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Slovenian Neo-Avant-Garde Visual Poetry¹

Abstract

This article typologizes visual poetry of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde. The Slovenian neo-avant-garde, which flourished roughly from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, was closely connected to student movements on the one hand, and to new theoretical and philosophical currents on the other. Young authors thus tested the boundaries of literary discourse and experimented with new artistic practices, such as happenings, performance, multimedia projects, land art, and so on. In so doing, they drew heavily upon the artistic and literary practices of the historical avant-garde, which again gained popularity at that time as well. Although the intertwining of the verbal and the visual in literature in the 1960s was not new, it reached new dimensions with the development of conceptualism.

Keywords: Slovenian literature, concrete poetry, student movement, conceptual art, reism

Concrete poetry

In her 1968 study of visual poetry, Mary Ellen Solt outlines a key feature of concrete art; namely, that it focuses on the physical material from which it is made. In the case of poetry, it is language; words are reduced to their basic building blocks: letters (visually) and syllables (aurally). In each case, it focuses on the essence of language, and it reduces it to the essential; the degree of this reduction is different for each author and literary work. Some authors also use non-linguistic elements in the role of language, but always in a way related to the semantic character of the words. In addition

¹ It would be interesting to compare this approach to certain Bulgarian song lyrics of the period with the intense scholarly attention to the lyrics of Russian rock songs from the 1980s. Yngvar Steinholt (2003) criticized this inclination of Russian rock critics and academics to examine the “Soundtrack of Perestroika” as primarily literary achievement and to overlook the interdisciplinary approach to it.

to reducing language to basics, visual poetry deals with its subject in a way that is intended more for observation than reading (Solt 1968).

Solt wrote about concrete poetry in 1968, when its production was at its peak and the entire literary movement was very much in vogue. Concrete poetry has since then presented a complex problem for literary and art historians, mainly due to it having a decidedly multimedia character. Theorists (such as Emmet Williams, Pierre Garnier, Reinhard Döhl, and Max Bense) have thus often used the term *concrete poetry* as an umbrella term for artistic practices in which poetry delves into visual, audio, and video art, whereas language still presents the foundation of all concrete experiments (Poniž 1984: 25–27).

Another way to discern different forms of concrete poetry is by the division into semantic and asemantic concrete poetry; in asemantic poetry the words are replaced by other signs, such as typographical symbols. Poniž does not offer further classification (Poniž 1984: 25–32); however, it is true that in the spirit of French structuralist theory of the time the question of semantics is often central in concrete poetry.

In this article I discuss visual strategies of Slovenian neo-avant-garde authors, and therefore I focus on the visual segment of concrete poetry. Lars Elleström points out that all written poetry is visual as such, but that what theorists call “visual poetry” is marked by a high degree of what he calls “iconicity.” It is true that, due to its nature and experimentation with different media, the theory of visual poetry is also distinctly interdisciplinary in nature because it goes beyond literary theory and extends into the semiotics and art theory. Elleström notes that “it is clear that we perceive both, ‘text’ and ‘images’ with our eyes; the difference is that ‘text’ produces meaning primarily through symbolic (verbal) signs (based on convention), while ‘images’ produce meaning primarily through iconic signs (based on similarity)” (2016: 441).

One can find similar thought process in texts written by neo-avant-garde authors themselves:

Texts are made up of letters. Letters are made up of lines. Lines serve the purpose of signalling visually individual sounds in the form of letters. Therefore, in the case of texts, the line is hidden behind the sound of the letter. How then can the line (as the basic element of the page besides printer’s ink and paper) be brought to light if not in the form of a drawing? In a drawing, a line stands on its own, if the drawing is on the level of self-awareness. A drawing consisting of lines is an indispensable element of the open pages of a newspaper or magazine. Visual poetry, also called topographic poetry, is the revelation of these differentiated (visual-sound) roles of the line. (Marko Pogačnik, cited in Brejc 1978: 13)

One can conclude that, although traditional poetry also possesses a visual dimension, people are not normally aware of it. They read through the material text to the meaning that lies beyond it. Because words' only function is to convey meaning, words serve as signs rather than as icons. In contrast, visual poems call attention to their physical attributes, which signifies that they are associated with being rather than with representing. They possess the same ontological status as objects. This is why only reproductions of these works are often seen in concrete poetry anthologies, whereas the originals are exhibited in galleries, as actual art pieces.

The Slovenian neo-avant-garde and concrete poetry

The Slovenian neo-avant-garde developed in the mid-1960s and ended toward the mid-1970s. The central representatives came from the student population at the time, a generation born after the Second World War, who drew many of their ideas from the contemporary theoretical movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, such as the Frankfurt School and French structuralism. The neo-avant-garde was thus also closely associated with student movements at the time (Juvan 2019: 189–193).

The main venues in which the authors published such works and the accompanying theory were the student newspaper *Tribuna* and the journal *Problemi*, in addition to which independent publications, such as OHO editions, *Katalog*, *Eva*, and poetry collections by individual authors were published. The most prolific authors (among them Franci Zagoričnik, Matjaž Hanžek, Ifigenija Zagoričnik, Iztok Geister, Aleš Kermauner, and Slavoj Žižek) gathered around the conceptualist art group OHO and these periodicals.

Slovenian concrete poetry developed as part of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde. Irena Novak Popov places its beginning in 1966. As elsewhere in the world, it consisted of a broad selection of new artistic practices, such as happenings, land-art, experimental theater, conceptualist multimedia projects, and, of course, concrete poetry.

Reism

The central concepts of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde were reism (from Latin *res* 'thing') and ludism (from Latin *ludus* 'play'); both were crucial for the experimental concrete poetry of the time. There is no clear definition of reism as it was understood by Slovenian neo-avant-garde authors; generally, it is perceived as a radical shift of attention from a person to things and to representing things as they are without presenting them as symbols of the lyrical subject's inner world. However, Marijan Dovič

notes that the rhetoric of the theoretics of this period (such as Taras Kermauner) has much more to do with Heidegger's phenomenology than with the reism as a philosophical current or the French "chosisme" of the *nouveau roman* (Dović 2021: 279–283). The specific stance on reism is clear from the meta-literary and theoretical text published along the literary:

The living Thing is not alive because man would be changed into it; in contrast—it is alive because it is cleansed of everything human, because it is as it is, dehumanized: the hook of the world is erased from the touch of manmade pollution. Metahumanism begins after the total absence of man, and the world becomes what it is (without man). (Kermauner 1968: 64)

One of the consequences of the reist movement was the tendency of the authors to shift their focus from the signified to the signifier; from the semantic meaning to the signs themselves. Reist poetry thus not only consists of semantic plays on words, such as Šalamun's, but it also poses question such as "What is a word?" "What is a letter?" "What is a literary text?" and "What is a book?"

The systematic approach to visual poetry

There are plenty of theoretical texts about visual poetry. However, for the purposes of this article, a systematic classification is required. I found such a systematic approach in the work of Eva Krátká in her volume *Vizuální poezie*, in which she offers a very detailed categorization of strategies of combining the visual and verbal in visual poetry. It is worth noting that creating such categories is difficult, especially in the context of the neo-avant-garde, where authors decidedly experimented with attempts to evade rigid structures of traditional literary theory. However, creating some sort of systematic approach to the complex set of experimental poetic practices is the only way to acquire a better understanding of it.

With the rise of conceptual art, authors often backed their artworks (including concrete poetry) with theoretical meta-texts that described the theoretical framework behind their work. Although these meta-text descriptions of artistic concepts are valuable in the sense that they can provide information on the author's thought process and the ways in which one is supposed to perceive those works, they are unsystematic and individual in retrospective and therefore not useful for analysis or classification.

The theoretical model for this purpose is Eva Krátká's overview of forms of visual poetry in a form resembling a table (Figure 1). The main framework of her classification is concepts such as *letter*, *text*, *image*, *object*, and *concept*, in which a *letter* is considered a basic font character, from which visual compositions are constructed; a *text* is considered a

word composition that can be reduced to minimum, but still remains at the semantic level; an *image* is considered any two-dimensional visual expression; an *object* is defined mainly by its three-dimensionality (such books, installations, environment, etc.); and a *concept* is defined by art pieces that negate the traditional materiality of the artwork and lean toward art as mental, processual, verbal, and physical acts (Krátká 2016: 181–183).

Medium	Form and its specification			
LETTER	Typography			
	Shape of the text area			
	Concrete poem	visual	Transcription	
			Imitation	Concretism
				Constructivism
			Kinetism	
		Op art		
		(Structural Abstraction)		
		Figuration		
	Numbers			
TEXT	Word constellations	“Word-images”	Polysemantics	
			Rébus	
			Mimetic poems	
			Contour poems	
		Onomatopoeic constellations		

IMAGE	Letter	Phonographic text
		Destroyed text
		Scriptural–gestural text, scriptural painting
	Font systems	Nonalphabetical letter
		Pictorial alphabets
		Pictorial systems
		Language systems
		Letter-object
	OBJECT	Authorial book/book as a medium
	Text in space	Installation
Photography		
		Environment/textual spaces
	Process of writing/reading the texts	
	Communication	Artificial languages
	Action poetry	Instructions
		Event
		Poetry of the body

Figure 1. Eva Krátka's (2016: 181–183) overview of forms of visual poetry.

Based on the structure of Krátka's presentation of forms (Krátka 2016: 183–184)² and with the theory of reism and concrete poetry in mind, my main focus is the hybridization of two different modes of expression (i.e., textual and visual) in Slovenian neo-avant-garde visual poetry.

² This figure was translated from Czech by the author of this article. In the original, the figure has another column with references to representative works of Czech literature and art, which are included in Krátka's book. Although it is necessary to include example(s) of each category for a proper understanding of the figure, the references would be redundant in this article.

Visual strategies in Slovenian neo-avant-garde visual poetry

Concept

The artistic projects of the OHO group often took the shape of happenings, performances,³ ready-made art, comic strips, drawings, land-art, and so on; however, it is questionable whether one can consider these poetry if the authors themselves did not do so. The new artistic practices of the neo-avant-garde blurred the lines between different artistic fields; the result of this overlapping is that today more studies have been published about OHO in art history than in literature; their works are thus presented at retrospective exhibitions in galleries and rarely in anthologies (Novak Popov 2021: 255; Juvan 2021: 13).

The artwork of the OHO group was commonly accompanied by theoretical texts, manifestos, and similar meta-texts. Novak Popov cites Marko Pogačnik's text about the ontology of literature, stating that "Literature exists in the way of listening, watching, and moving. . . . A sign (letter) is a space where the auditory and visual elements (literature) converge, from where the motor element (books) flows, [which is] the space in which one moves with one's hands and eyes" (Marko Pogačnik, cited in Novak Popov 2021: 259).

The name of the group OHO itself is an example of this convergence; the visual aspect of it represents the main geometric shapes; the circle and the square, which, according to the group members, represent the square footage of a circle. It is also symbolic at the semantic level as a portmanteau of the Slovenian words *uho* 'ear' and *oko* 'eye', representing the multimedia nature of the group's artistic practices (ibid.).

Object

One of the main outputs of Slovenian neo-avant-garde groups and individual authors was what Krátká would call a "book as a medium." Special editions of concrete poetry books were regularly published. Projects like this include the multimedia Editions OHO, the posthumously published book *Knjiga Aleša Kermaunerja*, books by Marko Pogačnik (e.g., *Knjiga na obročku* and *Knjiga artikel*, both featuring perforated pages without

³ Perhaps the most famous one is *Triglav* (1968), in which three members (David Nez, Milenko Matanović, and David Dellabernardina) covered themselves in black cloth up to their necks and stood in Congress Square in Ljubljana, representing Mount Triglav.

text, Figure 2), Iztok Geister (e.g., *Embrionalna knjiga* with self-referential descriptors of the book), Matjaž Hanžek (e.g., *Prostorska knjiga*), and others. Typical for these hand-made editions was the semblance of a book (with covers, pages, authors, titles, etc.) but the (almost) complete reduction of text.

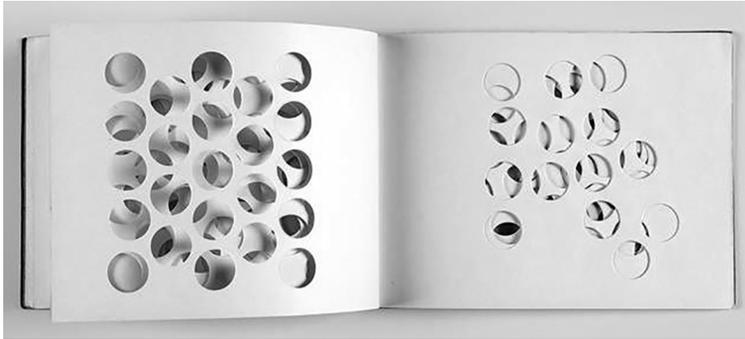


Figure 3. *Knjiga artikel*, Marko Pogačnik (1966).

This form of expression went even further and delved into ready-made art objects in the form of OHO's painted matchboxes, presented as an installation (Figure 3), Milenko Matanović's visual vinyl records, and other similar artistic projects (Novak Popov 2021: 258).



Figure 4. *Stickers for Match Boxes—LSD*, Matjaž Hanžek (1967).

Image

If one applies the semantic / non-semantic division of visual poetry to this section, the furthest from semantic visual poetry would be illustrations, which stand in place of a text. The decision to treat illustrations (mimetic or not) as visual poems poses a key question: how can an illustration still be considered a piece of literature? In her article “Speaking about Genre: The Case of Concrete Poetry,” Victoria Pineda concludes that there is not one definite answer to this problem, but offers the solution of considering certain “elements . . . which can help us observe how concrete poetry is

located (according to some) or not (according to others) within the realm of literature. These elements include the traditional association of poetry and painting, the genre creators' testimony, and a set of metatexts that identify and define it" (Pineda 1995: 383–384).

Because there is no clear information on whether certain visual works of art are considered poetry or not, the inclusion of illustrations such as "Topovi" (Cannons) by David Nez (Figure 4) and other similar artwork published in special editions like *Katalog* among visual poetry can be questionable. However, considering the complexity of visual poetry, such a question is relevant, especially in the context of reism of the Slovenian neo-avant-garde. More than in any other element, the reistic tendencies are evoked in such illustrations; they are sometimes titled, and sometimes not; they often resemble ads and evoke a reistic stance on the democratization of art as pop items (Novak Popov 2021: 264). However, some of these visual compositions are undoubtedly treated as visual poetry when they are printed in "poetry" sections of literary magazines, such as Franci Zagoričnik's "Parabola o svobodnih in drugih zvezdah" (Zagoričnik 1972: 180), consisting entirely of straight lines crossing each other.

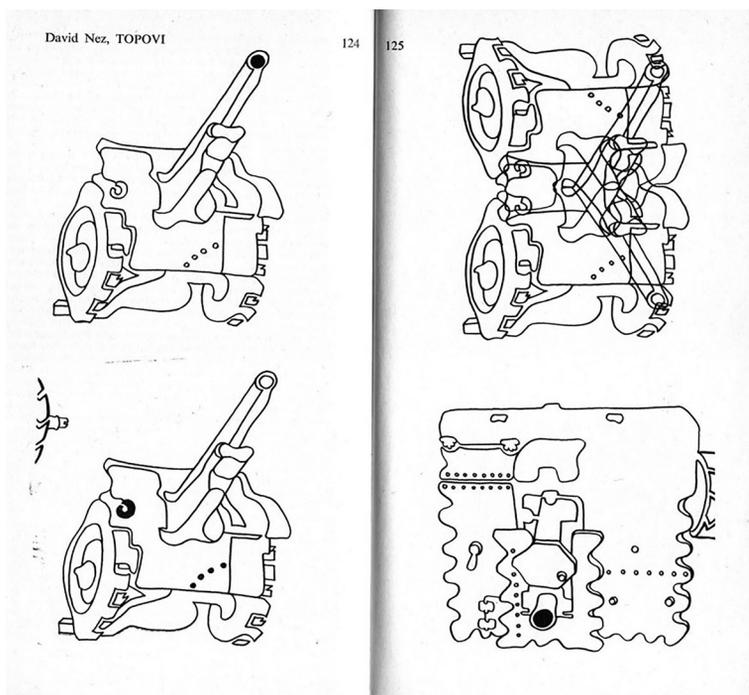


Figure 5. Topovi, David Nez (1969).

Image systems

A less confusing example of purely non-verbal visual poetry is Marko Pogačnik's "buttons" (Figure 5). The artwork does not have a title and was published in *Katalog* and *Tribuna* and later on in an anthology of *Tribuna's* poetry (*125 pesmi: antologija Tribuninega pesništva: 1965–1970*), which makes it easier to draw a line between an illustration and a concrete poem.

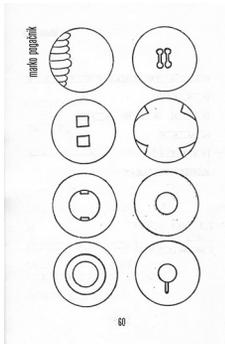


Figure 6. No title, Marko Pogačnik (1975).

Non-alphabetical letters and font systems

Somewhere between the "image" and "letter" category is Matanović's "alphabet," consisting of geometric signs. These symbols do not have any semantic value; they are completely arbitrary and present the possibility of a new language. Matanović's alphabet was published in *Tribuna*, titled "Erotika A B C" (Figure 6) with another made-up conceptual alphabet and a short theoretical text, which defines them as such, and signed "M. M." (Milenko Matanović) and "S. Ž." (very likely Slavoj Žižek). A similar linguistic experiment is also seen in Simon Mlakar's "In potem se znoči," published in *Problemi* (Mlakar 1975: 83).



Figure 7. Erotika ABC, Milenko Matanović (1967).

Collage

A type of visual poetry very common during the historical avant-garde and also the neo-avant-garde is collage, which is not included in Krátká's classification. Collages have plays on words and typography, such as an example (Figure 7) by a member of the Zagoričnik family,⁴ or examples of ready-made art such as one by Matjaž Hanžek made from cigarette ads and published in *Katalog* (Hanžek 1968: 95).

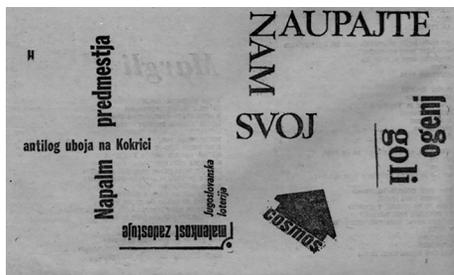


Figure 8. No title, O. I. F. Zagoričnik (1968).

Letter

The principle of “drawing” with letters, numbers, and other typographical symbols was not new in the 1960s, but the neo-avant-garde gave it a new momentum. The building blocks of this type of concrete poems are typographical symbols: letters and other signs that the authors produced with typewriters and printing machines. Because this was an accessible way of producing concrete poems for many authors, the variety of such experiments is very high.

One can find works in which the authors were experimenting with the visual aspects of typographical design (e.g., Milenko Matanović in *Problemi–Katalog*, Figure 8); one finds constructivist compositions made of blocks of letters (e.g., BOOZOOMbabavahatayerticdagehnitforeworfitizej by Vojin Kovač, Figure 9), examples of op-art constructed with typographical characters (e.g., Zagoričnik 1970: 180), and other abstract compositions made from typographical symbols.

⁴ A group of poems on the same page were signed collectively *O.I.F. Zagoričnik*, referring to Orest, Ifigenia, and Franci Zagoričnik. Because of the collective authorship, it is difficult to tell who wrote which poem.



Figure 9. db, Milenko Matanović (1968a).

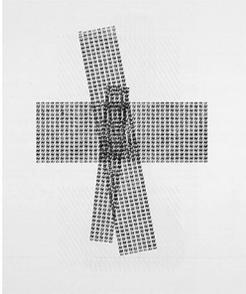


Figure 10. BOOZOOMbabavahatayerticdagehntforeworfitizej, Vojin Kovač (1968).

Besides those, one can also find figurative compositions constructed from typographical symbols that already delve into mimetic art or recognizable visual metaphors (e.g., Naško Križnar’s “sladka in slana voda,” Figure 10, or Ivan Volarič’s “Peščena ura,” Figure 11).

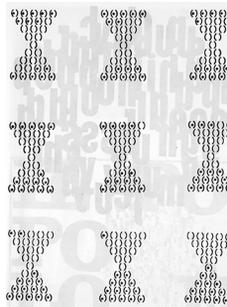


Figure 11. sladka in slana voda, Naško Križnar (1968). *Problemi–Katalog*. 72.

Figure 12. Peščena ura, Ivan Volarič (1972).

Text

Another very common group of forms of visual poetry is the one based on text. Eva Krátká's classification comes from the tradition of Czech visual poetry and, although one can find similar examples in Slovenian, the list of forms can never be entirely exact and comprehensive because the nature of concrete poetry is experimental, and each author was working on inventing new forms of expression and new ways to play and deconstruct the language and poetic tradition.

These word-images can be thus polysemantic (where words convey one meaning and image another; e.g., Dreja Rotar's poem, Figure 12), mimetic (where the words are often also self-referential in the context of the image; e.g. Vladimir Gajšek's *Lastna podoba*, Figure 13), or onomatopoeic (e.g., Milenko Matanovč's composition of letters and onomatopoeic words; Matanovič 1968b: 17), but also visual compositions of text cut into different shapes in a similar way as seen with the examples of compositions made from orthographical symbols.



Figure 13. *Socialistična federativna republika Jugoslavija*, Andrej Dreja Rotar (1972).



Figure 14. *Lastna podoba*, Vladimir Gajšek (1973).

Conclusions

This brief overview was limited to a few examples of visual poetry, which is otherwise characterized by great diversity. Such an approach would certainly need a more precise classification, which would show a larger spectrum of Slovenian visual neo-avant-garde poetry; however, such a challenge exceeds the limits of an article. Eva Krátká's classification proved to be a useful tool and a good example for this kind of work; especially in the material aspect of visual poetry; that is, "building blocks" that range from textual elements to visual and further to conceptual. Nevertheless, her classification overlooks the aspect of visual poetry, which, during this short overview, also proved to be crucial—namely, the degree of semantics and/or mimesis or, more generally, the relationship between the signifier and signified. Consideration of these dimensions of visual poetry seems to be necessary in view of the structuralist theoretical background of the development of concrete poetry in general. As has been seen, visual poetry constantly oscillates between the mimetic and the abstract, and between the activist and the hermetically self-referential. Authors have often used visual metaphors that carry a clear message, but in many cases only if they are accompanied by the (purely textual) title of the visual creation viewers see before them. In this way, experimental, seemingly abstract visual poetry frequently returns to and even cannot function without more traditional elements of poetic discourse.

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