

Concrete Poetry, Concrete Book: Artists' Books in German-speaking Space after 1945

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Following World War II and with increasing intensity in the 1960s and 1970s, artists working throughout Western Europe challenged established aesthetic and political paradigms by exploring new artistic media and techniques. In response to and often in protest against traditional art institutions, artists engaged in participatory practices that tested the boundaries of language and action, seeking novel ways to facilitate the dissemination and reception of their work. In this context, the book emerged as a compelling site for the investigation of visual and tactile experience, as well as the ostensibly more abstract activity of reading.

Drawing on the remarkable materials in the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library, *Concrete Poetry, Concrete Book*, presents the work of a group of German, Austrian, and Swiss artists who are related to one another not only by their shared artistic aspirations and collaborations but by longstanding friendships. This exhibition traces links between artists affiliated in the 1950s with the reduced visual forms of what was called “concrete poetry,” and artists whose disruptive, often violent actions came to define performance art in the 1960s and the 1970s, including movements known as Fluxus and Actionism.

These generations of German-speaking artists shared a particular discomfort with and often antagonism to their national institutions and cultural traditions, which found exemplary expression in artists' books that interrogated the German language and book culture. They were also apprehensive of the emergent consumer culture that accompanied the post-war economic boom especially in West Germany, to which the affordable and widely distributable form of the book presented a critical antidote. For these reasons, the book remained a surprisingly persistent artistic form in a period of radical experimentation in art that emphasized increasingly visceral and participatory modes of production and reception.

In tandem with the UChicago Arts Program *Concrete Happenings* that celebrates the return to campus of Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell's colossal “event-sculpture” *Concrete Traffic* (1970), this exhibition aims to showcase an array of Germanic artists' books that intersect with and depart from the ambitions of concrete poetry and performance art. Furthermore, this exhibition is an invitation to visitors to return after March 17th to the Special Collections Research Center to engage with these fascinating artists' books.

Take the opportunity first hand to undo the impossible constraint that exhibiting these works behind glass imposes. Don't just look at art, grapple with it!

A note on language:

Given that so many of these works are themselves profoundly engaged with issues of the form of language, significance, and translation, it is often incoherent to translate their titles, or contents. To the extent that it is possible, and to convey some sense of the playfulness and irony at stake, the curator has provided literal translations of the titles in English in brackets in the item labels.

What is an Artist's Book?

What is a book? What is art? This exhibition takes the perspective that any work is an “artist’s book” if it engages these two questions. As the title of the exhibition suggests, the artists collected in *Concrete Poetry, Concrete Book* were concerned with the materiality not only of the printed book but also of language and text itself. An investigation of the sense or senses involved in reading—an action at once perceptual, intellectual, and physical, if not metaphysical—linked the projects of poets, graphic artists, and performance artists.

The artist’s book also became an important medium in this period for documenting and anthologizing performance art. Rarely simply documentary, however, such anthologies reflect on the paradoxes of recording and preserving “happenings,” actions, and performances that often drew attention to their own transience and singularity.

While Thomas Bayrle and Bernhard Jäger’s *Artistisches ABC* reimagines each letter of the alphabet as a repeatable pictorial image or sign, Dieter Roth’s early books tend to do away with language and letters altogether, inviting tactile encounters that challenge the posture of reading by compelling the reader to reorient their physical comportment to his books and their pages. KP Brehmer’s *Braunwerte* presents the reader with a multi-page optical device with which to supplement the process of reading the newspaper, thereby giving a politically invested critique of what constitutes the news.

VALIE EXPORT and Peter Weibel’s co-authored *wien: bildkompendium wiener aktionismus und film* assembles materials that document over a decade of artistic action in Vienna, while Wolf Vostell’s *Ruhender Verkehr* records the making of his “action sculpture” in Cologne. With novelist Peter Faecke, Vostell engaged over the course of 1970 in an open-ended practice of collaborative and communicative exchange. Beginning in Chicago during the making of the sculpture *Concrete Traffic* (1970)—the concrete-encased Cadillac that inspired *Concrete Happenings*—the correspondence collected in *Postversand, Roman*, suggests, as the removable binding confirms, that this “novel” might be continued indefinitely.

Concrete Poetry, Action Poetry, Chocolate Poetry

Concrete poetry plays on the tension between the meaning of a poem and how it takes shape on the page. Emphasizing the materiality of text and its spatial configuration, Eugen Gomringer considered it the task of concrete poetry to generate a “concrete presence.” Although he may not have expected such an association, this emphasis on what might be called the “event” of the poem may explain why many concrete poets would go on in the 1960s and after to be involved in performance art. A fascination with presence, embodiment, and materiality binds together all the books in this exhibition.

The visual, perceptual action invited by Gomringer’s poem “ping pong,” Gerhard Rühm’s *bewegung*, and Hansjörg Mayer’s *typoaktionen* intersects with Claus Bremer’s contention, articulated in the poem presented here, that “The activity of the reader allows the text to happen.” Even more corporeal and visceral, Robert Filliou’s “action poem,” called “Yes” parodies the work of the poet in an anatomical analysis of his body and its functions. This proximity between, so to speak, the consumption and excretion of the text is nowhere more mischievously present than in Dieter Roth’s chocolate

smear volume of *Poetrie* or Emmett Williams' performance-poem "the last french-fried potato," the duration of which is equal to the number of french-fries performers consume.

***Spirale* (1953-1964): Concrete Poetry, Concrete Books**

The literary and visual art journal *Spirale*, founded in Bern, opposed the subjectivism and irrationality associated with American abstract expressionist painting in the name of what the editors called "absolute abstraction." Absolute abstraction was understood, paradoxically, in "concrete" if not objective terms that would supply a universal artistic standard available to anyone, regardless of their mothertongue. Concrete poetry was one such abstract art. It was in *Spirale* that Eugen Gomringer would publish the first international anthology of concrete poetry in 1958, evidencing the formal and utopian ambitions of the concrete art movement.

Concrete poetry is a typographical art. In the form of carefully arranged yet non-grammatical sequences of words, or in meticulous patterns of isolated letters, numerals, and punctuation marks, typography provides its raw material. A common concern of concrete poetry was how simple, beautiful, graphic arrangements of linguistic elements can nevertheless give rise to disorientation—in space and in reading.

Linking the graphic potential of punctuation to the production of space on a map, Helmut Heißenbüttel referred to his poems as "topographies." Gomringer's poem beginning "cars and cars," an example of what he called a "constellation," shows the repetitious and playful exploration of symmetry and exchangeability typical of his poems. Ludwig Gosewitz's "typograms" further reduce typography to its most basic graphic marks, eliminating words and letters in order to initiate a rhythmic visual reading process.

Many of Dieter Roth's early "concrete" books were first made in the years when he was an editor for *Spirale*. They contrast with his later work (seen elsewhere in the exhibition) in the precision of their geometrical design and the tactile engagement they solicit. All of his books, however, share a persisting preoccupation with embodiment and perception.

Topographies, Interiors, Itineraries (In and Around the 1960s)

One important aspect of concrete poetry was the dual exploration of the articulation of language and space. Such topographical reflections gave rise, in turn, to books of an extraordinary diversity of forms and formats. These artists' books not only model relations in space but produce experiences in which the mapping of language and forms onto reality is troubled in provocative and playful ways. When the unforeseeable or unfathomable is central, chance becomes a constructive principle.

In her accordion-style book *Ausser...ordentlicher Lemuel*, which is loosely based on the fictitious Lemuel Gulliver's travels, Warja Lavater visualizes the journey of a strange individual through a curious space. Trying to express itself, but unable to be understood, Lemuel is cast out of the order of things. In *246 little clouds*, Dieter Roth reflects on the in-significance of things—like clouds—that seem to invite but also frustrate interpretation. Tying together the passage of time with the production of space throughout the course of 246 days, he writes, "A book is a knot."

Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* was supplied in lieu of a catalogue at an exhibition in Paris, where the question of how to map and navigate the exhibition itself was treated as integral to the show. The book is a map: an exacting description of all the objects Spoerri observed one day in his room and an articulation of the random associations and anecdotes to which they gave rise.

Language Games, or, Making Fun of Books

The supposedly earnest form of the book also served as occasion for artists to ridicule austere forms of traditional artistic practice and high culture. These artists' books radically reject any expectation of being respectable, sensible, intelligent, or "bookish," in favor of exploring those aspects of experience that books, and the cultural forms they represent, have typically forgotten or disparaged. Presented as games and exercises, these books seem to take to heart Karl Gerstner's system for writing, which instructs its "literate" students: "By 'play' is meant: using writing as material for fun."

Marcel Duchamp set an important precedent for this kind of playful ridicule of traditional institutions. His use of ready-made materials questioned how expertise and individuality inform the definition of the artist, and his works often irritate boundaries between vision, language, and cognition, inviting hyper-reflexive and conceptual reception. Richard Hamilton's faithful typographic transcription of Duchamp's *Green Box* shows the games Duchamp played drawing on "abstract" words, those that lack "concrete reference," from the Larousse dictionary. Dieter Roth's *Mundunculum* is another "transcription" of the *Green Box*, although it is as if he has executed Duchamp's instructions in order to design a new system of signs, printed in the book in arresting arrays with his hand-made stamps.

The same suspicion of abstraction is at stake in Robert Fillou's *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*, which in fact poses a series of "stupid" questions that in their simplicity seem impossible to answer: "What should you do about love?" "What century should you have lived in?" "What do you laugh at?"

A book that incites its reader to have some fun with reading in an especially undogmatic way is André Thomkins' *Dogmat Mot*, which includes words in French, German, English, and "nonsense" on pinwheels. These can be spun to generate texts that simulate the production of significance and meaning along multiple axes—without actually arriving at any.

Seriality—Infinite Systems, Finite Spaces

Artists took advantage of the mechanical reproduction of the book as form to present series and sequences that could be construed to go on indefinitely. These books explore the relation between the human and the technological through an interrogation of tensions between automation and spontaneity, singularity and repetition, performance and iterability.

Peter Roehr's ten pages of "ciphers" organize numerical digits 0 through 9 in simple squares as if each page, striking in its simplicity, were a code that would unlock the passage to an incommensurable space of experience. Is this not, after all, what happens in that mysterious process called reading?

Hanne Darboven studies in her books the impulse to exhaustively write and systematize lived

experience. They present seemingly endless repetitions of numbers, dates, sequences, etc., that in fact, on closer examination, exhibit subtle differences in which life can be glimpsed and the system undermined.

As is evident in his distinctive mode of producing images, Thomas Bayrle was trained as a weaver and was an early experimenter with digital and computer graphics. His books reflect on the individual bound up in networks of images disseminated by mass media and consumer culture. The power and propagation of the pornographic image was in this regard a particular preoccupation. If pornography, in a way not unrelated to certain aspirations of performance art, is orchestrated to give the impression of presence for the satisfaction of the reader-consumer, then his *Feuer im Weizen* makes fun of such pornographic intention by multiplying the ostensibly singular moments it records.

Personal Notes: Portrait of Dieter Roth (1930-1998)

Dieter Roth's work is displayed most prominently in this exhibition, not only because he was one of the most prolific makers of artists' books, but also because he contributed to countless collaborations with a wide circle of friends in his lifetime. Roth provides the concrete link between concrete poetry and Fluxus, and his art bridges many of the themes and brings together many of the individual artists included in this show. From working on *Spirale* in Switzerland in the 1950s, through creating his artist's books in Reykjavík, Stuttgart, Philadelphia and elsewhere in the 1960s, to contributing to unusual poetry workshops in Café Exil in West Berlin in the 1970s, the book was a constant point of reference in Roth's wide-ranging and endlessly innovative artistic production.

While perhaps best known for the irreverence epitomized in his collections of poems called *SCHEISSE*, Roth's books frequently provide a format for conveying personal or intimate aspects of his life, from his struggle with alcoholism and depression, to loneliness and love. His *Ein Tagebuch aus dem Jahr 1982* is a complete photocopied reproduction of his diary that year. The "photo-version" of *Snow* presented here reproduces a unique book he created in 1964, which collects notes, photographs of people, places, and things Roth encountered, and all of the paper items—from drawings to kitchen roll—he touched throughout the course of a day.

"Mirroring"—An Art of Reproducibility

The notion that art mirrors nature, or frames the world, is an ancient—and much criticized—trope of artistic representation. These artists' books engage this long and controversial history of the representation of life in art yet again. In the context of the democratic and anti-elitist turns in artistic practice traced throughout this exhibition, these books serve to undermine residual aesthetic attitudes that privileged a particular cultural or artistic perspective. Instead, artists sought to destroy the aura around artistic images by democratizing their reception, mechanizing their production, and by insisting on the everydayness of the "reflection" presented in their work.

No one understood this better than Dieter Roth, who articulated his artistic philosophy in the first printing of his *Daily Mirror* series: "Instead of showing quality (surprising quality) we show quantity (surprising quantity)." The *Daily Mirror*, a British tabloid, provided an ideally titled source for Roth to question role of "truth" and authenticity in defining the quality of news. Characteristically, Roth uses the *Daily Mirror* repeatedly, enlarging and fragmenting stories, cartoons, headlines, and blank

margins in square segments, or reducing them into miniatures, and incessantly reprinting them. He provides an image of the news and its sundry concerns as a quantity.

Gerhard Richter's painting is famously "photographic." In *128 details from a picture (Halifax)* he arranges close-up photographs revealing the surface textures of an oil on canvas. He thus challenges us to think about our different habits of viewing – painting, photography, and even landscape. Where between the photographic details in the book and the unique painting does the "picture of Halifax" reside?

In his *Ideale Landschaft*, a "color pattern book" of six identical landscapes rendered in six shades of green as though for sale in a local hardware store, KP Brehmer reflects on the commodification of the natural world. His book offers an ambiguous ideal lodged between the idea of the imaginary landscape pictured, and the commercial availability of it as a palette that could be used to paint the home.

Circulating, Documenting, Anthologizing, Exhibiting –Happening, Fluxus, Actionism

These artists' books contain either proposals for projects and actions that can never be realized—like fantastic architectures or massive "concretifications"—or documents of performances that have taken place at festivals, in exhibitions, or even physically underground. In each case, the book assumes a kind of utopian function, standing in for an event that can never unfold, or for one that by definition cannot be captured as such by the media in which it is recalled. It is clear that the tension, if not the contradiction, between the "happening" and the book in which it is recorded is in fact integral to action- and performance-based art: from the start, performance art had to abandon any pretense of achieving "concrete presence," to recall Eugen Gomringer's phrase, and acknowledge instead a dialectic of the immediacy of performance and the mediation of its documentation. These artists' books, in other words, are not incidental to the performative practices of Fluxus and Actionism, but should rather be understood as integral to them.

24 Stunden, the book, ostensibly documents *24 Stunden*, the performance, in which an array of artists engaged in a series of provocative actions over the course of a full day and night. But the composition of the book, which includes realia from the performances as well as photographic documentation and textual scores, makes the distinction between the book and the performance difficult to draw. Rather, one could say, all of this—the performance, documentation, circulation, and this exhibition now—belongs to the (ongoing) work *24 Stunden*.

With a similar gesture, Allan Kaprow's *Assemblage, environments & happenings*, which is ostensibly an anthology of international inter-media and action-based art, invites readers to "Step right in..." to its pages. It is as if the artist's book introduces a divergent temporality to the performance that makes the performance available, in a different way to be sure, to readers today.

Provocation – Protest – Action (circa 1968)

The political upheavals of 1968 were prepared for and accompanied by similar upheavals in artistic practice. Artists identifying with and in some cases participating in worker and student movements turned aggressively against the art establishment and joined in the broader cultural criticism of

capitalist consumer society. They sought to use their art to interrogate and contest violence: the explicit violence of war, most pressingly in Vietnam, as well as the more insidious structural violence that pervaded everyday life. Increasingly, they understood their artistic practice itself as inherently political.

Jörg Immendorff's *LIDLSPORT–Ringmatte* is a “paper,” published by VICE Versand, that was meant to be laid out in public and wrestled upon. The artistic struggle on the mat actually takes place on the street, so to speak, to inflect everyday struggles that are otherwise obscured. This critique of everyday violence was extended in actions like Günter Brus' *Zerreißprobe* (1971), a graphic interrogation of the political and aesthetic anatomy of the human body.

Hans-Peter Feldmann, in contrast, collected images from the newsprint media into books, stripping them of their discursive context to produce jarring visual records of the representation of violence in mass media. The role of the mass media and the interests they represent spawned such critical newspapers and broadsides as those published by art students in Düsseldorf under the parodic titles *Information* and the *Illustrierte Akademie Zeitung*.

The blurring of the difference between political and artistic action paradigmatic in this period is attested to in Wolf Vostell's compilation of photographs, manifestos, and performance documents, *Aktionen: Happenings und Demonstrationen seit 1965*. His action-object, *Masztab: Leben ist Kunst*, a wooden ruler “printed” by the Swiss publisher Edition Howeg with a series of politically and institutionally-loaded terms, presents an ironic reflection on the topography and commensurability of art and everyday life in this time of turmoil.

Die Schastrommel (1969-1976): From Body to Book

Fleeing a prison sentence in Vienna for “debasement of national symbols” in a performance, Günter Brus founded *Die Schastrommel* in West Berlin in 1969. This art journal, whose title literally means *Farting Drum* and which bore the subversive subtitle “Organ of the Austrian Exile Government,” emerged as the most important documentation of Viennese Actionism, an action-based and often body-centric art practiced in Austria in the 1960s. Early editions of the journal collect performance documents like photographs, artists' writings, and scores as well as ephemera—from newspaper clippings to court proceedings and hate mail—and provide an image of the social, political, and cultural challenges radical performance art confronted in the postwar period, both in Austria and abroad.

A number of artists who had contributed to *Spirale* also contributed to *Die Schastrommel*, despite the strikingly different design and aims of each the journals, as captured in their respective titles. Compare Brus' rugged woodblock printed covers with the sleek concrete designs of *Spirale*. Later editions of *Die Schastrommel*, which was renamed in 1974 *Die Drossel*, function as complete artists' books, and represent Brus' emergent practice of *Bild-Dichtung*, or “image-poetry.” While his graphic images seem to bear no resemblance to the elegant typographical work of concrete poetry, *Bild-Dichtung* can nonetheless be seen as a continuation of the corporeal turn concrete poetry inaugurated.

Little known outside of Vienna where he took his own life in June 1969, Rudolf Schwarzkogler is best known today for the myth of suicide by self-castration fabricated in criticism of the exhibition of his action photographs at the documenta 5, where they were mistaken as “documentary.” In fact, although Schwarzkogler’s actions use medical instruments and evoke physical vulnerability, the photographs reveal an often tongue-in-cheek critique of assumptions about masculinity, beauty, and the integrity of the human body.

Often performed with his wife, Ana Steiner, in cramped interiors, Brus’ actions provide an analysis of the subtle violence of domesticity that translates provocatively into the intimate form of the book. These actions, witnessed by few and known through their circulation in print media or book form, exhibit the disconcerting conditions of spatial, corporal, and artistic constraint that defined much of both Brus’ and Schwarzkogler’s practice.

The relationship of the book to the body is explicitly considered in feminist artist VALIE EXPORT’s “Body Sign Action,” where she draws an equivalence between “book” and “human” that recalls the use of animal skin as paper, or vellum, in traditional book making. Her thigh, where she has a garter-belt tattooed, functions not only as a “codex” or site for transmitting visual information, but as what she calls a “real-poem.” For VALIE EXPORT and many of the actionists, the relationship between body art and the book extended beyond the documentary: the body emerged as one of the most pressing sites for the articulation of cultural critique.

In *Exil*—A Collaboration (1972)

From October 30th to November 7th 1972, Friedrich Achleitner, Günter Brus, Dieter Roth, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener convened what they called the first *Berliner Dichterworkshop*. Stationed in Oswald and Ingrid Wiener’s Café Exil in West Berlin, they set about generating a book of collages, drawings, poetry, and prose. The results of the workshop were reproduced and published as both the ninth edition of *Die Schastrommel* and the ninth edition of Roth’s *Gesammelte Werke*.

Café Exil was a small bar situated not far from the Berlin Wall in the working-class district of Kreuzberg. The name, which echoes that of club exil founded in Vienna in 1953 by Wiener, Rühm and other artist friends, conveys their continuing sense of exclusion from Austrian culture, as well as an unwillingness to integrate into the cosmopolitan life West Berlin offered. The Dichterworkshops these artists staged were friendly, casual occasions, typically sustained over several days by the meals and alcohol they consumed together in Café Exil far from the institutional spaces and restrictions of a museum or a theater, but also withdrawn from the public spaces of political protest and congregation.

The *Berliner Dichterworkshop* and the resulting book are fascinating examples of how a group of disparate artists, with increasingly different investments in both poetry and the visual arts, use the implicitly shared space of the book to engage one another’s work. The unique edition at the center of this case shows throughout its reworked pages how Roth’s interest in manual techniques and the manipulation of found materials intersects with Brus’ obsession with the figuration—whether performed or pictured—of the constrained human body. Friedrich Achleitner, Gerhard Rühm, and Oswald Wiener, who had published in *Spirale*, moved on from concrete poetry in various directions

to investigate architecture, sexuality, and cybernetics, respectively. Far from reflecting a single unified artistic intention, the book as a medium of collaboration captured the diversity of the artistic projects and preoccupations of the friends who gathered to form a distinctive community of exiles in Café Exil.