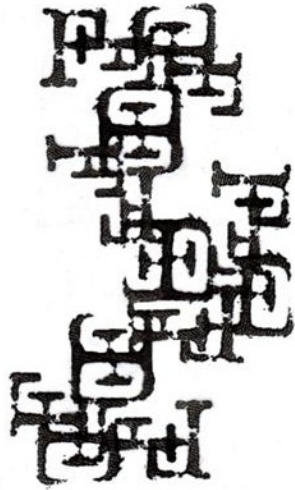


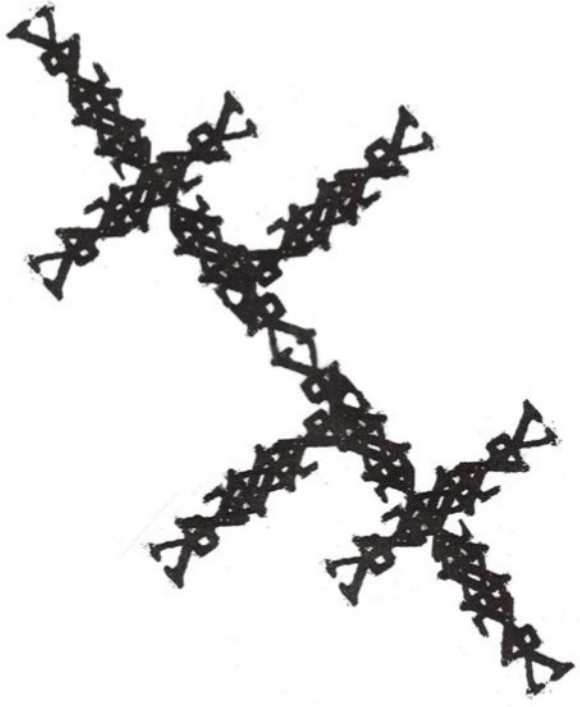


*speechless* 1

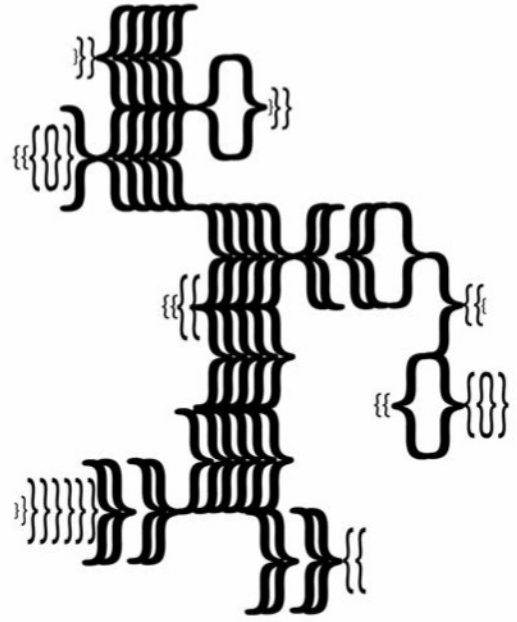
Eva Gonzalez | Rachelle Pinnow |  
Helen Hajnoczky | Mary Ellen Solt



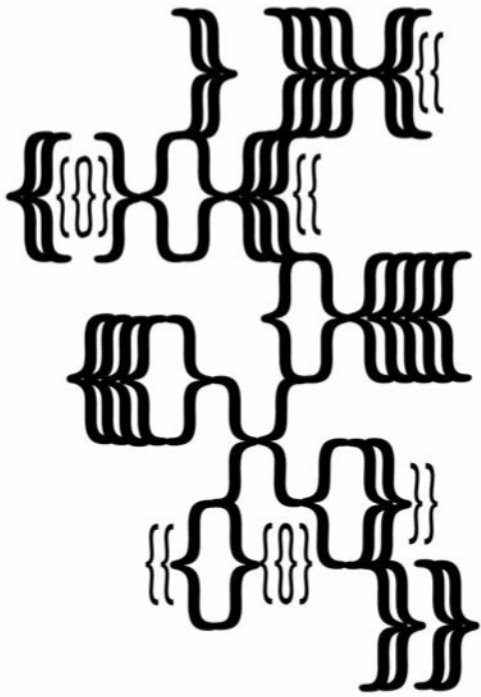




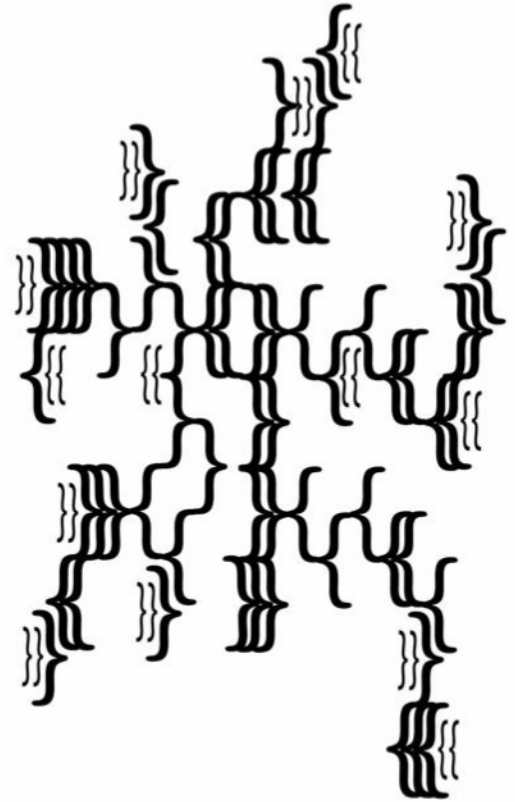
"Meet George"  
Eva Gonzalez  
4



"Brackets 1"  
Rachelle Pinnow  
5

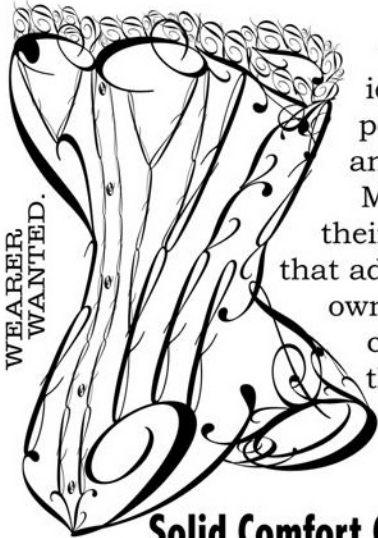


"Brackets 2"  
Rachelle Pinnow  
6



"Brackets 5"  
Rachelle Pinnow  
7

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Lovers  
Of  
Blue  
Elide  
Loves  
Instant  
Annulment

In her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” published in 1975, Hélène Cixous asserts that, “[w]oman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.”<sup>1</sup> Cixous insists that to reclaim her body, “[w]oman must put herself into the text,”<sup>2</sup> telling women that, “writing is for you, you are for you: your body is yours, take it.”<sup>3</sup> Cixous confides in us, saying, “I know why you haven’t written. (And why I didn’t write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great—that is for ‘great men’; and it’s silly.”<sup>4</sup> So often our bodies are not ours, but slates on which society tries to etch its vision of the ideal woman. By writing the body, however, we can validate our experience of the world, rejecting the notion that feminine experience is silly, hysterical, or irrelevant; by writing the body we can pry our bodies out of the hands of our culture and take back ownership of our selves. Though the *écriture féminine* movement to which Cixous belongs has already developed a surreal, automatic mode for writing the body, we should not limit ourselves to this style. As Cixous points out:

there is no general woman, no one typical woman... what stakes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions:

you can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one consciousness resembling another.

Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible...<sup>5</sup>

There is no one singular feminine experience, but many. There are as many potential ways to write the body as there are experiences of it, so we should not shy away from expanding into other modes of writing.

In this paper I examine the feminist potential of visually-based writing. A form that presents unique opportunities for feminist expression and for writing the body; opportunities that have remained largely unexploited because of the minimal female presence in this genre. I will examine how visually-based writing offers women the opportunity to explore their physical experience of the world, focusing on the exemplary work of Concrete poet Mary Ellen Solt, whose book, *Flowers in Concrete*, published in 1966, explores a feminine experience of domestic life and of language through representational visual poetry.

To understand the role of women in Concrete poetics, it is helpful to have a general understanding of the genre’s history. In Brazil in 1952 Décio Pignatari and brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos began the poetic group *Noigandres*, as well as a magazine of the same name. These poets promoted an ideogrammatic poetry that appealed to both the eye and ear, that patterned itself after contemporary graphic design, and that focused on sociological-political content. In 1953, without



knowledge of *Noigãndres*, Eugen Gomringer used his position as literary editor at the Swiss magazine *SPIRALE* to promote his poetry ‘constellations,’ that scattered words or a word about the page. Gomringer intended these minimalist Concrete works, “to express thoughts in short form,” revealing the meaning and nature of a word by isolating it and paying close attention to it.<sup>6</sup> When Gomringer and Pignatari met in Ulm, Germany, in 1955, a dialogue between the Swiss and Brazilian movements began, resulting in the official launch of the Concrete movement in 1956, as part of the National Exposition of Concrete Art at the Museum of Modern Art, Sao Paulo. The poets of the now official Concrete movement intended their writing to function as a universal language, transcending the cultural barriers of language by reducing language to its simplest semiotic form. Concrete poetry became increasingly popular and widely practiced throughout the world through the 1960s and 70s, but has since waned in popularity and official recognition. Today, Concrete poetry is infrequently published by major presses, and rarely studied or discussed in academic settings. Despite the absence of Concrete poetry from mainstream discussion, the form is still published through micro-presses, small magazines, and small publishers, and widely practiced and discussed within avant-garde writing communities.

No women participated in the founding of the Concrete movement, and very few joined the movement during the height of its popularity in the 1960s, leaving much of the feminist potential of Concrete poetry unrealised. Mary Ellen Solt is the most notable exception to this absence. I will now examine

the exemplary work of Solt, which explores a feminine experience of domesticity and of language through representational visual poetry. Mary Ellen Solt is best known for her Concrete poems made to resemble flowers, and for playing an important role as assembler and editor of the anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, the definitive anthology of the Concrete movement. Solt is one of only a few woman concrete poets featured in this substantial and comprehensive international collection, and while most of the women anthologised practiced in collaboration with men, Solt is the sole author of her work. In a time of stiff abstract concrete poetry, Solt’s *Flowers in Concrete* introduces an organic element to the genre that explores a both a feminine experience of domestic life and a feminine experience of language. In her “appreciation” of Mary Ellen Solt, A.S. Bessa outlines how Solt’s practice as editor and concrete poet remained decidedly feminine despite her membership in an almost exclusively male community of writers. Of *Concrete Poetry: A World View* Bessa asserts:

The genesis of the anthology is in many ways emblematic of Solt’s approach to literature, in which formal discoveries were not entirely dissociated from events in her personal life. To use a poetic cliché, Mary Ellen Solt was “absolutely modern,” a poet moving with ease between the domestic and public spheres and responding with immediacy to the events that shaped her era.<sup>7</sup>

Bessa suggests that it was Solt’s “openness to new ideas and the ability to bring the right people together that made her

book such a model anthology.”<sup>8</sup> Solt’s tendency to associate literature with her life is evident not only in her work as editor, but in her poetry as well, despite the impersonal poetic style of her male peers. Bessa notes that:

...it was among this predominantly male group that Mary Ellen Solt found her voice, a feat she achieved not by simply emulating theirs, but by bringing up themes and concerns close to her own life: the flowers in her garden (*Flowers in Concrete*, 1966), her husband (*Marriage-A Code Poem*, 1976), and her children (Solt dedicates *The Peoplemover-A Demonstration Poem*, 1968, to her daughters, Cathy and Susan, “who cut, sawed, painted, pasted and demonstrated”).<sup>9</sup>

Bessa also recollects Solt’s daughter Susan telling stories of her mother, “printing her poem ‘Zig Zag’ on the ironing board in their kitchen.”<sup>10</sup> Solt’s practice, Bessa tells us, “reassembled the events of her time through the prism of her domestic life.”<sup>11</sup> It is this unapologetic domesticity, and its validation of feminine experience, that gives Solt’s work its feminist element. While the poetry of her male contemporaries cast Concrete poets as architects drafting blueprints for an impersonal universal language, Solt’s flowers suggest poets are gardeners of language, cultivating and nurturing fragile organic figures of subjects central to their own lived experience.

This organic take on language is evident in Solt’s poem “Lobelia,” where each blossom grows one of the letters needed to spell the name of the flower.<sup>12</sup> “Lobelia” exploits the flower’s significance as a token of affection between lovers in

order to explore the negative side of love, that is, separation and heartache. Each letter blossom is composed not only of the letter needed for the title, but pairs these letters with their mirror image in order to create a balanced, symmetrical flower.

These backwards letters suggest a perversion of the meaning and clarity of the regular letters they mirror, and yet these backwards letters are necessary to form a complete blossom, implying that love is necessarily paired with sorrow and a disintegration of the original meaning and happiness of love. The blue of the blossoms also represents this sorrow. Finally, the font used to compose the flowers recalls fonts typically found on wedding invitations, and funeral invitations. “Lobelia” invites us not to a celebration of love, but to love’s funeral. Just as lovers give flowers as tokens of their affection, so do we give flowers as tokens of comfort upon the death of a loved one.

The acrostic that accompanies the visual portion of “Lobelia” also exhibits an organic take on language, with each letter sprouting a new word. ‘Lobelia’ becomes:

Lovers  
Of  
Blue  
Elide  
Loves  
Instant  
Annulment<sup>13</sup>

Like the flowers that shade this written component of the poem, the acrostic explores the negative aspects of love. Used

medicinally to induce vomiting, the lobelia here induces a poetic catharsis, as the acrostic purges the melancholy of romantic separation. Rather than loving each other, the lovers now turn their affections to blue, representative of melancholy. However, the lovers remain hinged to each other by their shared experience of separation, and by the pain this separation has caused them; elide means both to omit and to join. Here, the lovers are joined by the absence they each endure: "Loves/ Instant/ Annulment," all the lovers' pain typified in the token of this small blue flower.

Rather than insisting on an impersonal approach to Concrete poetics, Solt's work captures physical, lived experience, expressing a feminine perspective of domestic life, and a feminine interpretation of language as organic and alive. Solt's work validates feminine experience through its subtle depictions of the emotional experience of domestic life, giving her work its feminist element. Solt's organic take on language also validates a feminine understanding of the world, rejecting a poetics dissociated from the body and from lived experience. Solt's poetry allows women to approach language not as an abstraction of meaning from which all traces of subjectivity must be removed, but rather, as a concrete mould for meaning into which women can pour their experiences and perception. In this way, Solt's work demonstrates that Concrete poetry presents the opportunity to capture the lived experiences of women by approaching language as an integrated, organic part of feminine experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed., Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997) 347.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 348.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 347.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968) quoting Gomringer, 9.

<sup>7</sup> A. S. Bessa, "Mary Ellen Solt: An Appreciation," *UbuWeb* July 2007: 11 April 2009

<<http://www.ubu.com/historical/solt/index.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

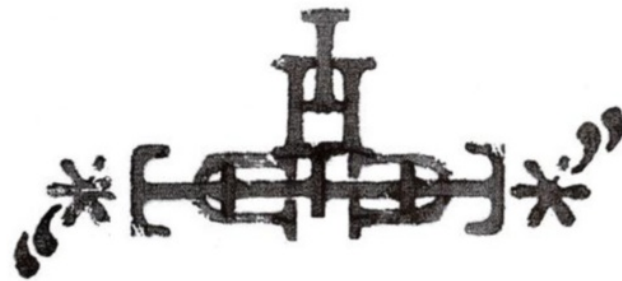
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, "Lobelia," *Flowers in Concrete* (Published by Solt, 1966) 5. reproduced by *UbuWeb* 11 April 12 2009 <[http://www.ubu.com/historical/solt/flowers/Solt\\_Lobelia\\_1964.jpg](http://www.ubu.com/historical/solt/flowers/Solt_Lobelia_1964.jpg)>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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this issue: front cover by Helen Hajnoczky,  
back cover by Eva Gonzalez



*speechless 1*  
edited by derek beaulieu

*speechless* is dedicated to the dissemination and discussion  
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