Playing "Ping Pong" with Words /
Jogando "Ping Pong" com as palavras

Claus Clüver [1]

1 Introduction

In a recent interview to Márcia Arbex (UFMG) and Miriam Vieira (UFSJ) for the dossier "Legible Images, Visible Texts", organized for Revista Vis[2], Claus Clüver, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature from Indiana University, USA, acknowledges the relevance of the several references to Brazilian Concrete Poetry in his vast investigation of hybrid media configurations. In order to supplement the remarks on his intensive preoccupation with this specific kind of literature, professor Clüver generously shared with the interviewers an essay titled "Playing 'Ping Pong' with Words". Although it is a text intended for a non-academic audience unfamiliar with Concrete Poetry, the way it intimately describes how he got involved with Concrete Poetry and Concrete Poets deserves to be read by a wider audience interested in intermedial studies.

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2 Playing "Ping Pong" with Words

In 1958, during my first stay in Bloomington as an invited lecturer in Comparative Literature, I shared an apartment with a young sociologist from Argentina. One day I found in one of the Spanish-language magazines he would receive from Buenos Aires a curious text that was presented as a poem:

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ping pong
      ping pong ping
   pong ping pong
         ping pong
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Eugen Gomringer, "ping pong," 1953. Reprinted in the Solt anthology, fig. 3, p. 92.

I was puzzled and also quite upset: this was nonsense and (except perhaps for its form) a far cry from what any literate reader would accept as poetry. It was not in Spanish, nor in any particular language – yet "ping pong" might be recognized all over the world as referring to a particular game. But to me those mere repetitions of the two syllables would not make any sense, though they must have seemed meaningful to the editors of the magazine. Curiously, while I never forgot my puzzlement, I also never forgot the text in its characteristic shape, although for ten years I did not know what to make of it.

In 1968, having returned to Bloomington, now with a Brazilian wife (whom I had met at IU in 1957), I saw an announcement in Ballantine Hall that two Brazilian poets would introduce their audience to some new kind of poetry. Mostly for my wife's sake we went, and what the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos presented opened up a fascinating new field of interest for me.

Haroldo spent most of his time helping his audience see what was going on in one particular "poem" of a kind I had never seen before (I thought), a text by Décio Pignatari, the third member of this group of "experimental" poets from São Paulo that had begun producing such kind of work in the mid-fifties. This text filled a rectangular shape of eleven lines with exactly twelve typing spaces in each. I had no trouble seeing what was going on at the top: the first line had in its center the word "terra," "earth" in Portuguese (and Latin and Spanish), followed by a space and a "ter" and preceded by "ra" and a space – both fragments of another "terra," suggesting an ongoing process, which actually kept going line after line in a particular visual

development: the right side remains fairly stable, with the space forming a vertical gap between "a" and "ter," while the "ra" on the left appears to attract in every line a new letter from "terra," so that the gap develops diagonally downward throughout the rest of the rectangular structure. In line 6 the left has absorbed all of the original "terra" and now also involves the right side, which closes the vertical gap. All of this visual development was easy to recognize. But it was hard to see how (if at all) it could be interpreted; it did not seem to affect "terra" and anything it might signify.

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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
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Décio Pignatari, "terra," 1956. Reprinted in the Solt anthology, fig. 14, p. 107.

In line 7 there appearead to be a slip: the line started with "ara" by seemingly pulling down the entire left part of the previous line, which from now on appeared to be descending diagonally. Haroldo was careful to make us understand what was happening here: "ara" means "plows" or, as a command, "plough(!)." The "error" in an otherwise strictly maintained process inevitably sets free further meaningful combinations of the verbal material.

As the orderly progression was resumed it pushed to the right and added the eliminated letter on the left of the next line, always adding new verbal meanings. So, "raraterra" gives "earth" a "rare" quality; the inevitable "erraraterra" is open to various interpretations, which may include a reference to the "error" in the line that gave us "araterra." That enrichment of the verbal semantics simultaneously semanticizes the visual appearance, provided one is willing to read the vertical and diagonal gaps as plough marks in a verbal field representing "earth." The final line, now without any gap and not capable of any further development, inevitably tells us that "earth ploughs earth," which might be best understood as referring to what happens in the text itself.

We are left with a text that appears entirely autonomous and self-contained. It makes the reader realize how meaning can be generated by the ways in which suitable verbal material, in this case a single word, is visually arranged in the space of a page. We are aware, of course, that the choice of the word and this particular structure are the poet's, but we do not hear the poet's voice or a message or sentiment. The text appears to generate itself. And from the start it emphasizes progression or development, a temporal aspect, and at the same time it builds a firm shape in space. Haroldo indicated that the ideal of this group of poets was to create spatio-temporal texts as poetic equivalents and even embodiments of an Einsteinian view of the universe as a space-time continuum.

In his part of the presentation, Augusto showed several poems, mostly made up of two to four words and each with its own visual arrangement according to a "spatial syntax," and emphasized the possibilities these texts to be read aloud. His own poem "uma vez" was the longest of these texts. It relied entirely on rhymes, alliterations, and assonances to present a mysterious narrative that was perhaps a crime story. In a multidirectional structure it offers a series of words all introduced by "uma," the indefinite feminine article that can also be a noun, "a female." Moving diagonally down we hear/see "once [upon a time] / a female talks / a ditch / a bullet," and then it turns and says "a voice / a valley," to end up with "once," "uma vez" – four instances of which form the vertical axis of a structure that repeats on the left, in reverse direction, what is happening on the right, with the whole forming visually what may be read as a ditch or a valley. A reading can also proceed horizontally, but it will not bring us any closer to finding out whether the bullet killed the voice and the female is now in the ditch. The poem's appeal is in its form, in the way all of its parts relate to all other parts in sound and visual structure. Augusto suggested that such poems could rightly be called, in a phrase borrowed from James Joyce, "verbivocovisual" texts.

Augusto de Campos, "uma vez," 1957. Reprinted in A. de Campos, *VIVAVAIA: Poesia 1949-1979*, 2001, p. 100.

Their structures might invite the reader to enter the text in a number of places and pursue not only horizontal but also vertical or diagonal readings, by one or several voices.

The Brazilians had been invited to Bloomington by Mary Ellen Solt, who had just published a luxurious multi-colored anthology of similar poems produced in twenty-one countries. The first poet anthologized was a Swiss-Bolivian, Eugen Gomringer, whom Pignatari had met in Europe and who called his similarly structured poems "*konstellationen*" (honoring a major model, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé). Following Ezra Pound, one of their own major models, the São Paulo poets called their texts "*ideogramas.*" In 1955 Gomringer and the Brazilians decided collectively on a new name for their poetic production in this vein: "concrete poetry." That term also appeared in the title of the essay with which Mary Ellen opened her anthology, which showed on its cover one of Augusto's early ideograms.

Solt's anthology opened with poems by Gomringer, and to my surprise, the third of his poems was… "ping pong"! But thanks to the presentation by the Brazilians I now knew how to read it – as a verbivocovisual structure arranging its minimal verbal material in the space of the page. This text relies on the rule of the affinity of forms in visual representations, which invariably makes us mentally connect identical or similar forms. Our eyes move from the "ping pong" in the upper left to the "ping pong" in the lower right and back, crossing the two longer lines between them; thus making a verbal reference to the back and forth movement we can easily connect to a game of ping pong. In fact, looking at the two longer lines, which function like a net in this game, we realize that the affinity of forms also leads us to skip the "pong" in line 2 to get from "ping" to "ping" and to perform the same action in line 3 by skipping "ping." That ping-pong-like skipping action even involves vertical movements, because the "pong" in line 1 connects with the first "pong" in line 3, and so forth. The entire text induces us to operate our reading as if we were playing a verbal ping-pong game.

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ping pong
    ping pong ping
    pong ping pong
        ping pong
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Eugen Gomringer, "ping pong," 1953. Reprinted in the Solt anthology, fig. 3, p. 92.

Mary Ellen Solt, whom I had met on the occasion of the visit by the Brazilian group, joined the Comparative Literature faculty at that time to teach sections of our popular undergraduate course on "Modern Literature and the Other Arts" which I was overseeing, and we immediately agreed that we should include concrete poems in our agenda to illustrate the fusion of verbal, visual, and sound elements in highly condensed texts. These could easily be made accessible no matter from which language the verbal material was taken (which does not mean that a native speaker might not derive much richer meanings from operating these poems). Our students enthusiastically caught on, and so did the students of Thomas Ockerse, who at that time headed the Design Department of Fine Arts. The year 1970 was Indiana University's sesquicentennial celebration, and funds became available for special events. Our students applied for funding an extensive exhibition of concrete poetry in one of the large lounges of the Union Building. Solt, Ockerse, and I were the faculty advisers. The month-long exhibition used materials from Mary Ellen's large collection and also much work produced for the occasion at IU. Speakers were invited, and there were musical events that reflected the same "experimental" spirit as the concrete poems – which came in all kinds of material and shapes.

Fig. 1 - Cover of the flyer for the concrete poetry exhibition, Indiana University Memorial Union, 1970. Design: Thomas Ockerse, based on a poem by Aram Saroyan.

Tom Ockerse designed a logo for the flyer that served as a logo for the exhibit, redesigning a one-letter poem by the American poet Aram Saroyan (who was not asked for permission and did not like the new *sans-sérif* version in the different font – so he sued the university). The four-legged figure can be read as a new letter of our alphabet or an extension of an existing one (unless it is taken for a purely visual design suggesting an aqueduct or the like). It can give rise to many reflections about the visual representations of language. In our course we

would later start our introduction to poetry by exploring this one-letter poem in its two versions.

Our exhibition, which took place, exactly fifty years ago turned out to be one of the first exhibitions of concrete poetry in the U.S.. Few poets in the US understood the concrete poetry movement, which by 1970 was beginning to give way to other forms of visual poetry. But the US produced excellent anthologies of concrete poetry,, Mary Ellen Solt's, originally published in 1968 standing out among them. In 1970 Indiana University Press published a redesigned version of it, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, which is by now a collectors' item.
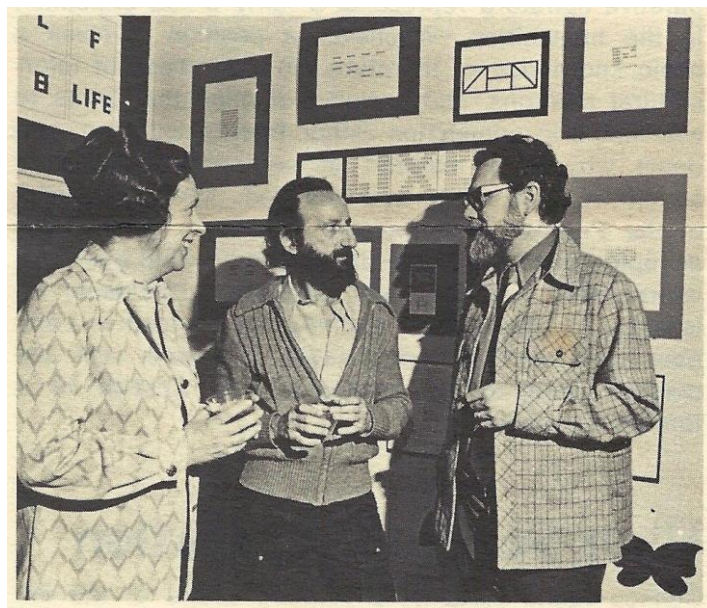

Fig. 2 - Mary Ellen Solt, Décio Pignatari, and Claus Clüver in 1976, at an exhibition of Brazilian concrete poetry in IU's Matrix Gallery.

The cover of the 1970 anthology presented one of Mary Ellen's own poems. The text is literally based on the word "FORSYTHIA," with each letter serving as the initial of a word springing from it, in acrostic form:
FORSYTHIA/OUT/RACE/SPRING'S/YELLOW/TELEGRAM/HOPE/INSISTS/ACTION

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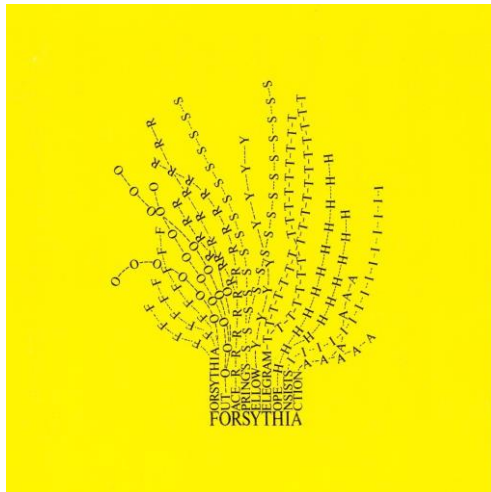
Fig. 3 - Mary Ellen Solt's poem "Forsythia" from her portfolio *Flowers in Concrete* (1964/66). Design: John Dearstyne. Copied from the cover of Solt's anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Indiana University Press, 1970.

The design continues with repetitions of the letters rising upwards to form a typographic image of the shape of the bush it names, with letters connected by lines – which on closer inspection turn out to be formed by repetitions of these same letters in a different sign system, the Morse code. The designer of the cover made yellow the background color to the poem.

IU's bicentennial is a proper occasion to remember important and unusual events that happened to celebrate its sesquicentennial in 1970. The concrete poetry exhibition was one of those events. For me personally, it was the beginning of a major interest, as a scholar and collector, in the work of poets who participated in the concrete poetry movement, many of whom I had the privilege to meet in a number of countries, including two who are still with us and with whom I am in touch: Eugen Gomringer, born in 1925, and Augusto de Campos, born in 1931.

Fig. 4 - Claus Clüver and Eugen Gomringer in Wurlitz. Germany, 2012. Photo: Maria Clüver

Fig. 5 - Augusto de Campos and Claus Clüver in the poet's apartment. São Paulo, 2013. Photo: Stefan Clüver