

# Concert Posters as First-Wave Concrete Poetry in the United States

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper covers the major way concrete poetry existed in the United States during the period commonly referred to as "The first wave" for concrete poetry around the world. The years from 1950 to 1970 seem to have little US concrete poetry. But this is because these poems were masquerading as art masquerading again as advertising: rock posters. This was centered in San Francisco with little travel elsewhere until after the first wave was considered "over". But this is not an anomaly; the reasons given for the growth of concrete poetry in the avant-garde are the same reasons, to an extent, it grew in the United States. The culture in San Francisco in the 1960s enabled the similarities to coalesce and became The United States' missing generation of avant-garde.

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Concrete poetry is not merely read, but viewed. And something about it prevents us from calling it graphic design. In some non-consistent way It communicates through text, through composition, through color, through form, through the components of the text. And it does this at least as much as, if not more than, the component text itself. Possibly even instead of the text itself. The letters have more importance than the words they make up.

Concrete poetry had its first "wave" from about 1950 through about 1970. Starting with Brazil and Switzerland, it spreads globally, reaching the UK in 1962, and Canada roughly the same time (though there is contention about when it first started in Canada). There are many poets and poems before this time and outside this geographical frame, but when the

term "concrete poetry" is used it almost always refers to this certain type of poetry created in this twenty year period in these places.

Why was there no concrete poetry movement during this time in the United States? As long as we accept that people can work within a genre without realizing it exists as a genre, there was a movement. There was a very strong concrete movement in the United States during this "first wave" period, and it was centered in San Francisco. What are seen as concrete poems fully existed in the United States at this time, and had a wider effect. But they weren't called concrete poetry, or even poetry. Concrete poets in the United States were working as concert poster artists.

## **Genesis of the Form**

Most poets in concrete poetry in this first wave time frame are important because they referred to themselves as practicing concrete poets, creating concrete poetry. Unlike previous poets, their words were not all necessarily read from A to B. There was not a beginning and end. There was not a linear component where the reader constructed the sentence through space and time. The poems were approachable as an art piece, viewing the entirety, then each individual piece as suits the reader, feeling the whole come together in the mind. It may be unnecessarily poetic to describe the poems this way, but it is what is happening. The first wave was (mostly) a realization that a poem can be art not simply like a painting, but also like an architectural plan or a symphonic score or even ripples on a river.

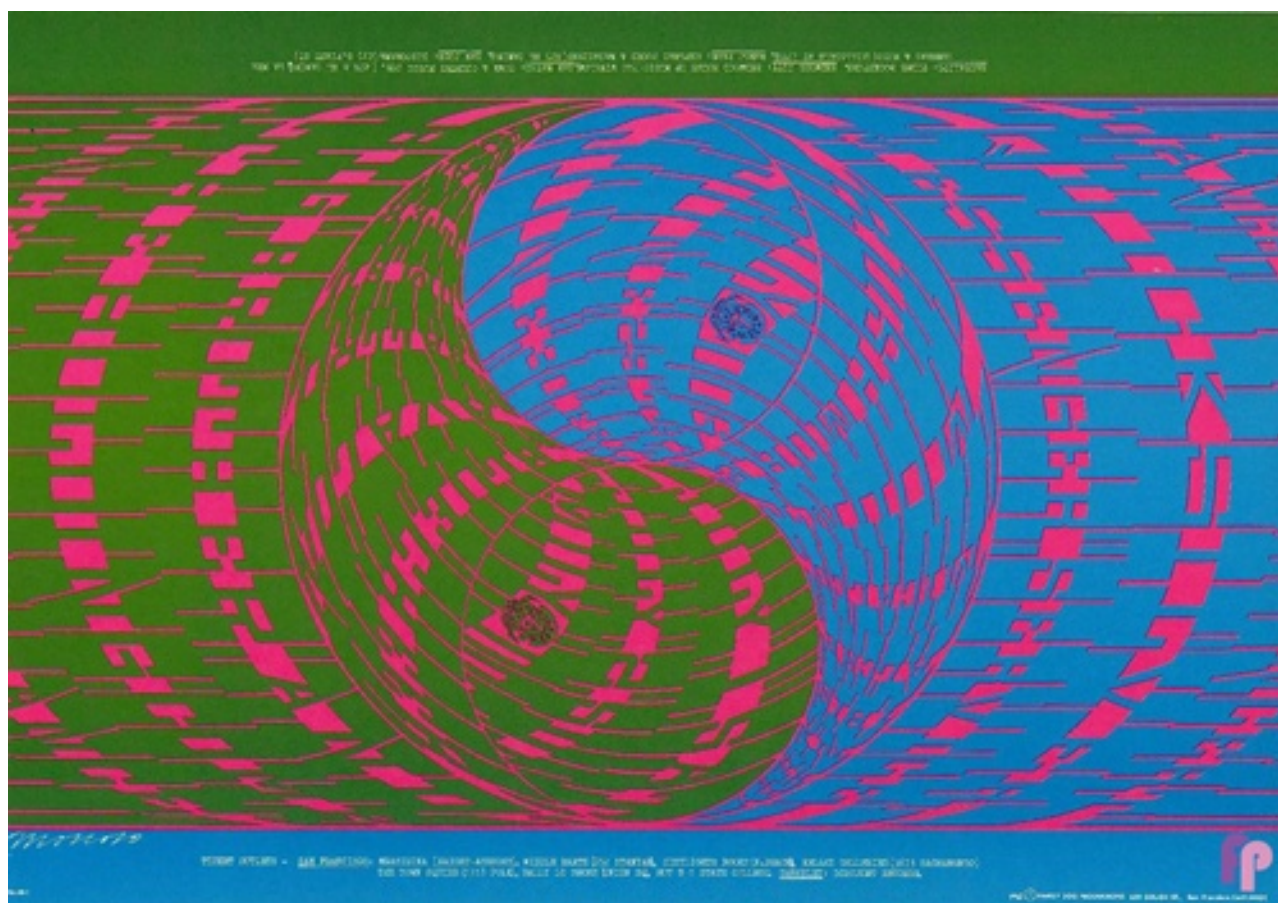
Despite the claims of an international lexicon that concrete poetry would give, there was very little in the US. There were some, of course, such as Mary Ellen Solt or Emmett Williams or Aram Saroyan or d. a. levy, but their works were connected only to their own development (rather than starting or growing from a connection with other poets). These poets who worked in concrete poems mostly gave up the field after a number of months. The field itself supposedly died in the early 70s as it was so there feels like there was little hope for US poets to catch on and catch up to the movement. (I should point out here that there are other printers whose work could be classified as concrete poetry, such as Jack Stauffacher, but their work is more about creative use of fonts in printmaking and the boldness of stark design rather than a literary interaction with the viewer. This is further

shown but Stauffacher's description of his 1973 collaborative series with Michael Taylor as being a work showing a balance between poetry and type.)

There are a couple of reasons you could explain the lack of concrete poetry in the United States. First, that concrete poetry wasn't international as much as it was a reaction to US economic imperialism. There are many South American poems that reflect this. But still most European poems from this era don't, and for that matter, there should be some reaction within the US to its own economic explosions.

Second, and the one I am going to pursue, is that there actually were many, many, many concrete poets working in the US. The difference is that they didn't call themselves concrete poets, and they weren't aware of a field called concrete poetry. This is especially important as during this first wave of concrete poetry around the world a substantial defining requirement of who was a concrete poet was a declaration of being a concrete poet (nobody asks for verification!). Additionally these US poets, retroactively labeled, were working as promoters, which seems to be contrary to the political aspect of those concrete poets and poems that have a political drive to their creation.

I call them promoters because their work wasn't wholly advertising; "Commercial language is more exclamatory than it is communicative." (Gumpel, 15) The works these US-based promoters, these artists, these poets created shifted between communication, semantics, and visual design. These elements are part of advertising, of course. But the co-mingling of all these parts, the poetry, the design, etc. all come together and make something that is not so much a representation of something, but a signifier of something. (Gumpel, 62-3) It comes together in a way that makes any previous experiences up to the point of reading the poem moot. It's not about how you relate to the poem through your past or even the author's past. It's all about the now, the moment you read the poem.



*Poster for Quicksilver Messenger Service at the Avalon Ballroom, by Family Dog, July 1967*

At least, when we talk about concrete poems, we talk about the present, we talk about the immediate moment. The non-visual poetry refers to something the poet has experienced, and that connection to the reader is shared through a similar or at least relatable experience. And this is what is promised with rock posters of the late 1960s, specifically those that started in San Francisco. These posters, this style, is just as concrete in its communication, in its form, in its shift between communication and expectation.

## **Meeting the Definition**

There is no real fixed definition of visual poetry. There are aspects that can be generalized, such as a use of a spatial frame of reading experience rather than a discursive frame of reading experience, as well as a non-linear use of language communication rather than a linear one. Sentences must be read from the start to the end, poems must be read starting at the beginning to the end. But a visual poem has no beginning or end. It only exists in a

moment. There is no beginning and no end, only the entire piece as ideogram. To discuss the first part or last part of a concrete poem is as incomprehensible as discussing the first part or last part of a period in a sentence.

Visual poetry is then also connected to experienced time differently. When reading other poems the experience is one that has already been had, one that is written down like a history. When Rilke writes about the coming of autumn in his poem "Day In Autumn," it is from past experience. This experience is not necessarily the same as what the reader will have (for example, maybe the reader has no knowledge of wine that Rilke references), but as people we can all expect to have gone through a change from summer to fall and can thus relate. It is the past, told exquisitely, possibly predictively, but based on something both writer and reader have previously felt. The visual poem is a moment of the immediate now.

This is especially true given the time period of what is generally considered the first wave of concrete poetry – the late 1950s through 1970. The age of immediacy, of "nowness," of getting more, of getting faster, and of getting more faster. Communication speeds up each year, each month, each day. Travel takes less and less time. All perceivable moments become shorter as the interactions in our lives take less time. The present, the precise moment of now – can only be contained in a concrete poem. Not a sonnet or prose poem.

Advertising also jumped in this period. It became ubiquitous, and went from being influenced by the current style to influencing the current style. It changed how people think about fonts and design, about how people communicate through corporate logos and other symbols as much as words. The chaos of modern life gives us less time to stop and read, because we stop and read less to create more modern life. Everything has its immediacy. This communication centered on typography and visual layout is shared between advertising and concrete poetry. "The central sign, often a word, takes on polemical or proclaiming function." (Bense, 73)

Additionally advertising changed capitalism in ways that was explored by concrete poets, especially in Brazil. Décio Pignatari is a famous representative of this starting with "Beba Coca Cola" in 1957, and this specificity to advertising and how it is the extension of corporate colonialism continued with many poets in Brazil well past the so-called "end" of concrete

poetry in Europe in 1970. However the Noigandres Group poets in Brazil were not especially interested in specifying their work and the methods of their work as concrete poetry – they considered it a work of all language, common in all manner of communication, which is why it fit in so well with not only concrete and visual poetry but with advertising and film and spoken word and music and every other manner of expression. It was a “general aspect to all language” (Moya, 115) because language is affected not only by thought but by audio and visual components. Concrete poetry is not stripping out one of these, according to Noigandres Group founder Haroldo de Campos, but using it in the same way that the incompleteness of language has already in its core. (ibid) There was a shift from the styles of concrete in the 1950s, but it was slight, with de Campos shifting to what is called “popcrete” and Pignatari to semiopoetry. (Hilder, 107) But it still had the current of reaction to capitalism. The theme was there, but it became more playful, as generally happens to orthodoxies in an avant-garde. The shift moves away from strict politics to a greater exploration of emotion and experience.

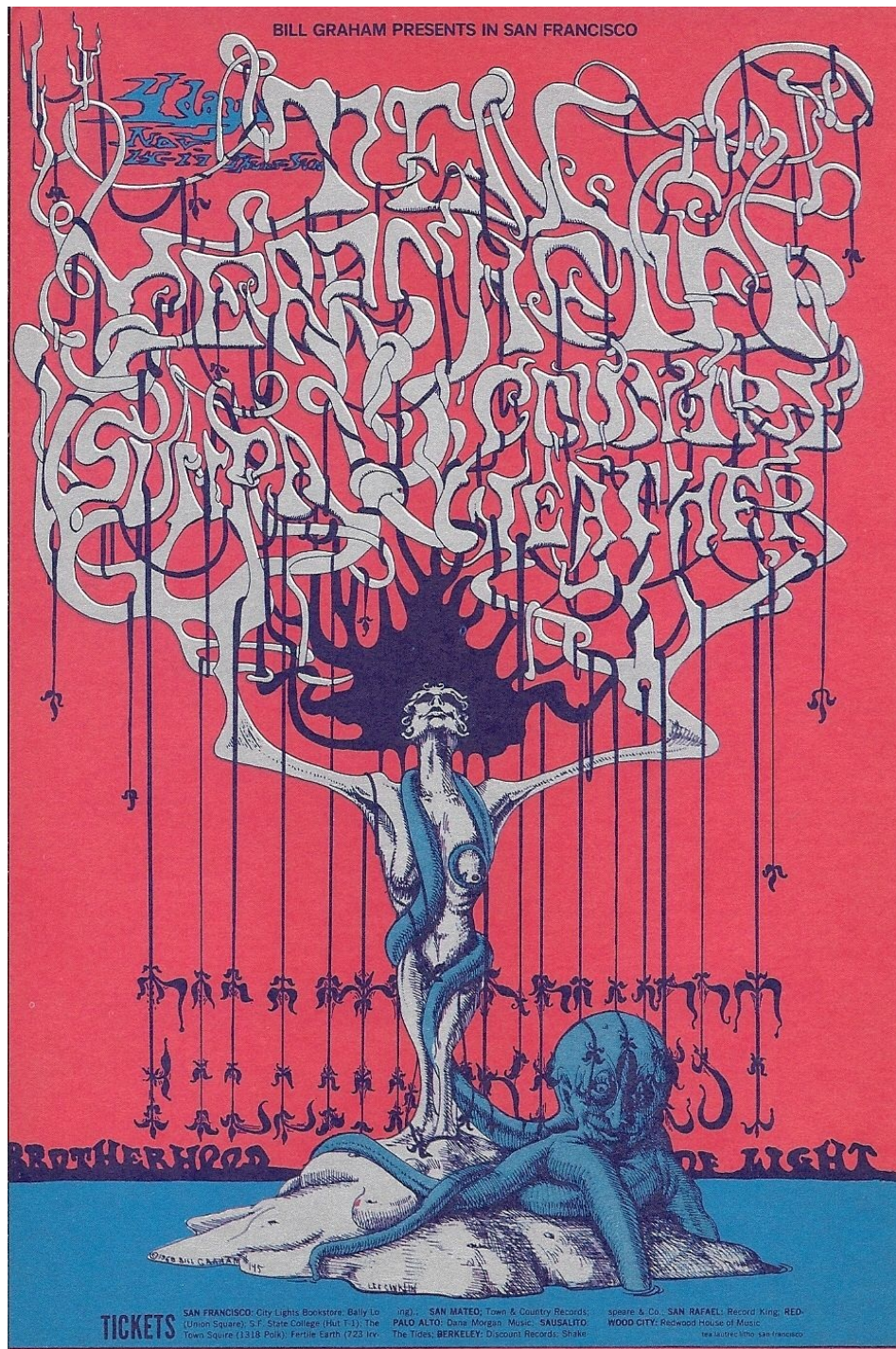
This ambiguity, the partial use of the components of language to communicate a complete idea, or in this case, an experience, is exactly how the genre of concrete poetry in the United States was created. It was a lucky happenstance, but it was using the same ideas that drove the avant-garde poets in other parts of the world, but in the US, specifically San Francisco, it was limited to advertising posters.

It doesn't take an academic paper to understand that advertisements are, or hopefully continue to be, an atypical form of messaging. Advertisements are proclamations, while other read/visual forms such as novels or poems are more broadly like communication. There is an implication of giving in most texts that advertising does not have. But this difference is important, because the use of communication in the posters advertising rock shows is definitely a promise rather than a proclamation. It is a statement not of “now” but of “will be.”

These concert posters, specific American forms of concrete poetry, are not advertisements in the typical sense, and they are not poems in the typical sense, and not even concrete poems in the typical sense. They are not talking about a shared past experience, such as you would expect from a book or song lyrics. They are not talking about an immediate shared experience that concrete poetry generally adheres to, especially from this time period.



These posters are portraying a shared experience that as yet nobody knows what it will be but that we will enjoy it in a certain way and, most importantly, discover it together. They use the fragments of visual layout to create the promise of the future, of what the audience at the concert will experience not only visually but also sonically, emotionally, and psychologically.



Poster for Ten Years After / Sun Ra / Country Weather, by Lee Conklin, Nov. 1968

As you can see from this Ten Years After / Sun Ra / Country Weather concert poster from 1968, it combines language and design and typography in ways that are unlike poetry, unlike concrete poetry, and unlike advertising. The function is still advertising in the sense that the promoter wants to generate an audience which pays. However, the posters of concerts are not advertisements in the sense that Coca Cola and General Electric and other companies put out advertisements. The function between most advertising and what the concert promoters are doing is different. The concert poster printers are trying to create an audience to share an upcoming, still unknown, experience. The advertising of the concerts, at least in the posters, and in this period, is to describe the experience that hasn't happened; it is in the future, and it is something that cannot be compared to any previous experience of the concert-goer. It is trying to describe the sound, the sight, and the feeling of the show. This description comes not only through the text, but beyond the actual content of the text. They are describing the experience you will have at the concert.

As it is a description of what is to come, rather than a reminiscence of what the poster printer - that is, the "poet" - has already experienced and is envisioning to share with an audience that may or may not have shared. The concrete poems of rock posters describe an unknown experience that they will share.

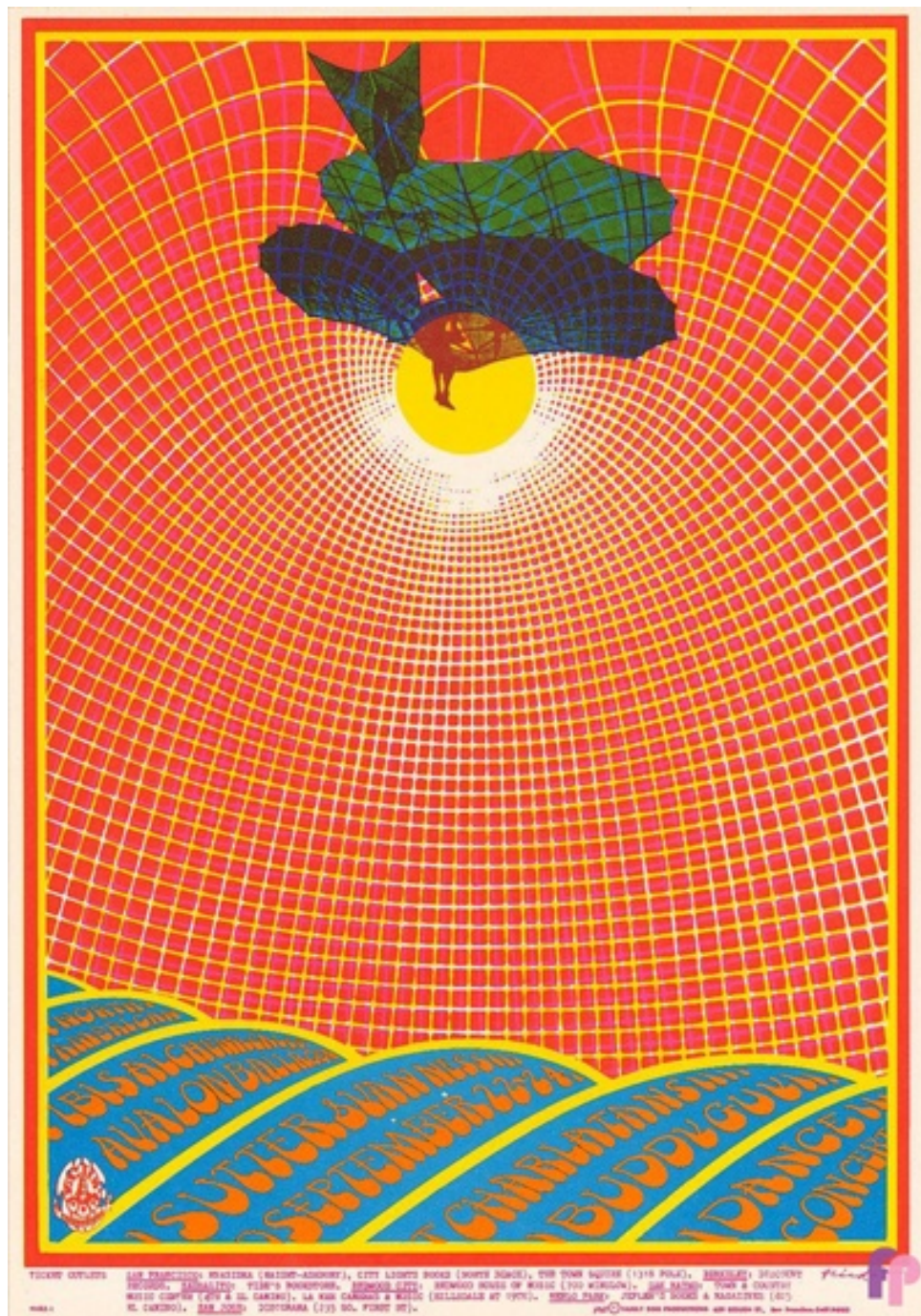
Ultimately the goal of concretism, according to Liselott Gumpel, is not representation. Rather than concrete pieces being a representation of a feeling, or a season, or a piece of music (or given the concerts promoted in San Francisco, even a drug trip), concretism's goal is to make something relatable that has no antecedent experience (Gumpel, 62-3). As such these concert posters are constantly oscillating between the different methods of how they are read or viewed, the meaning of the text and design defining the "future" shifting between semantic designation and visual design.

Eugene Wildman considered concrete as defying language, in a sense, to communicate an understanding.

*Wildman uses the example of a calendar image in the Chicago Review's office, unchanged since July 1967, whose caption, "A new bridge over the Biferno (Molise)," is printed in five different languages: Italian, French, English, German, and then Spanish, with the last two words identical in each. Wildman asks: "But is this not a concrete poem?" (Hilder, 78)*



The state of Wildman's found poem says that the communication must both act as translation of experience, being available in multiple languages, while at the same time still capable of communicating to people who would speak none of the languages.



Poster for Charlatans and Buddy Guy at the Avalon Ballroom, by Family Dog, Sept. 1967

Similarly, these concert posters work through the commodity of illegibility. It does not matter if you can read it in the sense you would read any other concert line-up to see how it

might affect you. A poster promoting a symphony orchestra and a poster promoting a black metal band are going to have distinctive appearances regardless of the specific collection of musicians. With these posters created by San Francisco artists such as Family Dog, it does not matter who is playing or how. Consider the Ten Years After/Sun Ra poster. Ten Years After is a British blues-rock band, and Sun Ra an avant-garde jazz band. Country Weather was a psychedelic rock band. But it doesn't matter what music is performed or what music you are into. The posters aren't especially communicating the bands that will play or the genre of music performed. You are already in some segment of the target audience anyway. You are going to get it. That is, you are already comprehending, you are already experiencing, you are already enjoying. You are already *in*.



Poster for the Can You Pass The Acid Test? by Paul Foster, Dec. 1965





Poster for Trips Festival / Can You Pass The Acid Test? Vancouver, by Bob Masse, May 1967





*Poster for jazz pianist Roland Kirk at the Both/And, by CYMA, Feb. 1967*

Canadian visual poetry was not only towards the end of the first wave of concrete globally, but it was isolated from the international sphere as well (Hilder, 16-18). The isolation from the global scene, as much as Concrete Poetry was heralded to be a globally unifying force of

the avant-garde, is representative of the differences between the cultures of the US and Canadian west coast with Europe, South America, Japan, et al.

Something as basic as the font has its own influence on the interpretation. The early Swiss and German pieces were heavily influenced by Bauhaus. Very crisp, elegant, spare. Planned and plotted like an engineer's diagram. But the rock concert posters were wild, natural, bulbous. This difference of the type into a more hand-drawn, inconsistent, organic movement is a rejection of the geometries and rigidity of the previous decades as well as a rejection of the general position of the outside world, focusing on the internal, the organic, what's in the mind and not universally held around the globe. It's a rejection of the typewriter's fixed type and spacing; All Bs look the same, all Ms look the same, the difference between em-space and en-space is made immaterial. But the bulbous, garish lettering of these posters, these concrete poems, take on the meaning of biology. Everything is the same but each individual has its own differences. The sum of the parts is greater than the whole yet each part has its own special function, special force, and possibly even special meaning.

The global unification of concrete poetry's promise - the ability to use symbol to defy translation yet retain readability and meaning - is a utopian promise that is upheld in the communal sensibilities of the 60s. The organic farm, the homestead, the community as organism, the return to what is locally held rather than globally overriding. The blobs of lettering show this soft, amorphous quality of neighborhood of community, as opposed to the crisp, clean, elegant all-one world of, for example, airport signage, of 2001:Space Odyssey spaceport signage, to come.

So while it is squarely in the period of concrete poetry that is necessarily affected by advertising (naturally), separated from the eras of Apollinaire et al., it also is separated because it is the advertising in some ways. And again as band promotion, the design sense of the poster artists drives the change in cultural design theory rather than reacts to it. Rock and pop music makes the changes that become entrenched and avant-garde then reacts to through rejection.





Poster for the Trips Festival at the Seattle Center by John Moehring, May 1967.

## Local, Not Global

I previously wrote that there was some concrete poetry created in the United States and Canada, and further that one reason it wasn't especially popular in the US was the result of concrete poetry, in many ways, was a reaction to the US economic imperialism. These posters are very specifically tied to San Francisco. There were some created in Los Angeles, and a few for the Janis Joplin / Big Brother tour that was run by Bill Graham. But those are very, very rare and for nearly all cases were done in San Francisco.

The spread came with San Francisco becoming the target for hippies starting in 1966 and then going back, especially to Vancouver, Canada. This style is seen in the late 1960s only in San Francisco, Vancouver, and Seattle. Oregon, for instance, still used traditional typeset





Michael McClure was an enormous fan of boxing (and still is, presumably), and envisioned this poster before he wrote "The Beard", the play it was advertising. The poster was done sometime between January and March of 1965, and was put everywhere he could.

*I put the poster up on fences, windows, and in liquor stores where boxing posters would be, and put one up behind my head in the room I worked in at the time, which overlooked the bridge and the ocean. I could feel the presence of Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow broadcasting from the beautiful poster to the back of my head out towards the ocean. They began enacting the play and I began typing it up. (Edwardes, para 3)*

A shop window at the corner of Haight and Ashbury, the supposed center of 'Hippie Culture', was one of the first places to have the poster. And it sat there, in that window, facing that intersection, the entire year. (Hjortsberg, 246-7) The performance was December 18, 1965. Further shows were scheduled but the police shut the play down for obscenity.

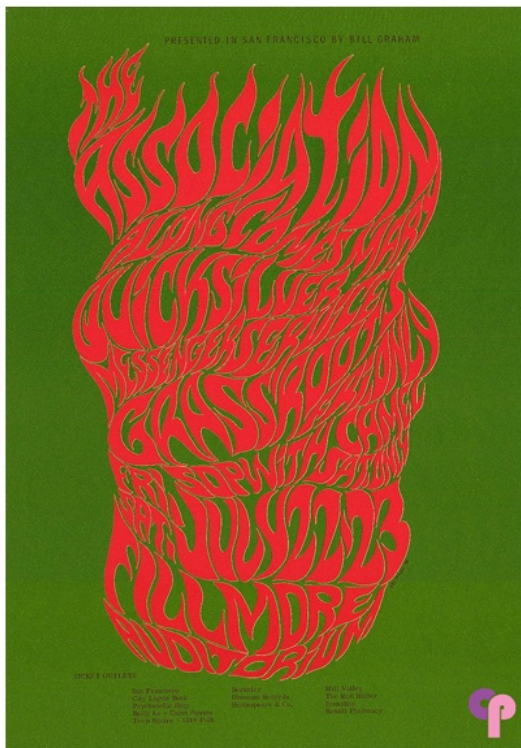
It is clear that McClure saw the poster as somehow speaking to him, the characters coming to him their dialog rendered through the simple composition and irregular structure. McClure had no trouble reading this visual poem and then turned it into a play. This poster inspired him and the graphic designers of San Francisco both. This poster started the wave of the US version of first wave concrete poetry.

The start of these first wave posters have more in common with Russian Futurism than with the concreteism in the rest of the world. In the same way that Vassily Kamensky was influenced by circus posters (Mellis and Oshashevsky), McClure was influenced by boxing posters. (Rollison, q.2) In both pre-revolutionary Russia and counterculture United States, advertising was a starting point for what is reused, expanded, and refined by the avant-garde. (Mellis and Oshashevsky) But unlike the relationship between Russian Futurism and the rest of the world, US concrete poetry was an inside-out relationship, where the local becomes displaced. Also differently from all other avant-garde forms of poetry, the leaping-off point from advertising was into more advertising, which is as much an expression of the relationship of internal US economic power as it is in the rest of the world and external US economic power informing concrete poetry.

While first wave US concrete poetry stayed primarily in San Francisco, it also went to Vancouver. Posters and flyers for the Can You Pass The Acid Test? (also called Trips in

Seattle and Vancouver) Festivals in San Francisco, Vancouver, and Seattle as well as other similar festivals such as the Be-Ins highlighted these poster works. Later posters in Seattle and Vancouver were not exclusively in this style but did incorporate it regularly. Vancouver poets often came down to San Francisco, and the Can You Pass The Acid Test? In 1967. It's clear that there was some concrete work happening in Canada before 1965; Bill Bissett's *Blew Ointment* started in 1963, for instance. But the works in Canada at that time appear more influenced by the European concrete pieces (and earlier, such as Apollinaire, Letterism, and so forth).

I do not think the poets of Canada were specifically, directly influenced by the concrete promotional posters. I do think they were influenced by the same forces that were contributing to US concrete poetry; these forces become the same influences that contribute to Canadian concrete poetry prompted by the influx of the concert posters. In 1967, once the posters became commonplace, they would have influenced poets the same way any other contemporary advertising from America would have influenced non-American poets and movements.



Left: Poster for The Association and Quicksilver Messenger Service at The Fillmore. By Wes Wilson, July 1966. Right: untitled poem by Judith Copithorne, 1968.

I won't spend pages and pages on specific examples. This is not intended to call out any one poet; the Roland Kirk poster looks as fresh as any collage-effect concrete poetry, even those produced today. This isn't intended to say that any North American concrete poetry steals from these posters. This is only to illustrate that the same forces are at play on the North American west coast at this time. San Francisco is the center of it and the germination grows to, awakens in, Vancouver and Seattle.

## Claiming Meaning

The concept that poetry, concrete or not, must have a fixed meaning or function is not only a problem of looking at it as art but of looking at it as necessarily not visual art. It is the same issue with seeing concrete poetry as a fixed visual pictographic decipherable language rendering. That is, that 'concrete' not only refers to a fixed not-specifically-language representation of the artist's idea, but that this fixed representation also represents a similarly fixed idea. The conflation error is readily represented in airport signage. It is a good basis for a metaphor but it fails when applied to the concepts used in poetry. It's simple enough to convey the static meaning of "Exit" or "Baggage Claim" or "Information Kiosk", and even gives a jolt of appreciation when a more complex form is used that is unexpectedly readily understood, such as the symbols for each Olympic sport. But poetry, and the meaning of expression, goes into deeper expressions that may or may not intend to evoke the same meaning as it is designed as registers with the reader. Thus when you consider a concert poster, it can evoke something as simple as the night's lineup, but also something about how the music will move you, how the music makes at least the artist feel when you are at the show, maybe even the listener, something about how different it is to experience the music live than in person, something about being part of a joyous rapt crowd at a concert and nothing about that feeling of appreciating the music. It can even express the kinds of drug experiences you might find while at the concert or even while listening to their music on their own. It could evoke any of these in combination, or none of them. And here, it does not matter.

Further, the experience rendered by the poster lists a specific time and place, the antithesis of a global communication supposedly evoked by concrete poetry. Yet it fits perfectly in concrete poetry because it is not a piece of art, it is a communicative language. It is not art



in the sense that it is trying to evoke an aesthetic quality in the viewer, because the end result of any of these poems is commercial, is to get the viewer to spend money on the experience, or at least imagine the experience represented by the list of bands and venue. These are concrete poetry because they combine discrete symbols, identifiably discrete symbols even though they are not recognizable, into a known form of signage, of symbolism, of semiotic conveyance. Or as Ostashevsky describes in his joint lecture on Russian Futurism, there is a simultaneity of reading these pieces, there is not a linear reading.

What is even better about the rock posters is while they can be seen as concrete poetry they do not require the literary knowledge to enjoy them. They are aided more by the knowledge of music, of neighborhood and community (if these are local or visiting/touring bands, or even if you can know), of geography and commerce (where the venue is located, what the venue is like for enjoying music and if dancing will be allowed, encouraged, permitted). A specific knowledge is required to enjoy the poster to its intended commercial advertising version, but again like all concrete poetry, it is still enjoyable for at least some or most of its own literary and design merits even without any of the required literary or design background.

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