

***Ground States:
The Visual Contexts of bpNichol***

A 2009 Preface: This essay was written for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition St. Art: The Visual Poetry of bpNichol, which I curated for the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown in 2000 and which then toured to two other Canadian art galleries. Both the essay and exhibition were intended to introduce Nichol's work to a visual arts audience with little knowledge of what comprised visual poetry.

1

In the beginning there is the cosmological ground state. The vacuum. Absence. Recent theorizing about the origins of the universe has included a concept called "the decay of the false vacuum." The vacuum of empty space – the ground state – is not the void we cartoonishly perceive it as being. It is, rather, a turbulent sea of sub-atomic particles spontaneously popping into existence and then being quickly re-absorbed into the background nothingness. They are virtual particles, not quite real. From a nothing comes a sort of something, but as not to violate any physical laws and so maintain the cosmic status quo, these somethings are fleeting in existence, living an infinitesimally slight life span before re-assimilation into the ground state.

But add a little energy into the scheme of things to give a virtual particle a push and it can cross the line and become materially real. From nothingness can indeed come a palpable something and a universe be born.

I invoke the cosmological concepts of the ground state and the decay of the vacuum as a metaphor for the creative process, particularly as it occurred in the work of the late Canadian poet Barrie Philip (bp) Nichol. Born in 1944 in Vancouver, Nichol was a poet, novelist, and essayist who won the Governor General's award for poetry in 1971. He was an internationally renowned sound poet who performed with the ensemble *The Four Horsemen* (which included fellow poets Rafael Baretto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, and Steve McCaffery). He wrote children's books, and scripts for children's television shows like *FraggleRock* and *The Raccoons*. He was a librettist. And he was an artist who undertook a career-long exploration into the visual possibilities of the material stuff of language until his untimely death in 1988. *St. Art: The Visual Poetry of bpNichol* constitutes a contextual enquiry into aspects of Nichol's range of visual poetics, from typewriter-based works of the 1960s, to comic-book inspired drawings and sequences, to his reinventions of the alphabet and work with his favorite letter, "H". Nichol's lifetime body of work can be less metaphorically likened to the branches of a tree sprouting from a single trunk, or even a Deuleuzian rhizome. Rather, it can be seen more a part of an ongoing return to and encounter with the creative ground state and the charged space of the working surface.

For so universes are born.

2

Within the realm of the literary arts, visual poetry, a poetic form with a history that arguably stretches back to at least 1700 B.C.E.¹, truly came of age early in the century with the work of the French poet (and first major theoretician of Cubism) Guillaume Apollinaire, his Dadaist contemporary Tristan Tzara, and the Italian Futurist, F.T. Marinetti. In the 1950s, the Concrete poetry movement achieved international status and some degree of recognition by an avant-garde movement within the visual arts community. Mid-century too, the work of artists like Jasper Johns admitted language into the painterly canon, and carrying on into a new millennium, the likes of Lawrence Weiner and Jenny Holzer (amongst numerous others) use text exclusively as a means of visual and conceptual expression.

But despite contemporary assertions that “visual poetry is one of the hallmarks of our age, like jazz and abstract art,”² it has been largely ignored by the mainstreams of both the literary and visual arts. Visual poetry, it seems, would be claimed by neither camp, regarded as little more than the bastard child of a brief and embarrassingly unfortunate trans-disciplinary fling. And though Weiner's semantically conceptual language pieces, Holzer's work with electronic LED signage, and even Canadian painter Gerald Ferguson's typewriter composition *The Standard Corpus of Present Day English Language Usage, arranged by word length and alphabetized within word length* (1970)³ all exemplify the interest in and exploration of language carried out by visual artists, visual poetry — “poetry meant to be seen”⁴ — created by *literary* artists is ignored or dismissed as irrelevant by visual artists.

It wasn't always so. In the heady days of Canadian culture — the late 1960s and early 1970s — the mainstream of visual art in Canada made some attempt to embrace the visual things that writers were doing. Both *artscanada* and *vie des arts* magazines, for example, extended their cultural catchment areas to include visual poetry, publishing

¹Dick Higgins. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Albany: State University of New York, 1987, p. 4.

²Willard Bohn. *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914-1928*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 1.

³Itself preceded by minimalist sculpture Carl Andre's typewriter works of the 1960s, including "Still, A Novel".

⁴Bohn, p. 2.

examples of the work as well as the theory behind it.⁵ The work of bpNichol figured prominently in this period, but as the century and millennium drew to a close, this window of cross-disciplinary opportunity narrowed. Visual poetry would become ghettoized as a sub-culture within the literary world.

Print has dominated Western culture since Gutenberg, and while its authority is disintegrating synchronously with the rise of an image-based paradigm driven by the computerization of society, its sway within intellectual and academic spheres remains as yet unchallenged. "I have serious trouble," argues Barbara Maria Stafford in *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*, "with the deprecating rhetoric that stakes out bookish literacy as a moral high ground from which to denounce our tainted 'society of the spectacle'."⁶ In a print-dominated world, images have long been culturally and socially tainted by their association with immorality and vice; the internet today, for example, is nothing if not marked by its plethora of web sites exclusively devoted to erotic or pornographic imagery.

Nichol's visual work, then, has become bound up within a literary economy, and so has virtually no presence within the visual arts scene today, despite his production of a variety of visual poetics over a period roughly spanning twenty-five years, and both solo showings of his work and inclusion within larger international exhibitions. Though he initially established himself early on as Canada's most internationally renowned Concrete poet when the movement was a truly global phenomenon, Nichol's reputation – both national and international – now rests almost exclusively on his literary achievements, and particularly his major work, a long poem entitled *The Martyrology*.

Even here, though, in this literary landscape, Nichol's visual sensibility is well rooted, for he constantly explored the dualism of language as both container and content. Through the course of the sequence of books that constitute *The Martyrology*, Nichol constantly disrupts the conventions of the poetic structure – and our conventions of reading – with visual poems, drawings, collages, and the like. It was so with most of his published works (indeed, Nichol wrote an entire novel as an extended visual poem⁷).

But the origins of Nichol's visual work trace back to the ground state and an encounter with a device considered central to the history of modernist art: the grid.

3

The grid is so endemic to twentieth century art that it has become virtually synonymous with modernism itself. Artists like the late painter Agnes Martin made it central to their

⁵See "10 Canadian Poets on Light," *artscanada*, December 1968, pp. 65-67; Robert White and Gary Michael Dault. "Word Art/Art Word," *artscanada*, June 1968, pp. 17-20; John Michael Chandler. "Incoherent thoughts on concrete poetry," *artscanada*, August 1969, pp. 10-13; and Jacques Lepage. "Poésie visuelle," *vie des arts*, printemps 1973, pp. 62-65.

⁶Barbara Maria Stafford. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 4.

⁷bpNichol. *Extreme Positions*, Edmonton: The Longspoon Press, 1981.

entire life's work, and countless others have employed it as a device intended to secondarily aid or sustain a primary visual endeavor. Its attractions include, among other things, the fact that it can stylistically mask banality of creative thought. When all else fails, one can always count on the visual impact of the grid's recursive and repetitive multiplications and divisions.

Though it has been argued that the grid succeeded in creating a rupture between “the arts of vision and those of language,”⁸ it isn't a device exclusively embraced by the former. The literary world indeed has its own experience of the grid. It involves (of course) the alphabet, that sequence of twenty-six symbols we use to construct meaningful semantic units (i.e. words), and the typewriter. The typographic grid is part and parcel of the technology of the typewriter, and while the grid has no *apparent* place within the communicative conventions of language, poets long ago discovered that it was a useful device for dealing with language in a material way. With it, the literary world eventually spawned an avant-garde that was able to make a tenuous toehold in the world of the visual.

The late American poet Charles Olson theorized the grid and the alphabet/typewriter matrix in his groundbreaking essay “Projective Verse,” first published in 1950. In one of the most influential of expositions of a modernist poetics, Olson wrote

from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had.⁹

With the technology of the typewriter readily at hand, the poet was at last freed of an intermediating dependence on the printer to carry out or complete the poem, and was at last able to deal with the matter and visual structure of language directly. Until the typewriter, the grid, for the most part, was the exclusive preserve of the typesetter.

Nichol's application of the grid to the ground state of the page was two-fold. His life-long love of comic strips eventually led him to a sometimes-simultaneous exploration of the grid of the comic book panel and the architectural grid of the divided light. But in the early 1960s, it was the grid of the typewriter that led him to become Canada's most internationally prominent practitioner of what came to be called Concrete poetry.

⁸Rosalind Krauss. "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986, p. 9.

⁹Charles Olson. "Projective Verse," in *Selected Writings*, Robert Creeley, ed. New York: New Directions Press, 1966, p. 24.

There were two major anthologies published that documented the Concrete poetry movement as it was at its height: Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), and Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968). Both included work by the major figures of the movement, poets and artists from around the world, and in both the work of a single Canadian appeared: bpNichol.

Concrete poetry has the singular distinction of having been developed in three places – Sweden, Switzerland, and Brazil – and in three languages – Swedish, German, and Portuguese – simultaneously. One of the two European paths of its history traces back to Bolivian-born poet Eugen Gomringer. In the 1950s Gomringer was employed as secretary to Swiss artist, Max Bill, and came under the influence of Bill's formalist aesthetic, derived, as it was, from Russian Constructivism and the modernist abstraction of Dutch artist Piet Mondrian. In 1953, Gomringer published his first book of visual poems, *konstellationen* (“constellations”), a work comprising poems that took single words and experimented with their structure, breaking them down into their constituent letters and making of them new shapes and patterns, all so as to dispose of the clinging auras of semantic meaning. Gomringer later defined this new kind of poem as

an object to be both seen and used: an object containing thought but made concrete through play activity.... The constellation is the simplest possible kind of configuration in poetry which has for its basic unit the word, it encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster.¹⁰

At about the same time in São Paulo, Brazil, Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Haraldo de Campos came together as the *Noigandres* group (taking their name from a nonsense word in a poem by American poet Ezra Pound) and began publishing visual poetry that shared strikingly similar concerns and intentions as Gomringer's constellations. In 1958 they formalized their aesthetic in “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” defining it as a “tension of thing-words in space-time”¹¹ which “begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent.”¹² In both the theory and work of Gomringer and the *Noigandres* group, the modernist agenda of art's autonomy from representation is argued as language's break from its historical compact with the needs and obligations of linear narrative structures.

Contact between Gomringer and the poets of *Noigandres* first occurred in 1955 when Pignatari traveled to Germany. From that date on, Concrete poetry ceased to be a localized and isolated phenomenon, evolving, instead, into a transnational movement that knew no linguistic or political barriers. Concrete poetry could be carried out in any language. Freed of its representational (semantic) straitjacket, the morphological make-up

¹⁰Eugen Gomringer. "From Line to Constellation," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Mary Ellen Solt, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968, p. 67.

¹¹Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haraldo de Campos. "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Mary Ellen Solt, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968, p 72.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 71.

of any language offered the possibilities of concretism. Concrete poetry, like so much of the architecture and visual art of the period, was internationally modernist to its very core.¹³ Here in Canada, Nichol was introduced to it in the early 1960s by Vancouver poet George Bowering, and through the work of poets Bill Bissett, Judith Copithorne, and Earle Birney. In 1965, he published his first book of visual poems, *Cycles*.

Perhaps Nichol's most famous poem of his Concrete period was a work that came to be known as *Blues*, which appeared in the Solt anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View* with the title "love," and with the notation "Canada's leading concrete poet is B.P. Nichol, one of the editors of GRONK. From his text we learn that 'love is also a beautiful word to look at.'"¹⁴ Such inane contextualizing (of which this is but one example) historically did nothing to aid the cause of Concrete poetry in its efforts to acquire legitimacy in the spheres of both the literary and visual arts, but it also serves to diminish the particular instance of this poem. *Blues* exemplifies Nichol's interest in the possibilities of the grid, as well as in narrative visual strategies that shrug off semantic conventions. With a single word, he works visual permutations across the horizontal, vertical, and diagonal axes of the page. His poetry from this period nods broadly toward the Minimalist aesthetic: the logic of typewriter concrete is self-contained, and the poems are true to their material and their making.¹⁵ Their relationship to the visual arts is also affirmed by their non-linearity; one doesn't "read" a concrete poem from the top left hand corner to the bottom right as one would a conventional text. Nichol's Concrete poems, like most other work from this genre, work spatially. Though Nichol sketched an idea for a sculptural, three-dimensional version of *Blues*, the idea was never executed.

While the typewriter made the grid directly available to poets, Nichol's working method in large part involved its use to create the final, publishable/showable version of the poem. In work after work, Nichol first *drew* the poem freehand, literally marking out the vertical and horizontal axes of the grid and situating the letters of the poem within the appropriate cells. Only then would he turn to the typewriter to formally complete the work

Early on, Nichol called his work "ideopomes":

because i had read Fenellosa on the Chinese written

¹³Indeed, it has been argued that the work of the *Noigandres* group was strongly influenced by the modernist architecture of Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil entirely designed by French architect Le Corbusier. See Sergio Bessa. "Architecture Versus Sound in Concrete Poetry," <http://www.ubu.com/papers/bessa-ord.htm>.

¹⁴Mary Ellen Solt, ed. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Mary Ellen Solt, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968, p. 47.

¹⁵The poem "Love," as anthologized, was intentionally disrupted from its typewriter Concrete origins. Though Nichol later published it as the poem "Blues" in his major concrete collection, *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* (London: Writers Forum Press, and Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1973), restoring it to its original typewritten form, the Solt anthology version was a re-design undertaken by another major figure in the Concrete poetry movement, Hansjörg Mayer, that dispensed with the typewritten structure of the poem.

character as a medium for poetry¹⁶ because i was very interested in Chinese, Japanese, Haida & Kwakiutl poetic modes, & because i saw myself as consciously working with the ideogrammatic potential of the arabic alphabet. This was before i learned of "Concrete Poetry" as such.¹⁷

Later, he would come to describe his visual poetry as "borderblur." In "some afterwords" for the Canadian Concrete poetry anthology he edited, *the cosmic chef: an evening of concrete* (1970), Nichol noted

by way of an introduction let me simply say that this whole book is best described by the term dom sylvester houédard¹⁸ coined BORDERBLUR everything presented here comes from that point where language &/or the image blur together into the inbetween & become concrete objects to be understood as such.¹⁹

"Borderblur" was a term that could be synonymous with another, better known word used to broadly define the activities of many artists of the mid-twentieth century: intermedia. Though the mainstream of the visual arts had shown little interest in Concrete poetry, it did draw the attention of a coeval avant-garde movement, Fluxus. It was artist, writer, and scholar Dick Higgins, a Fluxus founding member, who published *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* through his Something Else Press, Inc. (also publishing works by John Cage, Claes Oldenburg, Al Hansen, and Allen Kaprow, among others), and it was he who brought forward the expression "intermedia" in 1966 to describe works "which fall conceptually between media that are already known."²⁰

It was Fluxus involvement and interest in Concrete poetry that gave it some degree of legitimacy with visual artists it otherwise wouldn't have enjoyed. It was a Fluxus artist and poet – Emmett Williams – who edited the Something Else Press anthology.²¹ And one of the luminaries of the Concrete poetry movement was Diter (or Dieter) Rot of Iceland, an artist and writer whose work was central to the Fluxus phenomenon.

¹⁶Ernest Fenellosa. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (edited by Ezra Pound). San Francisco: City Lights Books, no date.

¹⁷bpNichol. *Doors: To Oz & Other Landscapes*. Toronto: grOnk, 1979, unpaginated.

¹⁸The late Dom Sylvester Houédard was a Benedictine monk and one of the leading theorists and practitioners of the Concrete poetry movement.

¹⁹bpNichol, ed. *the cosmic chef: an evening of concrete*. Kingston: Oberon Press, 1970, unpaginated. Interestingly, Nichol dedicated *cosmic chef* to five of the great cartoonists of all time: Walt Kelly (*Pogo*), Winsor McKay (*Little Nemo in Slumberland*, and a pioneer animator), Chester Gould (*Dick Tracy*), George Herriman (*Krazy Kat*), and Cliff Sterrett (*Polly and Her Pals*).

²⁰Quoted in Pedro Reis. "Concrete Poetry: A Generic Perspective," in *Experimental - Visual - Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry Since the 1960s*, p. 293.

²¹Williams has an association with the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax that dates back to the late 1960s when the institution became associated with cutting edge movements like Conceptual Art.

While his career was initially established, in large part, because of his work within the Concrete poetry movement, Nichol soon chafed at its constrictive minimalism. His eventual abandonment of the limited condition of the typewriter grid comprised a return to the elemental ground state of the grid itself, leading to an encounter with the Toronto painter and printmaker Barbara Caruso. In the early 1970s, Caruso was at work on a major sequence of large abstract paintings she called the *Colour Lock Series*. Essentially, each work involved a grid of what Caruso termed “colour shapes” painted two-high in a long rectangle. Individual colour shapes were segregated from each other by an outlined neutral boundary that made each discrete entities, isolate but proximate.²²

Nichol saw Caruso's paintings as variants on the conventions of the cartoon strip composed, as it typically is, of a sequence of individually self-contained panels that in combination make for a structural and narrative whole. Working in collaboration, Nichol and Caruso produced the serigraph portfolio *The Adventures of Milt the Morph in Colour* (1972), comprising a sequence of eight separate prints each based on Caruso's colour shapes gridded in a two-high rectangle of discrete blocks of colour demarcated by a neutral boundary.²³ Nichol worked into this grid, introducing both images – outlined figures – and text. But Nichol didn't confine himself to the kind of tightfisted discreteness of Caruso's grid or the closed pictorial boxes of the comic strip, preferring, instead, to mix a combination comprising Caruso's modernist grid, the panels of the comic strip, and the architectural grid known as the divided light.

Nichol and Caruso collaborated on a number of print editions, and Caruso acted as printer and publisher, through her Seripress, for works by Nichol alone and by several other artists and writers. One of Nichol's solo Seripress efforts, *From My Window* (1978), virtually literalizes his interest in and use of the divided light, that style of window – developed of necessity and the historic limitations of glass-making – composed of smaller panes of glass separated and held in place by a grid of muntins. In a sequence of seven prints that correspond to each day of the week, Nichol proffers a repeated image of a four-pane window beyond which is the blue of a sky. Above each is printed the specific day of the week, beneath the word “blue”. Not much happens in the sequence, though the shade of the blue subtly shifts. What is critical here is the frame of the window, for this is a true divided light self-reflexively contextualizing the world, and beyond it something — be it ever so subtle — happens that is not strictly delimited by the parameters of the frame. The window is a way in (or out), a portal to the world, and Nichol used it in any number of his cartoon strip works. It is perhaps best exemplified, though, in the works that comprise the *Lonely Fred the Cowboy Hero* cartoon strips.

²²See her essay "The Seripress Collaborations" the exhibition catalogue *St. Art: The Visual Poetry of bpNichol*, Gil McElroy, curator. Charlottetown, PEI: The Confederation Centre Art Gallery & Museum, 2000, pp. 47-60.

²³Barbara Caruso denied permission to reproduce *The Adventures of Milt the Morph in Colour* in the *St. Art* catalogue, as well as any of the other credited collaborations she undertook with Nichol.

The first historically acknowledged comic *strip* – a sequence of narratively related pictorial panels – was *The Yellow Kid*, which appeared in 1895 in a New York City newspaper. Its popular appeal quickly spawned imitators, and the medium soon became well established, if not entirely respected. In the 1940s and '50s, a campaign led in large part by American psychologist Dr. Frederic Wertham led to a law in Canada regarding “crime comics,” and U.S. Senate investigations into the corrupting influence comics had on young people.²⁴

Corrupting, indeed. Nichol never outgrew his childhood love of comics, as an adult eventually assembling a significant collection of both comic books and many of the more historically important comic strips. But his major contribution lies in his original work using strips as vehicles for artistic expression. His first real effort was *Bob de Cat* (circa 1960), a strip based around the adventures of Bob, a stereotypical '50s “beatnik” in dark glasses, goatee, and beret. The strips were formulaic and conventionally rendered, each a sequence of three panels within which Nichol kept his narrative tightly enclosed. The juvenilia of *Bob de Cat* was succeeded by more sophisticated imagery, characters, and ideas. In 1967 Nichol published *THE YeAr OF THE FROG* through his own Ganglia Press. While not a strip *per se*, it comprised a series of independent, though thematically related, line drawings detailing traits and attributes of anthropomorphized frog characters. From a drawing of “the loves of the frog,” in which a clothed and standing frog stares narcissistically into a mirror, to “the doubts of the frog,” depicting a similar-looking frog unhappily hunched over with the words “the doubts” weighing down its shoulders and back, Nichol reflects on our historic love of anthropomorphic animal creatures, from the creatures of “Wind in the Willows” (a quote from which Nichol reproduces in the chapbook) to the characters of Disney or Warner Brothers animation.

But perhaps Nichol's best work with the comic strip was *Lonely Fred The Cowboy Hero* (1974-75). The strips – each typically three-panel narratives – involve Fred, the lonely cowboy, whose “life was filled with cacti & not much else,”²⁵ and his horse, the self-referentially named Horse (“It's the existential questions that bother *me!*!”²⁶). A number of the strips revolve around Fred's dream to become a singing cowboy and Horse's dream to become more famous than Trigger. They're intentionally inane issues, and Nichol uses them to lovingly mock the plot lines of comic book and movie serial cliffhangers he adored: “WHAT WILL FRED DECIDE? TUNE IN NEXT TIME FOR EVEN MORE THRILLS!” reads the final panel of the third strip. By the fifth strip, though, Nichol steps forward and introduces a disjunctive plot twist that totally distorts the conventions of the rather banal overriding story-line: “MEANWHILE OUT OVER THE OCEAN SOMETHING IS HAPPENING THAT WILL CHANGE FRED'S LIFE!!” The scenery shifts from the desert to the stylized waves of an ocean. A few birds are suggestively

²⁴see “The Comic Book Villain, Dr. Frederic Wertham, M.D.”
<http://www.sigma.net/comichistory/Hist2.html>.

²⁵bpNichol. *Lonely Fred the Cowboy Hero*, c. 1974-75, #2.

²⁶ibid, #1.

scattered through the air. There's an orb – the sun or moon – partially covered by clouds hanging in the sky. And there's an object dominating our attention, seen from our vantage in receding perspective, hovering above the water. It's a massive letter of the alphabet.

“H”.

7

Nichol's family lived in Winnipeg for a time when he was a child. Their neighborhood was divided into smaller sections each identified by a letter of the alphabet. The Nichols lived in “H” section, and to find his way home the young bp walked alphabetically: “G” wasn't quite far enough, and “I” was just a bit past.

“H” was Nichol's favorite letter of the alphabet, and he worked extensively with it. One of his Seripress collaborations with artist Barbara Caruso was *H: An Excursion* (1976), a portfolio of seven prints in which the letter “H,” upper case and rendered initially in sans-serif outline, decays narratively through the sequence until it becomes pure form and colour stripped of any vestigial semantic content, a modernist 3 x 3 grid of Caruso's colour shapes. And in *P.S. 32: Zygol Movements Over North America* (1978), Nichol literalizes a month's worth of daily weather maps from a newspaper, constructing a storyline detailing the movements and activities of the massive “H”s (that in reality denoted zones of high pressure) floating above the continent.

His work with alphabet wasn't restricted to a single letter, however. In 1971, Oberon Press published his *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book*, a work in which Nichol worked serial permutations on the English alphabet, using each letter individually in recursive combinations that created interference patterns – kinds of graphemic *moiré* – to devise typographically self-referential pieces that echoed the work of activist artists who made up a European social and artistic movement known as *Lettrisme*.

Founded in France following World War II by Romanian-born artist Isidore Isou, Lettrisme was primarily an artistic attempt to create a form of visual poetry that entirely dispensed with words and semantic referencing (though it later became intertwined with the social activism of the Situationist International movement in France in the 1960s). In his “Manifesto of Letterist [sic] Poetry: A Commonplace about Words,” Isou declaimed that “the word is the first stereotype,” and that “the carpentry of the word built to last forever obliges men to construct according to patterns.”²⁷ To break free of those patterns and dispense with semantic referral, the Lettristes worked with alphabets – both real and invented – and pictograms in their drawings, paintings, films, and even furniture designs. Though essentially a European phenomenon, Lettrisme was introduced to North America by the American poet d.a. levy, who in turn introduced it to Canadian poets, Nichol amongst them.

²⁷David W. Seaman, ed. and trans. “Selections from the Manifestos of Isidore Isou.” *Light and Dust Anthology of Poetry* [Online]. Available: <http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/lettrist/isou-m.htm>.

The Lettriste attempt to subversively foil the conventions of the semantic/communicative agenda is echoed through Nichol's whole range of visual poetics. But his alphabets are the one of the sites where such a strategy is at its most elemental.

ALPHHABET/ILPHABET (1978), another work published by Seripress, consisted of two complete alphabetic sequences, one based on the letter “H,” the other on the letter “T”. These are objects entirely removed from any economy of semantic representation. While the English alphabet is recognizable within the typographic shapes and sans-serif faces (more readily so in the “H” alphabet), the letters aggressively refute the denoting function ascribed to conventional alphabets.

In *Allegories* (circa 1980), Nichol welded together the alphabet, comics, and the pictorial in a series of thirty-two drawings that resisted semantic co-option while simultaneously taking an aggressive part in it. In the sequence of drawings, individual letters of the alphabet are rendered as perspectival and sculptural objects set into relationships with one another or with non-alphabetic representational symbols. In *Allegory #1*, the letters “O,” “W,” “D,” “A” and “E” are jumbled together atop an “H”. From the midst of this alphabetic amalgam emanates one of the great inventions of the comic strip: the thought balloon. Within it, Nichol has set his letters to thinking – hopefully ? – of the letter “Z,” somewhere further down along the line at the end of the alphabetic road.

In *Allegory #4*, the letter “T” shapes a sculpturally negative figure on the paper's ground and in which a paradoxical glimpse of sky with bird and cloud can be seen (echoing, perhaps, the seascape of his hovering “H” in the *Lonely Fred the Cowboy Hero* sequence), and from which rises a thought balloon – or actually, a series of them in recursive combination, one set within the other in an infinite regression of self-referentiality.

A decidedly modernist device, the tautological loop, like the grid, has obviously narrow limitations. Nichol, however, was never so enamored of either that his visual work became choked or stultified by a single-minded modernist pursuit of the “essence” of such mechanisms. With *Allegories*, Nichol messes with the idea of allegory and its concepts of extended metaphor and meaning being conveyed symbolically. While we tend to ascribe its use to poets like Dante or artists like Giovanni Bellini, Nichol's work reminds us that grids, modernist loops of self-referentiality, and cartoon strip conventions all are very much a part of an allegorical economy.

Thought balloons.

8

Underscoring the thought balloon that is this essay is a fundamental inability (and even unwillingness) to delimit Nichol's lifelong body of work. Beyond the range of visual poetics discussed here are his watercolor drawings, collaborations with fellow poet Steve McCaffery, the sculptural objects that make up the stock of his *Pataphysical Hardware Company*, and the enormous diversity of printed matter that continues to be published

years after his death. Nichol's ongoing return to the false vacuum of the artistic ground state, his lifelong re-encounters with the *tabula rasa* of the working surface, ensures that a complete circumscription of his work here is impossible to complete.

Nor was it intended. Rather, the focus is on aspects of Nichol's work in which the meeting of the literary and the visual is demonstrably a part of a visual arts discourse and the aim of re-situating Nichol beyond the limited literary context he has been given.

Despite the marginalization of visual poetry as a whole, Nichol's work has had an enduring impact. In June of 1997, the University of Alberta in Edmonton played host to "EyeRhymes: A Multi-Disciplinary International Conference and Festival of Visual Poetry." It attracted poets, artists, and scholars from thirteen different countries who participated in lectures, readings, and exhibitions. On the conference's "Canada Day," Canadian visual poetry was in the limelight, and though Nichol had long since passed from the scene, his contribution was foregrounded in scholarly papers and through the work of living poets.

Nichol's ongoing influence and artistic weight is critical here, for it shapes a ground state in and of itself. Despite enjoying international success within the world of Concrete poetry early on in his career, Nichol made a conscious decision to focus his energies within a more immediate community. His extensive and career-long involvement in the Canadian small press environment – as an editor and publisher – was vital in ensuring its success. Beyond his own artistic contribution, his active role in the literary and visual milieus ensured that new and unknown writers – visual poets or not – were able to publish to an audience within their own country, he helped give shape to the very cultural landscape that made it so.

This is the ground state of Canadian (visual) poetry today.

bpNichol.

St. Art.

Gil McElroy
February 2000

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