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Concrete Poetry in Portugal Experimentalism and Intermediality

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Introduction

Concrete poetry does not constitute an organized movement in Portugal. Instead, one must consider a range of contemporary Portuguese poetic experimentations achieved by several poets which come close, at a given point in time, to the aesthetics of concretism. This distinctive feature of the Portuguese context is outlined in this article in a comparative perspective, situating the poetics and politics of experimentalism within the international context of concrete poetry, but stressing specific aspects of the critical, historical and political Portuguese context. At the same time, the concrete tendency of experimental poetry points to the importance of literary and communication theories, as semiotics, information theory, and others provide background to understanding individual poems and manifestoes of the poets mentioned within. Finally, the article takes into consideration the fact that concrete poetry fits in larger poetic discourses, ultimately forcing us to understand the importance of literary practices for a better understanding of our surrounding world and culture.

1. The poetics of Experimental Poetry in Portugal

Concrete poetry in Portugal must be addressed in the context of the activities of a group of writers and artists who coined themselves *experimentalists*. In truth, as Melo e Castro points out, in Portugal there was not an organized group or movement (1973, 11), but rather a tendency, at a point in time, in which these poets began to broaden their “*pesquisa morfo-sintática* (morpho-semantic research).” (1973, 11)²

The absence of a consensus regarding the terminology to be adopted is also proof of this inexistent generalized and organized practice, and the chosen

denomination of experimental poetry seems justified as this broader term defines the extremely rich variety of experiences that constitute the project of Portuguese Experimental Poetry.

However, it is acknowledged by all actors of the process that two main events preceded concrete and experimental poetry in Portugal: Décio Pignatari's visit to Lisbon in 1956, after his highly publicized meeting with Eugen Gomringer; and the publication in 1962 by the Embassy of Brazil in Lisbon, of a collection of concrete poetry of the Group Noigandres, from São Paulo (Melo e Castro 1973, 11).

The history of Portuguese experimental poetry (henceforward abbreviated as PO.EX), however, is still being written. At least until the end of the 1980s, only its most persistent members had written relevant studies providing theoretical and critical context. It is therefore understandable that the PO.EX group, as Ana Hatherly puts it, still thinks that the movement was a "*causa ingrata* (ungrateful cause)" (Hatherly 1985, 15).

The fact that the most important and influential books published in Portugal rarely mentioned their activities, aesthetics, and works seems to explain the dismissal of concrete poetry by official criticism as well as its absence in the general curricula of literary studies. And the main works, published in journals and artist's books, were unavailable in most libraries and bookstores until Meudes de Sousa and Ribeiro's anthology was published in 2006.³

The autonomy of a movement is also questioned by the poets themselves, who prefer the notion of a group of people temporarily linked by common aesthetic interests. This convergence of poets with distinct intentions and ideologies, though contributing to the fragmentation of a possible movement, nonetheless created room for a plethora of theoretical works, even if only by the poets themselves.

The use of new expressive techniques and formal freedoms was generalized in Portugal after the appearance of PO.EX. The evolution of recent Portuguese visual poetry undoubtedly has its roots in this generation of writers, as one can witness with *Poemografias* (Aguilar and Pestana 1985). One must also consider more recent aspects of digital incursions in literary experimentation and creativity to truly understand the scope of this influence. Several authors, including the author of this article, have studied the importance of concrete and experimental poetry to the development of new poetic practices, namely those based on electronic media, such as e-poetry, cyberpoetry, and digital poetry (Portela 2008; Reis 2008), and have studied the systemic affiliation of concrete poetics to digital media, in an international context (Block and Torres 2007;

Portela 2006; Schaffner 2006; Simanowski 2004).

The choice of a broader term to define concrete, visual and sound poetries alike thus seems justified: the poetic objects of PO.EX are much diversified and eclectic in matters related to the form and the materials being used. The most active poets of the group seem to prove exactly that: Salette Tavares addresses the verbal plasticity of the *other* arts with the use of materials for the construction of her object-poems and her graphic poetry, such as jewellery, tapestry and pottery; Ana Hatherly explores the visual resources of handwriting and calligraphy; Herberto Helder develops refined combinatory techniques, foreshadowing experiences with computers and cybernetic literature; António Aragão explores photocopying and electrography; and Ernesto M. de Melo e Castro, a pioneer of video-poetry, explores digital media, quite ahead of his time. What one observes is the broadening of graphical resources and plastic elements as they relate to the order of writing in its verbal, visual and vocal functions.

The Euro-Brazilian roots of concrete poetry are definitive to the experimentalists. But a general theory of visual texts (or of visual mediums), as well as their historical background, was sought after by authors like Ana Hatherly and E. Melo e Castro, among others. And this tendency for innovation in poetic texts, which in Portugal, best conveys the concrete influence of Haroldo de Campos and friends, calls for the adoption of generalized practices of a poetry of invention.

The assumed roots of concrete poetry and experimental poetry reveal a shared heritage, and they open the way back to the international historical vanguards of the beginning of twentieth century: from futurism and dadaism to the *calligrammes* and assorted typographical experiences and phonetic poetries.

This attention to the recognition of a historical tradition of innovative poetry led the Portuguese poets to recover (and sometimes re-write) texts that they considered experimental. In Portugal, this recuperation was achieved largely by Ana Hatherly. Her book *A experiência do prodígio* (1983), gathering texts from the fifteenth century and beyond, shares a preoccupation with visibility in the literary history that characterizes the compiled texts as precursors of Concretism.

In truth, Ana Hatherly aims to contradict the tendency of some literary historians to locate the appearance of visual poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the *parole in libertà* of the futurists or the collage-poetry of the dadaists. For Hatherly, however, as well as other authors, this chronology should include “*séculos de experiência de textos-imagens, que compreendem*

hieróglifos, ideogramas, criptogramas, diagramas, rebus, mandalas, amuletos, jóias, brinquedos, lápides e até alguns monumentos, além de todos os outros textos e objectos poemáticos identificáveis como tal (centuries of experiences with texts-image, which include hieroglyphs, ideograms, cryptograms, diagrams, amulets, jewels, toys, tombstones and even some monuments, besides all of the other texts and poetic objects traceable as such)." (Hatherly 1975, 6–7)

The re-evaluation is well summarized in the words of Ana Hatherly: "*se para uns a tradição existe e deve ser imitada, para outros, se existe é para ser reinventada* (if, for some, tradition exists and should be *imitated*, for others, if it exists it is to be reinvented)," (1985, 17) as it is in the texts of Herberto Helder when he says that "tradition is a movement." (1964, 6)

Maria dos Prazeres Gomes studied Portuguese experimental poetry in this light, and her book *Outrora Agora* (1993) proposes a cartography of its internal dialogical relations. Her interest is concentrated in the identification of a "*movimento plagiotrópico das formas culturalmente fixadas* (plagiotropic movement of culturally fixed forms)." (Gomes 1993, 19) The author studies a series of Portuguese experimental texts (mostly by Melo e Castro, Helder and Hatherly) that stage the transformation and the devouring of tradition in an attitude that could be coined as "*crítico-lúdico-transgressora* (critical-ludic-transgressive)." (1993, 22) This translation represents a "critical re-reading of the tradition," (Gomes 1993, 20) and the existence of texts of this type is what makes it possible to witness *plagiotropy* as an "inalienable movement in literature." (Gomes 1993, 20)

The theoretical background (and foreground) of PO.EX is likewise relevant. It is connected with aspects of contemporary criticism and establishes a significant relation among poetry and information theory, structuralism, and semiotics. It is noteworthy that information theory is introduced in Portugal by the experimental poets themselves: Salette Tavares, António Aragão, E. M. de Melo e Castro, and Ana Hatherly, among others. They were indeed its best promoters.

Poeprática is a challenging concept and a neologism introduced in 1980 by experimental poets in the context of a retrospect at National Gallery of Modern Art in Lisbon (Marques 1985, 89). It accurately translates the performative and pragmatic aspects of experimentalism in Portugal, blending poetics and politics, theory and practice.

The *experimentalistas* found in Portugal of the 1960s a deep-rooted literary system of criticism that was unsuitable for reading the aesthetic theory of innovation and experimentation that the group was trying to convey. It seems

reasonable to state that it was this (ideologically—and politically—repressive) context that created the necessity of a *poeprática*, and not the opposite: “*o nosso exercício teórico foi obrigado a ser muito mais uma pedagogia e uma informação principalmente dirigida aos leitores, uma vez que o problema da comunicação nos era prementemente posto pelo contexto português* (our theoretical exercise was obliged to be pedagogical and information directed towards the readers, since the problem of communication was important with relation to the Portuguese context).” (Hatherly and Melo e Castro 1981, 174) Even so, theory comes after practice: “*A nossa actividade teórica foi posterior à própria criação poética* (Our theoretical activity was subsequent to the poetic creation itself).” (Hatherly and Melo e Castro 1981, 173)

[As] Fernando Aguiar puts it: “[a] poesia procura [...] estimular a capacidade de raciocínio e de relacionamento do leitor, criando um envolvimento mais profundo do seu sentido crítico-perceptivo (poetry tries [...] to stimulate the capacity of reasoning and of the relation of the reader, creating a deeper involvement of his/her critical-perceptive sense).” (1985, 156) And António Aragão, likewise, explains that “*a explosão de descontinuidade provoca a expansão de outros modelos, pluraliza as mensagens e torna tanto o espectador, como o consumidor ou criador, mais activos e mais capazes de escolher com outra nitidez a sua individualidade* (the explosion of discontinuity provokes the expansion of other models, pluralizes the messages and makes the viewer, the consumer, and the creator more active and capable of choosing their individuality with additional clarification).” (1985, 182)

PO.EX affects other literary movements, as it stands against any forms of sentimentalism, discursiveness, rigidity of meter and rhyme, individualism, nationalism, realism, and automatism (Hatherly and Melo e Castro 1981, 26–27).

As in many other countries, concrete poetry in Portugal lead to a shared sense of community, in so far as it may be understood as an international movement. Pedro Reis clarifies that this is “*uma produção poética que, na sua transnacionalidade, torna possível a detecção de uma configuração dominante* (a poetic production that, in its transnationality, enables the detection of a dominant configuration).” (1998, 43) Hatherly and Melo e Castro also affirm that “*a Poesia Experimental portuguesa propôs-se com uma dimensão internacional, estabelecendo relações de troca de informações, de colaborações e de publicações com os mais diversos países* (Portuguese experimental poetry proposed an international dimension, establishing relationships of informational exchange, of collaborations, and of publications with several countries).” (1981,

213)

Concrete poetry can also be perceived as the portrait of a time and place characterized by industrial and electronic revolutions, by media techniques and theories of communication, using words as the material for visual, verbal and sound compositions, as a way to interact with a fast-paced consumer-oriented society.

A need for preparation of the reader is voiced by many of the poets involved in the group's publications and happenings. Poets like Aragão, Helder, and Tavares make explicit references to theoretical concepts such as open work (Eco 1962) and information theory applied to the analysis and reception of poetry (Moles 1966). Information and mass communication theories constitute "*pedras angulares da vanguarda* (angular stepping-stones of the vanguards)" (Melo e Castro 1981a, 72), in so far as they represent an opportunity for the general public to acquire "*um novo e rigoroso léxico crítico e um poderoso aparelho analítico* (a new and rigorous critical lexicon and a strong analytical tool)." (Melo e Castro 1981a, 72)

Melo e Castro expresses the specific importance of information theory in terms of poetic production, having stated that "[o] trabalho criador do artista experimental é precisamente produzir estruturas de grande entropia, pois quanto maior for a entropia dessas estruturas maior e mais vasta será a informação possível; maior será portanto a pluralidade significativa da obra de arte. (The role of creator of the experimental artist is precisely to produce structures of great entropy, because the bigger the entropy of the structures, the better and vaster the amount of information will exist in these same structures; and the bigger the significant plurality of the work of art will be)." (1965, 100)

The main concern of these poets with information theory, semiotics or structuralism is associated with demystification, opening room for a definition of the function of poetry as a means to produce defense and alert mechanisms in the reader.

2. Experimental Poetry in Portugal: from Concretism to Intermediality

In Portugal, like other parts of the world, concrete poetics has laid the foundation for later forms of experimental poetry. Ana Hatherly published the first article in Portugal presenting concrete poetry to the public for the September 17th edition of the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* (Hatherly 1959), and it included a concrete poem by the author. However, it was not until 1965 that the first book entirely devoted to the subject was published: *A Proposição 2.01*, by Melo e Castro.

One should also note individual works that lead up to concrete and experimental poetry in Portugal. Salette Tavares' *Espelho Cego* (Tavares 1957), containing both a spatial configuration of the signifiers, and the semantic play based upon oppositions of words-as-objects, gives way to concrete constellations and the ideogrames. Before the end of the 1950's, artists and poets such as José-Alberto Marques, Alexandre O'Neill, and Jaime Salazar Sampaio conducted graphic and typographic experiments. In many of Melo e Castro's *Ideogramas* (1962), the graphic configuration of the page is close to Gomringer's *constellation*, only it is adapted to national (or at least local) interests. The oppositions and juxtapositions promote a general idea of the ideogram as constitutive element of semantic organization. And repetition, which is a key element to PO.EX, promotes a differential result through its combinatory possibilities. These introductory experiences, however, were still far from the course that Portuguese Experimentalism would later chart, in which visuality, collage, happenings, and installation, would become common.

Nonetheless, these works constitute scattered experiences, lacking the conceptual legitimization of collective movements. Experimental poets rarely presented themselves in Portugal as a group until the publication of *Poesia experimental: 1º Caderno antológico* (Aragão and Helder 1964) where the works, in an explicit reference to the word *Caderno* (exercise book), were reproduced as individual leaflets.³ In 1963, António Aragão and Herberto Helder were already preparing the plan for the publication of the first volume in July of 1964. The result was a set of visual and concrete poems as well as several other experimental exercises with photocopy, graphic design, and semantic combinatory techniques. There is also a short anthology of poetry reaching from Camões to Cesariny de Vasconcelos, confirming the re-reading and re-writing of the literary canon that these poets set to promote.

Following this first collective publication, the networked organization and the international configuration of concrete poetry finally included the Portuguese poets. In 1964, they signed-on to the *Position-I* of the international movement of *Spatialism*, in collaboration with experimental poets of fourteen other countries. This new movement, launched by Pierre Garnier in France, had its origins in the *Manifeste pour la Nouvelle Poésie: Visuelle et Phonique*, published in the magazine *Les Lettres* (number 29, 1962). Garnier wrote the manifesto that was signed by poets from all over the world and became known as *Position I du Mouvement International*, published in the same magazine in October 1963 (number 32). Melo e Castro and Ana Hatherly also established contact with Dom Silvestre Houéddard (Heatherly and Melo e Castro 1981).

Portugal, mostly through Melo e Castro, also became an important agent in the dissemination of concrete poetry in Europe, following the contact of E. M. de Melo e Castro and Ana Hatherly with Dom Silvestre Houéddard (Hatherly and Melo e Castro 1981, 212–234).

Before the second number of *Poesia experimental* (Aragão, Helder, and Melo e Castro 1966), there are also some events that comprise a distinctive approach to concrete poetry by the Portuguese poets. In that same year, these authors organized a collective exhibition of visual and kinetic poetry at the Gallery *Divulgação* in Lisbon, to which they gave the title *Visopoemas*. This enabled the poets to extend their materials and their usage to new and innovative frontiers. This activity, which took place on January 6th, 1965, included participation of the central nucleus of authors who participated in the first *Caderno antológico* that included Aragón, Melo e Castro, Helder, Barahona da Fonseca, and Salette Tavares. The exhibits included poems in the form of objects, paintings, and posters that attest to the transposition of concrete poetry to a new and broader vision of poetry. Most of the poems written on wire, plate or pottery were becoming common materials for writing poetry.

The day after the inauguration of the exhibition, a happening, *Concerto e Audição Pictórica*, took place, which combined poetry and music in mutual transformation. It provided the aesthetic setting of intermediality as the distinct dimension of creative interplay between verbal, vocal, and visual dimensions. Décio Pignatari's claim that the "*olhouvido ouvê* (the eareye listensees)" (1956, 69) serves as a good explanation of this form of symbiosis.

Ana Hatherly, who at the time was writing musical criticism in the weekly column of the literary supplement of *Diário Popular*, wrote about the *Concerto*, emphasizing its variety of new forms and materials as expressive media for communicating poetry, including instruments, toys, and objects (Hatherly 1965, 46).

Visopoemas and *Concerto* were deliberately transgressing the concept and structure of the book as a document. The participation of avant-garde composer Jorge Peixinho and musician Mário Falcão is also relevant, as it marked the coming together of the group with Portuguese experimental music. The former ends up in the second number of *Poesia experimental*, with a long essay entitled "*Música e notação* (Music and Notation)," as well as a visual score. Like in many other countries and groups, Portuguese experimental poets consider the serial music of Anton Webern, the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer, and the experimental and electronic music of John Cage as key points to achieve the desired interdisciplinarity. This concert or event anticipates the latter's visit to

Portugal, in November 1967, when the poets of the group received him warmly.

Concrete and experimental poetry no longer exist solely in the realm of literary theory. One needs broader concepts to truly understand texts that manipulate several sign systems and/or media. As Claus Clüver's studies emphasise (2000, 2006b), concrete poetry is no longer just verbal poetry: it is part of an intermedia discourse.

On the other hand, as Clüver has shown (1992), and Hoek (1995) and Vos (1997) further developed, transposition, juxtaposition, combination, and fusion/union represent types of relations and processes that correspond to different discourses: transmedia, multimedia, *mixmedia*, and intermedia/intersemiotic, respectively. Concrete and experimental poetry fit in the latter insofar as they refer to fusion/union.

The second issue of *Poesia experimental* (Aragão, Helder, and Melo e Castro 1966) confirms and emphasizes the variety of interdisciplinary approaches seen in previous compilations. A semi-pictorial text of Lewis Carroll appears on the inside cover, and guests from Brazil (Peter Xisto, Haroldo de Campos, and Edgard Braga) and France (Pierre Garnier and Henri Chopin) are included.

The *Conferência-objecto* (Gallery *Quadrante*, Lisbon, April 13th, 1967) also demonstrates this self-referential attitude. This conference, programmed as a literary happening to promote the magazine *Operação* (Melo e Castro 1967), engaged in an explanation of the poems included in the magazine. After an introduction by the art critic José Augusto França, poets Ana Hatherly, Melo e Castro, and José-Alberto Marques, accompanied, again, by the musician Jorge Peixinho, presented the theoretical bases of concrete and experimental poetry. These ideas were based on theories that range from Information Theory, Semiotics, Linguistics, and Structuralism. *Operação* thus represents an effort to explain and to inform, but also to demystify archaic conceptions about the poem and poetry in general.

For Hatherly, what further permits access to linguistic and literary code is the "*conhecimento da linguagem, uma vez que ela define o homem e através dela o homem conhece e se conhece* (knowledge about language, because it is language that defines man and it is through language that man gets to know himself)." (1967, 136) In a similar manner, Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos has said that concrete poetry is a challenge to language, because the poet has the "*(...) consciência de uma responsabilidade. Responsabilidade total, aceita como missão última do poeta perante a própria poesia como perante a vida da linguagem* (conscience of a responsibility. Full responsibility, accepted as the ultimate mission of the poet before poetry itself as before the life of language."

(1957 [2006], 156)

Concrete and experimental poetry in Portugal uncover the correlation of the political dictatorship and academic conservatism, thus linking poetry to a project of social rehabilitation. In the case of Portugal of the 1960s, this hierarchy of values is further framed by a generalized political and social repression of the *Estado Novo*, a government ruled by António de Oliveira Salazar from 1932 to 1968.

In this sense, for these poets, attacking the political code was equivalent to confronting the literary values of the time, and vice-versa. As Hatherly and Melo e Castro affirm,

[a] Poesia Experimental portuguesa atacou e ataca destrutivamente o código fossilizado da leitura sentimentalista e opressiva da língua portuguesa no momento preciso em que o sistema político fascista dele mais se reclama (no início da década de 60) para galvanizar o povo para as guerras do Ultramar (Portuguese Experimental Poetry destructively attacked and attacks the fossilized code of the sentimentalist and oppressive reading of the Portuguese language in the precise moment that the fascist political system was claiming this reading model in order to galvanize the Portuguese people for the wars in territories overseas). (1981, 176)

Following the first period of experimental practices in Portugal, there was a continued re-evaluation of their activities in two important retrospects: *PO.EX 80*, at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Lisbon (1980), and *PO-EX 99*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Serralves, Porto (1999). These served as a form of updating and reconfiguring already published works.

Several concrete and visual poems of the 1960s have been revisited by the authors, adapting them to new media and objects, as a sign of preoccupation with the present. These intersemiotic texts appeal to the convergence of different sign systems. In the observed mixture of different forms of expression, in recycling as in recontextualization, experimental poems propose new forms of intermediality, which reconfigure themselves into new paradigms of information.

A new generation of Portuguese poets came along at the beginning of the 1980s, and *Poemografias* (Aguiar and Pestana 1985) is their point of departure. Fernando Aguiar is perhaps the most prolific of all. Not only in terms of following the inter-artistic context developed and proposed by older poets, but

also because he organizes, represents and disseminates important activities of concrete, visual, and sound poetry for the last twenty years in Portugal and in the rest of the world. Other important contemporary authors include Alberto Pimenta, Antero de Alda, António Barros, Silvestre Pestana, and Emerenciano.

As we have observed elsewhere (Block and Torres 2007), poetry stands as unique, flexible and dynamic modes of observation, by means of reflection, transformation, and re-creation. In particular, experimental poetry helps to reform the social conscience through the regenerative capacities of the signification of the text. In Portugal, the political context had a determinative role, justifying the ideological claims of the group. Experimental poetry was, therefore, subversive in its criticism to an established entity; the poem was looking at what the reader was understanding and resisting the structures of everyday language.

As Pedro Reis has noticed, experimental poetry may be seen as “a contribution to overcome an eventual exhaustion of codes, reactivating them in order to create new mechanisms to produce meaning, not yet depleted by their use.” (Reis 2008) But the compositional methods and techniques that experimental poems use, namely “atomization or pulverization of the verbal material, juxtaposition, agglutination, interpenetration, redistribution, cutout (...),” (Reis 2008) also suggest that poetry is in tune with the prevailing media of the time. Poetry assists us not only in dealing with old and new media, but also in clarifying the way we write and read texts in general. Subverting the order of writing and the literary establishment, concrete poetry challenges our assumptions and definitions of text, author, and reader, and in so doing regenerating social messages and literary techniques. Its main goal, however, is the survival of poetry itself.

Notes

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2 All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

3 The word *Caderno* (exercise book) is an explicit reference to the configuration of the works, reproduced as they were in individual leaflets.

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