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ENU33065-202526 LITERATURE AND WRITING TECHNOLOGIES

8 December 2025

The Tate Modern's *The Shape of Words & Women in Concrete Poetry* : Art, Poetry, & the
Production of Meaning

The work of many twentieth-century writers and artists demonstrates an interest in experimenting with language by questioning the conventions that instruct how words and letters should be used to convey meaning. These creatives explore the potential of words beyond their semantic functions, treating letters as material objects and shapes. This idea is exemplified in both *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959-1979* and the Tate Modern Art Museum's display: *The Shape of Words*. The Tate Modern display's text-based (or text-inspired) art and the concrete poetry collection, through different mediums, both explore the expressive potential of letters and words with techniques which question and counter the ways they have been used traditionally in literature. This essay will investigate the ways in which the Tate Modern's *The Shape of Words & Women in Concrete Poetry* produce meaning in new, experimental ways. While both collections reveal the expressive potential of language when it is materialised, this essay will focus on the particular significance of materialisation for women creating concrete poetry. Viewers should approach concrete poetry and text-based art with openness to explore the meaning produced by these writers and artists.

Concrete poetry resists simple categorizations of 'art' and 'literature.' It may mislead audiences to view it purely as literature, due to 'poetry' being in its name and its frequent presentation through the medium of books. While this calls into question if literary texts should be looked at visually, the more relevant question may be to what extent concrete poetry should be perceived and examined as art rather than literature. Scholarship on concrete

poetry, such as the introduction to *Women in Concrete Poetry* by Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre and the introduction to *Concrete Poetry: A World View* by Mary Ellen Scott stress the importance of viewing the letters that make up concrete poetry as material objects (more akin to artworks) instead of abstract ideas, reflecting the ‘concrete’ portion of concrete poetry’s name. Scott writes that ‘The visual poem is intended to be seen like a painting,’ which pushes concrete poetry towards the category of art rather than literature (7); Balgiu and de la Torre state that though concrete poetry can vary, ‘There is a fundamental requirement which the various kinds of concrete poetry meet: concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made’ (12). Thus, it is necessary to view concrete poetry through an artistic lens rather than interpret it in the same way as literature. This is not to say that literature cannot be interpreted through the ‘word-image question’ (as Balgiu and de la Torre call it), but it is to stress the importance of not forcing the conventions of language’s use in traditional literature onto concrete poetry. In traditional poetry, the abstract meanings of words are often stressed and their physical qualities ignored—concrete poetry flips this narrative by encouraging viewers to consider the material shape of words.

While Scott, Balgiu, and de la Torre underline the visual nature of concrete poetry, their descriptions become increasingly complex—they suggest that concrete poetry is not simply visual, but can also experiment with phonetic or kinetic elements. Balgiu and de la Torre state: ‘At its most active level, the poem is a verbivocovisual artifact and thus a score for an oralization’ (13). Scott mentions the English critic Mike Weaver, who ‘distinguishes three types of concrete poetry: visual (or optic), phonetic (or sound) and kinetic (moving in a visual succession)’ (7). Through its use of text, concrete poetry has the ability to evoke sounds and illustrate movement, which opens up many possibilities for producing meaning, but also calls into question suggestions that these poems’ elements should be viewed purely as visual, material objects. While the literature on concrete poetry seems to contradict itself in

this way, the purpose of stressing the view of concrete poems as objects is essential to encourage audiences to transcend the conventional ways of understanding poetry. The perception of concrete poetry as multifaceted art rather than literature may be the best approach to opening up all possible dimensions for meaning.

The intersection between concrete poetry's context and various modes of producing meaning is exemplified in the cover of *Women in Concrete Poetry*. The cover's photographic image (Figure 1), though it may not be categorized as a poem (even this could be contested due to concrete poetry's resistance to categorization), illustrates the creative ways in which both concrete poetry and text-based art produce meaning. The image's presentation of a figure licking a typewriter creates a kinaesthetic feeling for viewers, provoking them to imagine what this experience might feel like. The image references the complex relationship between gender and the typewriter Balgiu and de la Torre discuss. Gender is one of the top concerns in the collection; on page 14 Balgiu and de la Torre explain: 'Gender inequality was often explicitly denounced by the artists and poets in this anthology. They proved that questions of identity, gender, and power were not only not antithetical to concrete poetry, but also could be made intelligible—and could be activated—through the process of the materialization of language.' Balgiu and de la Torre discuss how the typewriter plays a key role in the connection between concrete poetry and women because of its accessibility and ability to provide opportunity for creativity. The relationship between 'body and machine,' or woman and typewriter, is complex, however, because the entrance of women 'into the workforce was disproportionately reliant on them' (14). The cover image experiments with this complex relationship by demonstrating an unexpectedly intimate connection between the figure and the typewriter. There are no words in the image, but the letters of the typewriter play an essential role in the image's production of meaning. This image symbolises connection to and accessibility of writing as a technology, claiming the power of using letters

to create meaning. This image focuses on the potential for creating words, and its significance is in the relationship between humans (specifically women) and the ability to create meaning through writing.

While the cover image may reference positive change such as the democratising of creativity, the strange and uncomfortable qualities of the image should not be ignored. Balgiu and de la Torre mention that some artists from the collection allude to ‘sterile machine-based writing of men,’ advocating for ‘the emancipation of women through the reappropriation of handwriting as a form of communication proper to them’ (14). From this perspective, the cover image may represent the discomfort caused by the need for women to use the typewriter to enter into the workforce. When audiences continue onto the first few pages and the back cover of the collection, this angle is further solidified. Ted Dodson writes about the images which follow the cover: ‘De Barros licks a typewriter’s keys, then its typebars, before becoming increasingly ensnared by the typewriter until the final image: The artist is gone, and a tongue of crowded typebars is in her place, mirroring the first image of the series, a shot of the artist’s lolling mouth’ (16). The images following the cover develop a new understanding by providing additional context to its narrative. The typewriter, from this perspective, is a machine created by a patriarchal society, which may provide a false sense of creative democracy for women. Though the typewriter may have provided a way for women to enter into the workforce, producing new and deconstructed forms of language (which reject the typewriter or use it in a new way) reclaims the power of creativity. This idea is deeply woven throughout the poetry collection, and underscores the significance of gender in the expressive potential of language.

These ideas are referenced in poems such as those on pages 32 and 132. The poem on page 32, by Mirella Bentivoglio in collaboration with Annalisa Alloatti (Figure 2), slices and splices letters of different fonts, creating a chaotic formation. This poem imagines what

happens when letters come apart to create new shapes. It calls into question how letters create meaning by encouraging the search for meaning beyond the messages sent by words (as they are traditionally used). In this poem, meaning is produced by the shape of letters, their movement across the page, and their interactions with each other. For instance, letters come together to create face-like structures; a parenthesis and a piece of a letter (possibly an 'I' or a 'T') come together to resemble a smiley face, and two 'U' shapes resemble closed eyes. Consequently, the poem comments on the way that the use of letters has changed with modern technology, where letters emerge as typographical symbols. Additionally, there is an apparent breaking of letters; the top of the letter 'T' snaps off, a 'U' splits in half, and an 'N' fractures into pieces, which both literally and metaphorically breaks from the traditional presentation of letters and words. The physical deconstruction of typographical conventions visually presents the sense of resistance *Women in Concrete Poetry* symbolises, suggesting that previously established writing systems must be broken down and expressed in new ways by previously underrepresented groups. The movement of the letters around the page emphasises this everchanging use of language and its pieces.

The poem on page 132 by Betty Danon (Figure 3) uses lines and shapes to create a formation reminiscent of words on a page, questioning who or what determines when lines create meaning. In the top left corner of the image is a block of ink, and lines of differing shapes and sizes, as if in different 'languages' or handwritings inhabit the rest of the page. By resembling blocks of text, this image plays with the production of meaning, alluding to the impact that lines on a page (letters and words) can have. This poem creates writing systems of its own, where different languages are both separated and overlapping.

These two poems both construct new verbivocovisual (visual, phonetic, and kinetic) communication systems which use the materiality of language to express meaning. While their visual elements may initially stand out, beneath the surface they demonstrate elements

from Weaver's phonetic and kinetic categories. The poem by Bentivoglio and Alloatti (Figure 2) illustrates movement and interactions between shapes. Some 'letters' are closer to each other, while others stand alone, but they are all part of the loosely connected cluster of shapes. The motion and connection in this poem use relative proximity to play with the psychology of visual perception within viewers; some letters are close to each other while others are closer, which creates pathways for producing meaning, and even though the shapes are separated, they all fit into some sort of whole, which is complexified by the fact that none of the shapes are actually connected. The poem is also able to express elements of sound—audiences may imagine the sounds created by letter combinations such as 'TTTT' or 'FFFF' as well as sounds produced by deconstructions of letters such as a broken 'M' or 'T.' The poem by Danon (Figure 3) also presents the movement of shapes in order to produce meaning. At the top of the page is a line which gives the perception of being extended, causing it to overlap with another section of 'text.' In the same way as the poem by Bentivoglio and Alloatti, none of the shapes are actually connected, but their visual proximity, appearance, and relative separation into blocks suggest that some shapes are more similar to the shapes in their respective 'groups.' Danon calls viewers to question how separated the sections actually are, as they interact with each other and the lines 'separating' them are not closed off. Danon's poem combines a cacophony of lines, suggesting that each section might make different kinds of sounds. While there are phonetic and kinetic elements beneath the surface of these poems, viewers must be open to look for them (or listen to them), since they are not as manifest as the visual elements.

Concepts discussed in *Women in Concrete Poetry* compellingly align with the Tate Modern's display. *The Shape of Words* is a collection of artworks using 'words, letters, signs and calligraphy' as 'new artistic vocabularies' and 'the basis for new, anticolonial, abstract languages' (Tate Modern). Balgiu and de la Torre's recollections of the Brazilian Noigandres

group's view of 'liberating letters from words, and words from the conventions that dictate how they should function' (12) perfectly describes Christian Dotremont's *[no title]* (1975–6) (Figure 4), which presents black logograms combining to create one larger, abstract shape of unreadable poems in Sumerian, Japanese, Arabic, and Indian scripts (Tate Modern).

Dotremont treats script as visual art, focusing on the shapes letters can create rather than presenting them as traditionally written words. By illustrating words which 'are divorced from the need for readability or legibility of writing,' as the Tate Modern explains, Dotremont works to construct a new understanding of how writing can be used, which is similar to the intentions of many poets from *Women in Concrete Poetry*. Where his work differs from concrete poetry may be found in the bottom right corner, where a French poem, which dramatically speaks to transient moments depicted in art, is written in red.

Another work from the display, Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi's *Four Figures Sitting in Paris* (1967) (Figure 5), presents four abstract figures which bear a resemblance to calligraphy. Sadequain's figures intertwine in the same way that the letters in calligraphy do; by calling upon the conventions of calligraphy, he creates a connection between the figures, which is emphasized through their matching colours. The figures are light grey, which contrasts with their black outline. The colour of the outline blends together with the colour of the figures to create a dark grey background. In this way, the figures are not only connected to each other, but also with the background, furthering the connection between the letters and the page they inhabit. Though the figures are far from creating the legible words of the calligraphy tradition, they imitate the dance-like movement of calligraphy. Thus, Sadequain produces meaning primarily through the shapes created by the letters and their connections with each other. Their movement and connection is made possible through the conventions of calligraphy; though this artwork breaks from the tradition of calligraphy, it draws inspiration from its style of letters which appear to dance across the page.

According to the Tate Modern Art Museum, Sadequain ‘was born into a family of calligraphers,’ and was also influenced by a group of Négritude thinkers in Paris. The Négritude movement, which began in Paris in the 1930s, ‘was developed by men and women of African descent who lived in white cultures that privileged European lineage and subjugated African heritage, a hierarchy that had become firmly ingrained in the English language’ (Rice 1). Sadequain’s use of non-Western script exhibits ‘resistance to assimilation,’ which Rice lists as ‘one of negritude’s essential tenets’ (2). While Sadequain’s use of language is vastly different from the examples in *Women in Concrete Poetry*, he and these poets share the idea of using language in counter-cultural or experimental forms in order to reclaim power as a subjugated or underrepresented group in society.

André Masson’s *Kitchen-maids* (1962) (Figure 6), similarly to Sadequain’s work, uses ‘script-like lines’ (Tate Modern). In comparison to Sadequain’s painting, Masson’s figures are less uniform. They all seem to be created by the same brush, like Sadequain’s four figures, but each figure is more or less abstract. In Masson’s ‘loose squiggles,’ as the Tate Modern calls them, additional objects and features, such as a carrot, faces, and hands, may be discerned, which is reminiscent of the poem in *Women in Concrete Poetry* by Bentivoglio and Alloatti (Figure 2). Also similar is the sense of liveliness and perhaps chaos the painting exudes, which is enhanced by Masson’s use of various bright colours.

The Tate Modern explains that Masson ‘was well-versed in Chinese calligraphy and was particularly fond of Thuluth script,’ suggesting that Masson took inspiration from this style of calligraphy to create his surrealist work. A study on Thuluth scripts found that its alphabets’ ‘common components were introduced by making clear the combinability of words of this handwriting’ (Hamid, Reza Chatr Bahr, et al. 7). Masson’s brush strokes combine with the style of calligraphy to ‘express creativity without conscious control’ (Tate Modern). These ideas align with the poem by Danon (Figure 3), as both the poem and

Masson's work play with the interaction between unrestrained handwriting and uniform script.

While there are evident similarities between the production of meaning exhibited in *Women in Concrete Poetry* and *The Shape of Words*, their intentions for working with the materiality of language often differ. Mirella Bentivoglio (who Balgiu and de la Torre discuss on page 13), the curator of exhibitions featuring female artists, including *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (*Materialization of Language*) for the Venice Biennale, addresses the particular significance for women in reclaiming the materiality of language, stating:

Obviously women aren't the only ones engaged in this work, but they do have double the motivation for engaging in that discourse: in the past they've been rendered immaterial (dare I say dematerialized) by the 'abstract sublimity' of their public image, parallel by their public absence; privately confined to daily, exclusive contact with the material world, women are now using every fiber of their beings to oppose a world rendered unreal (dare I say 'derealized') by repetitive mechanisms.

The materialization of language is at the core of *Women in Concrete Poetry*. Even the act of creating concrete poetry produces meaning in itself for female poets from the perspective of Bentivoglio. While the works in the *Shape of Words* transform letters into material objects as a means of producing meaning, for those featured in *Women in Concrete Poetry*, the act of materialisation itself is a crucial production of meaning.

While it is easy to separate *Women in Concrete Poetry* and *The Shape of Words* into their respective genres, they are closer than they may seem. Concrete poetry breaks free from poetry's assumption that words should be reduced to ideas (or immaterialized)—both Scott and Balgiu and de la Torre write the exact same sentence: 'Emotions and ideas are not the physical materials of poetry' (7 and 12). Readers may be quick to interpret using their previous associations or definitions of words, but these introductions on concrete poetry warn

against viewing (concrete poetry's) words as semantic entities instead of as shapes or objects, which is where the poetry collection and art display collide. In both collections, letters become objects, or materialized pieces of writing systems.

Text-based art and concrete poetry should both be stressed as art forms so that viewers are encouraged to interpret their materiality and formal elements such as shape and composition, but there are still distinctions to be made between the two categories. Text-based art typically allows for more variation with colour, spacing, and media (painting, drawing, photography) for instance. Concrete poetry is often limited to the typewriter or word processor, and although the production of creation for concrete poetry can be limited in this way, it opens up possibilities for the production of meaning by portraying poets in relation to their means for creation (the typewriter or word processor). The cover of *Women in Concrete Poetry* emphasises how categories of concrete poetry and visual art blur. The cover's image may be classified as visual art, as it is a photograph, but it is deeply intertwined with the concepts addressed by this collection of concrete poetry.

While concrete poetry and text-based art should both be seen as visual, materialized works, it may be impossible to separate words from their semantic meanings. Readers can be encouraged to look at letters as objects, but when they do spell recognisable words, semantic meanings cannot be ignored. However, this creates an additional pathway for creating meaning. In other words, concrete poetry opens up the possibility for using letters in all their communicative possibilities: as words (in the traditional sense), shapes, and sounds for instance. This is what sets concrete poetry apart from text-based art. Text-based art creates vast possibilities for the production of meaning, through both visual composition and connotations/histories surrounding writing systems, but concrete poetry's more frequent use¹ of readable words opens up an additional pathway to meaning.

¹ Some text-based art, such as Dotremont's *[no title]* (Figure 4) does use readable words, but this is less common in text-based art than in concrete poetry.

The Tate Modern's *The Shape of Words* and *Women in Concrete Poetry* both demonstrate innovative uses of language which break from the conventions of how words are traditionally used in literature. Both collections transform letters into objects which create images, movement, and even sound. While both underline the materiality of language, this concept is stressed in scholarship on concrete poetry, as women who have been rendered immaterialised reclaim materiality and creativity. For *The Shape of Words*, materialisation is a method for producing meaning; for *Women in Concrete Poetry*, materialisation is both a method for creating meaning and a production of meaning in itself. The artists and poets from these collections express themselves in multiple dimensions by presenting previously established concepts in deconstructed, creative, and experimental ways. It is essential that viewers approach these works as art in order to become receptive to the various ways in which these artists and poets produce meaning. When viewers interpret concrete poetry and text-based art with a willingness to accept its contradictions, experimentation, and complexity, meaning begins to materialise.

Figures



Figure 1: *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959-1979* cover image

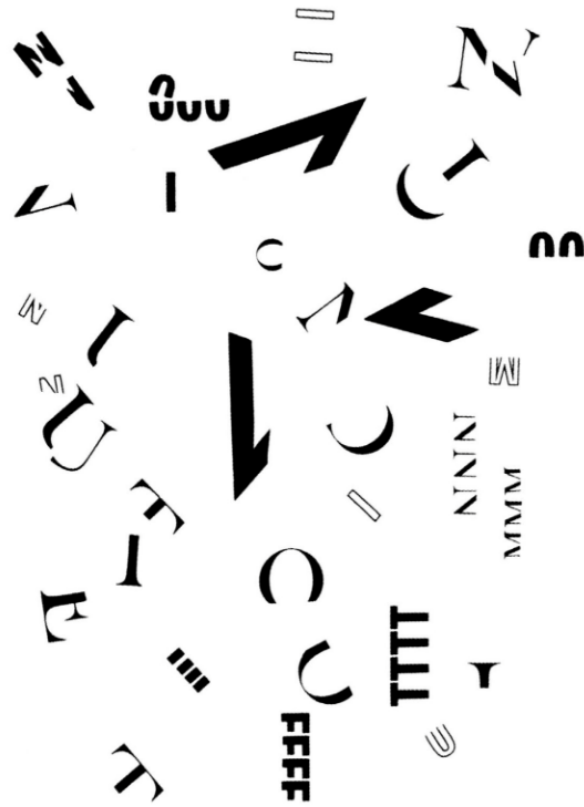


Figure 2: ‘Monumento’ from *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959-1979*, by Mirella Bentivoglio in collaboration with Annalisa Alloatti



Figure 3: 'Selection from Punto Linea' from *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959-1979*, by Betty

Shanon

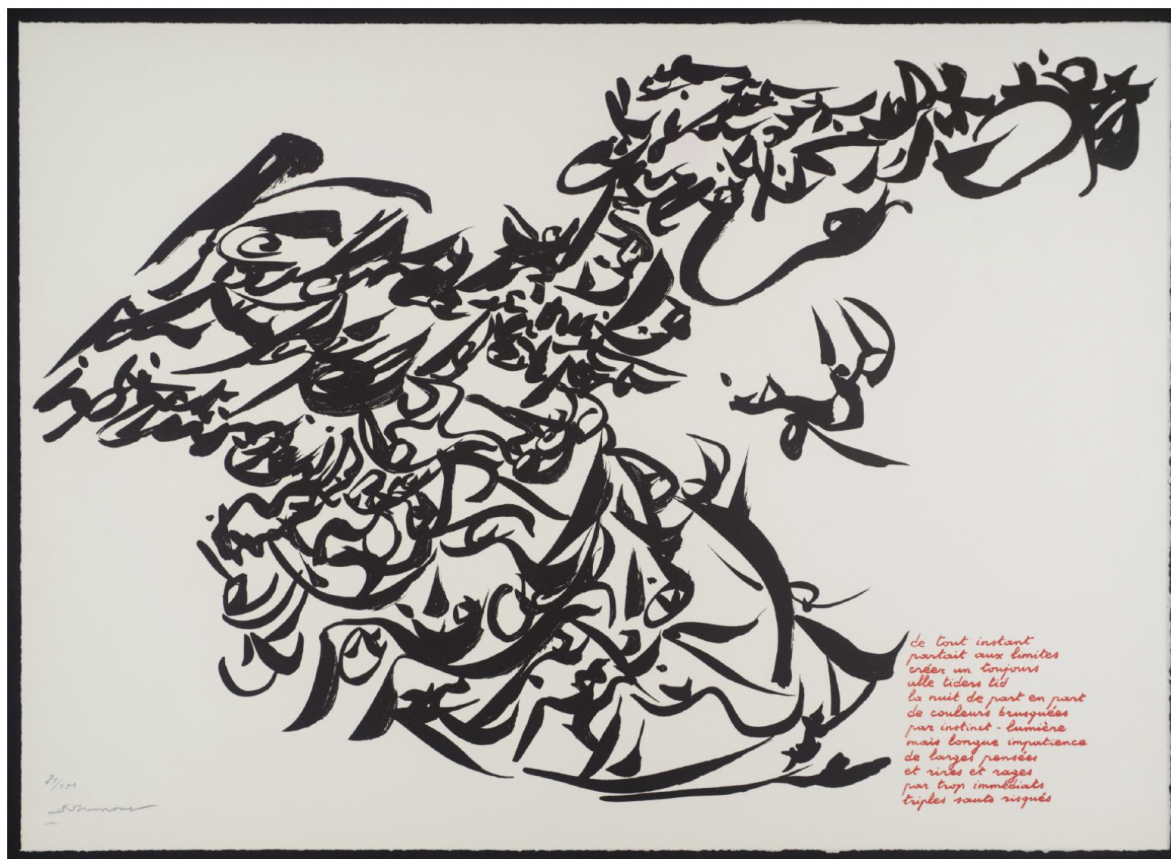


Figure 4: *[no title]* by Christian Dotremont



Figure 5: *Four Figures Sitting in Paris* by Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi



Figure 6: *Kitchen-maids* by André Masson

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