# Another piece of reassuring plastic: 8 notes on what the noigandres group taught me

**Derek Beaulieu**
Calgary
derek@housepress.ca

## PROLOGUE

My concrete poems resemble widgets and gizmos more than lyrics and odes. I publish these gizmos in repeating and varying venues, allowing the poems–and my own critical reflections on how these pieces work–to proliferate. Concrete poems are not rarefied jewels carefully chiselled for a bespoke audience; they are nuts and bolts, factory made, shifting from use to use; they are airport signs manufactured in bulk, they are screen-prints awaiting t-shirts. While my initial forays into Concrete poetry were influenced by the works of Canadian poets bpNichol, bill bissett, John Riddell and others, I have since found greater inspiration in the Noigandres Group, Max Bense and Mary Ellen Solt.

### 1.

Predating and inspiring the development of Concrete poetry in Canada was the "Clean"[1] aesthetics of "heroic" international Concrete poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. Concrete poetry, arguably "the first international poetical movement" (Bense "Concrete Poetry I") of the 20th Century was first theorized by Eugen Gomringer in Germany and the Noigandres Group–Décio Pignatari, Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos–in Brazil.

To me, when coupled with Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968), the manifestos, statements and poetry of Gomringer and the Noigandres Group remain the best examples of Concrete poetry. Their work eschews representation and emotive content in favour of rationality, graphic design and the "tension of thing-words in space-time" (de Campos, Pignatari and de Campos "Pilot Plan"). Solt declares,

the [C]oncrete poet seeks to relieve the poem of its centuries-old burden of ideas, symbolic reference, allusion and repetitious emotional content. (Solt "A World Look")

Concrete poetry as theorized by Solt, Gomringer and the Niogandres Group, is no longer interested in the "burden" of "repetitious emotional content" (Solt "A World Look"). Poetry can move past the tired declarations of humanist emotion into a form more indicative of how readers actually process language:

[f]undamentally, it is the realization that the usages of language in poetry of the traditional type are not keeping pace with live processes of language and rapid methods of communication at work in the contemporary world. (Solt "A World Look")

[1] The "Dirty" and "Clean" categorizations are very much of a Canadian tradition (and are not part of an international discourse), but the distinguishing features of both do make these discriminations useful. See Lori Emerson's "A Brief History of Dirty Concrete by Way of Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* and Digital D.I.Y." for a fascinating exploration of the history of the terms "Dirty" and "Clean" Concrete poetry—a history which does not seem to have a discernible initial usage.

In Concrete poetry, especially in the work of Eugen Gomringer, Solt sees

[a] move toward "formal simplification," abbreviated statement on all levels of communication from the headline, the advertising slogan, to the scientific formula–the quick, concentrated visual message, in other words. (Solt "A World Look")

It is precisely this distancing from traditional poetics that makes Concrete poetry both a marginalized form unrecognizable to many poets and a genre perfectly suited to a 21st Century readership.

### 2.

Kenneth Goldsmith, founder and curator of *UbuWeb*, argues that for this classic, "heroic," period of Concrete poetry "readability was the key: like a logo, a poem should be instantly recognizable" as poets endeavored to

render all language into poetic icons, similar to the way that everyone can understand the meaning of a folder icon on the computer screen. (Goldsmith *Uncreative* 55–57)

For Goldsmith, Concrete poetry presaged the language and formulation of the graphic interfaces of the contemporary Internet and the shift "from command line to graphic icon" (Goldsmith *Uncreative* 57).

Marjorie Perloff, in "Signs are Taken as Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space" (1990), levels a withering critique of the "utopian" Concrete poetry of the 1950s and 60s, declaring that

it is a question whether such [poems] charming and witty as they are, especially the first time we read/see them, can continue to hold our attention. (Perloff "Signs" 115)

Perloff here grips tightly to traditional definitions of poetry: Poundian formulations that "literature is language charged with meaning," that "[l]iterature is news that STAYS news" and that a poem must continually plumb the depths of literary offerings which grant the reader reason to repeatedly return to the text (Pound *ABC of Reading* 28–29, original emphasis).

In her introduction to *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Solt pre-empts Perloff's charges by declaring that to approach Concrete poetry with traditionally poetic expectations is a fallacy for "[t]he Concrete poet is concerned with making an object to be perceived rather than read" and "the content of the Concrete poem is non-literary" (Solt "A World Look"). It is precisely this non-literary content that makes the "Clean" Concrete poem ideal for a 21st Century audience. In "Signs are Taken as Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space" Perloff expresses concern that

[t]he question remains, however, whether the conflation of Concrete poetry and advertising isn't a kind of dead end for the former; such texts as "código," after all, function primarily as recognition symbols: as soon as we see them, we know a particular object [...] is in question because only that particular object has just this (and no other) emblem [....] Indeed, it seems the call for what Eugen Gomringer has characterized as "reduced language," for "poems ... as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs," runs the risk of producing "poems" that are airport and traffic signs. (Perloff "Signs" 120)[2]

By placing quotation marks around "poem," Perloff further underlines her doubt that these objects have any right to claim the title of poetry. Perloff seems concerned that Concrete "poems" would end up not only resembling, or being inspired, by "airport and traffic signs" but being replaced by them. I couldn't disagree more.

The poem, under the theories of Gomringer and Solt, is the result of a "concentration upon the physical material upon which the poem or text is made" (Solt "A World Look"). Solt insists that "[e]motions and ideas are not the physical materials of poetry" and compliments Haroldo de Campos's "notion of literature not as *craftsmanship* but [...] as an *industrial* process" where the poem is a "prototype" rather than the "typical handiwork of artistic artistry" (de Campos "Informational Temperature" 226, original emphasis). Perloff reappraises her position on Gomringer and the Noigandres Group in "From Avant-Garde to Digital: The Legacy of Brazilian Concrete Poetry" (2008). No longer considering the embrace of way-finding signage and traffic signs as a potential "dead end" for poetry, Perloff instead argues that these poems are more indicative of reading after the Internet (Perloff "From Avant-Garde" 52).

Max Bense argues that Concrete poetry "serves less an understanding of meaning than an understanding of arrangements" (Bense "Concrete poetry I"). In his estimation, Concrete poetry should focus on the arrangement of letters and material where

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. (Gomringer "From Line to Constellation")

That meaningful use, Goldsmith and Perloff argue, has now arrived.

Solt believes that

if the visual poem is a new product in a world flooded with new products, then it must partake of the nature of the world that created it. (Solt "A World Look")

Goldsmith and Perloff build upon this arguing that the Concrete poem is ideally suited for a digital milieu. Goldsmith extends Gomringer's claims, arguing that

[C]oncrete poetry's [...] claim was that poetry, in order to remain relevant, needed to move from the verse and stanza to the condensed forms of the constellation, cluster, ideogram, and icon. (Goldsmith *Uncreative* 59)

as a means of aligning Concrete poetry with the iconography of the contemporary laptop and the graphic interface of the Internet. Goldsmith draws similarities between the Concrete poet's attraction to cool, rational typefaces such as Futura and Helvetica and the contemporary spread of Arial and Verdana–"cleanliness, readability, and clarity [...] cool words for a cool environment" (Goldsmith *Uncreative* 59–60).[3] To Goldsmith, early Concrete poetry was a form in search of its environment, only activating once media caught up with Gomringer, Bense and the Noigandres Group's prescient ideas about a flatscreen, utilitarian writing. Goldsmith suggests that the reason Concrete poetry of the 1950s and 60s–as typified by Gomringer and the de Campos brothers–has become relevant again is that their poems most closely echo the icons used in contemporary computing–the file-folder icon, the floppy disk save icon–not to mention the cool typography of the Mac platform and icon-driven interface of the iPad.

3.

While graphic design, advertising and contemporary design culture expand to redefine and rewrite how we understand communication, poetry has become ruefully ensconced in the traditional. The McDonald's golden arches, the Nike swoosh and the Apple logo best represent the aims of writers working in this form of poetic discourse.

Beat poet Lew Welch supposedly wrote the North American insect repellant Raid's ubiquitous advertising slogan "Raid kills bugs dead" as a copywriter at Foote, Cone and Belding in 1966–and thus applied Imagist doctrine to the world of advertising. Conceptual poet Vanessa Place argues that

[t]oday we are of an age that understands corporations are people too and poetry is the stuff of placards. Or vice versa. (Place "Poetry is Dead")

By proposing poems "as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs," Eugen Gomringer moves poetry away from readability (despite Goldsmith's claims) towards poetic icons (Gomringer "The Poem as a Functional Object").

2 To be perfectly fair to Augusto de Campos and "código," the poem was written to operate *both* as a poetic object and as the logo for the Brazilian poetry magazine *Código*. That dual purpose doesn't seem problematic to me at all.

3 Luis Fernando Verissimo, in his novel *Borges and the Eternal Orangutans*, has Jorge Luis Borges, a character in the novel, state, "No-one can possibly recognize their mother tongue when printed in Futura typeface. It lacks maternal warmth, it lacks friendliness." (58)

Both Goldsmith and Perloff discuss Concrete poetry in terms of readability. Goldsmith believes that for Gomringer and the Concrete poets of the 1950s and 60s, "readability was the key" although "like a logo, a poem should be instantly recognizable" (Goldsmith *Uncreative* 55). This conflates two differing approaches to Concrete poetry and its place within a poetic discourse. If Concrete poetry (and perhaps by extension all poetry) is to assert ongoing relevance, "readability" cannot continue to be "key."

Today the Noigandres Group's "thing-word" concept is best understood as the desktop icon, the Facebook "like" button and the corporate logo. If poets are beholden to Eliot's "changing face of common intercourse" then Concrete poetry's embrace of the "instantly recognizable" poetic "thing-word in space-time" reflects today's common textual intercourse.

Johanna Drucker, in *Figuring the Word* argues that

the Brazilians rejected all forms of "expressionism"–lyrical, personal, emotional–in favour of a poetic form which could function as an object in its own right, betraying nothing about the author, nothing of subjective feelings, or individual identity. (Drucker "Experimental / Visual / Concrete" 118)

Declaring poems "objects" with "functions" does suggest way-finding signage but when the vast majority of the language we consume is non-poetic, should poetry not attempt to poetically intervene within these non-traditionally poetic spaces? As Caroline Bayard posits

Gomringer wanted the public to use poems as daily objects, to remove aesthetic distance and replace them with a "utilitarian relationship." (Bayard *New Poetics* 21)

In order to contextualize the logo as poem within a poetic discourse, I suggest that Concrete poets working in response to Gomringer and the Noigandres Group situate their work as corporate logos for oneiric businesses.

## 4.

Since 2005, I have constructed Clean Concrete poems entirely by hand using out-dated technology. Dry-transfer lettering, ubiquitous in graphic design and advertising from the early 1960s to early 1990s, has been relegated to use by artists and hobbyists. At one point a specialized tool with an expensive pricetag, Letraset (the commercial name of the largest producer of dry-transfer lettering) was used in graphic design and technical drafting in order to standardize graphic elements, eliminate the individuality of the artist's hand and speed up the creative process. With the advent of desk-top design and publishing, the production and use of dry-transfer lettering dropped significantly.

Dry-transfer lettering has the disadvantage of being unforgiving. Once a designer, artist or writer places a letter upon a page or canvas, that letter is permanently affixed and can not be moved or replaced. I construct my poems without the aid of plans or sketches; the work builds gesturally in response to shapes and patterns in the letters themselves. I construct the poems one letter at a time, each placed by hand, a physical embodiment of Allen Ginsberg's dictum extolling "first thought, best thought" (Ginsberg "On Improvised Poetics" 350).[4] The resultant poems, if executed with the same care given to projects by the best graphic designers, are logos and slogans for 'pataphysically impossible businesses.

Like logos for the corporate sponsors of Jorge Luis Borges's Library of Babel, these poems use the particles of language to represent and promote goods and corporations just out of reach. These imaginary businesses, and the advertising campaigns that support them, promote a poetic dreamscape of alphabetic strangeness. As these imagined businesses are metaphorical, each logo can become–as Drucker describes the poetry of the Noigandres Group–

creative work which is fully autonomous, self-sufficient, able to exist–not as an interpretation of other objects, and not as a mimetic representation–but as a creation in the fullest sense–original, independant of reference or imitation, meaningful in its own right. (Drucker "Experimental / Visual / Concrete" 119)

These poems, the vast majority of which I leave untitled, are moments of poetic nostalgia for the signposts of a non-existent past. My Concrete poetry points back to the poetic concerns of Gomringer and the Noigandres Group in order to complicate the canon and to refer to the possibilties of a dreamt, noncommercial signage. My poems are not a matter of the Poundian "new," they refold the old, retrieved from a nowhere cultural memory.

## 5.

My concrete poems are fitfully nostalgic for an ethereal, ephemeral moment. In our dreams, the resolution of the landscapes has a limit–much of what our mind establishes as the backdrop for our oneiric antics is only as clear as required. They are the streetsigns, the signage, the advertising logos for the shops and corporations which are just beyond reach. They are not islands of meaning–semantic or corporate.

4 See Ginsberg's "Chögyam Trungpa: Introduction to *First Thought, Best Thought*" in *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995* for an exploration of the origin of his slogan, its conjunction with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's teaching, and its affect on Ginsberg.

Like the de Campos brothers, I believe that Concrete poems should be as easily understood as airport signs, but instead of pointing the reader to the toilet, the directions they impart are spurious if not completely useless. Concrete poems need to be cognizant not of *readability* but of *lookability*. Airport signage is not designed with readability as a primary concern. They are designed for instant and momentary recognition and comprehension as ultimate goals. Viewers need not read, they only need momentarily stare:

the most representative (and perhaps even the most exciting) art form of our age is the advertising logo. Why not create a logo advertising modern poetry, modern art? (Clüver qtd. in Perloff "Signs Are Taken as Wonders" 119)

Clean Concrete poems refuse linearity in favour of the momentary. Wayfinding signage is designed to be easily understood in a moment, it operates without the need to read. It only requires consumption. Designed to be smoothly digested and transparently communicative, wayfinding signage and traffic signs work extra-linguistically. Goldsmith refers to Gomringer's efforts as a

utopian agenda of [...] transnational, panlinguistic [...] writing that anyone–regardless of where they lived or what their mother tongue was–could understand. Think of it as a graphic Esperanto, taking language and rendering it as symbols and icons. (Goldsmith *Uncreative* 54)

As Goldsmith notes, Gomringer's utopian aspirations didn't pan out, but the idea of a poetic form outside of language continues to resonate. Instead of leaving logos and slogans to the world of graphic design, poets are better served to craft work which is responsive to a new reading milieu. These poems perform a poetic intercession into the language of signage and complicate the need to "panlinguistically" communicate in favour of co-opting the discourse and the form of the plastic advertising logo.

**6.**

I just want to say one word to you. Just one word.
Yes, sir.
       Are you listening?
Yes, I am.
Plastics.
Exactly how do you mean?
       –*The Graduate* (1967)

Dry-transfer lettering–and thus the poems constructed from it–consists of a thin sheen of plastic. Christian Bök, in his 2002 manifesto "Virtually Nontoxic," interrogatively argues that plastic has become the perfect medium for poetic discourse:

[h]as not language itself begun to absorb the synthetic qualities of such a modern milieu, becoming a fabricated, but disposable, convenience, no less pollutant than a Styrofoam container? Has not the act of writing simply become another chemically engineered experience, in which we manufacture a complex polymer by stringing together syllables instead of molecules? The words of our lexicon have become so standardized that they now resemble a limited array of connectible parts [...] and the rules of our grammar have become so rationalized that they now resemble a bounded range of recombinant modes [....] We see language marketed as an infantile commodity–a toy suitable for kids of all ages, because its plastic coating makes it safe to own and easy to use. (Bök "Virtually")

Canadian sculptor James Carl's *Content 1.0* (2002) takes this idea to its extreme. With *Content 1.0*, Carl creates a new typeface which replaces all alphanumeric characters with images of recycleable plastic bottles of home-cleaning products. Every letter and number has been replaced by an insignificant, inconsequential, line-drawn image of a disposible container or lid. This incomplete inventory, seduced by the shapes and forms of plastic packaging, reduces language to a series of products–each of which points to an anonymous manufacturer. Carl's font, while not strictly Concrete poetry, embraces Mary Ellen Solt's declaration that

if the visual poem is a new product in a world flooded with new products, then it must partake of the nature of the world that created it. (Solt "A World Look")

My letraset poems, like Carl's typeface, render the particles of language into "Content 1.0," a new content that uncannily resembles the letters we already have, but form logos which promote empty storefronts and boarded-up retailers, their signs scrubbed to the point of illegibility. In these oneiric logos letters combine, like so many pieces of orphaned Lego, to form previously unexpected constructions not at all resembling the images on the packaging.

In the age of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, poetry must embrace plasticity in order to remain relevant. Plastic and vinyl perfectly embody the poetic possibilities for language. As Bök argues, the recombinant possibilities of plastic (especially recycled plastic) are the ideal metaphor for poetry. John Bevis, in "Vinyl: material location placement," provides a useful history of the creation and refinement of vinyl (Polyvinyl Chloride or PVC) from its creation in 1838 to its commercialization by Waldo Semen of BF Goodrich in 1926. While this history may seem marginal to the history and development of Concrete poetry, it does align with contemporary concerns. The commercialization of plastic in the 1920s and its ubiquity by the 1950s coincides with the rise of Concrete poetry from its Dada beginnings during World War One through the post-World War Two rise of global corporatism.

Plastic is not only indicative of rising consumerism but also of the post-consumer need for recycling, reformatting, reusing and recasting, all of which are 'pataphysically foreshadowed in Concrete's early manifestos.

Bök's declaration of the poetic implications of plastic is echoed by Roland Barthes's "Plastic," a brief essay which entreats for the artistic potential of "ubiquity made visible" (Barthes "Plastic" 97). Barthes's comments on plastic are germane to a discussion of Concrete poetry, especially Concrete poetry made with PVC dry-transfer lettering. Concrete poetry, like plastic is

a "shaped" substance: whatever its final state, [it] keeps a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless. (Barthes "Plastic" 98)

Poetry no longer retains the cultural caché that it once held. Like plastic, poetry

in the hierarchy of the major poetic substances [...] figures as a disgraced material. (Barthes "Plastic" 98)

Complementing Solt and Gomringer, Barthes argues that plastic (read "poetry") "belong[s] to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use" (Barthes "Plastic" 98).

**7.**

PVC / vinyl is created from a combination of hydrocarbon byproducts and Chlorine. I have lived in Calgary, Alberta for over 35 years, having moved here as a young child, and it seems only appropriate that I would choose to poetically investigate a medium produced as a product of oil and gas exploration. Calgary's economy is driven by the problematic revenue of non-renewable resource exploitation and increasingly by the notorious northern Albertan oil sands. Calgary–with an estimated population of 1.2 million–popularly represents itself through its rural ties, by oil and gas revenue and by right-wing politics. Alberta defines itself not in terms of cultural growth but in terms of economic growth.

To be an artist or arts worker in Calgary means to engage with the culture and economics of oil and gas exploitation. Concrete poetry created with dry-transfer lettering–PVC suspended on inert backing paper–actively embraces marketability and the technology of waste:

[p]lastics have been seen, notwithstanding developments in recycling technology, as the one-way conversion of natural resources into mountains of waste. (Bevis "Vinyl")

The Noigandres Group embraced advertising and graphic design–the logo-ization of language–as necessary and inevitable in order for poetry to prove its relevance to a contemporary audience. Bevis argues both that plastic "adds quality while reducing skill, enriches and cheapens" but "[w]e couldn't be modern without them" (Bevis "Vinyl"). Concrete

poems, like plastic, are "the very spectacle of [their] end-products" (Barthes "Plastic" 97); the spectacle of a logo, operating normally, but promoting an empty product. The material of poetry, here, "is wholy subsumed in the fact of being used" (Barthes "Plastic" 99) while ignoring the need to be poetic. Concrete poetry, like plastic, contains a "reverie [...] at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter" (Barthes "Plastic" 97).

**8.**

The circulation of poetry is problematized when confronted with the publishing requirements of the majority of literary magazines and journals. Most literary magazines in Canada request that contributors grant "First North American Serial Rights;"[5] an agreement that all work accepted has not appeared elsewhere in the North American market. This request restricts poems to an ephemeral moment of epiphanic truth. Requiring poems to appear only once (before potential book publication) limits poetry to unique missives from the poet directly to the reader, conveyed within a temporary framework: these poems were written for *you*, *now*. I ignore these requests. Much to some editors's and colleagues's chagrin, I actively pursue placing my poetry in recurring and overlapping venues. Restricting publication to a single venue limits audience to a lone, ephemeral space–and does not allow for the proliferation of poetry into other discourses. I have published my Concrete poems as 1" buttons, t-shirts, broadsides, chapbooks, through both poetry and illustration submissions and projected on the sides of buildings (most notably on the side of Calgary's 191-metre tall concrete spire the Calgary Tower), often at the same time. I believe that poetry–and criticism, including this refelction–should be poured from container to container, using the grains of sand to build new castles.

This open refutation of publishing norms asserts that poetry is most affective when it works within another discourse. My poems are designed to be received as logos for empty products. As logos, these poetic emblems are synonymous with, and indistinguishable from, branding and trademarks. de Campos's "código" and my emblematic Concrete poems are designed to be as ubiquitous as Nike's swoosh or Starbucks's twin-tailed mermaid. The swoosh and the mermaid are meant to saturate, they move without resistance from billboards and products to print ads and television spots without tension. Poems, on

---

5    See, for instance, the "Privacy Policy" of Calgary's *filling Station* magazine: *filling Station* reserves First North American Serial Rights. This means we get to publish the work we have received from contributors first in magazine form, and this also extaends to our Digital Edition through Zinio / Magazines Canada, this website, and *filling Station*'s social media presence. (*filling Station* "Privacy")

the other hand, due to their very medium, have restrictions placed upon their appearance. Editors and poets, it would seem, are the people most invested in preventing poetry's potential cultural inundation.

Concrete poems are written with an eye for adaptability and reproducibility at differing scales –from magazines and books to computer monitors and handheld devices–without being confused for any other brand. Limiting publication through the assertion of "First North American Serial Rights" interferes with Concrete poetry's ability to operate outside of the traditional poetic discourse. Concrete poetry was theorized to work within another space, to abandon the page in favour of emblems, sandwich boards and signposts. It flourishes only when allowed to operate within its intended milieu.

As I continue my exploration of the glyphic nature of Concrete poetry, I expanded my dry-transfer lettering pieces from small poetic logos to larger compositional fields. It would be easy to contextualize this work, once again, within an Olsonian field composition but I would rather gaze at these pieces under the neon sheen of the Tokyo skyline. No longer bound by the page, Concrete poetry now fully embraces the plasticized space of graphics and glyphs, pixels and projections.

With *Prose of the Trans-Canada* (Bookthug 2011) I situate Concrete poetry within a history of artists's books and the avant-garde. Constructed as a response to Blaise Cendrars's 1913 *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* ("Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France"), *Prose of the Trans-Canada* seeks to expand the scale of Concrete poetry past the manuscript (or magazine) page to the larger concerns of the canvas while still working within the discourse.

Cendrars's *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (hereafter *Prose of the Trans-Siberian*) is a "a sad poem printed on sunlight" (qtd. in Michaelides) created in collaboration with Sonia Delaunay-Terk. Each Technicolor copy of *Prose of the Trans-Siberian* is an accordion-fold, codex-challenging, "book" which, when unfolded, measures 16" □ 72". With a proposed edition of 150 copies, *Prose of the Trans-Siberian*'s prodigious length was such that every copy placed end-to-end would equal the height of the Eiffel Tower, the symbol of Parisian modernity (despite Guy de Maupassant's dietary habits). Unsurprisingly for a book with such a radical design, there were ultimately only approximately sixty copies of *Prose of the Trans-Siberian* produced (of which only around thirty survive).[6]

6 See Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay's A *Book of the Book* for a full-colour (albeit reduced) reproduction of *Prose of the Trans- Siberian*, an English translation, and a history of Cendrars and Delaunay-Terk's collaboration.

*Prose of the Trans-Canada* playfully responds to Cendrars's legacy in a 16" □ 52" Concrete poem. Produced as a scroll instead of an accordion-fold book, when all 150 copies of this limited edition are placed end-to-end, the resultant length is the same as the symbol of Calgarian modernity, the Calgary Tower. Like Cendrars's original, while the intended edition of *Prose of the Trans-Canada* is 150 copies, it has been published print-on-demand and is unlikely to ever reach its intended print-run. Due to the poem's length, Toronto small-press publisher Bookthug (who took on this project when it was rejected by several other publishers for being impractical, if not impossible, to produce) ultimately printed the 52" scroll on matte polypro film, the same plasticized vellum used by architects and oil-field refinery designers for blueprints and schematics.

Cendrars's *Prose of the Trans-Siberian* notoriously uses 12 different typefaces in its poetic recounting of a troubled journey across the Russian countryside. Highly unusual for the time, Cendrars's typefaces temporally align his work with Futurism and Dada's embrace of commercial design, advertising fonts and display faces in an attempt to embody a corporate landscape. Like Cendrars's efforts to graphically present the material forms of his poetic evocation, *Prose of the Trans-Canada* embraces a torrent of typefaces, flooding across an unending field of half-formed logos and proto-glyphs that blend in to a single panel of undifferentiated language material.

*Prose of the Trans-Canada* was ultimately projected nightly on the side of the Calgary Tower as part of Wordfest 2011, an international literary festival focusing on emergent and established authors. Phallically erected in the centre of Calgary's downtown core, the Calgary Tower (once known as the Husky Tower, its original name revealing the primary funder of the tower's construction: Husky Oil and Refining Ltd.) has become a symbol of Calgary's reliance on oil and gas and its dedication to growth and expansion (the tower ostentatiously features a natural-gas fired cauldron on its tip as placed by Canadian Western Natural Gas and lit in nostalgic celebration of Calgary's hosting of the 1988 Winter Olympics).

Constructed using PVC lettering, *Prose of the Trans-Canada* was published on plasticized vellum and ultimately projected upon the most recognizable symbol of Albertan dedication to the exploitation of non-renewable resources. Like James Carl's *Content 1.0*, *Prose of the Trans-Canada* is a celebration of a plasticized poetic; letters are pelleticized, melted, poured and reformed from one undifferentiated lump into another. *Prose of the Trans-Canada* features no identifying words, only the smallest pieces of language repackaged as a flowing panel of glyphic remnants. The detritus of advertising swept up, flattened and projected on the side of Calgary's most iconic building.

Not surprisingly, given poetry's –and especially Concrete poetry's– cultural purvue, the projection of *Prose of the Trans-Canada* on the side of the Calgary Tower was met by complete cultural indifference. No one in the popular or cultural media discussed the projection nor the intervention of a poetic object in to commercial space. Despite the Calgary Tower's location at the intersection of two prominent, high-traffic, streets (7th Avenue sw and Centre Street s) and prominence in the Calgarian skyline, the poem, ironically, did exactly what Gomringer expected for Concrete in general. By projecting *Prose of the Trans-Canada* on the side of the Calgary Tower, the poem ceased to operate as poetic, it became the object of its own critique– it became an indistinguished logo.

I argued earlier that Concrete poetry's formulation of a non-literary space made it perfectly suited for a 21st Century audience. Perloff's fears that

the call for what Eugen Gomringer has characterized as "reduced language," for "poems [...] as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs," runs the risk of producing "poems" that are airport and traffic signs (Perloff "Signs" 120)

are not to be taken lightly, for in the display and projection of *Prose of the Trans-Canada* they came to pass. But that's not surprising.

Reading has shifted from something that takes place over time (a concentrated investment occuring privately, i.e.: single readers quietly reading single books) to something that takes place instantaneously (a brief moment occuring publicly, i.e.: momentary scans of logos, headlines and brand-recognition). Moving *Prose of the Trans-Canada* from a literary space (the published edition) to a commercial space (the side of a public building) guaranteed that it would no longer garner attention within literary circles. It simply washed over readers in the same way as any other billboard, logo or corporate slogan. Comfortable and unnoticed. Another piece of reassuring plastic.

## Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.

Bayard. Caroline. *New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989. Print.

Beaulieu, Derek. *Prose of the Trans-Canada*. Toronto: Bookthug, 2011. Print.

Bense, Max. "Concrete poetry I." Trans. Irène Montjoye Sinor and Mary Ellen Solt. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. *UbuWeb*. Web. 10 September 2013.

Bevis, John. "Vinyl: material location placement." *Vinyl: Project for Installation*. Ed. Simon Cutts. Tipperary, Ireland: Coracle, 2005. N.pag. Print.

Bök, Christian. "Virtually Nontoxic." Web. 13 November 2013.

de Campos, Augusto. "código." Web. 29 October 2013.

——, Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos. "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry." Trans. Irène Montjoye Sinor and Mary Ellen Solt. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. *UbuWeb*. Web. 10 September 2013.

de Campos, Haroldo. "The Informational Temperature of the Text." *Novas: Selected Writings*. Eds. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros. Trans. John Tolman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007. 223–234. Print.

Drucker, Johanna. "Experimental / Visual / Concrete." *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*. New York: Granary, 1998. 110–136. Print.

Emerson, Lori. "A Brief History of Dirty Concrete by Way of Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* and Digital D.I.Y." *Open Letter*. 14 7 (Fall 2011): 120–129. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. "Chögyam Trungpa: Introduction to *First Thought, Best Thought*." *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. New York: Perennial, 2000. 458–464. Print.

——. "On Improvised Poetics." *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Eds. Donald M. Allen and Warren Tallman. New York: Grove, 1973. 350. Print.

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. Print.

——. "A Week of Blogs for the Poetry Foundation." *The Consequence of Innovation: 21st-Century Poetics*. Ed. Craig Dworkin. New York: Roof Books, 2008. 137–149. Print.

Gomringer, Eugen. "Constellation." Web. 29 October 2013.

——."From Line to Constellation." Trans. Mike Weaver. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. *UbuWeb*. Web. 10 September 2013.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Afterword." Beaulieu, Derek. *flatland: a romance of many dimensions*. York, UK: information as material, 2007. 105–109. Print.

——. "The Changing Face of Common Intercourse: Talk Poetry, Talk Show, and the Scene of Writing." *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 29–53. Print.

——."From Avant-Garde to Digital: The Legacy of Brazilian Concrete Poetry." *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 50–75. Print.

——. "Signs are Taken as Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space." *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

93–133. Print.

——."Unoriginal Genius: An Introduction." *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 1–23. Print.

Place, Vanessa. *Echo*. Calgary: No Press, 2011. Print.

——."Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It." Web. 24 October 2013.

"Privacy Policy." *filling Station* Magazine. Web. 20 November 2013.

"Provincial Government Spending on the Arts and Culture in Saskatchewan in 2009/10."Web. 20 November 2013.

Rothenberg, Jerome and Steven Clay, Eds. *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections About The Book and Writing*. New York: Granary Books, 2000. Print.

Solt, Mary Ellen. "A World Look at Concrete Poetry." *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. *UbuWeb*. Web. 10 September 2013.

*The Graduate*. Dir. Mike Nichols. MGM, 1967. Film.

Verissimo, Luis Fernando. *Borges and the Eternal Orangutans*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: New Directions, 2000.