

BORDERBLUR POETICS: INTERMEDIA AND AVANT-GARDISM IN CANADA, 1963-1988

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Concrete Poetry

In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual message.

—John Berger (1972)

The year 1955 marks the beginning of an explosive period of aesthetic risk taking by an international network of poets and artists who eschewed conventional verse for the expansive possibilities of visually oriented expression. Their work could undoubtedly be recognized under the umbrella category of borderblur; however, many of the poets who were part of this wave preferred other descriptors. Some poets, like Bolivian-born German poet Eugen Gomringer, called their work “constellations,” but it is most commonly known by the term “concrete poetry.” The dynamism of this generation’s poetics is comprehensively captured by three anthologies published before 1970: Stephen Bann’s *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (1967), Emmett Williams’s *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), and Mary Ellen Solt’s *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968). Together, they feature poets from Brazil, Britain, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United States, and elsewhere. Nichol was the only Canadian-identified poet acknowledged among these international selections, with poems in two of the three anthologies—Williams’s and Solt’s.¹ These poems are exemplars of Canadian intermedia poetry and are among the work produced by Canadian poets that closely resemble representative works by first-generation practitioners. Nichol’s poem “eyes,” for example, bears certain visual resemblances to other

pieces in Williams's anthology, such as Aram Saroyan's minimalist poems and Williams's rubber stamp poems. Relatedly, Nichol's celebrated poem "Blues" (in the Solt anthology) is remarkably similar to Gomringer's "constellations," especially his famous poems "Wind" and "Silencio," which create slippages between signifier and signified and feature ordered typographic arrangements of black letters surrounded by white negative space, suggesting the inverse of a star-filled sky. However, Canadian concrete's leading practitioners in the early 1960s, such as Nichol, bissett, and Copithorne, did not begin to publish their work until nearly a decade after the form's banner had first been raised by Gomringer and the Brazilian Noigandres poets Décio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, and Augusto de Campos in 1955. The use of the moniker "concrete poetry" in reference to a visual literary form arrived in Canada belatedly, and Canadians seemed to have adopted it after they began their own avant-garde practices.

There are many definitions of concrete poetry that gesture toward its intermedial features—so many, in fact, "that it is difficult to say what the word means," writes Solt.² Avant-garde poet and theorist Richard Kostelanetz defines concrete poetry straightforwardly as the reduction of "language to its concrete essentials, free not only of semantic but syntactical necessities. . . . Simply letters or disconnected words scattered abstractly across the page."³ Kostelanetz's definition is useful but risks oversimplification since it cannot capture concrete poetry's full range of aesthetic nuance, and really it most aptly describes earlier forms of concrete poetry, like those composed by Gomringer and the Noigandres poets. After a scan of the anthologies mentioned above, one can quickly gather that concrete poems can appear disconnected and scattered, but they can also be quite rigid and uniform; they can be tight minimalist works like Nichol's "eyes," but they can also be sprawling and chaotic multi-page works like both panels of McCaffery's *Carnival* (discussed below). Within the larger international borderblur network, the Canadian node of concrete poetry is difficult to precisely distinguish and define. Critics such as Stephen Scobie and Lori Emerson have referred to much of this activity as *dirty concrete*, which describes works that resist the "clean lines and graphically neutral appearance"⁴ characteristic of the work of the previous decade—the opposite of Perloff's description of the first wave of international concrete poetry as "ideologically suspect . . . advertising copy."⁵ These are subtle yet critical distinctions that overly narrow definitions cannot capture. Yet, again, not all works published during this time by Canadian

borderblur poets necessarily correspond to this more specific definition. In fact, when comparing bissett, Copithorne, McCaffery, Nichol, David Aylward, Paul Dutton, Roy Kiyooka, David UU, Ann Rosenberg, Shaunt Basmajian, and Brian Dedora—whose works provide this chapter’s case studies—we see a diversity of aesthetic iterations.

Like Scobie and Emerson, UU argues in “Beyond Concrete Poetry,” published in the December 1972 issue of the *British Columbia Monthly*, that Canadian concrete poetry is dissimilar to the first wave because it is dirty, disordered, and chaotic. He refers to Canadian concrete poetry as “Canadada,” a neologism that fuses “Canada” with the historical European avant-garde movement known as “Dada.”⁶ For UU, concrete poetry begins with concrete art—as represented by the Bauhaus School and artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Joseph Albers—and its principles of intellect, organization, and construction.⁷ Canadian concrete poets do not share these values but instead operate intuitively with “physical/destructive” tendencies.⁸ “Concrete Poetry embraces the visual (image) while Canadada is emotional and embraces the auditory (lyric); it is “an illogical search for no meaning in an ordered universe (a body without mind).”⁹ While UU’s characterization of Canadian concrete poetry is somewhat limiting—Canadian poets did after all produce carefully constructed and intellectually driven poems—and though concrete poetry could have a sonic element if performed, it is not necessarily lyrical. As a descriptor, “Canadada” did not survive, but UU’s argument captures the contemporary perspective on concrete poetry as it emerged under the auspices of Canadian borderblur. Notably, too, UU’s neologism also contains “nada,” subtly indicating that concrete poetry had no place in Canadian arts and literary culture at the time, so the poets were forced to create a cultural context of their own. UU achieves this, in part, through his astute comparisons to international cultural movements, thus developing the cosmopolitan purview that this book partly traces.¹⁰

Since there is such a diversity of definitions for concrete poetry in Canadian and international contexts and a vast heterogeneity in its aesthetics—clean, dirty, partly washed, whatever you would like to call it—I appeal to an expanded definition to invite the many formations of concrete poetry that emerged within the publishing activities of the borderblur network. Concrete poetry is a visually oriented form that places language as one medium within a framework shared by visual artistic media and modes, including design, illustration, painting, photography, and more. Concrete poetry may emphasize

linguistic content and semantics, but it can also underscore and revel in language's materiality and the expanded creative possibilities generated when language is placed in dialogue with non-linguistic materials. Concrete poetry is intermedial in that it explicitly relies on a creative interaction between language and visual modes, elements that can include shape and pattern as well as imagery, the latter raising certain similarities with collage. Its cultural and historical touchstones are many, as are its aesthetic manifestations. Casting a wide net in this way enables us to perceive a group of practitioners whose work might have otherwise been excluded from overly stringent definitions.

As I now proceed into the first of three poetic forms examined in this book, I want to stress again that Canadian borderblur is an umbrella term that describes a contextually situated intermedial poetic and avant-garde network of affiliation. Concrete poetry—like the sound and kinetic poetry analyzed in later chapters—is one manifestation of borderblur's expressive forms (and this book cannot possibly deal with them all). This chapter focuses on Canadian practitioners of concrete poetry and continues to develop my argument that Canadian borderblur is an avant-garde paratradition inflected by a cosmopolitan awareness that complicates assumptions about Canadian poetry as an expression of Canadian identity. Again, my modest intent is to add nuance to the story of this nation's literature and to emphasize that, while we may call this literature Canadian, it is motivated by considerations that complicate and at times exceed a cultural-nationalist discourse.

In this chapter, I treat concrete poetry as one vector of borderblur activity within two interrelated contexts. First, I demonstrate how this Canadian network of affiliation was in dialogue with international concrete poets in order to emphasize the cosmopolitanism underpinning of this paratradition. Furthermore, along with this chapter's discussion of how concrete poetry is ostensibly shaped by an emergent sense of international connectedness, I also explore the form's investment in the transnational conditions of an emergent visual and technological culture—with a focus on advertising, typewriters, film, and television—that was rapidly transforming life in Canada, the United States, and England at the time. As avant-garde poets "mainly concerned with the present,"¹¹ the broader implications of a transnational, technologically driven, and media-saturated culture preoccupied Canadian borderblur poets more than the prospect of a national literary culture formulated on the literature of the past.

Beginning Again: A Confluence of Encounters

Identifying a single point of genesis for any national literary tradition or paratradition is a monumental task, and the job is often confounded by the flows of influence that inevitably pervade the written form. Literature should never be envisaged, in Wai Chee Dimock's words, as "the product of one nation and one nation alone."¹² Rather, it is always a confluence of temporal, geographical, and cultural encounters and influences. With its combination of British, French, American, Asian, and Indigenous foundations, critics today recognize Canada's literature as undeniable evidence of this truth, but this was not adequately reflected in the dominant cultural-nationalist discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which largely overlooked the breadth of Canada's diversity. Gregory Betts pursues this line of thinking in *Finding Nothing* (2021), recognizing that concrete poetry's specific aesthetic and cultural foundations are evidenced in many lines of influence, beginning in the early twentieth-century with the materialist experiments with language championed by the European avant-garde: the calligrammes of Guillaume Apollinaire, which are evocative of seventeenth-century pattern poetries such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings," and which prefigure the emergence of the American E. E. Cummings's shaped poems; the esoteric Symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, including his spatially cognizant, book-length poem *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard*; the rebellious Italian Futurists such as F. T. Marinetti, who advocated for a typographic poetry modelled after modern industrialization; the colourful typographical experiments and collagist anti-artworks of Dadaists Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Hoch, and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven; and Ezra Pound's call for precise diction, clarity, and scrupulous imagery in the Imagist manifesto, which draws from his fascination with Chinese written characters. These are vital poetic nodes of avant-gardism that comprise the international artistic and literary zeitgeist that culminated in 1955.

The many materialist explorations of language that took place in the first half of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for the emergence of concrete poetry's first wave. "The international movement of Concrete Poetry owes its origin," writes Bann, "to a meeting which took place in Ulm in 1955. It was in this year that Eugen Gomringer, then working as a secretary to Max Bill at the Hochschule fur Gestaltung, made the acquaintance of Décio Pignatari. . . . Both were already active in the field of experimental poetry."¹³

The meeting “opened a channel of communication between Gomringer and the Noigandres poets, but also led to an agreement that their work should henceforth be identified by one common title.”¹⁴ This one common title was *poesia concreta*, or concrete poetry. Following the Ulm meeting, these poets gained increasing recognition as they advanced separate but concurrent manifestos regarding the ambition of their work. In 1956, Gomringer typified first wave concrete in phraseology that reflected conventional avant-garde theories and emphasized that it does “not follow the traditional verse and line order.”¹⁵ Two years later, the Noigandres poets echoed Gomringer’s denunciation of the past: “Assuming that the historical cycle of verse (as formal-rhythmical unit) is closed, concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent.”¹⁶ Embodying traditional characteristics of avant-gardism, first wave concrete poetry is understood as a break with tradition and was said to represent innovative possibilities for creative expression with a focus on language’s materiality. Thus began the international movement of concrete poetry, which would be critically lauded and enthusiastically anthologized well into the late 1960s.

In contrast to this oft-accepted narrative describing the origins of the first wave of concrete poetry, its Canadian iteration is unique. Instead of formulating itself as a mutated version of a pre-existing movement, some Canadian concrete poets, like the poets of the first wave, also thought they were starting anew. Canadian concrete poetry—as part of borderblur as an international whole—was established discretely and only then recognized within the broader, rich tradition of visually oriented intermedial poetics. The confluence of writing and thinking that set the stage for Canadian concrete poetry is well-documented. Tracing the vectors of poetic and artistic confluence allows us to elucidate some of the ideas and encounters that animated Canadian concrete poetry and to demonstrate these poets’ eschewal of a single line of influence, a denial of a linear narrative that authoritatively connects events. Poets such as Nichol, bissett, Copithorne, and UU outline variegated influences on Canadian concrete poetry’s earliest stages, some of which overlap, some of which do not. Many influences shaped Canadian concrete poetry (and there are more to be identified than those highlighted here). This is suggestive of its heterogeneity as well as a distrust of singular narratives that informed the nationalist discourse and were solidified by the subsequent outpouring of publications that advanced a tradition of poetry in verse.

Having started his work in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a visual artist and poet, bissett was living and working within Vancouver's transnational nexus of writers and poets. During his earliest developmental phases, bissett experimented alongside such poets and artists as Lance Farrell and Martina Clinton, "eschewing th narrativ line" to rethink the page as surface and space and the placement of poems upon it to effectively fold together his artistic practices.¹⁷ In a 1972 letter to Nichol, bissett eagerly identifies Clinton and Farrell as part of his lineage, in contrast to other distant poets and traditions. Vancouver at the time was also a destination for American poets thanks to the UBC professor Warren Tallman, who invited several Beat and Black Mountain poets for visits, including Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, and others, who represented a new wave in poetry and poetics at the time (as anthologized in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*). The presence of these poets has been well-documented, and the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference remains a cornerstone in Canada's avant-garde literary history. bissett did not formally attend that event, nor was he affiliated with the academic poetry that Tallman bolstered, but he did meet poets like Ginsberg, who passed through Vancouver on more than one occasion. Unlike bissett, Copithorne did attend some parts of the Vancouver Poetry Conference, and, like bissett, was also aware of the city's lively downtown literary culture, especially the intermedial activities at Motion Studio, the Sound Gallery, and Intermedia. She was inspired by the work of American poets like Kenneth Patchen (who visited Vancouver in 1959) and enamored by the genre-defying poets and artists whose work she saw in San Francisco at City Lights in 1961: Brion Gysin and Henri Michaux, both of whom share with Copithorne an affinity for asemic writing—that is, writing that has no specific semantic content. bissett and Copithorne, then, like others in Vancouver's poetry scene at the time, were circulating within multiple international networks composed of a fertile mixture of different poets, aesthetic approaches, and ideas.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Nichol drew inspiration from Vancouver's cosmopolitan scene and its vital confluence of artistic forms, which he brought eastward to Toronto through his various publication efforts. It was reportedly in 1965 that Nichol came into direct contact with international practitioners of concrete poetry. In the *Ganglia Press Index* (1972), he credits George Bowering with assisting him in making connections to the concrete poetry scene that thrived in the wake of the initial manifestos

published by Gomringer and the Noigandres poets. While Frank Davey contests this point in *aka bpNichol*, offering a slightly different version of this timeline, the critical point is that in 1965, at nearly the beginning of his work as a poet and publisher, Nichol began to correspond with Cavan McCarthy, an English poet and publisher of *Tlaloc*, as well as with the aforementioned Houédard and French poet Pierre Garnier. McCarthy, in 1965, published a special Canadian issue of *Tlaloc* featuring contributions from bissett, Bowering, Nichol, Gerry Gilbert, and Lionel Kearns, with non-Canadians Houédard, McCarthy, and Robin Page. These connections to McCarthy, Houédard, and Garnier granted Nichol and his Canadian affiliates access to this international network, and likely also led to Nichol's inclusion in the major international concrete poetry anthologies.

Like the page space of books, periodicals, and correspondence, the art gallery was a central nexus that evidences a direct and incontrovertible relationship between international and Canadian practitioners. UU organized notable exhibitions that demonstrated the way concrete poetry blurs the borders of media and disciplines—bringing poetry into spaces typically dominated by visual arts—while also demonstrating its international reach. The first of these exhibitions was *Brazilia 73*. It was held at the Mandan Ghetto and featured the work of Canadians bissett, Nichol, UU, and Stephen Scobie, with international contributions from Houédard (England), Henri Chopin (France), Ian Hamilton Finlay (Scotland), Ernst Jandl (Austria), and d. a. levy (United States).

After that, in 1971, UU organized another ambitious show at the Avelles Gallery in Vancouver entitled *Microprosophus: International Exhibition of Visual Poetry*, which ran 9–28 September. The press release for the show notes that it featured 153 works by 30 contributors from 11 countries. The lineup included Canadians such as bissett, Copithorne, Coupey, Wallace, Gary Lee Nova, Mr. Peanut, Gregg Simpson, and Edwin Varney. The names of the international contributors were not included in the press release; however, the title of show is clear evidence that some Canadians explicitly acknowledged their relationship to the broader international avant-garde. Finally, in 1969, UBC was host to the *Concrete Poetry: An Exhibition in Four Parts*, from 28 March to 19 April. Like *Brazilia 73*, the exhibition featured Canadians such as bissett, Nichol, Copithorne, Varney, and Scobie, as well as international practitioners such as Houédard, Finlay, Bob Cobbing, John Furnival (United Kingdom), Hansjorg Mayer (Germany), Carlo Belloli (Italy), Niikuni Seiichi

(Japan), and more. Thus, it is evident that by the late 1960s and early 1970s international practitioners had become frequent contributors to Canada's concrete poetry exhibitions and periodicals, solidifying Canada's place within a broader international avant-gardist network.

It would perhaps be tedious to map these relations any further, even if stopping here admittedly risks omitting essential references that may further illuminate the many artistic and intellectual vectors intersecting this poetic and the poets who practice it. However, before moving on, more might be said about later concrete poetry anthologies such as Canadian poet Peggy Lefler's 1989 *Anthology*, published by a scenario press. The mini-anthology was initially created for a grade-school workshop, which never took place, yet the book itself demonstrates the strong connection between Canadians and the international network of concrete poets even decades after it had been formed in the 1960s. Lefler's selections include Canadians bissett, Nichol, Hart Broudy, jwcurry, David Aylward, Shaunt Basmajian, and Gerry Shikatani (as well as Lefler herself), alongside Crag Hill, Richard Kostelanetz, John M. Bennett (United States), Fernando Aguiar (Portugal), Shoji Yoshizawa, Seiichi Niikuni (Japan), Bob Cobbing (England), and others. As such, even at this later stage in the history of Canadian concrete poetry, *Anthology* is reflective of an ongoing commitment to the earlier principles of concrete poetry in Canada, with its intermedial aesthetics and its connections to a broader international network.

To many critics, and especially critics like Dimock (noted above) or Jahan Ramazani (mentioned in the introduction), this confluence of temporal, geographical, and cultural influence is hardly surprising. It demonstrates how Canadian concrete poetry is composed of many textual strands, and these convergences force us to acknowledge the cultural, temporal, and contextual diversity at the root of Canadian concrete poetry (and borderblur more broadly). Nichol, reflecting on his early days, confessed to poet Stuart Ross that "it was almost a necessity for stimulation to look across the borders, towards Europe, or towards the States."¹⁸ Once the network formed, Nichol found it stimulating, but this activity first needed to be animated by poetics from abroad.

Canadian Concrete Poetry and the Electric Age

Media and technology were central to the encounters that expanded Canadian borderblur's sense of itself beyond the traditional verse redolent of a Canadian

literary nationalism. Many technologies facilitated the flow of persons, ideas, texts, and sounds into concrete poets' awareness, thereby shaping their poetics. Cars, planes, and trains moved poets toward city centres like Vancouver; likewise, the typewriter, postal service, and telephone ensured pathways of communication across vast distances. However, the rapidly changing conditions of the mediascape in the mid- to late twentieth century more directly shaped Canadian concrete poetry. The press release for the 1971 exhibition *Microprosophus* succinctly captures the cosmopolitan dimension of concrete poetry while also acknowledging the influence of new theories giving shape to the electronic age. UU conceives of concrete poetry as a meeting point between media and disciplines and describes it as "a desire to experience the elements of literature and communicate this in a world which is besieged by electronic media and no longer understands the importance and progression of tradition."¹⁹ With electronic media, then, came possibilities for poetry that prompted poets to sever their connections to traditional literary lineages in a way that neatly aligns with Antin's conception of avant-gardism as "mainly concerned with the present."²⁰ It is also important to underscore UU's use of the phrase "in a world," which I interpret literally as a reflection of his sincere belief that Canadian concrete poetry was connected to similar activities in other geographical contexts involving poets who were also interested in the emergence and proliferation of electronic media. The worldliness of UU's thought is made explicit in his curated roster of international artists and poets, and it further confirms Canadian borderblur's status as a paratradition that is both within and without Canadian literature, and by the same gesture, within and without an international network. In a way, it occupies a liminal space wherein these poets are geographically located in Canada—reacting against the formation of a literary tradition contingent on a narrow conception of national identity—while responding, along with poets in other geographical contexts, to the social and cultural transformations happening within the world around them. These poets were concerned with the role of electronic media in their daily lives and adopted intermedial approaches to reckon with these new conditions. UU's identification with electronic media resonates with poet Ed Varney's claim that concrete poetry is "medium as message,"²¹ highlighting the media-centredness of concrete poetry with its nod to McLuhan's oft-used phrase "the medium is the message." Both Varney's and UU's claims find common ground not only in gesturing toward McLuhan's influence on borderblur, and especially Canadian concrete

poetry, but also in illustrating that concrete poetry cannot be reduced to a simplistic expression of Canadian national identity. Instead, it is concerned with how human life “in a world”²² is being reshaped within an emergent electronic context. These conditions reconstituted possibilities of poesis and, by extension, formed part of the ground upon which this Canadian avant-garde paratradition flourished.

The emergence of electronic media, which evidently preoccupied the imaginations of Canadian concrete poets, is captured in McLuhan’s writing on what he termed the *electric age*, or what might be recognized more commonly today as the early emergence of postmodernity. McLuhan’s 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Culture*—at the time, a cutting-edge analysis of newspapers, advertisements, radio, and film and their modulation of human thought, behaviour, and desire—effectively articulated these conditions for a whole generation of writers and thinkers. He continued this work with varying degrees of optimism and caution in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. *The Mechanical Bride* captures both the limits and possibilities that emergent media promised this generation. McLuhan writes,

Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike.²³

McLuhan recognizes this impetus toward control as a vital issue as the Western world transitions from an industrial age to the electric age. He writes that, in this age, the “Imagination flickers out,” the “Markets contract,”²⁴ life becomes monotonous and boring, and “conformity”²⁵ becomes increasingly rampant. The forms of media becoming more commonplace in McLuhan’s day, he suggests, seemingly reduce the possibilities for an enriched human experience and point toward the emergence of a society controlled by corporations, advertisers, and entertainers.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri confirm, with the advantage of hindsight, the conditions that McLuhan observed in his own time. They refer to these as symptoms of postmodernization—the transition from an industrial to a service-based economy, which includes everything ranging from “health

care, education, and finance to transportation, entertainment, and advertising,” and which is “characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, communication, and affect.”²⁶ As outlined in chapter 1, and emphasized by UU and Varney above, communicative possibilities were developing as communication became increasingly bound with electronic media. This brought multimedia methods of communication including television, film, and mass advertising, which in turn transformed social, economic, and cultural interactions. This is a moment that, for Hardt and Negri, “marks a new mode of becoming human,”²⁷ one that reformulated possibilities for expression, communication, and belonging. This concern with the present is a key distinction between borderblur as a literary paratradition and the dominant Canadian literary tradition that emerged in the 1960s. These poets were not concerned with the formation of a Canadian literary identity as much as the broader implications of electronic media and its impacts on human life. It is worth remembering, too, Arjun Appadurai’s point that electronic media has the power to transform our understanding of what it means to belong to a nation.²⁸ The rise of this new visual culture evidently influenced the compositional approaches that Canadian concrete poets adopted during the 1960s and into the 1980s. What I show in the remainder of this chapter, however, is that their responses to the conditions of the electronic age were multifaceted. Historical theorizations of avant-gardism might seek out particularly radical and rebellious responses to these conditions; however, as will be seen in the work of these poets, they responded with a sharp sense of rebellion—at times resisting emergent economic and social configurations—while also embracing the possibilities that electronic media offered them.

Against Manipulation: Advertising and Consumer Culture

John Berger’s 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*—based on the BBC television series of the same name—confirms that the late twentieth century was charged with anxiety as the conditions of entertainment and consumer capitalism intensified under postmodernization. The image was gaining inordinate ubiquity. “In no other form of society in history,” Berger writes, “has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual message.”²⁹ Like McLuhan, he acknowledges the troublesome bind of an optically centred consumerist culture that he calls *publicity*: “Publicity is not merely an assembly of competing messages: it is a language in itself which is always being used to make the

same general proposal.”³⁰ Advertising presents the illusion of free and sundry consumerist choices but actually offers limited variegation to benefit corporations, a point that echoes McLuhan’s concern about manipulation and exploitation. Publicity works, according to Berger, primarily by motivating and manipulating a person’s feelings. “Capitalism survives,” he writes, “by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible.”³¹ This is a familiar premise to us today, but it was among the most salient contentions of Canadian borderblur poets as they confronted the conditions of their own present. And concrete poetry was one poetic form for exploring the effects of this emergent visual culture.

While this chapter has so far maintained the distinction between the first and second waves of concrete poetry, both waves actually shared a fascination with postmodernization’s emergent phase as typified by McLuhan and Berger. In “From Line to Constellation,” Gomringer declares that “the language of today must have certain things in common with poetry. . . . Headlines, slogans, groups of sounds and letters give rise to forms which could be models for a new poetry just waiting to be taken up for meaningful use.”³² Gomringer’s declaration conveys his ambition to mend the fragmented world that emerged from the destruction and divisiveness of the Second World War. Gomringer attempts to overcome poetry’s antiquity by synthesizing it with the popular media of the day, thus making poetry more appealing to a contemporary audience. As Perloff points out, however, Gomringer’s “ambivalence” toward “the related visual poetics of advertising and the media” undercuts any kind of radical project intended to improve the conditions of human life.³³ She echoes Berger and McLuhan, noting that humans are “vulnerable” to “pre-fabricated messages, bogus claims to authority, and endless dubious prescriptions,” and that advertising exploits these vulnerabilities.³⁴ She is skeptical, too, of the Noigandres poets, whose work is aligned with a radical anti-advertising agenda and as such is demonstrative of a sort of prototypical culture jamming. Pignatari’s “beba coca cola” critiques Coca-Cola through visual wordplay to suggest that consumption of the beverage is a “form of infantile regression and at worst the consumption of excrement.”³⁵ Following from Rosemarie Waldrop’s careful reading of this poem, Perloff ultimately regards first wave concrete poetry’s divergent approaches to advertising thusly: “The Concrete poem as anti-advertisement . . . is perhaps not all that different from the Concrete poem as proto-advertising logo.”³⁶ In other words, first wave concrete poetry, to return to Perloff’s claim that it is “ideologically suspect,”

too closely resembles advertising copy.³⁷ Aesthetically replicating the conditions of the present, as many of the first wave concrete poets did, according to Perloff, is counter to any attempt to transform society.

This relationship to aesthetics and the mechanisms of advertising and visual media is said to mark Canadian concrete poetry's difference from the first wave that began in the 1950s. McCaffery epitomizes the form's anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist ethos when he argues that linguistic expression is intricately bound up with capitalism and its problematic program of homogenizing and standardizing the expression of the lyrical subject. "Capitalism begins," he writes, "when you / open the dictionary."³⁸ In a separate context, he suggests that "language . . . functions like money and speaks *through* us more than we actively produce *within* it."³⁹ McCaffery and his contemporaries believed that language was being systematically regularized to the extent that expression of the self had become imitative of the power structures that, as McLuhan also contends, manipulate, control, and exploit human subjects. This is a problem directly related to Perloff's critique of first wave concrete poetry's politics. By contrast, McCaffery would likely describe concrete poetry—especially its most disruptive variations—as writing that "extends far beyond scriptive practice and would include all non-utilitarian activities of excess, unavoidable waste and non-productive consumption."⁴⁰ In other words, writing that does not directly or intentionally reproduce language as it has been systematically regularized; instead, it is illegible, disordered, and challenging to absorb.

Building on McCaffery's work, poet Derek Beaulieu applies this theory of a heterogenous poetics directly to concrete poetry. In "an afterword after words: notes toward a concrete poetic," he advances an aesthetic theory for concrete poetry. Situating himself between Sianne Ngai's "poetics of disgust"⁴¹ and Roland Barthes's semiotics, Beaulieu argues that concrete poetry "can also be closely read in conjunction with the idea of concrete poetry as an 'inarticulate mark,'" suggesting that it "interferes with signification and momentarily interrupts the capitalist structure of language."⁴² While I am cautious of privileging a single way of thinking about concrete poetry's intervention into social and economic contexts—for these poets had diverse concerns and political leanings—some Canadian concrete poets were apprehensive of capitalism and conscientious of how their poetry figured within the rapidly intensifying dynamic of a capital-driven visual culture.

l e
 o e
 l o v e
 o e v o l
 l o v e o
 e v o l
 e o
 e i

Figure 2.1: “Blues” by bpNichol, from *As Elected: Selected Writing*, 1981.

With its minimalist exploration of the single four-letter word “love,” Nichol’s “Blues” is a compelling case study of Canadian concrete’s relationship to capitalism and the conditions of a consumerist culture that reached beyond national borders. The poem is similar to Gomringer’s “constellations” but surpasses the latter’s interest in the technical language of science or the simplicity of advertising and popular culture. If publicity, according to Berger, is the business of manipulating human emotion, “Blues” transforms the idea of love, an emotion that is often referenced in the capitalist marketplace to compel consumers to purchase products to increase their chances of gathering affection.⁴³ Nichol explores love as a complex idea and affect. In “Blues,” love is not merely an emotion that connotes a powerful social bond, nor is it an emotion for the service of a consumerist economy.

Critics like John Robert Colombo and Caroline Bayard have identified a binary in “Blues” that emphasizes a single permutation of the word “love.” They highlight “evol” as an alternative spelling of “evil,” a seeming opposition to love. Nichol, however, speaking through another poem, refutes dualistic readings of “Blues.” In “Captain Poetry in Love,” Nichol writes,

love
spelled backwards
is evol
is
‘nature’s way’ (i’ve
overworked it
in a dozen
poems) has
nothing to do
with evil
but rather evolves
new themes. how
impossible
to overwork them.⁴⁴

For Nichol, the poem contains at least a triad of words and meaning: love, evil, and evolve. Scholar Stephen Voyce, whose paper at the 2014 Avant-Canada Conference helped make these connections, notes that love for Nichol, especially in his early writing, “shares an operative logic” with borderblur.⁴⁵ Voyce

looks upon a passage from the sequence “JOURNEYING & the Returns,” one part of the 1967 slipcase of the same name, in which Nichol writes,

love is some sort of fire
come to warm us
fill our bodies
all in these motions
flowing into each other
in despair - the room -
one narrow world
that might be anywhere.⁴⁶

Love, as Voyce suggests, is for Nichol “an integration of subjects, bodies flowing into one another, into the space between.”⁴⁷ Love, then, embodies the core principles of borderblur: a means of overflowing a space, of transcending borders—genre, meaning, media, and materials. This point is unsurprising since, as Nichol writes on the back of the slipcase of *Journeying*, “The other is the loved one and the other is the key.”⁴⁸ Nichol demonstrates this clearly in his arrangement of a single word to offer at least three conceptual pathways into and out of the poem, offering an idea of love that embodies the term’s significance as an expression of feeling, belonging, and poetic form.

Adding to the poem’s complexity, Nichol is not so naive as to suggest that love overcomes evil. Rather, the poem acknowledges love to be intricately bound up with evil—or, at least, love’s negative emotions. “Blues” highlights love’s misgivings. In the context of romantic love, one must acknowledge the negative feelings that attachment can generate: jealousy, possession, insecurity, anxiety, and so on. Similarly, the poem’s invocation of evolution—via “evol”—suggests that love is a feeling that is always in flux; it expands, dissipates, and shifts over time. We come to love others, and our lovers can leave us too. Love is a process, and embedded within it is a series of entrances and exits to the self and the other. For Nichol, love’s meaning exceeds its conventional definition and its simplistic use in advertising as a positive feeling to connote affection and a deep social bond that can be mobilized by advertisers for economic gain—as we well know, for decades products have been advertised with the promise of making the consumer more desirable to lovers and friends. With all its additional negative complexities, the concept denotes a feeling that is not easily consumed or consumable. Love is complex and

multidirectional; it is comprised of both positive and negative feelings and, as Nichol's poem seems to suggest, any application of the word that reduces its complexity does so in the disservice of human emotion and the service of capitalist gain.

Love was evidently on the minds of other concrete poets within the Canadian borderblur network. Love is at the centre of UU's chapbook *Touch* (1967), published by Ganglia Press. The title itself directly invokes notions related to intimacy—touch, of course, is how one person can reach out to another and impress themselves upon the body and mind, to mark the surface of another's body, to generate bodily sensation in the skin and nerves. Except, in this case, the other body is a textual body: that of *Touch* itself, a staple-bound chapbook, wrapped in a slightly mottled, deckle-edged cover paper. The texture of this paper—unlike cheaper and more commercially available papers—highlights the importance of physicality and intimate interaction. Like Nichol, UU puts his faith in language and the poem to reach out and impress themselves upon the reader in a way that is akin to human touch—to reach out through the poem and touch another.

Touch includes an introductory note written on 20 March 1967 that foregrounds love as the work's central feeling. With a somewhat romanticized tone, UU claims that "all poemz arr lessonz tooe love."⁴⁹ UU's conception of love is demonstrated in the series entitled "a story," which closes the collection. This is a four-page suite of plot-driven concrete poems consisting of a single quasi-phonetic spelling of the word "luv," composed using a "mask" method to create perfect circles that are then overlaid on one another. The sequence depicts the movement of two circles, both created from the repetition of "luv" running in straight lines—vertically, inside one circle, and horizontally in the second. The two circles are side by side, almost but not quite touching, and poised with a seemingly intense attraction to one another. The remainder of the poem depicts the movement of these two formations as they succumb to each other's magnetism, at first overlapping only slightly before becoming fully overlaid upon one another. In the final page of the sequence, the two figures are situated side by side again, but this time enveloped by a larger circle also composed of the same word. If we were to project a story onto this sequence, as the title suggests, then this is a story of two figures attracted to one other. It is a story about desire—a "luv" story, if you will.

UU's concrete narrative poem is demonstrative of typical renderings of love, especially love as it is mobilized within consumerism. Advertisers seek

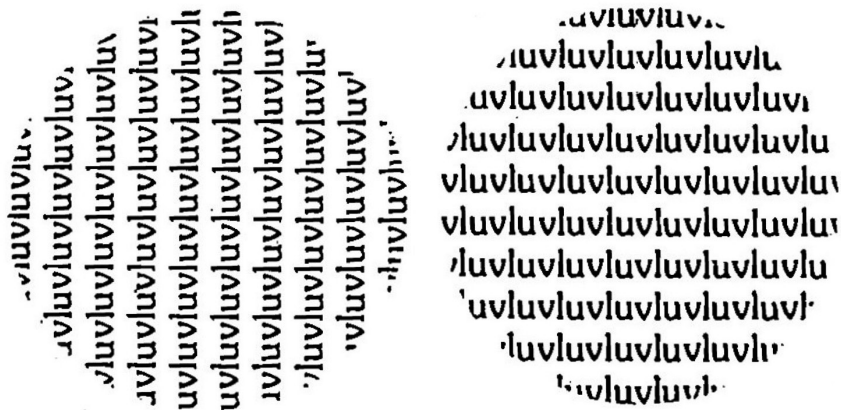


Figure 2.2: Excerpt from *Touch* by David UU, 1967.

to sell goods to consumers that, among other things, will ensure the loving embrace of another through the promise of an attractive image and social status. However, UU displaces this conventional notion of love in his introductory note to the poem, wherein he encourages the reader to “forget our social insurance number maybiy therr iz noe god eor tooemorroee but therr iz love.”⁵⁰ In the same breath, he suggests that love is a method for bringing people together and a site of communal resistance that exceeds the mechanisms of the state. Love, then, in this poem, is not conceived as a convenient means of bringing together persons in the promise of a happiness easily packaged and sold to consumers; rather, it is a site of intimacy, identity, and sociality that rejects conventional consumerist and state-sanctioned modes of togetherness.

Nichol’s “Blues” and UU’s *Touch* offer an oblique commentary on emotional complexity and consumerist manipulations of feeling and gesture toward the fundamental humanist and political concerns of their work. These were crucial concerns for their peers too, like bissett, whose poems often address social and political dynamics. bissett directly engages the genre of advertising as part of his poetry and publishing. *blewointment*, for example, would include advertisements for issues of the magazine that would never

appear. As Betts points out in *Finding Nothing*, the back cover of volume 4, issue 1 of *blewointment* advertised an upcoming piece by jazz musician Al Neil entitled “Chums,” which was ostensibly to be included in issue 2; however, that issue of the magazine was never published. Instead, the next installment of *blewointment* was volume 5, issue 1, which did feature Neil’s “Chums.” The mysteriously absent second issue of volume 4 may have simply been a result of a mismanaged publication schedule, yet this enticing offer of a new issue in that volume plays with readers’ expectations and their relationship to advertisements. bissett offers the promise of a specific cultural product without fulfilling that promise in the manner specified. Notably, too, *Th Combind Blewointment Open Picture Book nd the News* (1972) contains an advertisement for a steak house in Puerto Vallarta offering New York-style steak imported from the United States. The ad’s placement inside both the front and back covers of the anthology is out of place, considering that bissett’s core readership is likely far removed from the advertised destination (though bissett did spend time in Mexico in the mid-1960s). Instead, the appearance of this ad in 1974 highlights the transnational influence of American imperialism.

The advertisement in *Th Combind Blewointment Open Picture Book nd the News* is also indicative of the way bissett experimented with the materials of consumer culture, and especially its detritus, in his concrete poetry. bissett would occasionally print his publications on the backs of one-sided commercial ads.⁵¹ *Pass th food release th spirit book* (1973), for example, prominently features such mass-produced debris: torn imagery reassembled in collages, crushed papers with barely legible text, gum wrappers, and torn newspapers. One page of the collection consists of what appears to be crumpled and crushed paper, looking as though it had been forced through a duplication machine, with the phrase “whunawhunaw” written over it. Another page in the collection contains a torn page of advertisements from an 1871 newspaper printed in the then colony of British Columbia showing sugar, molasses, champagne, and other miscellaneous groceries; it is overlaid with fanged-shaped cut-outs along the top. The collage is notably anti-colonial in its posturing since these advertisements from earlier colonial days are given a threatening appearance via the fang shapes; it also comments more generally on advertising as a business.

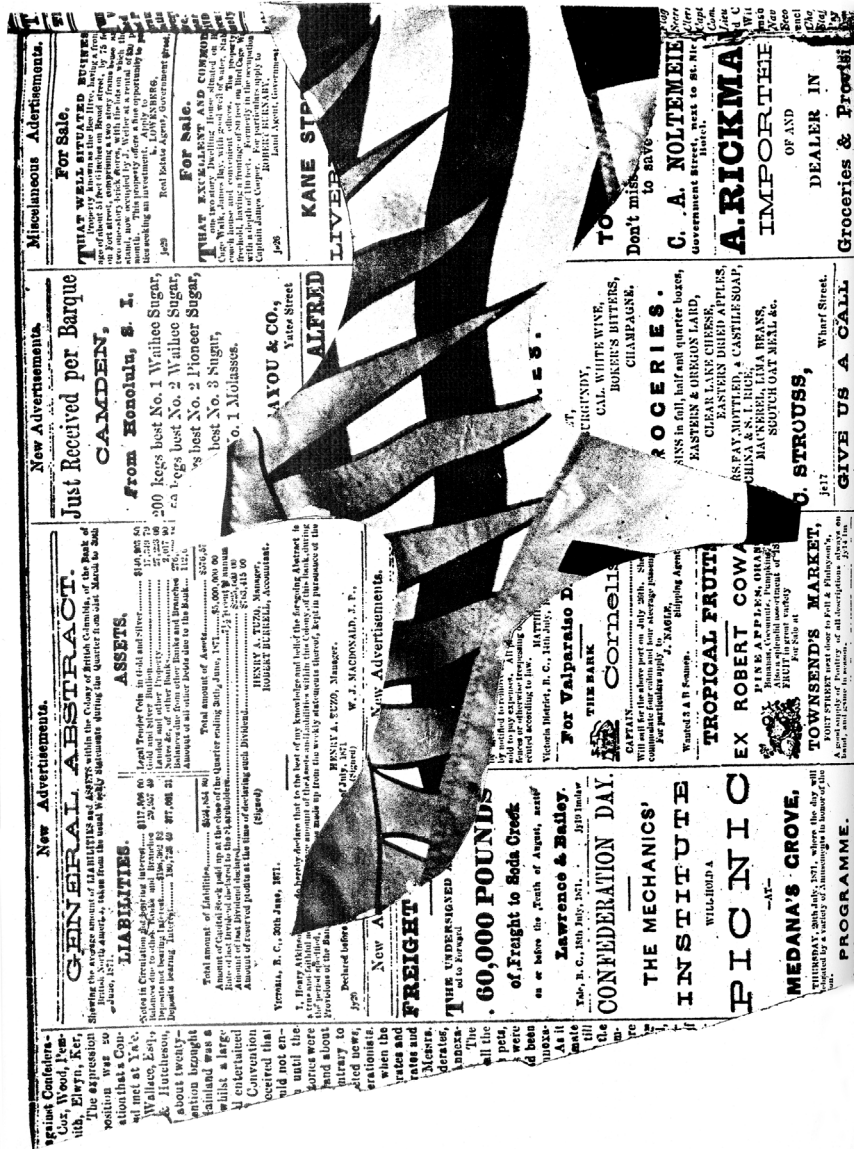
These collagist concrete poems literally engage McCaffery’s notion of writing as “excess,” since bissett in these poems uses literal waste to mark the

page, challenging conventions of poesis while also forcing us to confront the textual and material detritus of consumer culture.

Another striking poem from this collection begs readers to rethink or resist consumer culture. bissett places a Dentyne-brand gum wrapper at the centre of the page and frames it with a black rectangular box to identify the debris, like a picture frame, as an art object. Aside from reproducing and framing the wrapper, bissett's intervention is minimal, confined to his placement of the word "help" in the empty white boxes on the wrapper. "Help" echoes the slogan on the wrapper—"Helps Keep Teeth White"—but the repetition of the word is altered in the poem. There, in the word's second appearance in the poem, the typewriter line visibly slips and only a portion of the *h* is visible. The slippage suggests a struggle, thereby reinforcing the request for assistance. Moreover, in this way, the poem is a cry of desperation reflecting on the production of consumerist waste and its effect on the earth's atmosphere. It commands the reader to help, to become a better steward of the earth, and to think more consciously, as the frame of the poem suggests, about consumerist excess.

Breaking the Typing Machines

Implicated within the mechanisms of control that underpin the culture and values of publicity and advertising are the corporate offices where the "best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind."⁵² The twentieth century, as Darren Wershler explains, saw "the emergence of large corporations and global markets [that] produced a blizzard of documents—accounting ledgers, purchase orders, memos, correspondence, and so on."⁵³ The typewriter, though not always electronic, was an essential writing device that aided the work flows of corporations. Thus, the typewriter is emblematic of the capitalist and communicative conditions of the period. Not only is the typewriter emblematic of corporate culture, but, as Wershler explains (drawing on Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*), it is also representative of a form of disciplinary control that "operates by dividing the world into grids: spaces designed to contain and manage different segments of a population."⁵⁴ Discipline is the subtle modulation of bodies and behaviours to ultimately optimize the productivity of citizens, labourers, and consumers as contributors to a socio-economic system. Advertising does this by influencing the desires of consumers, prompting them to buy specific consumer goods. But as Wershler writes in regards to the typewriter, "nowhere



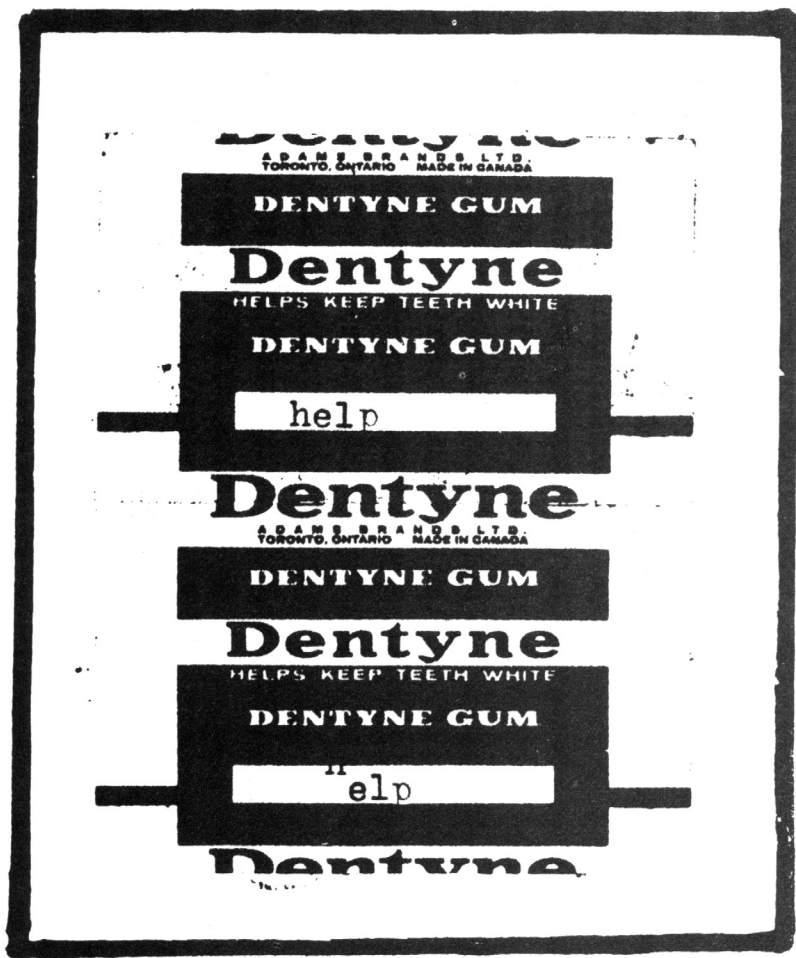


Figure 2.4: Untitled collage from *pass th food release th spirit book* by bill bissett, 1973.

does this system of discipline become more clear than in the standard classroom typing manual,”⁵⁵ which provides detailed instructions on the proper ways for engaging the typewriter’s mechanisms, including the placement and movement of fingers across the keyboard for optimal typing efficiency. So, for all the usefulness of the typewriter as a writing tool—one that poets in the mid- to late twentieth century often relied heavily upon to produce their mimeographed publications—it was also a site of control that dictated the movement of language on the page and the bodily movements of the typist within grid systems that were designed to increase the speed and clarity of printed communication. In the typewriter, we find both the literal modulation of communication and the symbolic modulations of corporate culture. Some poets reacted against these controlling mechanisms, creating concrete poetry that misused and abused the typewriter in order to free language from the discipline to which it has traditionally been submitted.

In *Reading Writing Interfaces*, Lori Emerson draws together the typewriter-based concrete poetry of Canadian borderblur poets McCaffery and Nichol and English borderblur poet Houéard, whose work she argues represents a form of media-based activism. During “the era from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s . . . poets, working heavily under the influence of Marshall McLuhan, sought to create (especially, so-called dirty) concrete poetry as a way to experiment with the limits and the possibilities of the typewriter,” writes Emerson.⁵⁶ She argues that Canadian concrete is visually unlike its first wave predecessors and is perhaps more aptly described as *dirty concrete*, a term that some Canadians preferred to use when describing the “nonlinearity and illegibility” of their work.⁵⁷ For Emerson, dirty concrete represents an aesthetic that actively contests the limits of communication devices such as the typewriter. If the typewriter is a “particular kind of mechanical writing interface that necessarily inflects both how and what one writes,” then dirty concrete is a means of breaking its material specificities.⁵⁸

The desire to respond to technologies that control communication and enable the development of postmodernization is strongly foregrounded by McCaffery, whose intermedial works “resolutely resist categorization and containment,” claims Stephen Cain.⁵⁹ McCaffery’s oeuvre is exemplary of borderblur, exploring as it does many intermedial possibilities, including concrete poetry, sound poetry, game-like works, and more. I will return to McCaffery’s work numerous times in subsequent parts of the book, but for now, I focus on his exemplary work of typewriter-based concrete poetry,

Carnival. *Carnival* is a work consisting of two panels, the first of which was composed from 1967 to 1970 and the second from 1970 to 1975 (both published by Coach House Press). McCaffery describes this work as “essentially cartographic; a repudiation of linearity in writing and the search for an alternative syntax in ‘mapping.’”⁶⁰

Carnival is multidirectional, coloured with both black and red typewriter tapes, and employs printing and copying devices that are typically found in corporate offices, such as rubber stamps, xerography, dry transfer lettering, and stencils. Each of these techniques are used in unconventional ways, creating a visual disorder on the page that is augmented by McCaffery’s use of textual overlay and abstract shapes. To consume the text as intended, a reader must destroy the book by removing each page and then following the instructions provided with the text and assembling the panels to create a largescale artwork. In effect, *Carnival* “challenges” not only “the sequentiality of the book” but the sequentiality of syntax and conventional reading processes writ large so as “to achieve a calculated annihilation of semantic meaning.”⁶¹ That McCaffery created a book that must be destroyed foregrounds his interest in exceeding the conventional limits of the medium, since here the book as a container for language needs to be broken before the work can actually be consumed. In doing so, McCaffery also theoretically frees the body from the disciplined practice of reading. *Carnival* is not a work that is meant to be held in your hands and read following the traditional left-to-right reading pattern. It breaks with this tradition while also breaking the linear, grid-like construction of the typewritten page. When assembled by the reader as instructed, it most loudly pronounces its intermedial aesthetic, blurring the medial borders of the book and framed artwork, of language and visual mark.

When assembled into its intended form, *Carnival* is also indeed “cartographic” and map-like. The typewritten words are freed from conventional linearity and both panels are maps for an imagined space, outside of syntax and semantics. In *Carnival*, there is no recognizable order. The book echoes the tradition of Western Christian and Greek Orthodox festivals, which include public celebrations, parades, and entertainment attended by persons in costumes and masks. It is traditionally a time for participants to free themselves from the strictures of their daily lives within the state. In his introduction to the book, McCaffery suggests that one can enter the text using one of many definitions of the word “carnival,” which in this case comes “from Med. L. carnevale, a putting away of the flesh and hence a prelental language

game.”⁶² *Carnival* is a space in which the rules of linguistic meaning-making are ignored in order to open a space of possibility in which readers can revel—much like the attendees of a carnival—in disruption, image, and play. As a text that seeks to free itself from the state, it also gestures toward the possibility of being outside of Canada, and, as a work of literature, of imagining the possibility of forming a textual community divorced from nationalistic forms of cultural expression.

Among the critiques of McCaffery’s *Carnival*, poet and scholar Andy Weaver foregrounds the problem of the socio-political art project in relation to issues of identity politics, which highlights some of the complexities of the book’s status as an avant-garde text, especially as they relate to privilege, masculinity, whiteness, and ableism. If this is, by one reading, an intermedial text meant to free language from the control of corporatized writing devices, whose language is allowed this freedom? Who is able to follow McCaffery’s prompt, that this text is about the putting “away of the flesh?”⁶³ For Weaver, this compromises the socio-political project of *Carnival* because, as he notes, McCaffery’s text is a call for “moving past the physical body, towards an ideal relationship between mind and language.”⁶⁴ The validity of McCaffery’s political project is problematized by the fact that this negation of the body ignores the conditions that deny other bodies—those of visible minorities, people with disabilities, queer bodies, etc.—the luxury of leaving their corporeality behind. These bodies are effectively locked within the social conditions produced by the stigmas that target them. The second panel of *Carnival* thereby ignores “the socio-political and economic differences that cause real strife in the world, an oversight that leaves the text dealing with ethereal problems at the expense of offering any thoughts on practical matters.”⁶⁵

Like Weaver, I seek to locate my analysis in the pitfalls of McCaffery’s conceptualization of *Carnival: The Second Panel*. The first pitfall concerns the problem of putting away the “flesh.” The whole body is not composed of “flesh”—flesh is but one part of the body, which is also composed of skin, bone, nerves, and blood, in addition to the emotions, sensations, and ideas that inform how the body experiences the world. Furthermore, McCaffery’s seeming attempt to negate the body by placing the “reader, as perceptual participant, within the center of his language” seems to be a mere provocation.⁶⁶ Body and language are intricately and totally assembled; they are inseparable. McCaffery himself describes the bodily aspects of language in processes of enunciation and vocalization: “Voice is the polis of mouth, lips teeth, tongue,

tonsils, palate, breath, rhythm, timbre, and sound.”⁶⁷ Similarly, the production of concrete poetry depends on an assemblage of bone, cartilage, and muscles: movements of the hand and eye and more. From these two points, I offer a complimentary reading that builds on the observation with which Weaver begins his essay: the text’s relationship to notions of disorientation, which seeks to free language from the controlling mechanisms emerging in the twentieth century. This might cut against McCaffery’s conceptualization of his own work; however, I think it is only fair to analyze his writing on its own terms. If *Carnival: The Second Panel* is a text within which the reader “confront[s] [language] as material without reference to an author or to any otherness,” then McCaffery, too, must be banned as authorial referent.⁶⁸

I propose that *Carnival: The Second Panel*’s call to move away from the body could be also understood not as a movement away from flesh toward the abstract, but as a move deeper into the body—into its feelings, intensities, and affects. In bold, rubber-stamped text an elongated form of the word “plunge” begins in the upper-left corner of the assembled version; it then moves diagonally toward the centre—signifying not a movement away from but a movement deeper *into* the body. In the assembled form of *Carnival: The Second Panel*, the movement of the word “plunge” draws the reader’s eye further into the centre of the text, not away from it. A similar sentiment is expressed on page 6, perhaps summarizing the book’s overriding project: “the message being that we are all poets one and all as long as we have lungs the moving into the body’s ritual of repeated semaphore / a perception of clarity beyond all measure of meanings.”⁶⁹ Again, there is a distinctive invocation calling the reader to move *into* the body—not away from it. I can only assume that the “message” is the poem itself. This message, as indicated by Weaver’s analysis, could rightly be characterized by disorientation, an effect traditionally used in many avant-garde artworks to, as theorist Charles Russell explains, allow readers to “perceive things of previously unimagined beauty, or experience states of abruptly expanded consciousness.”⁷⁰ *Carnival: The Second Panel* is deranged, mobilizing disorientation with the intention of offering a possible place within which an individual may find liberation, even just for a moment. As a receptive reader of *Carnival: The Second Panel*, one invites the text into one’s body and allows one’s sense of typewritten language to be disrupted, opening up new possibilities for writing and reading.⁷¹ McCaffery demonstrates these possibilities with his intermedial, multi-panelled book cum visual artwork. Typewritten language was essential for ordering society during

the mid-twentieth century. It allowed personal communication, but it also, as both Wershler's and Emerson's writings imply, facilitated the controlling mechanisms of corporate and disciplinary cultures. By reading McCaffery's poem, our "body's ritual of repeated semaphore" is disrupted, and that disruption is essential. It opens language to new possibilities of configuration and movement free from controlling mechanisms at the economic, social, and cultural levels.

Paul Dutton, like McCaffery, destroys his writing device in *The Plastic Typewriter* (composed in 1977), and creates a book using "a disassembled plastic-case typewriter, an intact typewriter, carbon ribbons, carbon paper, metal file, and white bond paper."⁷² McCaffery and Dutton share an interest in exploring the communicative functions of the writing machine by using those of its parts not usually designated for the production of typed language. The typewriter is an assemblage; thereby, all its parts in interplay are involved in the process of producing the typewritten word. However, the separate function of certain parts (e.g., the carbon paper, or the letters themselves) are more integral to the production of language than, say, the aligning scale or the spool cover. That being said, in the spirit of borderblur, Dutton's text is thematically linked to song and music. For example, lyrics from "Certainly Lord," a traditional Black spiritual commonly sung in churches and adopted in the 1960s as a civil rights anthem, is imprinted on some of the pages.⁷³ "Flamenco Sequence/1977," Dutton's contribution to the *Sound Poetry Catalogue* (1978), presents an excerpt from *The Plastic Typewriter*, where he writes, "Poetry consists of language; and language consists of sound and sight, of idea and emotion, of intellect and body, of rationality and irrationality,"⁷⁴ and he further explains that one should "Work with it, play with it, act on it. And most of all (ultimately, hopefully) enjoy it."⁷⁵ And perhaps, a work like *The Plastic Typewriter* is just that simple: a text wherein readers should find pleasure outside of the conventional communicative modes of his time.

If, for McCaffery and Dutton, breaking open the restrictions of the typewriter is about revelling in the pleasure of textual freedom, Copithorne, in the 1960s and '70s, developed an intermedial concrete poetic in concert with the core principles of borderblur, but deviated from her peers with her emphasis on the hand and body in her work. In an interview with Lorna Brown, Carole Itter describes Copithorne as one of the "astounding young women" of the Vancouver scene, someone "who insisted that their statements be heard

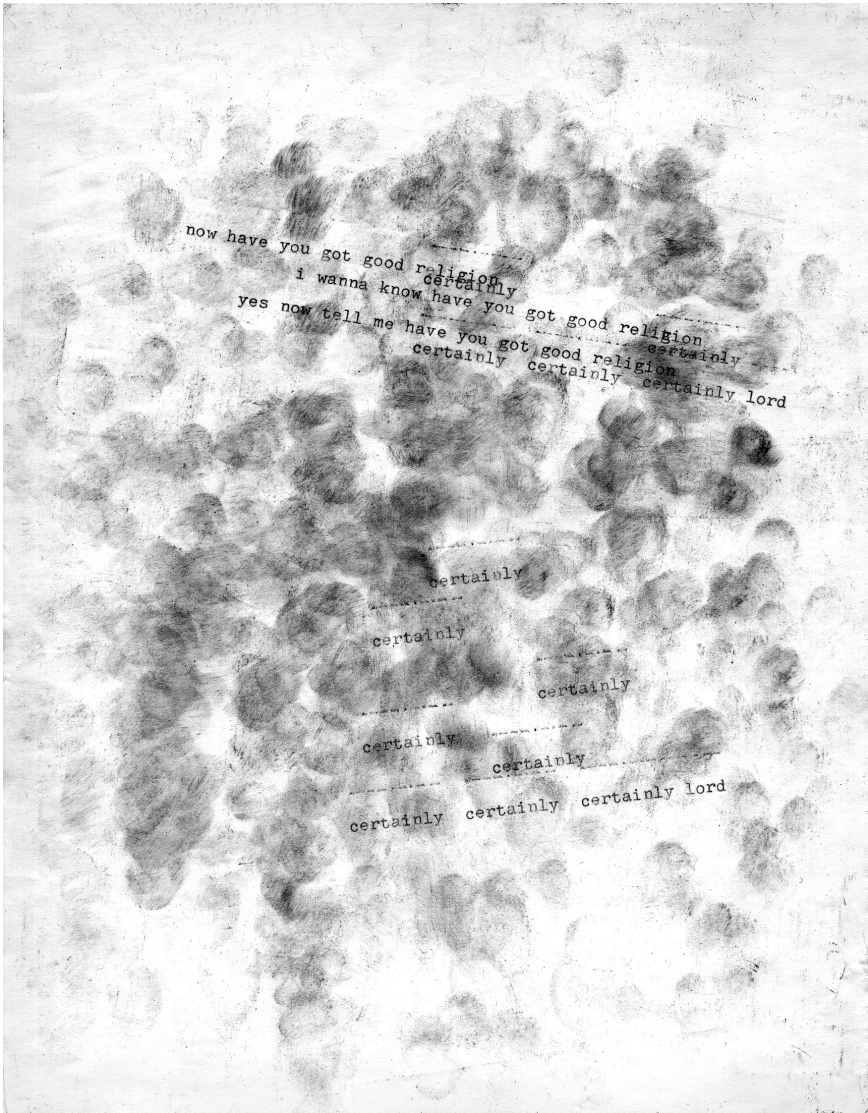


Figure 2.5: “The Plastic Typewriter, 12” by Paul Dutton (text sourced from the traditional Black US gospel song “Certainly, Lord”).

and that they could be artists.”⁷⁶ Indeed, active in both poetry and dance, Copithorne’s work stretched across local, national, and international literary networks.

Copithorne’s privileging of less mechanical writing media is significant for a variety of reasons. First, it becomes a way of folding together both of Copithorne’s artistic media: poetry and dance. The latter of the two is a fully embodied art, founded on principles of kinesis and proprioception. Second, it offers an expansion of Canadian concrete poetry discourse beyond its largely mechanized mode of poetics. Unlike some of the work by her male counterparts, Copithorne’s poetry and her choice of hand-drawn methods are significant because the relationship between typewriters and women’s bodies is troubling. Wershler himself questions critics who have hailed the typewriter as the mechanical device that “was the major means of women’s emancipation.”⁷⁷ Due to the increasing demand for clerical work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were more frequently employed in secretarial positions, including what Wershler, echoing the derisive usage of the time, refers to as the “Type-Writer Girl.” However, as Wershler points out, the typewriter led to “losses of power” as well as “gains.”⁷⁸ While women gained employment, equity was not the primary goal for the businesses that employed them: women were paid significantly lower wages than their male co-workers, and as “more Type-Writer Girls joined the workplace, corporations restructured themselves to ensure that these women would rarely if ever enter the management stream.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, as Wershler points out, many women were attracted to employment because popular culture painted a glamorous image of such work, yet this “imagery exaggerated the independence of the Type-Writer Girl, [and] it did so only to imply that part of her longed to be swept away by the right man.”⁸⁰ In effect, “fiction and advertising alike turned the Type-Writer Girl into something of a fetish object.”⁸¹ For these reasons, the typewriter’s role within the history of women’s emancipation has been overstated and should garner greater skepticism.

Wershler’s account of women and the typewriter illustrates the complex and alienating relationship between the two at the material level, yet a vast majority of the labour performed by women typists was also exploitive at an immaterial level. Much of what typists transcribed during this period was information received in dictation from men in superior workplace positions. The information that women typists worked with was derived from men’s voices and was not an expression of their own ideas. In other words,

women's labour—in assemblage with the typewriting machine—was doubly estranged since not only was it the first step in an exploitative labour environment for women workers, but this information was employed in the service of men operating as agents of the capitalist marketplace. In the clerical space, women were relegated to a mechanical status, treated as a conduit for the transference of information within a capitalist economy. In this way, the typewriter anticipates the conditions of the computing age and its problematic conceptions of embodiment. While the typewriter became increasingly ubiquitous, anticipated our own relationship to computers today, men's voices had already become perceived as a "bodiless fluid" that could be transmitted through an assemblage of women's labouring bodies and analog writing machinery.⁸² Considering this narrative of media archaeology, it becomes clear that McCaffery's typewriter-based concrete poem *Carnival* is problematic. According to Weaver, it posits male privilege as a universal experience. At the helm of the typewriter, women were unable to type themselves onto the page. But in Copithorne's decisive swerve away from the typewriter, she refused to entangle herself within its alienating mechanisms. Instead, she sought to write her body upon the page, to allow her body and its movements to take up space among a network of discursively dominating male practitioners.

In her early concrete poetry, Copithorne makes the body apparent by using graphic design tools such as sketching pencils and calligraphy pens, which require precise movements of the body that are distinct from the movements applied to typing machines. Betts notes that Copithorne's poems "bring the body back into the text by breaking the monotony and standardization of type."⁸³ Similarly, Bayard finds that Copithorne's concrete poetry traces "a narrative in space, and more than a transmitter of lexical meaning, each letter is carried across the page as a trace, the aesthetic and graphic energy of a specific mood, of a specific feeling."⁸⁴ Similar threads connect Bayard's and Betts's analyses of Copithorne's work: both draw attention to the importance of the body—its movements, feelings, and capacities to take up space on the page. However, I suggest that Copithorne's work is not just "breaking" the standardization of type, nor is it merely a "trace" or representation; instead, it is an embodied concrete poetic that responds to the gendered politics of writing media and literary culture in the 1960s and '70s. The typewriter requires the movement of hands and fingers to register a mark upon the page—the result of a type hammer striking typewriter tape and then page—thus, through this small form of violent impact the mechanical apparatus effaces

the movements of the finger. Conventionally used, the typewriter can render only the force of the typist. A forceful application of the finger upon a key might register a bold mark on the page, or even puncture the paper. With that said, this is not possible on all typewriters. Hand-held writings tools, like those used by Copithorne, much more effectively render bodily movement, speed, and pressure upon the page, affecting the overall texture, size, and style of the piece. In this way, the body is an undeniably integral part of the hand-drawn text's composition.

Copithorne ostensibly announces her difference and the capacities of her hand-based concrete poetic in her 1969 book *Release*: "There is another Order / to things," she writes, articulating the stakes of her poetic for us.⁸⁵ The necessarily broad invocation of "things" speaks to all aspects of material life: systems, bodies, language, affects, and so on, which become reconfigured in her poetry. Though not explicitly stated, this gesture toward the possibility of a new order suggests a dissatisfaction with the current order, which I recognize as the patriarchal conditions that arranged her communities as well as the increasing effacement of bodily materiality. Furthermore, she writes that this alternative order can be figured through "the games / that children play," "a doodle," and "delight."⁸⁶ Each of these elements corresponds to Copithorne's practice: there is indeed something playful about her work; the abstract graphics of her poetry might otherwise be referred to as doodles; and "delight" invokes pleasure, which is integrally bound with bodily processes. It is precisely from the body and its processes that Copithorne's poetry emerges, seeking a new order. It is, she writes,

produced from
my body of bliss
 growing
 beyond
 my mind⁸⁷

Beyond the mind, in Copithorne's conception, is the body; this is where she locates her poetry and from where a new order may be attained. It is an order wherein intelligence, bodies, materials, and affects are intricately bound. Atop these words is a drawing of a winged creature, sitting on the opening words as if about to take flight, suggesting that this mode of bodily poetry offers agency and a pathway out of the "order of things" as they are.

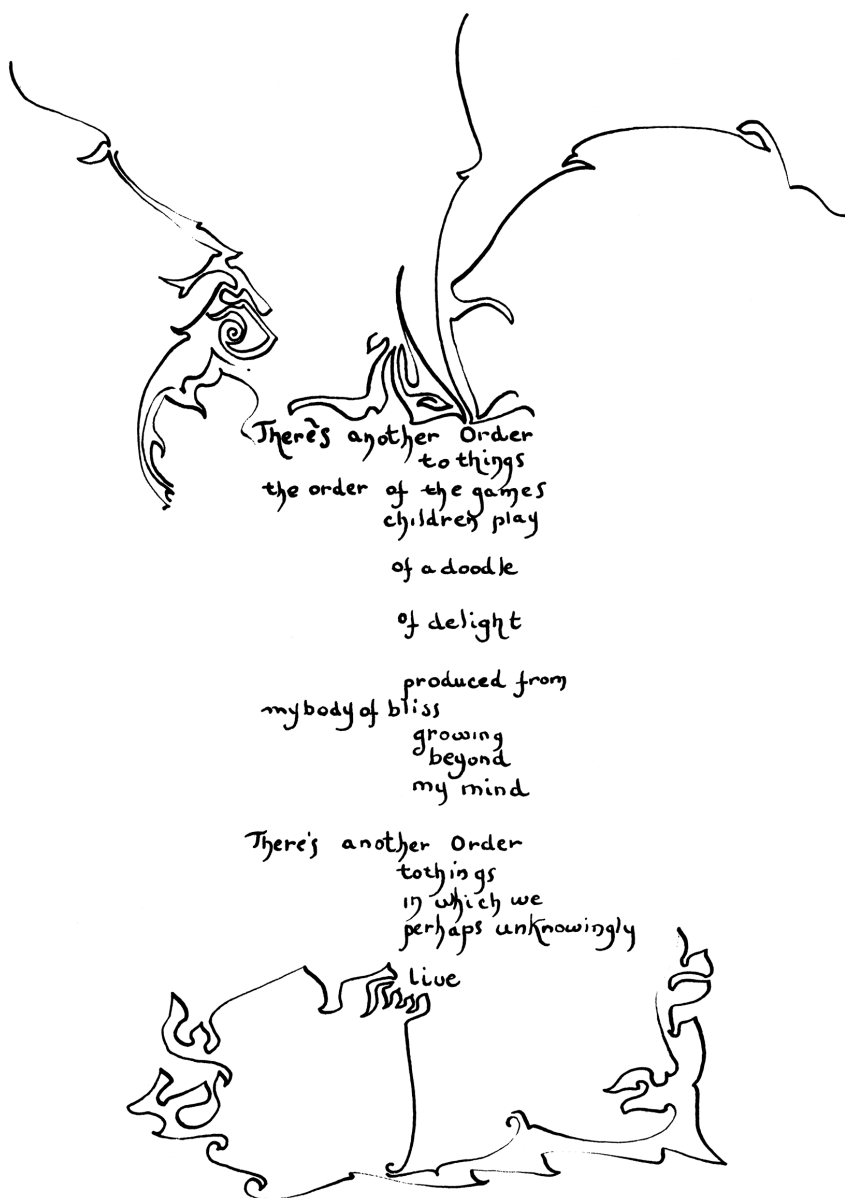


Figure 2.6: Excerpt from *Release* by Judith Copithorne, 1969.

The first poem in this same collection, begins with the word “No,” and announces Copithorne’s resistance to the conditions and mainstream poetics of her time. The decipherable language of the poem, embedded within the curlicues of an abstract, hand-drawn graphic, elaborates on the opening sentiment:

No
I say
I don’t have to play
games your way
I can play any game
I please
and still say
No⁸⁸

Copithorne’s “No” is a matter-of-fact assertion of independence, announcing a poetry that is premised entirely on the pursuit of her own impulses.

“Play” is a foundational concept to many of the works published under the guise of concrete poetry in Canada. Nichol and McCaffery, in “The Open Ladder Essay,” articulate the stakes of “play” for poetry. While this piece was only published in 1992 (and had only been performed in full once before, in 1982), play with text and image was a driving force for many concrete poets long before they articulated the stakes. Despite the seeming innocence that accompanies the idea of play, its use in poetry is often encoded. Much of what is considered play in concrete poetry corresponds to a playfulness vis-à-vis writing machinery, as in McCaffery’s two panels of *Carnival*—a title that even foregrounds playfulness by gesturing toward the carnivalesque. Less recognized is the type of play that Copithorne’s concrete poetry explores. She plays with her hands—following not the program of a typing machine, but her desire for movement as her hands, clasping a pen or marker, pull across the page to create what might otherwise be read as doodles. Instead, these marks are the body’s imprints on the page as it interacts with writing materials. In doing so, Copithorne refuses to “play by the rules,” resisting what was becoming, at the time, an aesthetic norm of machine-driven concrete poetics.

(Moving) Images: Film, Television, Photography

While Copithorne's concrete poetry explores the sensuality of the body, the lesser-known Armenian-Canadian poet Shaunt Basmajian (born in Lebanon) explores feeling and desire in conventional, heteronormative relationships.⁸⁹ These instances of desire in Basmajian's poetry are noteworthy for the way they take their cues from popular culture, with Nichol identifying rock 'n' roll as a major influence on Basmajian, whose work he says conveys an "infatuation which is so often taken as love, emoted as such in the rock & roll radio wave world we live in."⁹⁰ Nichol's point reminds us that he was thinking carefully about the meaning of love and the way the word circulates within popular culture, and Basmajian's exploration of the word here extends some of Berger's concerns around consumerism, advertising, and entertainment, as outlined in a previous section of this chapter. The influence of rock 'n' roll is apparent in Basmajian's concrete sequence "Personal Traumas," from his 1980 chapbook of *Boundaries Limits and Space*, which includes many poems that recall the playful minimalist poetic of Aram Saroyan. The words of "Personal Traumas" move across the five horizontal lines of a musical staff. The words themselves pay homage to rock 'n' roll and the well-worn lyrics about unrequited love typical of the genre.

"Personal Traumas" consists of only six pronouns—"me," "him," "her," "she," "they," "them"—and the adjective "alone," variously arranged across the staff, blurring the boundaries between musical and poetic media. In their own way, each word is a note in the poem, generating visual rhythms. The poem captures the speaker's romantic fixation with a woman who is in a relationship with another man, and the speaker's repeated disappointment with his inability to get close to her (hence the melodramatic reference to "trauma" in the title). The poem, which is composed across six pages, places these words in such a way as to describe the speaker's varying successes (or failures) in approaching the woman, who is sometimes quite close and other times blocked by another suitor. The poem ends with a penultimate "Breakdown" that uses overlaid text that communicates the speaker's anguish—as though the word "me" were falling or collapsing into itself—and then ends with the single word "alone." While Basmajian's poem is distinct from other concrete poems mentioned in this chapter, such as Nichol's "Blues," UU's "Touch," or poems from Copithorne's *Release*, since it lacks the kind of radical social and political thought that informs these works, "Personal Traumas" highlights

1/ IMAGINARY WALLS - between us

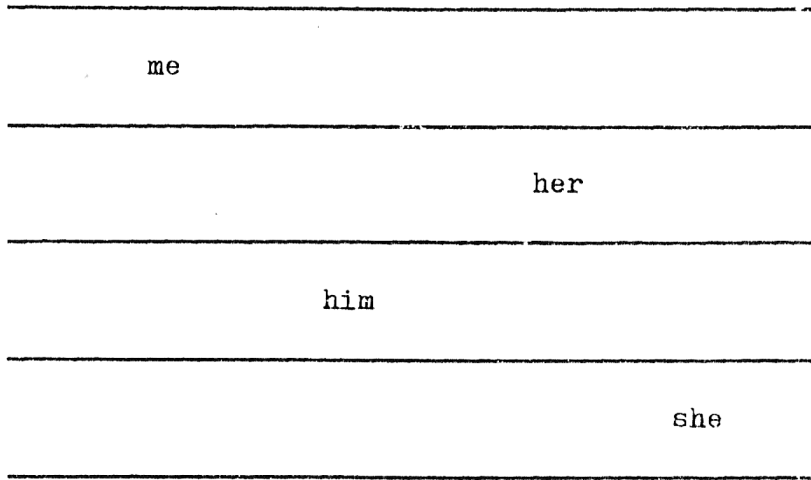


Figure 2.7: Excerpt from Shaunt Basmajian's "Personal Traumas," 1980.

the way modes of expression move across disciplines, informing each other in terms of both meaning and form. In this way, Basmajian enthusiastically transposes the schmaltzy musical expressions and lyrical archetypes that define the mid- to late twentieth century into a series of minimalist concrete poems that tell the same classic tale conveyed in many rock songs.

Basmajian's minimalist engagements with music and popular culture are in stark contrast to bissett's *Stardust* (1975), a maximalist book of concrete poetry that takes up the complexity and problems of complicity experienced by a person living in a media-saturated environment. *Stardust* indulges bissett's deep affinity for Hollywood, which he describes as a "dreem/nightmare uv a poor man in a / countree that has not its own / freedom independence intact / nd is mostly a capitalist countree." bissett states at length that

yu maybe cudint get a buk like ths
stardust writtn at all but in ths
kind uv oligarghy ths ar th gods
nd goddesses nd also th vessuls uv our
own ideaz nd in any kind uv society
tho prhaps diffrently paid nd glamorizd yu
have to have th prforming arts from street
theatre to opera whatevr so ths buk it
self is not a capitalist xpressyun
so forget that if yu ar thinking it
coz thats not wher its at ok⁹¹

bissett's poetic preface to *Stardust* makes clear his awareness of film's relationship to capitalism, inequity, and consumerism, especially in the way it represents false configurations of reality. bissett, too, is likely critical of Hollywood cinema as a container for the export of US ideology, promoting capitalism and consumerism as desirable ways of living. In this way, Friedrich Kittler's writings on film in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999) offer a useful reference point for understanding bissett's complicated relationship to film. As Kittler points out, "films are more real than reality and . . . their so-called reproductions are, in reality, productions."⁹² As such, they effectively undermine assumptions that film is a documentation of life. Films are, he writes, "scans, excerpts, selections."⁹³ In other words, films are momentary interventions into, and selections of, the stuff of real life, reconfigured mainly

for popular consumption. As such, the power of film as a medium is in the hands and minds of those who cut and splice the stuff of life. This point may underscore why bissett, in the very first issue of *blewointment*, felt compelled to advance an open letter responding to Forest's *In Search of Innocence*, with its partial representation of Vancouver's arts scene. While bissett does not accuse them of misrepresenting their subject, he does suggest that their film does not wholly represent the community he saw coming into existence at the time. The consequences of this deficit, bissett seems to recognize, will be a misperception of the reality of the 1960s Vancouver arts scene among future generations.

Poems from *Stardust* directly intervene in the entanglement of film, capital, and consumerism, with their collagist elements (mainly pictures of bissett and celebrities), shaped lyric poems, hand-drawn images, and dirty typewriter concrete poems. The book is both a celebration of Hollywood, celebrity, and film, and an investigation of film's impact on the shape and perception of everyday human life, hence bissett's framing of the book as both a dream *and* a nightmare. Following the title page, *Stardust* opens with a collage combining a photograph of twentieth-century media darlings Fred Astaire and Jane Powell in *Royal Wedding* (1951) placed overtop a repeated pattern of the letter *x*. Gaps in the pattern leave room for white spaces, like stars against a night sky, falling upon the kinetic grace of Astaire and Powell as a celebration of their musical prowess and celebrity status. On the following page, there is a similarly designed collage depicting a scene from another film: *Kim* (1950), based on Rudyard Kipling's novel of the same name and starring Errol Flynn and Dean Stockwell. In the image, Stockwell (playing Kim) is taken into custody by the police to escape a group of persons following him. Unlike the collage with Astaire and Powell, however, the pattern above the photograph is more solid, with the addition of a somewhat ominous, tentacular-looking type drawing over top. While both images share a context—the so-called golden era of Hollywood cinema, when audiences were promised spectacular visuals and storytelling—and both represent Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer productions—they are nonetheless in stark contrast with one another. One depicts the agency and grace of Astaire and Powell as onlookers watch with pleasure; the other presents a boy in captivity, glared at by a group of stern-looking men. In comparison, these images capture both the dream-like and the nightmarish sides of Hollywood film, seen here as a source of entertainment but also of containment.



Figure 2.8: Untitled (Astaire/Powell) from bill bissett's *Stardust*, 1975.

bissett moves beyond this initial binary in the shaped poem “THE TUBE IS GASEOUS,” which considers film, much like Kittler, as a medium for displaying and obfuscating the conditions of human life. In this poem, the speaker reflects upon *Royal Wedding* and asks, “will we all ever completely know / what m g m was and has done / to ourselves or the royal family,” a question that reveals a desire to know how media and corporations, like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, impact the conditions of human life. bissett suggests that the impact is the warping of reality:

jane powell did not shite or piss
 i remember that clearly how cud shee
 nor did the
 royal family⁹⁴

Anticipating Kittler’s theory of film as a medium that fractures and splices the actual events of real life, bissett identifies how film veils basic human functions and instead treats actors as “heaven / incarnate.”⁹⁵ For bissett, there is a classist dimension to such portrayals:

m g m may not
 have been in the nashun
 sintrest th board
 a governors so plottud n conivd against us poor
 white
 quakers⁹⁶

In this way, bissett draws attention to how Hollywood films cultivate a cult of celebrity, a tiered vision of human life that places some people in more privileged places than others.

First published by bissett’s Blew Ointment Press, McCaffery’s *Panopticon* (1984) is also thematically concerned with film while, perhaps, expanding the definition of the concrete poem to engage the problems of film as a visual medium that includes visual, sonic, and gestural domains. *Panopticon* is not a concrete poem like those examined above. It is, rather, a book-length work that at first glance looks more like prose than poetry. However, *Panopticon* engages optically centred media and displays the same material consciousness that other concrete poets have advanced in their work. McCaffery engages the

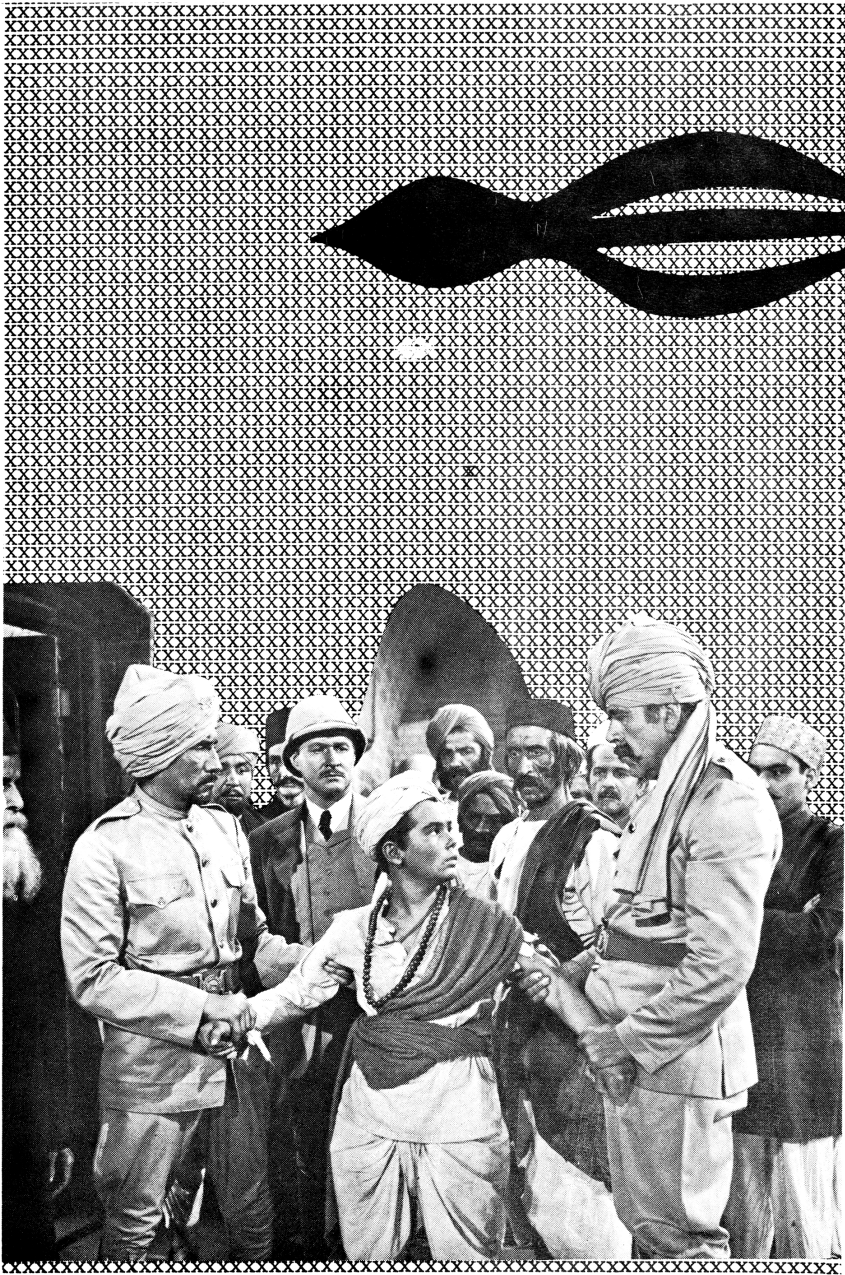


Figure 2.9: Untitled (*Kim*) from bill bissett's *Stardust*, 1975.

realm of narrative but with poetic intent. *Panopticon*'s narrative, if one can call it that, is ruptured in terms of both content and form by the integration of many concretist elements. As such, the book closely corresponds to concrete poetry as a materially conscious form: unconventional typography and layout; collagist techniques with images, grids, and false errata; and, perhaps most strikingly, a section containing the image of a static band that differentiates the white page space from a strip of pixelated grey, which reviewer Sam Rowe suggests is "meant to represent a filmic image."⁹⁷

Hailed by poet Charles Bernstein as the "exemplary antiabsorptive work," *Panopticon* engages film as a visual, narrative-driven medium by returning to and remediating the same scene: a woman emerging from a bathtub, reaching for a novel, as she prepares to see a film.⁹⁸ This scene is reconfigured in *Panopticon* across three sections, beginning with part 3, "The Mind of Pauline Brain," followed by part 2, "Summer Alibi," and ending with part 1, "The Mark"—a sequence that resists linear convention. As Rowe explains, "the woman both appears in and watches a film variously titled *Summer Alibi*, *Panopticon*, *The Mark*, *Toallitas* and *The Mind of Pauline Brain*, a film which at certain points inexplicably changes into a novel, in fact, the very novel that the woman reaches for in her bookshelf after stepping out of the bath."⁹⁹ *Panopticon* shifts between media quickly by invoking the typewriter, photograph, novel, play, film, and more. As an extremely fragmented work, it engages the optic realms of media with an eye to how they present disparate sequences of events with coherence, a point that Kittler, as noted above, describes as fantasy. In its fractured form, *Panopticon* reminds us that media presentation is part fantasy as it problematizes conventions of narrative and visual media as representations of life.

With its repeated ruptures, returns, and remediations, McCaffery's book also engages problems of control. The title invokes Jeremy Bentham's notion of the "panopticon," a prison model predicated on omnipotent surveillance as a means of control. *Panopticon* engages this intensity of seeing by way of exhaustive, meta-conscious descriptions wherein the reader is at times placed in a position closer to that of author or filmmaker:

Let the image of the bath persist and split a second time. Place the woman in the room and in the theatre. This time allow the man to walk away. Follow him until you reach the study door. Don't bother to describe the room, just put him in it. Let him

meet another man. Don't mention names. Allow them to leave the room and walk down into the street where a planned complication will occur. Finish the chapter. Switch off the machine.¹⁰⁰

As Bernstein claims, the “mark” is “the visible sign of writing,” and he further claims that “to make a movie of the ‘mark,’” as *Panopticon* does, “is to theatricalize it.”¹⁰¹ McCaffery foregrounds the fact that reading often makes the material signifier of the mark invisible: “A TEXTUAL SYSTEM UNDERLIES EVERY TEXTUAL EVENT THAT CONSTITUTES ‘THIS STORY.’ HOWEVER THE TEXTUAL HERMENEUSIS OF ‘THIS STORY’ DOES NOT NECESSARILY COMPRISE A TOTAL TEXTUAL READING.”¹⁰² The “total textual reading” is further obscured by film as a medium (with the exception of early silent films, which employed text to convey dialogue and even sound). Without subtitles, later twentieth-century films make language transparent as a medium—it initiates and drives the actions of any film, which often begins as a written text; however, in the end, the written word is erased, replaced by moving image and audio. While engaged by film, we can hear the word, but we cannot see it. *Panopticon* reverses the filmic privileging of images and sound over letterform, forcing us to turn our gaze away from the spectacle of media and back toward language and its necessary interaction in McCaffery’s media-saturated world.

In *The Bee Book* (1981), Ann Rosenberg fuses the montage techniques of moving images—as used in film and television—to create a nearly two-hundred-page intermedial novel that fully embraces the materially conscious spirit of borderblur. Like McCaffery’s *Panopticon*, Rosenberg’s *The Bee Book*, which Nichol shepherded through production while at Coach House, extends the definition of the concrete poem. Is it a novel? A poem? A collage? A play? *The Bee Book* blends all of these genres to create a meditation on a woman’s desire and sexuality that relies on the interaction of visual and linguistic media. The novel’s nine sections each take the form of narrative prose fragmented by elements of concrete poetry (which are integral to the story), including hand-drawn images, photographs, diagrams, musical scores, asemic writings, and typographic arrangements of text that resemble waves, lips, and genitalia. Over a series of connected vignettes, *The Bee Book* follows Habella, a bee enthusiast and natural science teacher, as she navigates the complexities of sexuality as a young woman nurtured by Catholic principles and traditions. Rosenberg uses the lives and language of bees, with a particular emphasis on

their mating patterns and internal hierarchies, as a counterpoint to Habella's understanding of human relationships. In part, the book follows Habella through relationships with two men as she tries to understand what she needs and wants—emotionally, physically, and intellectually—in partnership. *The Bee Book* traces Habella's shift from her belief in patriarchy and her desire for marriage toward self-reliance and an embrace of matriarchy. In this way, the book is located at a critical juncture of interest for the concrete poets: that of visuality and the limits of individual expression through multiple media (which might also explain why Nichol appears to have been a steward of the book).

The text employs image in a variety of ways; however, text and image are used most strikingly in places where conventional language does not fully capture feelings and ideas. Like other concretists of her time, Rosenberg uses visuality where consciously apprehended language fails. For example, in chapter 3, "The Drone," Habella courts a man who claims he is an Egyptologist named Solomon. She is quickly infatuated with him and loses her virginity, a decision she later regrets. Their brief courtship is described in prose fragmented by the interjection of images. As they flirt, they draw hieroglyphics and diagrams of bee dances to impress one another with their knowledge, and these are presented as physical imagery in the book.¹⁰³ They also dance together to suggestive music, which is described in the typographic arrangement of the morphemes "UUHHHHH," "MMMAHHHH," and "oooooooo."¹⁰⁴ When they finally have sex, Rosenberg conveys this encounter with a typewritten concrete piece consisting of the letters *n*, *m*, and *o* in repetition, and a letter-based depiction of a penis and vagina.¹⁰⁵ This final depiction is augmented by the language used to create these images: "I want to," say both Solomon and Habella, which leads Solomon to reply insensitively, "why why do you cry habella oh what damn it is the matter with you."¹⁰⁶ Later in the book, when in conversation with her close friend Matthias, she expresses of regret: "Damn it, damn it. I I'm so ashamed. I I gave up my virginity to someone I I'll p probably never see again. I I j just lost my head."¹⁰⁷ On the one hand, this expression is enough to convey Habella's feelings in the moment of her encounter with Solomon—she is overwhelmed, impassioned, infatuated. However, the fragmentation of the narrative through the incorporation of concretist image effectively depicts Habella's feelings. These feelings are heightened and passed on to the reader, who, in a similar way, might feel

disoriented by the mixture of text and image, which simultaneously breaks the logical flow of conventional narrative.

Eventually, Habella marries a man named Fred, with whom she raises several children. Over time, though, Habella grows unhappy in her marriage. She is bored of Fred and seemingly unhappy with her children. She begins to seek a way out of the reality she has found herself in, which is largely the result of her fulfilled desire to be married: “why can’t I *create* my own dream and *choose* the people who live it with me? Why can’t I become *in charge* of my reality?”¹⁰⁸ From this utterance, the story dramatically shifts toward the surreal. Habella proceeds upstairs and begins rearranging the furniture so as to build a “hexagon in her room with one side open,” where she feeds “herself on Royal Jelly.”¹⁰⁹ In so doing, Habella has transformed herself into a queen bee, thereby fully emulating the species she has admired so deeply all her life. Near the end of the novel, Habella’s son Harry seems to voice Habella’s esteem for bees when he “announced for some reason with ten-year-old earnestness that he would build a colony where workers shared equally in labour and where there would be no sexual rivalry.”¹¹⁰ *The Bee Book* ends with Habella leaving her hexagon, transformed into a queen bee. Once the narrative confirms Habella’s flight, the text ends not with language but with photographs of an open sky, indicative of Habella’s newfound freedom.

By framing it as being in dialogue with the visual culture of mass media—especially film and television—we might locate *The Bee Book* in the context of important discussions regarding the representations of women in media. While Copithorne’s hand-drawn poems can be understood as a response to the various patriarchal structures embedded in arts and literary communities, and reinforced by the typewriter’s gendered history, Rosenberg’s text does similar work in relation to narrative and television. While the novel is not preoccupied with television as a medium, its narrative structure is disrupted (or expanded) by its montage-like qualities. In *Panopticon*, McCaffery, too, finds stimulus in the ruptures of narrative brought about by electronic media, which is routinely signalled by *Panopticon*’s return to a voyeur-like moment that focuses on a woman emerging from the bath. *The Bee Book* makes for an interesting companion to McCaffery’s book, presenting a more robust characterization of women and desire. Furthermore, not only is *The Bee Book* driven by a conventional narrative about self-discovery, but nearly every page integrates a new visual element—drawings, diagrams, charts, photographs, musical score, and other images. It reconfigures media, like

television, so as to disrupt and expand upon the production of meaning. In *The Bee Book*, Rosenberg shifts her focus away from the woman as a subject of the male gaze; instead, she follows Habella's development in dialogue with a culture that objectifies women's bodies and desires, a problem that continues to haunt advertising in the twenty-first century. Rosenberg claims the strategy of the fractured narrative to better represent the experience of Habella's coming of age, reclaiming media's collagist strategies to better represent the complexities of a Habella's life.

While Rosenberg, McCaffery, and bissett produced works connected to moving images, Roy Kiyooka's *Stoned Gloves* (1970) focuses on the still image—the photograph. As George Bowering recounts, "Kiyooka had gone to Osaka to install his brightly coloured sails at the Canadian pavilion at Expo '70. While there, he photographed gloves discarded by workers at the site. The photographs and some of his words, rendered large, made a travelling exhibition in Canadian galleries, and were translated into a book by Coach House Press."¹¹¹ In a work that is equal parts poetry and art book, Kiyooka fuses black-and-white photographs with text (overlaid or accompanying) and "traces the history of race labour in the foundations of the Canadian nation-state, and attempts to redress state policies of racial exclusion and discrimination in Canada's national narrative."¹¹² Kiyooka's photographed found gloves synecdochically represent the erasure of immigrant labour in crucial nation-unifying projects such as the building of the transcontinental railway, just as the gloves discarded around the site of the 1970 Expo represented the local workers who assisted in building the Canadian pavilion.

Blurring the borders of art and life, Kiyooka utilizes the photograph as a mechanism for witnessing these unacknowledged bodies of workers: "the way they fell / the way they lay there / the dust sifting down / hiding all the clues."¹¹³ The photographs are the only evidence of these labouring bodies before the dust of history settles upon them, perfectly occluding their narrative lines. Instead, in this sequence of photos, Kiyooka announces their presence and, in a simple equation, speaks to the interconnectedness of body, earth, and nation:

glove
equals
leaf
equals

stone
equals
wood
equals
bone¹¹⁴

This equation is particularly striking since it was during this period that poets and critics like Atwood were investigating such natural images as foundational aspects of settler life in Canada, where an earlier generation of newcomers had struggled against the natural environment. The photographs in *Stoned Gloves* effectively gesture toward the various internationalizing movements of ideas and, especially in this case, bodies across borders that are foundational to the formation of Canada as a nation thus undermining claims to a national identity by critiquing how this singular mindset risks effacing racialized bodies and labour.

Kiyooka draws attention to the frame of an artwork in *Stoned Gloves*'s exploration of absence, presence, race, and identity. The text could be profitably compared to the work of poet and craftsman Brian Dedora, who has at times similarly explored the way aperture obscures and reveals a subject. The most obvious comparison here would be Dedora's 1988 chapbook *The Compact Edition of HUGE* (published by UU's Silver Birch Press), which brings together poetic text and photographs of the "HUGE" brand of notebooks. Dedora's privately published 1978 poem *CRACK*, however, captures my attention for the way its form is more sharply distinguished from *The Compact Edition of HUGE*. In *CRACK*, Dedora's skills as a photographer and framer are apparent. The poem is comprised of a single piece of black, 8.5-by-11-inch cardstock containing a small aperture that reveals a thin white line and a few letters, like an opening on or within the page. The effect of such a presentation emphasizes the role of the reader as viewer. When looking at this poem one may feel as though one is peering through a door left ajar or a crack in a wall. Composed of only a few letters, the poem is void of semantic content; it is impossible to know what words are seemingly concealed by the matte black of the page. In its own way, like many poems addressed in this chapter, *CRACK* unsettles the conventions of the traditional page-based poem. Typically, readers expect the high contrast of a white page covered in black text to ensure legibility. Yet here, Dedora has overwhelmed the page with a stark blackness to obscure legibility.

Beyond these reversals, it is difficult not to read Dedora's *CRACK* within the historical context in which it was written, specifically the oppression of Toronto's gay community in the 1970s and '80s. In "I Have a Remember When," Dedora remembers his experiences during this tumultuous period, which are "entirely unknown with the corollary apprehension of what else is unknown, forgotten, or lost."¹¹⁵ He highlights, for example, the various forms of violence and surveillance that Toronto's gay community faced at the hands of the Metropolitan Toronto Police. "Vice arrests" at bars such as Toronto's Parkside Tavern "were made easier through collusion with the owners of the Parkside, who allowed police surveillance in the downstairs washrooms."¹¹⁶ Officers would entrap gay patrons by constructing a surveillance hole in the bathroom that allowed them to peer from the other side and look, say, for any signs of cruising, and anyone found participating in such activity would surely face "grievous consequences."¹¹⁷

Dedora's *CRACK* recalls the same kind of optics employed by police. The reader is a viewer peering through a crack in the wall, surveilling the language on the other side, hoping to seize upon its meaning. Likewise, surveilling officers peer through the wall, intending to seize gay patrons. There is distinct violence that unites each instance; both language and subject are meant to be forced into systems that make them known and knowable. Yet *CRACK* resists legibility and closure; it thwarts our attempt to reduce it to a singular meaning. The language remains open to possibilities more significant than semantics. In this way, and through this analogy, Dedora's *CRACK* reminds us, too, that the queer subjects behind those tavern walls—whose identities may not be legible to an ignorant public and police force—are people who can be recognized in ways that are far less reductive and complex than sexual identity. Taking a step back and recalling Dedora's interest in photography as a visual mode, *CRACK* reminds us that in the era of the ubiquitous image, the visibility images may offer can also be willfully misread and used to manipulate people toward unjust ends.

Though lacking the resonant images of surveillance and police oppression evoked in Dedora's *CRACK*, this chapter offers a minuscule aperture through which to view the vast matrix of Canadian concrete poetry produced under the aegis of borderblur. Another way of reading Dedora's *CRACK* is to read it as a metaphor for the creative openings that intermedia offered this generation of poets, including a wider array of strategies for expression. All these poets, in one way or another, demonstrate how their expansive, intermedial

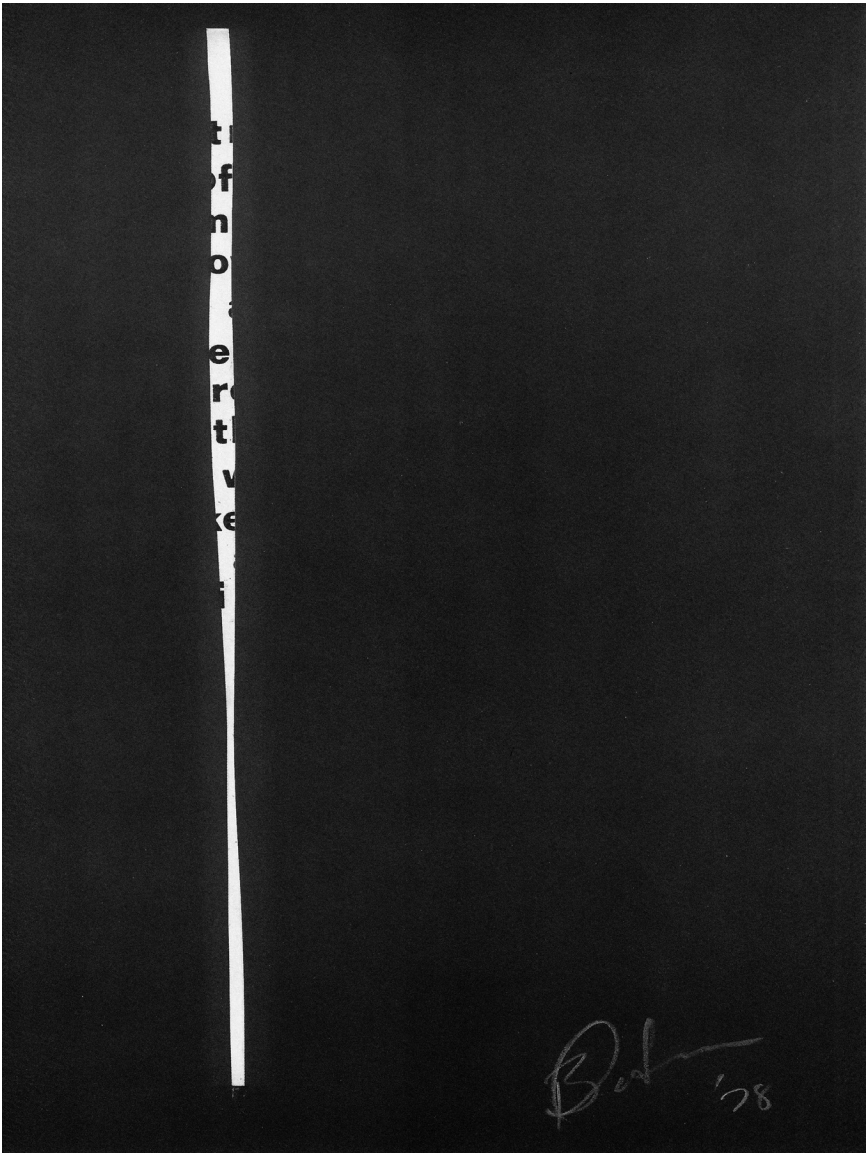


Figure 2.10: *CRACK* by Brian Dedora, 1978.

poetics challenge literary tradition through their inimitable fusion of poetic language with optically centred modes. As detailed above, their concerns far exceed the project of cultivating a national literary identity; rather, they were often wrestling with the implications of what it meant to create in a world in which, for better or worse, images were making their presence ever more forcefully felt.