

VISUAL POETRY

Some Palette Analysis for the Renegade Anthology

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The Crux: Language as Material/Material as Language.

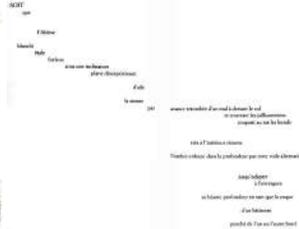
Visual poetry emerges where verbal writing realizes the alter-linguistic potentials of its visual forms. Or where visual form discovers its possibilities for carrying utterance and expression in a language relying on alternate (visual, spatial) lexica and grammars.



Simias Rhodius 4thC BC



George Herbert 1633



Stéphane Mallarmé 1897



Marinetti 1915



Apollinaire 1916

LanguageMaterial/MaterialLanguage. The phenomenon of visual poetry has everything to do with what art can be found/made at this threshold, this interface, transition, border, flap, overlap, shift, crux, flip between the linguistic and what is not language, between what is visible/touchable/pliable and what is also language. Here we can start. The fascination and importance of visual poetry, of work we can find fit to call this, like here in this new anthology¹, comes down to a large extent to the importance and interest of **this crux**, where we encounter the fundamental wedging between the being of world/stuff/object/surface and the being of anything in a system for meaning, and between our thoughts on the one hand and on the other anything that can be made to convey them – between being material and meaning something. Obsessing at this juncture, troubling the margins/thresholds of language as phenomenon and as force in the field of available materials is, perhaps most profoundly of all, what visual poets do, and what the artists collected in this anthology do in myriad ways. Material media embraced for the **more traction** they give in ongoing projects of constructing or construing a text as meaningful, and perhaps the meaning as poetic.

New Evidence: Visual Poetry Lives

Visual poetry has its literary history, its origin moments, champions, stars, groups, trends, styles, controversies, hits, classics, clichés, crap, all within a widely fluctuating genre formulation with many variants extending over many generations, and in the long view

¹ This piece written at the invitation of Andrew Topel for his anthology of contemporary international visual poetry, *Renegade a collection of international visual poetry & language arts* ed. Andrew Topel (San Diego University Press, forthcoming 2015).

already over many hundred/a couple thousand years. Though some of the work in question belongs already to other art-discourse framings and doesn't necessarily need or welcome inclusion here, much/most comes from dedicated traditions of self-aware visual poets since the beginning of the 20th Century, producing large bodies of high-quality work in loosely or tightly connected groupings often central to art scenes at the forefront of art experimentation and cultural transformation in many countries. Many of the classic introductions to visual poetry, earlier anthologies like Emmett William's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), Mary Ellen Sollt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1970), and Richard Kostelanetz anthology of critical writing: *Visual Literature Criticism* (1979), were working against a background of general skepticism as to the existence or plausibility of their subject, and with a limited overview of what in fact was being done. Still today, when skepticism as to visual poetry's relevance or interest is more an issue than incredulity/cluelessness as to its existence, an anthology like this one, now in 2015, still appears necessarily as a reminder, re-membering for us this thriving (whatever you think of it) literary genre/artform, which everyone seemed to have forgotten (again). Since the 70s, great collections and serious critical work have been done, establishing to anyone who can find the material that visual poetry is a confluence of grand traditions in experimental art. See the great French collection, *Poesure et Peintrie* (1993), in German Klaus Peter Dencker's recent vast *Optische Poesie* (2012), and the massive *Visual Poetry: L'avanguardia delle neoavanguardie* (ed. G. Allegrini, 2014) from Italy, as well as the book you are holding in your hands, international but an American collection, for evidence. The last anthology to come out in the American field that I know of was Crag Hill and Niko Vassilakis's *Last Vispo Anthology 1998 - 2008*. It was obviously not the last; and good thing. Many figures recur but here a larger time-range is included, and medially the works represent an expanded palette, displaying artistry, doing poetry, with a broader range of visual/conceptual resources.

So visual poetry has its literary history, its proof in the cultural record, but it also has its idea, its promise as a cultural pursuit. To say it in slang: **The language-like use of visuals for poetic purposes**. There is also the **visual art-like use of letters and text**, and it is often hard to tell a difference between the two, but theoretically there is a difference. As an offer/invitation into literary history, **the idea of visual poetry** adds the whole universe of "visual" to our stock of expressive resources for doing "language", and by means of language, poetry. The world of possibilities this opens up is breathtaking. Its many horizons have been assiduously explored by artists in various trends and traditions, especially since the beginning of the 20th Century, and over time the terrain has been partially organized into semi-distinct fields. This book presents a very comprehensive sampling of the fate of this idea in practice, and its aliveness in practice today.

To help think about the work collected here, it might help to pick out a couple of the types or trends that show up, and look more closely at the different fields being worked. As the corpus of visual poetry consists of a wide range of styles and kind, resulting from artists' idiosyncratic use of available resources for expression, I try to represent the different types and trends appearing here not in strict category boundaries, but as a set of **palettes**, sample assembled material-sets for meaning making, ways of using materials/language for different modes of reading, yielding different meaning effects. As

a short list of palettes we recognize in the work collected here would include: concrete poetry with its many descendents and deviances, calligraphy ancient and modern, the legacy of modernist typography and photomontage, visual poetry in the broad sense, sound poetry and performance scoring, and object art/book art/-and in a limited sense, installation art. To keep track of the broadness of the field we're wandering in reading/viewing this book, it is helpful to remember that many of the qualifying works are intermedial pieces originating in, or gravitating back to, other fields: the graphic arts, painting, music, sculpture, sound art, installation and conceptual/action/performance art. Each distinction marks a possible and actual visual poetry, bearing one or another visual style, claiming or excluding one or another set of possibilities in order better to explore those possibilities selected with the framing, within the resources assembled on the palette.

These few palettes, and a thought on how we read, should help you/us get in to the rich sampling of current creation Andrew Topel has gathered here. Each palette a spread of the possibilities along a certain axis, with certain distinctions and sorting made to help. The measure (the legibility text) is a way of finding the peotics in what shows up thus as evidence of visual poetry being vital and alive. Enjoy seeing for yourself.

Palette 1: **Concretism and Calligraphy**

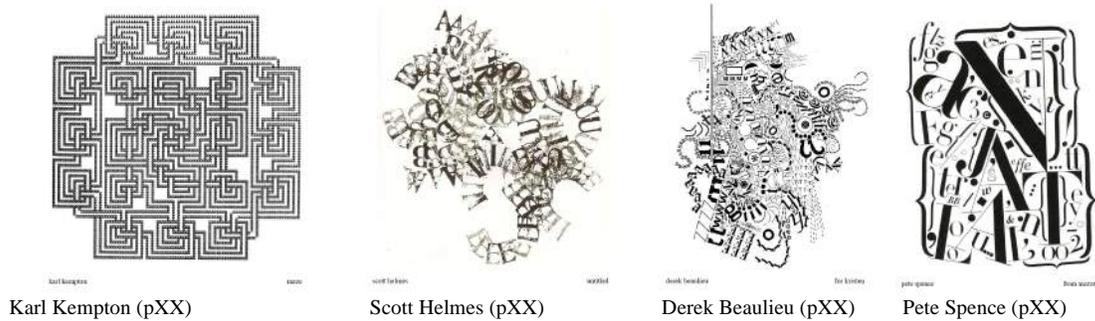
Concrete poetry is still for many the best known type/trend within the field of possibles we could call visual poetry, but it is also the most narrowly defined, and should not be allowed to stand for visual poetry in general. It is, however, easy to talk about, and helps make the point (that language is material) clearly. In its programmatic formulation, e.g. Gomringer (19??)'s formulation of the "Konstellation", concrete practice explicitly excludes the use of material other than the alphabet and the page, the better to observe what happens at this edging between letters and their materiality in visible/printed space.

silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio

Eugen Gomringer 1950s

Classically based on an isomorphism between the alphabetic/verbal gestalt and the graphic/spatial gestalt, "getting" a concrete poem in the classic formulation comes down to tracking this virtual matching: verbal/conceptual sense : graphical/spatial sense. The minimalism of Eugen Gomringer's program for **concretism**, and the German-language concretism he famously anthologized, represents a purism in the art of bringing this to salience, this pairing, the tracking of a meaning in mirrored codes: lexical/grammatical : spatial/material. The simultaneous, related and independent movement of concrete poets in Brazil, and the many afterwaves in the US, Canada, France, Japan and elsewhere, proved the serious interest of concretism as a rigorous investigation based in any language or alphabet. At the same time experimentation beyond rigorous concretism's

limits produced further proliferations in the corpus of plausible visual poetry, beyond concretism, through a messier palette of materials including non-alphabetic visuals and the materiality of print media and reproduction technologies, evolving a “dirty concretism” more relevant to the visual linguisticity of the media age, and to the work in this anthology. While often still minimalist and purist in their practice, artists of this stamp are in contact with a fuller field of visual potentials for their poetic work. In this anthology this would include: Avelino de Araujo, Karl Kempton, Scott Helmes, Kelly Mark, Derek Beaulieu, Leon Schidlowsky, and Pete Spence.



Another important source are the various ancient arts of **calligraphy**, where a similarly strict practice of typography becomes a mode of meditating on the way in which meanings take and arise from material form. In the great story of Arabic calligraphy coming out of Islamic traditions, the interdiction against the visual imaging of divinity places creative pressure on the now strictly verbal means for spiritual expression, and in this characterization inflates language with new potentials won in the expressive shaping of script. In a simple sense of calligraphy, the verbal material is styled simply for devotional/aesthetic effect, but in more serious craft, calligraphy too is working around an isomorphism, artfully managed, between verbal/conceptual and visual/material meanings; a craft/conceptual pairing whose incompatibilities, differences and distances account for much of the dynamic tension of a compelling creation.



Once you have a piece of language (verbo-conceptual construct) in material form, everything you can do with the material becomes a possible articulation or inflection you can make in the linguistic expression. The materiality of ink on page is one whole world of potentials for poetic construction and inflection. The materiality of 3D objects and

spaces is another. A whole sub-genre can be constructed of letterform art, placing language into repeatedly new shapes, and therewith the substance of language into new material contexts and framings, with each embodiment making a new statement about the nature of language, even before any content is sought in the semantic units. Then there is the extreme materialisation of book art, reproducing a literarity/poeticity in the sculptural object of the book that might or might once or never have been found in its pages.



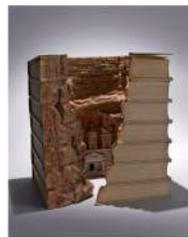
pablo lehmann

Pablo Lehmann (pXX)



K.S. Ernst

K.S. Ernst (pXX)



Guy Laramée

Guy Laramée (pXX)



Jaume Plensa

Jaume Plensa (pXX)

Palette 2: Visual Poetry in the Broad Sense

Behind concrete poetry emerging in the 1950s, contextualizing it in a broader cultural project, are modernist ambitions for a new art of visual communication, a synthesis of all available means in a graphic vernacular capable of bridging national-linguistic barriers and expanding potentials for thought, expression and exchange. With roots in the modernizing craft traditions of printing, bookmaking and display signage, and in the intermedial experimentalism of the avant-gardes of the 1910's and 20's, the Constructivist/Bauhaus traditions of **typography and photomontage** represent a great forge of visual language development, systematic study and codification of the expressive potentials of visible language and legible visuals. Integrated by now tracelessly in the everyday language of our mediated visual culture, the assembled use of these resources was the material of avant-garde speculative practice before it was consumer media and information design. A designer like Moholy-Nagy, aware both of visual media becoming grammaticalized, and of poets taking up visual means in an age of growing intermedia, comes to a visual poetry from the visual end, as a visual/spatial designer speculating a poetic graphic design art, proving the integrity of visual poetry as an intermedia, accessible from both ends. His theorization of typophoto in 1922 (?) approaches a total statement of the potentials present in visual language and language arts.



Moholy-Nagy 1924



Kawao Tomoko (p.XX)



Fernando Aguiar (pXX)



Andrew Topel (pXX)

Visual poets in the broad sense insist on including non-alphabetic elements, visual imagery and graphic media together with elements from verbal systems. The art developed here has to do with distinct modalities/styles in how materials are used to share the work of conveying poetic meanings. And the aesthetics of any visual poetry happening in these media lies in the particular blending and balance a particular writerly practice creates between its verbal/lingual and non-lingual/visual contents. This dualism or flicker between the verbal and the (non-legible) visual, between material and material you can read, handled in a composition applying principles of perceptual and informational contrast and counterpoint, is a defining feature or texture in many works. A lot of the variety we see in these examples comes down to the different strategies and styling artists apply in coordinating codes within the construction of a "text" designed for the eyes.

Paralleling the trend towards purification of the technical means, the trend that brought futurist/constructivist experimentalism down to the rigors of Swiss design, concrete painting, minimalism and literary concretism, there was/is the vector towards a maximal resourcing for visual expression, for making use of everything and anything in an eventual total blending of visual means for meaning, constantly updated by evolutions within the medial field itself.



Clemente Padin 1973



Patty Arnold (p.XX)



David Arnold (pXX)



Andrew van der Merwe (pXX)

This trend, **visual poetry in the broad sense**, has had to re-distinguish itself from concretist practice, which came later and is smaller, and has put forth different terms and discourses for claiming its wider field. The terms *visual poetry*, *poesia viva* and *poesie élémentaire* stand in this sense as specifically distinct from concrete poetry which they contain. Dada and Surrealist collage, Constructivist geometries, in addition to Bauhaus typesetting (in e.g. Typephoto), all show up as impulses behind new visual language blends, intimating the increasingly pervasive visual-languagification of our modern,

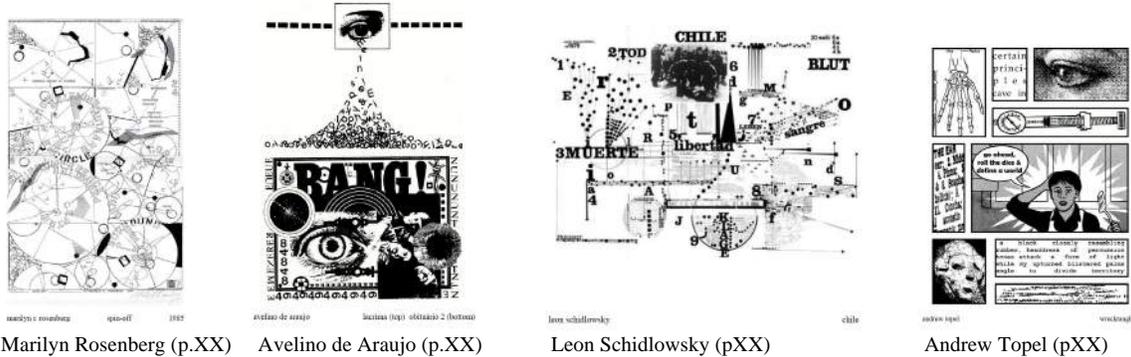
mediated consumer society. The proliferation of possible medial blends, intermedial meaning systems (language) and new kinds of poetry in or involving visual codes, lead to even higher levels of integration, bringing the idea of intermedia to an ultimate generalization or totalization, *Poesia Totale* in Adriano Spatola's phrase (+), expanding with the subsumption of all possible visual poetries, along with all possible poetries of sound, architecture, concept, movement (etc.). The becoming-total of our image of these potentials, the coming of age of the idea of intermedia, corresponds historically with our entrance into a new phase of human embodiment, characterized by all-consuming mediation and a digital dimensionalization of reality that challenges us as all our capacities of information intake, processing and comprehension. The examples of visual poetry you will encounter here vary between expressing the pathologies of, and exemplifying new masteries for, this constantly emerging new visual media culture.

The Poetics: Visual Poetry in a Strict Sense

The plausibility of a poetry done in visuals hinges not on the simple linking of a verbal content with a visual form, but on the assembly of visual contents into a structure for utterance and articulation, a conceptual structure, a system to be read. With visual poetry in the broad sense we come to the question of how to ground a visual poetry in the rigorous sense, i.e. where the poetry can be found and agreed on in the reading of the visuals. The informational density (or yield) of a visual text is one of its key variable features. As in the value system of literary poetics, the length or duration of the reading experience is a key proof of concept for a “visual poetry”. Concretism staked its claims on a koan-like minimum of poetic enunciation, a word or word-group to set in (poetic) relation to its spatial form. Julien Blaine, espousing a visual poetry in the broad sense, developed a visual-verbal sonnet form based on simple, regular phrase-image pairings, where principles classically explored under the rubric of *ekphrasis* secure the poetics of the composition. Can a visual poem hold readerly interest without verbal language, or bring its reader near to the same intensity/complexity/indeterminacy of interpretive experience we know from a good session reading traditional poetry? Or is this even what we're after in looking for what we're looking for here? Visual poetry.

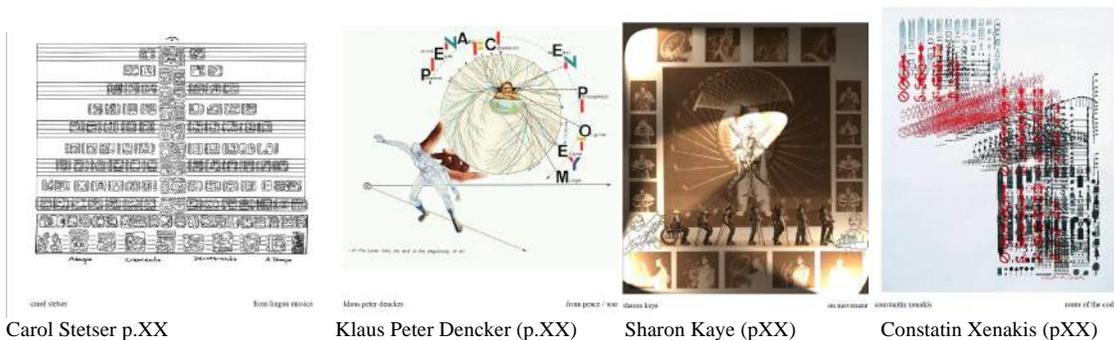
Texts combining many parallel or intervergent codes, or texts carrying a narrower code-set out over a longer span of elaboration, affording a longer text experience, offer a stronger basis for really asking the question. Affordances for exploring the visible space as codage, and the codage as a disposition to be read poetically, determine whether I can get the poetic text I'm getting, get it as visual poetry, and hence get visual poetry, as a clear it of theory or practice. How to build an argument as to the visual-poetriness of a medial text object is a scholar's concern. [If that's interesting, the “attention analysis” mentioned below might be for you.] What seems more relevant for the challenge and pleasure of exploring this new anthology, is just attention to the experience of reading, and attention to what we learn about reading in the process. While trying, it is important to remember that many of the pieces here are excised from longer sequences, and so lack material one would need for a full reading. On the other hand, the process in every case is

the same: see and make sense. Whether visual poetry exists or is alive and kicking is your decision, reader; a literature only if an audience. Can you read visual? Is it poetry?



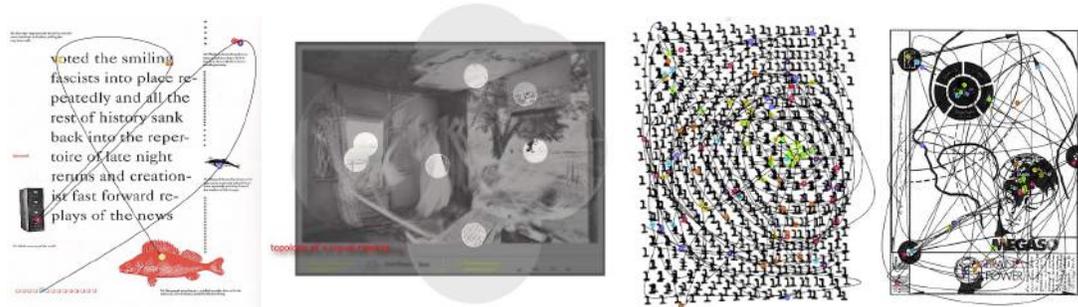
Visual Reading: Awareness Science

What we notice attending to the reading of visual poetry, is that when the poetry happens, it happens not in what's seen on the page, but in concepts in the mind, and in an experience of how these line up and relate. Encountering a visual poem, or what invites to be read as one, there is a series of glances that lead to a series of thoughts (however determinately or indeterminately formed), and in that series of thoughts, an experience we might call poetic. Do we? How can we tell?



Poetry is an effect in the mind as it builds concepts out of signs. To discuss a conceptual effect, we need a theory of experience. To see our seeing poetry in the visuals, we need a frame for watching our reading, and explaining the meaning we thereby experience. How? Before there is an analysis of the signs, the syntax or the story, there is an analysis of the (visual/perceptual) attention mobilized to take it all in, and of the (mental/conceptual) attention used to construe/construct from that a text, possibly poetic, and explore the results. The literary study of intermedial texts necessarily requires of us a particular phenomenological analytics, based in the study of attention and what its movements tell us about the way meaning is made from a field of visuals. If the study of how we read and put together meaning from words is at the basis of what we call intelligence in Western society - philosophy, logic, and rhetoric being little else - the study of how we do so from visuals brings us to a broader idea of intelligence, of a reasoning with perception, in perception, rather than outside of it.

The study of visual poetry (re-)teaches us what it means that we think and need to think in a much wider ambit, in an idea-stream/-chain that cannot abstract itself from the images, materialities, sensations, emotions, bodily processes and movements of which they are made and in which it is embedded. The challenge to account for the meaning we build in reading a “text” increases with visual poetry and the experimental arts of visual language, to include projects of reading/construal/construction feeding off different channels of sense input and exploiting different cognitive modalities in the processing.



Attention Analysis - Samples from an Empirical Study for Visual Poetics - by the author - alanprohm.wordpress.com/attentiontracking

Visual poetry continues to be relevant and interesting today (as opposed to just beautiful which is easy) because of what it shows us of our capacities for multi-channel meaning making, for higher order integration and relational construal. The literacy in between media, in intermedia; I would call it an intralinguality. The media age presents us with a mental/informational/infrastructural landscape that is unprecedentedly layered and cross-accessible. The ability to make sense and promote life in/on this landscape requires an unprecedented coordination, agility and dexterity at the level of visual attention, mental attention and construal. The effort to understand this ability and the literary/artistic disciplines it finds expression in, brings us to an art science based on an integrative aesthetics, a theory of reading as a participatory bodywide/bodydeep reception involving all senses and cognitive faculties.

Even as the academic study of poetry continues to lose relevance, the study of meaning production and consumption in media-cultural objects and in society at large is as crucial as ever. Visual poetics in fact represents an important antidote for those who fear the death of literature departments in the media age, if it is mobilized to re-establish the knowledge-base of literary analysis as the knowledge-base of more relevant, more intermedial modes of textual production and cultural exchange. On the one hand this opens the way for an evolution in the nature of “language” and textuality, not simply to media technologically, but towards a media-materialism in thought involving a greater integration of linear and non-linear, verbal and visual-spatial, conceptual and corporeal modes. And so it supports the urgent and ongoing cultural project of waking up to the embodied nature of mind, and of correcting the error that has allowed us to construct modern civilization on the basis of a rationality and intelligence trained to ignore huge swaths of what goes on in and among the senses as the experience of embodiment.

An Anthology Chronology (filling, but not exhaustive):

Anthology of Concrete Poetry, ed. Emmett Williams (New York: Something Else Press, 1967)

Bory, Jean-François. Once Again, trans. Lee Hildreth (New York: New Directions, 1968)

Concrete Poetry; a Worldview, ed. Mary-Ellen Sollt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970)

Visual Literature Criticism: a new Collection, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1979).

Elementar Poetry in USA East & West, DOC(K)S No. 35, ed. Julien Blaine (Marseille, Fall 1981)

Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature, ed. Dick Higgins (SUNY, 1987)

Core: a Symposium on Contemporary Visual Poetry, ed. John Byrum and Crag Hill (Cleveland, Mill Valley: Generatorscore Press, 1993).

Poesure et Peintrie: D'un art, l'autre, ed. Blistene et al., Musées de Marseilles, 1993.

Visuelle Poesie: Anthologie, ed. Eugen Gomringer (Reclam Verlag, 1996).

Experimental-Visual-Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry since the 1960's, e.d. K David Jackson, Eric Vos, and Johanna Drucker (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996).

Proliferation 5: The Visual Visible Issue, e.d. Burger, Mary and Chris Vitello (San Francisco: Durham, 1998-1999).

Poetry Plastique, curated by Jay Sanders and Charles Bernsetein (New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, 2001)

Last Vispo Anthology: Visual Poetry 1998 – 2008, ed. Crag Hill and Niko Vassilakis (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012)

Optische Poesie: von den prähistorischen Schriftzeichen bis zu den digitalen Experimenten der Gegenwart, ed. Klaus Peter Dencker, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012)

Visual Poetry: L'avanguardia delle neoavanguardie, ed. G. Allegrini and L. Vinca Masini (Milano: Skira, 2014)

Renegade a collection of international visual poetry & language arts ed. Andrew Topel (San Diego University Press, forthcoming 2015).

Figures:

Simias Rhodius, "The Axe" 4th Century BCE.
George Herbert, "Easter Wings" 1633.
Stéphane Mallarmé, from "Un coup de dés jamais n'abilira l'hazard" 1897.
F.T. Marinetti, "Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto" 1915.
Guillaume Apollinaire, "La colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau" 1916.

Eugen Gomringer, "Silencio" 1950s.

Karl Kempton, "maze" p. XX
Scott Helmes, "untitled" p.XX
Derek Beaulieu, "for kristen" p. XX
Pete Spence, "from mezzo" p.XX

Shinichi Maruyama, "from kusho (writing in the sky)" p.XX
Bin Qullander, "magnify the eye" p.XX
Abdallah Akar, "journal.n.qabani (diary of a woman)" p.XX
John Moore Williams, "ohne 3" p.XX

Pablo Lehmann, "freud's book" p.XX
K.S. Ernst, "broken english" p.XX
Guy Laramee, "untitled" p.XX
Jaume Plensa, "twins i & ii" p.XX

Moholy-Nagy, "school-girls' dream" (1924)
Kawaor Tomoko, "untitled" p.XX
Fernando Aguiar, "poetry is dead. long live poetry" p.XX
Andrew Topel, "comix-harnessing the power of language" p.XX

Clemente Padin, "L'art? Ah...oui" (1973)
Patty Arnold, "expected harm – mean time" p.XX
David Arnold, "she dreams about guns knives and water" p.XX
Andrew van der Merwe, "untitled" p.XX

Marilyn R. Rosenberg, "spin-off" p.XX
Avelino de Araujo, "lacrima" (top) "obituário 2" (bottom) p.XX
Leon Shidlowky, "chile" p.XX
Andrew Topel, "wrecktangle" p.XX

Carol Stetser, "from lingua musica" p.XX
Klaus Peter Dencker, " " p.XX
Sharon Kaye, "on movement" p.XX
Constantin Xenakis, "route of the code" p.XX