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Signmaking, Chino-Latino Style: *Concretismo* and the Mimesis of Chinese Graphemes

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Concrete poetry—the aesthetic instigated by the vanguard *Noigandres* group of São Paulo, in the 1950s—is a hybrid form, as its elements derive from opposite ends of visual comprehension’s spectrum of complexity: literature and design. Using Dick Higgins’s terminology, Claus Clüver concludes that “concrete poetry has taken the same path toward ‘intermedia’ as all the other arts, responding to and simultaneously shaping a contemporary sensibility that has come to thrive on the interplay of various sign systems” (Clüver 42). Clüver is considering concrete poetry in an expanded field, in which the “intertext” poems of the 1970s and 80s include photos, found images, and other non-verbal ephemera in the Concretist gestalt, but even in limiting Clüver’s statement to early concrete poetry of the 1950s and 60s, the idea of “the interplay of various sign systems” is still completely appropriate. In the Concretist aesthetic, the predominant interplay of systems is between literature and design, or, put another way, between words and images. Richard Kostelanetz, in the introduction to his anthology *Imaged Words & Worded Images* (1970), argues that concrete poetry is a term that intends “to identify artifacts that are neither word nor image alone but somewhere or something in between” (n/p). Kostelanetz’s point is that the hybridity of concrete poetry is deep, if not unmitigated. Wendy Steiner has put it a different way, claiming that concrete poetry “is the purest manifestation of the *ut pictura poesis* program that I know” (Steiner 531).

In response, I want to argue that concrete poetry, as a hybrid form borrowing from literature as well as design, is an enterprise that should be considered an endeavor of *signmaking*. In “Semiotic Conditions of Originality in Concrete Poetry” (2005), Elizabeth Walther-Bense invokes Aristotle’s theory of signs and the *semiotikós*, or “signmaker,” in relation to the Concretist program: “The signmaker is not only someone who creates signs but also one who frames signs in a new way for better understanding, or representing things or events, and informing someone about something” (205). Concretism’s condensation of poetry, achieved through its visual form, renders the interaction between poem and reader an experience of cognition more like the instance of perceiving a semiotic sign than the event of reading a verse poem. This quality of concrete poetry is a direct result of the

Noigandres group's agenda, which quite explicitly set forth to combine semiotic theory with poetic theory in engineering a new aesthetic, in hopes of redefining the experiences of reading and writing poetry as well as the very nature of written language's potential for codification and expression.

Regarding the roles of semiotics, linguistics, and communication theory in the rhetoric of Concretism, Mary Ellen Solt has noted that the *Noigandres* poets, from the very outset of the group's experimentations and formulations in the mid-1950s, were first and foremost "concerned with visual aspects of linguistic communication" (Solt, "Typography" 110). The innovators of concrete poetry were motivated simultaneously by a desire to create a new direction for poetry and by a self-perceived responsibility to create a new version of language itself, one that would be understood as "an advanced, highly sophisticated stage of writing" (Solt, "Typography" 115). Eugen Gomringer, a native Bolivian, was perhaps the chief proponent of this latter idea. As he recalls of the innovation of Concretism in the 1950s:

Concrete poetry distinguishes itself decisively from many other attempts to group poets and poetry in that it saw poetry as a great intellectual playing field and the poet as rule maker and umpire [...]. Concrete poetry saw itself for this reason as the aesthetic chapter in the development of a universal language [...]. By the concept of universal language ... we meant a conscious approach to the visual and acoustical potential for communication in language—an approach which would draw from all existing languages and yield a new language easily comprehensible in its signs and syntax. (Gomringer, "Poetry" 228, 233)

The "new language" Gomringer envisions is, in essence, a super-language: a language built from a calculated manipulation of existing forms of writing, reductive and economizing for the sake of heightening communicative potential to its "universal" maximum. As such, Gomringer's goal for concrete poetry requires a reinvention of the concept of poetry itself. The idea of concrete poetry as a new language reconsiders the status of the poem in general, for the poem and the sign have historically been considered as different in kind. Signs have always constituted poems, but in order to consider poetry as a language, not an art, the poem must become a sign in itself. This is why I opt for the term signmaking to define the enterprise, for the objectives of Concretism—as laid forth by Gomringer and *Noigandres*—necessitate a transformation of the poetic medium itself.

This reformulation of the poem to the status of the sign can be considered, in a word, metatactic. In anthropological discourse, metataxis denotes a change in the use of an object, as a result of external social factors, that implies a consequent, parallel shift in the object's identity, e.g. an ornamental sword. Higgins has used the term before to characterize the shift from early concrete poems—comprised entirely of letters—to the intertext poetry, or *poesia visiva*, of the 1970s that

largely used non-verbal images and signs in a looser interpretation of visual “poetry” (Higgins 44). In a different sense, I believe that the fundamental idea of reinterpretation at the core of metataxis is germane to formulating the notion of concrete poetry as signmaking. As an endeavor of signmaking, concrete poetry transforms the medium of poetry by performing an interrogation of how poetry itself can be regarded. “Concrete poetry can thus be described as a kind of thickening or reification of the poetic sign” (Shaw 29), a state from which the concrete poem, in its visual appearance, initiates a reading that can be deemed “the intellectual deciphering of a verbal code” (Shaw 34). If standard, traditional, versified poetry proper produces poems as works of literature, concrete poetry offers its forms as if they were signs in a newly invented alphabet.

In unifying the visual innovations of Modernist poets under a shared formal rubric, the *Noigandres* group derived its new correlation of the reduced aesthetic from Ernest Fenollosa’s and Ezra Pound’s theory of the “ideogram.” *Noigandres* rightly traces the heritage of the economic reduction of form in this vein of poetry to the theory of “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (1919), for the aesthetic of minimalization and simultaneity in poetic writing is chiefly a visual phenomenon. Early in *Noigandres*’s seminal manifesto *Teoria da Poesia Concreta* (1965), Augusto de Campos acknowledges Fenollosa as the originator of the theory of the “ideogram” and Pound as the theory’s direct heir and definitive practitioner (21). *Noigandres* adheres closely to Fenollosa’s essay in postulating the valence of aesthetic reduction to the ideogram. Haroldo de Campos specifically notes Fenollosa’s observation that the Chinese form combines imagery, iconography, and metaphor:

In Chinese the chief verb for ‘is’ not only means actively ‘to have,’ but shows by its derivation that it expresses something even more concrete, namely, ‘to snatch from the moon with the hand.’ Here the baldest symbol of prosaic analysis is transformed by magic into a splendid flash of concrete poetry (Fenollosa 370).

Appropriating Fenollosa’s term “concrete poetry” from their original context to apply it to the broader manifestation of condensation in the poetry of Modernist innovators, Haroldo de Campos asserts, “Fenollosa and Pound, by means of the Chinese ideogram, prefigured a new world of forms” (50),¹ one that defined the field of the language experiments of the avant-garde as fundamentally an Orientalist enterprise. In his opinion, Pound’s interpretation of the “ideogram”—the metaphor for concise imagery—is nearly synonymous with the formulation of the reduced aesthetic pivotal to all avant-garde poetry: “the principle of condensation...and the ideogrammic

method of composition: direct juxtaposition of elements in the unified creation of new relations” (de Campos et al. 97).²

As such, the ideogrammic method provides a rubric for the manner of writing central to the innovations of twentieth-century literature. In “Aspectos da Poesia Concreta,” Haroldo de Campos argues:

The importance of the Chinese ideogram as a medium for poetry was brought forth by Ezra Pound, as grounded in the study of the sinologist Ernest Fenollosa published by Pound in 1919. “In this process of compounding”—say Fenollosa and Pound—“two things added together do not produce a third but suggest some fundamental relation between them” [...]. In *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound, the ideogram is the principle of structure that presides over the interaction of blocks of ideas, which equally criticize, reiterate, and illuminate themselves. (de Campos et al. 94)³

In Haroldo de Campos’s view, the ideogrammic method constitutes a new “poetic logic” of its own (de Campos et al. 98), in its abandonment of “traditional logic” and “syllogism,” one that “advanced the notion of the possibility of spatial-temporal structure in poetry as one of the most important achievements” of form (de Campos et al. 100). In *Noigandres*’s view, the importance of this achievement corresponds to all reaches of experimental Modernism, but specifically makes concrete poetry the closest literary parallel to semiotic invention we have ever seen.

To understand concrete poetry as an enterprise of signmaking, an organizing taxonomy of such a procedure is necessary. Many critics of Concretism have tried to provide as much, to varying results. But no previous attempt has fully explored the dynamic of the Chinese written character as, simultaneously, the pivotal trope of Concretist poetics as well as the appropriate formal model for analyzing the visual operations of concrete poems themselves, utilizing the Chinese written character both deductively and inductively. I believe, as an enterprise of signmaking and explicitly substantiated by the *Noigandres* poets themselves in their exhortation of the “ideogram” (de Campos et al. 154-155), concrete poetry’s procedure resides essentially in the model of Chinese writing, and the evidence of its importance is manifest as equally in its aesthetic as it is in its rhetoric.

Although concrete poetry emerges from a critical engagement with the Fenollosa-Pound discourse on the “ideogram” (the nomenclature of which many critics mistakenly accept without critical interrogation), the method of aesthetic composition particular to Concretism is, in many ways, more closely related to the graphemic forms of the Chinese

written character in the most accurate lexical sense: the *liu-shu*—literally, “six scripts,” the six comprehensive categories of semantic expression used by analysts of the language. As only four of the six *liu-shu* are truly descriptive of character formation, these four types shall be held as models for comparison between Chinese writing and concrete poetry: the pictogram, the ideogram, the associated compound, and the pictophonetic compound.

There are two points I want to make to preface my argument that the structure of Concretist signmaking lies in the Chinese *liu-shu*. First, there is an obvious and profound difference between the nature of the Chinese written character and the Phoenician alphabetical letter; Chinese writing’s fundamental unit of signification has retained a recognizably pictographic dimension that Western writing has not. As such, there are distinct incompatibilities and limits to the comparison between Chinese writing and most concrete poetry. Nevertheless, in making the comparison, I will focus on the analysis of arrangement and its results in concrete poetry and not on the intrinsic virtues of the visible letters that comprise it. The comparison is between the manner of composing concrete poems and the manner of composing Chinese written characters in how their atomic particles are manipulated, not constituted.

Second, like Chinese written characters, not all the poems of the Concretist oeuvre fit categorically into these four types, nor even into all six. A substantial number of Chinese characters are exceptions, and in making the parallel to concrete poetry, the occurrence of exceptions is no different. It is not my goal to prove that every concrete poem fits neatly into the categories of pictogram, ideogram, associated compound, and pictophonetic compound. As Mike Weaver has noted of any taxonomic strategy for reading concrete poetry, “these categories represent an abstraction of tendencies; in practice the concrete poet has adopted all these approaches, either singly or in combination” (Weaver 294). Likewise, I believe that the four *liu-shu* embody abstractions that are manifest in concrete poems often in combination and to varying degrees. To catalogue all concrete poems ever published and sort them by their dominant aesthetic resemblance to each of the four *liu-shu* of Chinese character formation I have selected would be tedious and contestable, if not impossible. My point in making the comparison between concrete poetry and the four *liu-shu* of Chinese character formation is to demonstrate how the aesthetic of concrete poetry is, overall, far closer to the manner of Chinese writing than are Imagism, Symbolism, Objectivism, and any other form of Modernist poetry that has purported itself (or has been purported) as

informed by the Chinese written character. Concretism proposes a mentality of semiotic signification that integrates aspects of Eastern *graphé* and Western *graphé* and their respective, latent values (Santaella 73)—the culmination of the Western possibilities of the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry.

George Wilder, in the introduction to his *Analysis of Chinese Characters*, explains that the six *liu-shu* of Chinese written characters can be grouped more broadly into two different forms: “the 文 *wen* or simple figures and the 文 *wen* or compound” (Wilder vi). The *wen* include pictograms and ideograms, the *wen* associated compounds and pictophonetic compounds.⁴ The four *liu-shu* of character formation can be placed into these two groups because pictograms and ideograms are essentially shorthand sketches of visible things, while associated compounds and pictophonetic compounds are combined forms of these prior two types. Whereas the pictogram’s form depicts an object for the sake of designating that very object, the ideogram depicts an object—or perhaps it is better to say a visible phenomenon—that insinuates an idea related to it. Nevertheless, in their use of singular images to comprise meanings, the pictogram and the ideogram are formally comparable.

Wilder gives examples of these two primary forms and mention of them here will serve to preface my readings of concrete poems and view of concrete poetry at large as a form of signmaking. He relates pictograms and ideograms, referred to by Wilder as “imitative symbols” and “indicative symbols” respectively, to corresponding characters in the following manner:

1. Imitative symbols or pictures such as 又 *you*, right hand; 手 *shou*, left hand; 門 *men*, door, of the Chinese two leaved style with projecting pins at top and bottom for hinges.
2. Indicative symbols, that suggest meaning often with the idea of motion as, 一 *yi* representing suspension from above or action of force or authority from above downwards; 日 *tan*, the sun 日 *tan* just above the horizon 一 *yi*, suggesting the meaning of morning. (Wilder vii)

These examples effectively explain the difference between pictograms and ideograms. The difference lies in the application of symbolized objects. In the pictogram, the grapheme designates the object it imitates without implying a secondary level to its meaning, whereas in the ideogram, the secondary level, removed from the first level of objectified representation, is integral to the meaning of the sign. One can easily see how the ideogram builds its complexity upon the basic form of the

pictogram, and it is this quality of semantic extension, drawn upon the principle element of the pictogram, that renders the pictogram “the basis on which the whole Chinese writing system is built” (Woon 269).

Visual poetry as a whole is similarly built upon foundations of pictographic representation, and concrete poetry, in its own particular way, is really no exception. That said, many critics have made the contrary point that concrete poetry is wholly different from pictographic, representational visual poetry: “it is the representational poem that makes it most difficult to use the term ‘concrete’ in its orthodox, constructive definition” (Solt, “Typography” 114). The “constructive” aspect mentioned here is key to the Concretist aesthetic, and a valid point against understanding concrete poetry as pictographic. As the “tension of word-things in space-time” (de Campos et al. 154), concrete poetry first and foremost seeks to produce: to produce anew, through language, not exclusively to represent or imitate, and this principal ideal makes the pictographic element secondary to the primary motive of a constructivist reinvention of formal communication. However, this does not preclude the pictographic quality of iconography from the Concretist aesthetic: only subordinates its role as one of many means to constructing an aesthetic effect that embodies the ideals of verbal condensation, the isomorphism of form and content, and the poetic interdependence of sound, vision, material, and spectator.

In spite of her objection to considering concrete poetry as pictographic, Solt does admit that, “the Noigandres Pilot Plan, however, through its recognition that *there are degrees of concreteness*, makes it possible to see Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* and similar works as a primitive form of concrete poetry” (Solt, “Typography” 115). In the “Pilot Plan,” *Noigandres* lists Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Pound, and Cummings, among others, as the movement’s “precursors,” so although it may be somewhat disingenuous to call Apollinaire’s calligrams a “primitive form of concrete poetry,”⁵ it is safe to say that shaped poetry, in its pictographic representation, had a strong impact on the Concretist agenda.

The impact is evident not only in Concretist rhetoric, but also in concrete poems themselves. Even in some of the earliest concrete poems, Gomringer’s *Konstellationen* (1953), a pictographic element is readily visible in the iconographic play of the word arrangement. Consider Gomringer’s “wind”:

w w
 d i
 n n n
 i d i d
w w

(Gomringer, “wind” 93)

The poem is a double-entendre, yet both meanings are grounded in a pictographic logic. The first has to do with wind, the noun. The second, with to wind, the verb. Wind is ubiquitous, fleeting, twisting, swirling: moving in all directions at once. Likewise, the poem is composed to illustrate these qualities through the visual arrangement of the word, which can be read in all diagonal directions, intersecting and sharing letters. Involved with the effect produced by the orientation of the letters, the spacing of the letters also registers in abstracting this poem. Wind, as physical phenomenon, is essentially invisible; its only visible evidence is its effect on other things, like trees, chimes, or hair. In the case of this poem, the perception of wind is represented by an effect on the letters that comprise “wind” as a sign. The letters, blown apart, neither hold the word together in tight groups nor maintain an order to be read along the horizontal line—rendering the effect of wind, not the thing itself. Thus, in regards to the pictography of “wind,” the poem represents the phenomenon of action, not presence, since wind has no true presence that can be visibly detected. But since the event of wind is still an observable aspect of every natural environment, as such it can be symbolized in a picture—which is precisely what this poem does. In reading this poem, Clüver argues, “all it requires of the reader is a knowledge and experience of the phenomenon it denotes” (Clüver 35).

Clüver’s point, however, is predicated on reading the word wind solely as a noun and not a verb. As much as the noun wind resonates in the poem, the verb to wind is manifest as well. Starting with the “w” in the upper right of the page, “wind” can be read diagonally downward, from right to left. The next letter following in that direction is the lower left “w,” which begins the “wind” that reads on the outer left edge of the poem upward, from left to right. Then once again the following letter in that direction is “w,” which starts the “wind” from upper left to lower right. Finally, the fourth and last “wind,” begun by the “wind” immediately beneath and to the left of the previous “d,” reads back to the upper left and completes the continuity of the pattern: the poem winds.

Because the text of this poem can be read continuously in a spiraling direction, the poem pictorially symbolizes the action denoted by the verb to wind.

However, the unique aspect of concrete poetry's method of composition lies in the agency afforded the verbal sign. Even when it functions to convey the codified meaning of words, the written sign in the Concretist aesthetic is always charged with an iconographic force that, in substance, performs a commentary critical of the normative practice of standard writing. When the denotative function of the written sign is coupled with a connotative, visual, iconographic design, the potential for abstraction emerges. In the Concretist "pictogram," the abstraction is simple, immediately conceived, and not stimulating to the reflex of interpretation, for it is related to a thing, not purely and idea. But the extension to abstract ideas in concrete poetry introduces the category of the "ideogram," paralleling the virtues of the ideogram of the *liu-shu*. In opposition to the Concretist "pictogram," the "ideogram" utilizes visual iconography to complicate the dimension of meaning associated with the verbal signs displayed in the poem. This complication is directed towards the expression of an abstract idea or set of abstract ideas grounded in the denotation of a word or words contained in the poem.

Consider, for example, Pedro Xisto's poem "Epithalamium II":



he = êle
& = e
she = ela

S = serpens
h = homo
e = eva

(Xisto 114)

The title of the poem and the key of terms provided at the bottom of the page perform a vital function. They enable a context within which to consider the letters of the poem that invites the visual objectification of the letters “she” to invoke “not the object pictured but some thing or idea that the object pictured is supposed to suggest.” The letters “she” can only be arranged to form the word “She”: “ehs,” “esh,” “hes,” “hse,” and “seh” mean nothing. Thus, the three letters displayed in the poem can only be read to comprise the English sign for the feminine subject. However, like the Chinese ideogram, the simple denotation of “she” cannot be equated to the entire meaning of the textual sign. In regards to the poem’s title,⁶ an epithalamium is a poem that commemorates a marriage. By being an epithalamium, the poem implies a relationship that both is objectified by and inspires the poem.

The key of terms beneath the poem offers further indications of the associative context related to the text. Besides translating the English to Portuguese, the key also equates the “s” to serpent; the “h” to man; the “e” to Eve. This sum effect provides an allegorical subtext for the poem germane to its title. One can read the poem as a symbol for the nature of woman’s relationship to man, hearkening to the scene of original sin in the biblical context; as Roland Greene has observed, “Epithalamium II” finds “the whole story of humankind’s fall in the common letters of *he* and *she*” (Greene 17). The visual conjunction of the symbols for man and woman implies a tension that seems equal parts antagonizing and harmonious. Hence, the title and key of the poem grant a meaningful dimension to the symbol of “she,” one that can be likened to etymology. The expression of iconography in the Chinese ideogram and compound forms is entirely enabled through etymological recourse, for the use of a pictogram to denote an idea not pictured by the visible signs but rather insinuated by the depicted object’s tacit association to an abstract concept must be determined as such by the history of its figurative, conventional use. In “Epithalamium II,” the code embedded in the poem’s iconography is rationalized by the poem’s title and key of terms, thereby prescribing attributes of historical allusion to the visual gestalt of the text. This historical dimension, as a sign constructs its meaning, is a factor both in this poem and in Chinese writing in a broader sense. In analyzing “Fenollosa and the ‘Hsiao Hsüeh’ Tradition,” Songping Jin coins the term “etymorhetic” to describe a comparable kind of operation in Chinese script: “etymology largely employed to decorate speech for a rhetorical purpose” (Jin 71-2). As much as the idea is relevant to Chinese graphemes, Fenollosa’s

theories, and Pound's ideogrammic method, it is also completely applicable to Xisto's poem. Because the objectified "she" in this poem invokes a greater, more complex understanding than merely the generic identity of the feminine subject, it operates like a Chinese ideogram, for it bears simultaneously a picture, a set of abstract insinuations, and an etymologically enacted logic on the face of its strokes.

Other forms of concrete poems are more complex than "pictograms" and "ideograms." They combine, in substance, the basic aspects of these simpler kinds of concrete poems into texts that themselves visibly embody associative relationships—not solely directing the reader to connect the material icon of the poem as a whole to concepts off the page but also to relate one portion of the visual text to an identifiably different portion also present in the text. The effective interrelation between signs happens when there is more than one word in the concrete poem, and this phenomenon of interrelation can be likened to the Chinese form of the *tzu*, or compound. In explicating the two forms of the *tzu*, associated compounds and pictophonetic compounds, Wilder uses the terms "logical combination" and "phonetic compounds":

1. Logical combination, in which the meaning of the character results from the meaning of all its elements. 占 *chan* is a mouth 口 *k'ou*, meaning to ask, under a 卜 *pu*, a diviner or the lines of a tortoise shell, so the whole character means to consult the diviner or simply to divine, i.e. to ask the tortoise shell lines.

2. Phonetic compounds, in which one part has to do with the meaning and the other with the sound only. 沾 *chan* to moisten, naturally has the water radical 水 *shui* to suggest moisture and has the 占 *chan* for the phonetic, to indicate the sound. In many cases the phonetic has little likeness in sound to that of the character of which it forms a part. Such discrepancies will be understood if one remembers that the Chinese custom requires that only the latter part of the sound of the phonetic shall be like that of the character whose sound it indicates. Thus 尙 *shang* is, [sic] considered a perfect phonetic for 鞫 *t'ang*, and 童 *t'ung* for 鐘 *chung*, 般 *pan* for 盤 *p'an* etc. (Wilder vii)

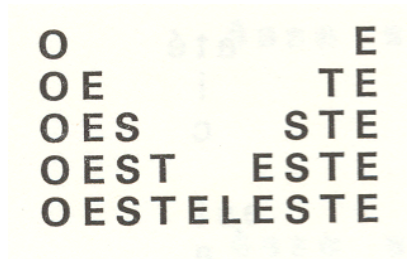
Both compound forms are governed by a common principle: to enact the meaning of the whole written sign through an implicit relationship between paired—or in some cases, multiple—

components. In the associated compound, the definitive combination of pictograms or ideograms relies on the meanings of the constitutive components, whereas in the pictographic compound, one component is used for its understood meaning, to locate a context within which the sign will resonate, and another for its phonetic value, to affix the conventional meaning of the entire sign in its unique position within the catalogue of possibilities afforded the associative realm of the first component.

The associated compound and the pictophonetic compound are derived by two closely similar forms of logical arrangement, and as such share many visible traits within the operations of their iconography. But although they are similar in their mutual mechanism of combination, they differ in the nature of aspects compounded therein. In the associated compound, the combined elements are equivalent in value; the two (or more) components are identical specimens of semantic value. Using Wilder's example of an associated compound, the Chinese character for "to divine" combines "to ask" with "the lines of a tortoise shell," bringing together the meanings of two words into a new, holistic understanding. Although the components inherently have phonetic values, neither is privileged over the other in deriving the resulting sign. Even though *k'ou* and *pu* have similar vowel sounds, the whole of the character—*chan*—is unaffected by these phonetic prescriptions, in either meaning or sound.

On the other hand, the pictophonetic compound requires the sound of one of the components to affect the overall sign's meaning, in essence indexing the specific register of the total sign within the set of possibilities dictated by the other component's meaning. This aspect engages two separate domains of expression: literal meaning and phonetic significance. One component, known by philologists as the "semantic determinative," classifies the "area of meaning" (Moore 15), whereas the other prescribes the dimension of specificity enacted by the value of its sound. This signifying play, through the classifications of Chinese writing, aligns the variable of context with the "picto-," for the basic unit of Chinese written expression is the picture-symbol (Shih-hong 2), and the variable of index with the "-phonetic," for in the course of semantic extension the phonetic agent of character formation was a final, logistical product of the Chinese written language's evolution (Wu xi). Thus, the pictophonetic compound encapsulates, in a microcosmic manner, the entire spectrum of semantic extension—from pictography to ideography to association to phonetics—and therefore should be considered the most complex of Chinese written characters.

In translating the two forms of the *tzu* into the discourse of concrete poetry, their rules of character composition gloss the aesthetic effect of many concrete poems. Oftentimes a concrete poem employs two words in combination to produce a visual effect that constructs a new textual sign without explicating the value of the combination, only leaving the import of the visual arrangement to be experienced through interpretation by the reader. Take as an example the following, untitled poem by Ronaldo Azeredo:



(Azeredo 113)

The poem is comprised by a visual arrangement of two Portuguese words: *oeste* “west,” and *leste* “east.” True to the form of the associated compound, this poem combines two verbal signs into a visibly unified object that suggests a third order of significance.

At first glance, it might seem as if the poem has no meaning, or at least offers nothing more than a playful, even arbitrary layout of the letters of these two words. However, this poem can be considered not only a specimen of the Concretist “associated compound” but also a form that illustrates, both visibly and verbally, this *liu-shu*’s structural model of composition. First of all, the poem, in its sum of positive and negative space, fits neatly into a square. This parallels the fundamental fact that “Chinese characters are made up of groups of strokes that fit into a notional square” (Moore 11). Second, since “oeste” and “leste” are each comprised of five letters, as such the poem is constructed as spatially symmetrical; the combination of the two words can be divided down the middle of the poem, rendering the text as two spatially identical halves. This design mirrors the method of diagramming “the most common of the combination phenomena” in Chinese (Rankin 8), where the “two unit” compound, such as *huai*, 中不, *tu*, 口土 and *wu*, 仨五, can be enclosed by a halved box, 口, with the components side by side in the “left” and “right” (Seymour 12-4). Third, although the terms “left” and “right” are commonly used to describe this structure of identifying Chinese compounds in the most literal and conventional manner, these binary positions of horizontal “framing” are also known in Chinese lexicography as


“west” and “east” (Rankin 8).⁷ This last notion, in the context of comparison to Azeredo’s poem, is evident through the denotation of the words *oeste* and *leste* in their respective positions on the page. “Oeste” resides in the “west” frame; “leste” in the “east.” It is as if the words are markers of the horizontal, two-unit frame of the Chinese compound, denoting “west” and “east” through both their verbal definitions and their physical positions on the page.

Besides embodying an elemental structure of the Chinese associated compound, Azeredo’s poem can also be read as a unique sign within this category of signification. West and east are opposite directions, but the poem unifies their signs into a single poem-object. Thus the poem can be seen as an attempt to reconcile difference, or extremes, suggesting the stasis of dialectic forces when imposed upon one another. If the poem can be taken as a sign, it signifies a synthesis of opposition, using the symbolic junction of west and east as a metonym for coalescence. Moreover, since the iconographic design and permutations of the words involve negative space, there is a simultaneous effect of incompleteness, perhaps insinuating the absence of north and south. By combining the ideas of west and east, as well as positive and negative space, this poem mutually expresses the otherwise incompatible ideas of tension and harmony in a most economic fashion.

This poem’s likeness to the Chinese compound—in its spatial likeness to the west and east framing of the compound form; its conjunction of words into a unified, visual whole; and its involvement of the aural to heighten the effect of integrating the associations of its depicted signs—resembles another “associated compound,” produced by Pignatari:

hombre	hombre	hombre
hambre	hambre	hembra
hembra	hembra	hambre

(Pignatari 97)

In its iconography, this poem clearly takes the shape of three vertical columns, another phenomenon common to Chinese compounds. When framing the Chinese compound, the most basic schema for the three-unit character is the tripartite horizontal frame,  , housing characters such as *jie*, 佳字, and *dao*, 倒 (Seymour 14). In this manner, Pignatari’s

poem orders its text in a typical Chinese fashion, embodying a template for the compound form as it engenders Concretist signmaking.

By enacting this logic of composition, Pignatari's poem operates through the associative implications the juxtaposed signs create in light of one another, echoing Draper's assessment of Gomringer's "constellations": "Many of his poems consist of words, especially nouns, not articulated into sentences, but poised in spatially suggestive relationship to one another" (Draper 332). Liselotte Gumpel, too, has noted this strategy of "grouping," or "assemblage," in regards to Gomringer's early poems (Gumpel 41), in which the word *qua* sign exists as a particle of meaning in the flux of associations generated by its non-semantic coupling with other words. Although Draper and Gumpel explicate this kind of operation through an inductive observation of physical features—and their readings of concrete poems in a broader regard of semiotics indeed amplify the sense constructed through the play of ambiguity—I want to add to the interpretive potential of these poems by suggesting that the *a priori* logic of the Chinese compound lends to a more substantive reading of the nature of "suggestive relationship" within concrete poems such as this. The words *hombre* "man," *hambre* "hunger," and *hembra* "woman," in their visual arrangement, suggest not only a relation but a process of desire between "man" and "woman." In the first two columns, man and woman are separated by hunger—in the first instance, hunger siding with man, and in the second hunger siding with woman—but in the third, man and woman are joined, with hunger left beneath their union. This suggestive effect, through its incorporation of a third element tantamount to a state of being (hunger), is more explicit and thus more akin to the function of a true sign in the context of signmaking. As a sign, this poem expresses a qualitative relationship between two things, still open for interpretation—as hunger has myriad connotations—but nonetheless more rhematic in its "tightening" of the expression latent in its verbal proposition.

Pignatari's poem relies on phonetic value to facilitate the coalescence of ideas present in the text: "The aural connections suggest the pattern" (Draper 331). But again, although *hombre*, *hambre*, and *hembra* all sound very much alike, they equally resemble each other visually, and this physical quality perhaps supersedes the phonetic effect of similitude in experiencing the poem. Upon a quick glance, the printed words appear almost indistinguishable, for the outlines of their print are nearly identical. Inasmuch as the sounds

of the words are closely related, the material marks of their print are equally close in form, an effect that once again adds to the holistic operation of the poem as a sign.

In light of the categories of the Chinese compound, the salient quality of sound in these poems does not situate them under the rubric of “pictographic compound,” for in this form the role of sound has a very particular function, one not evidenced by the aforementioned poems. As noted earlier, even the example Wilder offers of the Chinese associated compound *chan*, is comprised of two components, *k’ou* and *pu*, that are close in vowel sounds, but this circumstance of equivalence avoids a conjugation affecting the overall result of the sign. Nonetheless, in comparing concrete poetry to the Chinese forms of the *liu-shu*, the importance of sound is crucial to Concretism, an idea overlooked by many critics. Weaver has insinuated that “in emphasizing the visual aspect of concrete poetry” the *Noigandres* group “neglected its phonetic aspect” (Weaver 294), but this assessment is only partly true.

In the pictophonetic compound, phonetic value has a specific role, and is reserved for only one component of the form. Likewise, many concrete poems utilize sound as an agent of signification in a manner closely related to the structure of the Chinese pictophonetic compound. But in the Concretist “pictophonetic compound,” the function of the sound component is notably different from the Chinese form in one particular way. Since the Chinese version uses the phonetic component to index meaning within the semiotic structure of language, sound occupies a pragmatic space, one in which the performance of cataloguing is its sole function. Contrarily, the concrete poem does not exist in a predefined system of codified logic; since it is charged, as a poem, with “the possibility of amplifying its means of expression” (Menezes 43), it diverges from the Chinese form, for the Chinese character conversely limits its expression in order to differentiate its meaning within the vast realm of an entire language. In the Chinese form, sound value is merely a marker purposed to specifically label the sign within a gamut of possibilities, but in the parallel Concretist form, sound is an agent in the strategy of building a newly invented verbal object and thus resonates with meaning beyond the capacity of perceptible extrinsic differentiation.

To illustrate this distinction, consider the following poem by Xisto:

es pa ço
es pa ço es

pa ço es
pa ço es pa
ço es pa
ço es pa ço
es pa ço

(Xisto, Untitled 757)

There are two different registers for the meaning of this poem: the way it looks and the way it sounds. Its visual aspect is enacted by the presence of the sign “*espaço*,” which in Portuguese means “space,” and is manipulated in design (artificially spatialized with like syllables aligned in diagonal rows) to suggestively mirror the denotation of the word. Roland Grass says that in this poem, “the syllables of the word *espaço* function in at least three ways (in addition to establishing the theme of the poem): they define the essentially square shape of the frame, they establish a regular pattern within the frame, and they suggest particles that fill the frame” (Grass 137).

The idea that the word establishes the “theme of the poem” relates to the “picto-” dimension of the pictophonetic compound, for in the Chinese form, one component (the semantic determinative) establishes the realm of meaning in which the other component, the “-phonetic,” will register the final denotation. In Chinese, the semantic determinative that limits the set of meanings in which the sign resides is nominally pictographic, but because of the fundamental difference (in regards to pictography) between Chinese and Phoenician script, this poem achieves the “picto-” effect through the sum of the word’s meaning and its visually manipulated design. Hence, the ensuing “three ways” in which Grass claims the poem functions are all visual and thereby germane to the “picto-” component of the whole.

But Grass’s reading of the poem ignores the sound of the Portuguese word and the dissection of its syllables into phonetic values themselves. The three constituent syllables, “es,” “pa,” and “ço,” are homonymic of three other Portuguese words: *és* “you are,” *par* “equal,” and *sou* “I am.”⁸ Since the poem separates these elements into isolated entities, it optically suggests regarding them as units of meaning, like whole words. To read the poem as stating “you are” / “equal” / “I am” is to articulate one of the basic ideals of concrete poetry: the union of poet and spectator via the poem as an active mechanism of “relational force” (de Campos, et al. 155). The poem insinuates that the “you” of the reader and the “I” of the author are one and the same through the objectified presence of the text, a synergistic concept at the core of the Concretist enterprise.

The vehicle for this expression is the poem's sound, which differs from the visual text itself, and as such can be related to the “-phonetic” capacity of the pictophonetic compound. Whereas the visual gestalt of the word *espaço*, in the sum of its literal meaning and iconographic display, can be read to engender the “picto-” dimension of the poem, the sonorous implications of its separated syllables—when regarded for what they sound like, not denote through their print—can be understood to perform a function akin to the “-phonetic” component of the Chinese compound form. By reading the poem in the manner presented, the syllables' sounds, divorced from the visual signs, function entirely through their aural values. This parallels the operation of the “-phonetic” component of the Chinese pictophonetic compound: to index the verbal object's meaning, through a sonic marker, within the set of associative possibilities afforded by the semantic determinative. In the instance of the Chinese form, the phonetic role has no insinuating logic; it merely tags the radical to which it is linked in order to designate its sovereign domain within the tremendous array of signs that constitute its language. But in the case of the Concretist form, the phonetic has a greater, more meaningful role, for this form is a poem, not a semantic sign. Although I liken concrete poetry to a literary process of signmaking, I also maintain that it is still poetry, for every part of the concrete poem—if composed entirely of verbal signs—contributes to the verbal expression. As Gomringer has noted, when involving sound into the intensity of the poem, the concrete poet “engages in a sort of game-activity whereby new combinations of the concrete acoustical and written verbal signs he derives constantly allow new associations and meaningful relationships to arise” (Gomringer, “Poetry” 239). In its status as a poem, the Concretist “pictophonetic compound” cannot limit any phonetic value to the one-dimensional purpose of lexical intermediary while simultaneously generating “new associations and meaningful relationships” via the totality of its forms. This would be impossible.

In this essay, I have laid forth a comparison between concrete poems and the forms of the *liu-shu* of Chinese character composition for one express purpose: to demonstrate how the Concretist aesthetic closely resembles the visual logic of Chinese character formation. Although both concrete poetry and Chinese script are clearly visual forms of writing, and the influence of the Modernist “ideogram” on the rhetoric of Concretism is central to its program, the actual manifestation of Chinese writing's formal attributes within concrete poetry has never been deeply analyzed. As a result of this critical void, scholars of

Modernism have neglected an important issue at the heart of the enterprise of avant-garde poetry; Western innovative poetry in the twentieth century not only was influenced by the ideas of the Far East but also embodied the medium of expressing these ideas through form. The realization of this latter aspect fulfills a crucial proposition of Modernism, captured by Marshall McLuhan's now popular assessment that "the medium is the message." This idea is thoroughly applicable to the status of concrete poetry as a form of signmaking modeled after Chinese writing. Even though the *Noigandres* poets argued that their poetic innovations extended Pound's practice of the ideogrammic method through an evolution of verbal condensation, the forms of concrete poetry more closely resemble Chinese script than Pound's ideogrammic verse ever did. Thus, the medium of concrete poetry has superseded the initial message of Imagist poetics, for concrete poetry more deeply and faithfully manifests the formal influence that the Chinese written character has had on avant-garde poetry.

In proposing the rubrics of this essay, I admitted that not all poems can be classified as "pictograms," "ideograms," "associated compounds," and "pictophonetic compounds." As many concrete poems do not fit into these designations of the *liu-shu*, so many Chinese characters do not fit into these categories as well. Chinese philologists have a name for this category: *su tzu*, or the "non-classical character" (Wu 392). Instead of adhering to the compositional principles of Chinese script laid forth by the *liu-shu*, according to Wu, this kind of "character was arbitrarily created" (Wu 392). The two *liu-shu* that I have excluded from my analysis of concrete poetry, borrowed words and transmissives, have qualities similar to the non-classical character. Borrowed words are loans from other languages, and as such do not germinate from the ancient context of the *liu-shu* principles. Transmissives are characters that were composed according to the *liu-shu* but, through the historical circumstances of transcription error, were corrupted in ancient and archaic manuscripts and hence disseminated as tainted forms that subsequently were accepted into convention. Formally speaking, borrowed words and transmissives can correspond to any of the four *liu-shu* character formation, or even the category of non-classical characters. Borrowed words, transmissives, and non-classical characters also share the common distinction of being exceptions to the rule, and although the vast majority of Chinese characters can be categorized by the *liu-shu*, the occurrence of exceptions is substantial.

The parallel can be made to concrete poetry. Not only do many concrete poems belie the forms of the *liu-shu*, but also many seem to embody aspects of some or all of the *liu-shu* simultaneously. For example, the poems in Haroldo de Campos's *Xadrez de estrelas* ("Star Chess"), especially the series 'The Essence of Omega,' present groupings of letters, punctuation, words, and phrases (a style reminiscent of E. E. Cummings, with syntax dissolving into a looser play of language) spread all over each page, often in thin, rigid columns that remind one of the form of Chinese vertical lines. When manipulated in combination, the *liu-shu* yields further possibilities for concrete poetry, and its integration is manifest to varying degrees: "these categories represent an abstraction of tendencies; in practice the concrete poet has adopted all these approaches, either singly or in combination" (Weaver 294). The point of comparing concrete poetry to the *liu-shu* is to illustrate the similarities in visual logic between both realms of material expression. But what makes the comparison truly interesting is understanding the impact of the fundamental difference between concrete poetry and Chinese script; the former is poetry, and the latter is language. The Chinese written character, in its uniqueness as a visual form, functions to limit its possibilities of expression to specific, finite denotation within the boundaries of its vast lexical domain: Chinese. Conversely, the concrete poem, in *its* uniqueness as a visual form, functions to expand the potential of verbal expression beyond convention, semantics, and denotation. Although I have posited that concrete poetry is a form of signmaking, it must be understood that any literary form fundamentally involves a process of interpretation that is mutually excluded from the event of semiosis. Entitled by its designation as poetry, the concrete poem confounds, explores, insinuates, and proposes, inviting the spectator to interpretation and experience in a manner that the Chinese written character must avoid in order to function solely as a sign and not a poem. The ultimate end for a Chinese character is to signify clarity; the ultimate end for a concrete poem is to produce the "tension of word-things in space-time" (de Campos, et. al. 43). Yet, as a literary form of signmaking, concrete poetry integrates both roles—of sign and poem—into its overall status as a thing regarded. Echoing the words of Fernando Pessoa, the concrete poem's purpose is to presence a conundrum of expression: "ser raro e claro," 'to be odd and clear.'

Notes

¹ “Fenollosa & Pound, a propósito do ideograma chinês, prefiguram um novo mundo de formas” (50). Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of Haroldo de Campos’s are mine.

² “[O] princípio de condensação...e o método ideogrâmico de compor: — justaposição direta de elementos em conjuntos geradores de relações novas” (de Campos, et. al. 97).

³ “A importância do ideograma chinês como instrumento para a poesia foi salientada por Ezra Pound, com base em estudo do sinólogo Fenollosa, publicado por E. P. em 1919. ‘Nesse processo de composição’—dizem Fenollosa e E. P.—‘duas coisas conjugadas não produzem uma Terceira, mas sugerem alguma relação fundamental entre ambas’ [...]. Em *The Cantos*, de E. P., o ideograma é o princípio de estrutura presidindo à interação de blocos de idéias, que se criticam, reiteram e iluminam mutuamente” (de Campos, et al. 94).

⁴ The last two of the six *liu-shu*, borrowed words and transmissives, are predominantly forms of the first four *liu-shu*, but distinguished as distinct from pictograms, ideograms, associated compounds, and pictophonetic compounds by their peculiar attributes of semantic extension, not their formal composition. Borrowed words and transmissives are known as *su tzu*, or ‘non-classical characters,’ and will be addressed more directly at the end of this essay.

⁵ It is disingenuous because it implies that the concrete form was predetermined rather than innovated. *Noigandres* remarked upon Apollinaire strategically, as they did upon Pound and others, to justify the importance and complexity of the minimalist form of the concrete poem. Apollinaire’s calligrams are germane to the Concretist aesthetic because *Noigandres* believed them to be approaching the visual suggestiveness of writing that concrete poetry embodies, not because the calligrams fated the emergence of concrete poetry.

⁶ The poem is titled “Epithalamium II” because it is the second of three “wedding poems” Xisto composed.

⁷ The two-unit character can also be diagrammed, in the instance of being composed “vertically,” 田, as “top” and “bottom” (Seymour 12-13), or “north” and “south” (Rankin 8). Examples include *li*, 本, *du*, 毒, and *xiao*, 笑.

⁸ In some Northeastern Brazilian dialects, “es” and “és” have notably similar, though not exactly identical, pronunciations. However, in the coastal dialects of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, the sounds differ significantly. Given the inherent restraints of the poem’s potential for double-entendre, the absence of the accent mark signifies a play that does not preclude incorporating the verb *ser* ‘to be’, but rather invites it.

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