



THE RIVER DOESN'T STOP FLOWING
BECAUSE THE SUN GOES DOWN

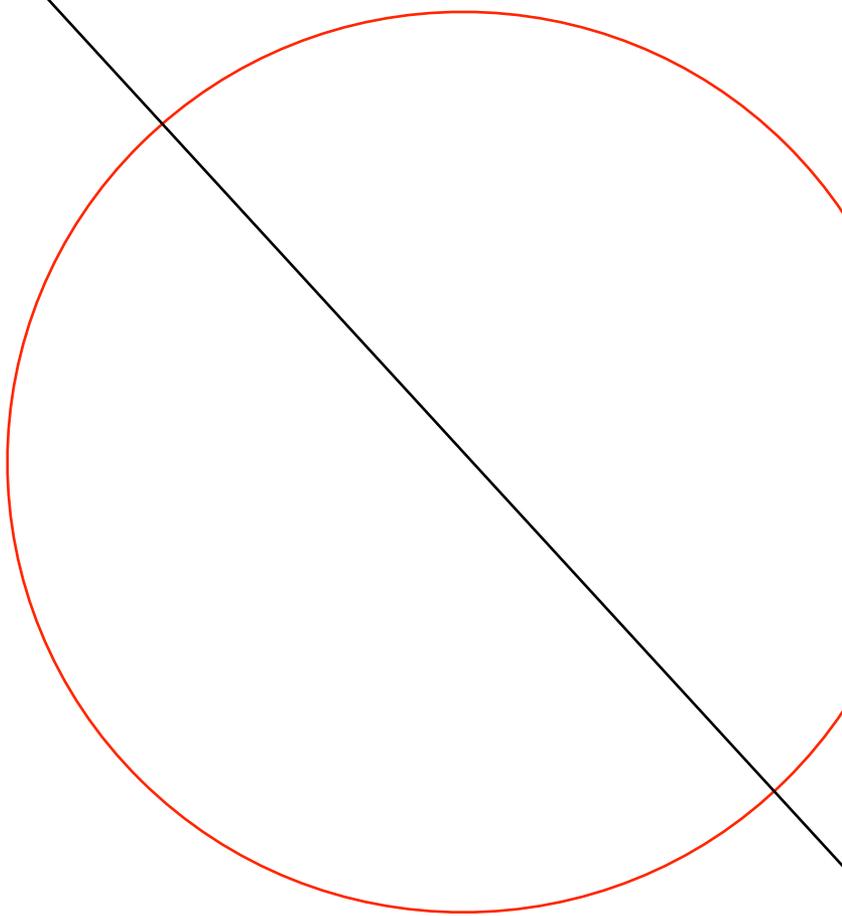
THE ONLY WAY WE CAN MEASURE THE FLUIDITY OF THIS LINE IS BY BREAKING IT

海 海 海
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A SPHERE AND A LINE

BY KARL YOUNG



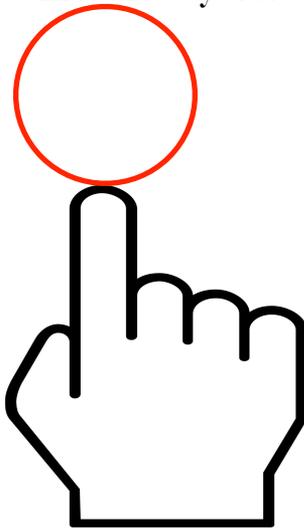
To me, Art is best understood as a sphere of experience.

You can find subdivisions such as painting and poetry in it, but there's no reason to see them as inherently separate. Nor is there any reason to imagine the Artistic Sphere does not intersect with other spheres of experience. The interaction of ever-changing segments within the Artistic Sphere has been one of the main dynamic forces in the evolution of art. At times, isolating segments has produced major paradigm shifts in society and new dynamics in the arts. I see a pulsation of combination and selection as a cogent model for a perpetual state of renewal of art in relation to the other aspects of life.

In this model, visual poetry is an ad hoc term for joining or reintegrating verbal and visual modes of expression.

The name was coined to separate other modes from Concrete Poetry, a genre that created a fad, followed by the most severe backlash against any serious mode of poetry in the 20th century. Part of its temporary success and ultimate failure was the way it isolated itself from larger contexts. Despite its failure, Concrete successfully documented itself and hence is virtually the only widely known form of visual and verbal combination of arts in North America. This has created an unfortunate situation in which people try to revive its limitations while perpetually reinventing other less well known modes. Its failure took its own best works out of serious consideration by a wide audience as well as creating the impression that all visual modes were as trivial and gimmicky as much of its most widely distributed work

My strongest affinities with previous movements oriented toward visual poetry are with Lettrisme, a Paris-based movement that was largely built on ever expanding contexts and interrelations. It seems likely that visual poetry will remain a small and isolated phenomenon if it does not reach for larger contexts and become as important as any other combination of arts. Theater – both on stage and in film – is an example of a combination of arts that has not been fractured in such a way as to disappear for centuries.



At present, with computer technology dependent on a combination of words and images, visual poetry has an opportunity to become a stable frame for interaction of numerous variations as long as it presents itself and holds a full and functional range of contexts, from artistic to social, historical to scientific. If it defines itself as a limited set of isolated tricks, it will probably go through another period of eclipse as an identified and identifiable mode or genre. Oddly and ironically, interactions of verbal and visual modes have never disappeared, they've simply been called by other names. The disadvantage of this is that other modes have not had opportunities to identify themselves as a form of poetry and draw on a full range of literary resources. Identification with poetry presents two extreme paradoxes. First, its linguistic dimensions need not be immediately present. They may be latent as scores. They may work like the iconographic writing system of pre-Columbian Central Mexico, meant to be read by people who spoke different languages by functioning through shared icons rather than words. They may work by the application of linguistic principles to images. And so on through myriads of permutations. The second paradox is that isolated poetry may be the most highly endangered of arts at the present time. It's the lowest paid, the least respected, and the most highly ignored of the major arts. It's still going strong when allied with music in song, but may disappear in any other mode if it does not interact with other elements of the Artistic Sphere.

isolated poetry



WHAT DO THE LETTERS OF DREAMS MEAN
WHEN THE ECLIPTIC IS A RIVER OF MODULANT LIGHT?



e-clip-tic
a great circle on the celestial sphere representing the sun's apparent path during the year, so called because lunar and solar eclipses can occur only when the moon crosses it.

Like many of the methods and aims of visual poetry, problems with its acceptance, and even its production, come from changes in the reading of poetry. The process of transcribing oral poetry, developing writing into a cornerstone of society, and creating a world that includes growing preservation and access to sources, could form one of many narrative lines for a history of human culture as well as a compendium of artistic activities open to exploration.

In addition to increasing sources and methods, a practice that can enhance experience comes from isolating segments of the spectrum. But closing and barring a door behind such segmentation seems more a form of atavism than progress. In the fourth century A.D., when the main type of literacy we now practice was taking shape, St. Augustine of Hippo observed something that struck him as odd enough to note and to speculate on: St. Ambrose read silently. It took a millennium and a third and considerable social and technological change for silent reading to become the norm. There are a lot of advantages to this kind of reading. Perhaps the most important of them comes from the way it focuses concentration and seems to create a private and at times magical world. I spend most of my reading and even writing time in this silent space, and wouldn't want to be without it. **Yet the notion that this is "basic" reading or the only kind of reading, or that the cutting off of reading from speech, music, visual patterns, bodily actions, and the whole spectrum of artistic activities, is necessary, seems utterly sick and depraved to me.** Considering the interaction of images with text as a new and aberrant outgrowth of some pre-ordained and absolute law of nature is as perverse as insisting that poetry should never be read aloud. That we should have to defend or justify visual poetry or any other interactive art is something about which we should feel outrage or mourning.

Abundant forms of visual poetry are easy to find, but don't get identified as such. I've seen several examples on mainstream television in the last week. One was in a program on the Nasca lines in the deserts of Peru. Another was on crop circles. They are similar in the use of landscape as their foundation, and though the first were made over a thousand years ago and the second are still being made today. Both attract more attention than the work of people identified as visual poets. This is in part because they suggest a larger context, even if no one, except the few people who make crop circles, fully understands them.

In an episode of the serial, *Mad Men*, the protagonist remembers a hobo introducing him to a system of markings used by tramps during the Great Depression. This system may be of interest to some visual poets. With its long reach back into European history, it may lead to an aesthetic base, though such signs seem to have been made for purely utilitarian reasons. I live in a city, and regularly see graffiti art without having to search for it. During the 1990s, this may have been one of the most inventive forms of visual poetry being practiced in the U.S. Most graffiti is less artistic or useful than hobo signs. Yet some make more sophisticated use of characteristics of characteristics and styles of electronic media, from television to computers, than most of the self-identified

visual poetry of the time. Spontaneously changing “programs” (in the art historical sense) to create sequences in a fast-moving environment make the art even more dynamic. Taking design suggestions from the buildings, buses, trains, and other surfaces on which the artists painted would have made muralists of previous ages envy them if they had had the chance to observe the work of their heirs. One of the most advanced forms of the art was “tagging:” simply the writing of the artist’s name. Graffiti artists made quick and wide-spread use of the internet to document and show their art. This may have contributed more to its decline than anything else, since artists around the world began copying each other and destroying their originality. (This should be a cautionary example to those who identify themselves as visual poets and either become too inbred or too reliant on narrow conceptions of their art.) **I’ve spent decades working in such seemingly esoteric areas as East Asian calligraphy and the iconographic writing system of Central Mexico. In the above examples, I’m simply talking about forms of visual poetry you have to *be trained* to ignore or **not** see.**

“Constant features” usually aren’t more than a century and a half old.

Until the mid 19th Century, the definition of poetry was simply an utterance with a highly regulated sound pattern. It didn’t even have to contain words, and we have examples of metrical nonsense syllables going back at least to Aristophanes. In this definition, a mnemonic for a recipe was as much poetry as an epic. The oldest forms of verse we know were oral-formulaic compositions. They had nothing to do with writing, and a “line” referred not only to a repeated unit of sound, but how it got that way. A poet was a singer or chanter whose memory carried detailed stories and standardized phrases in metrical patterns. He could recite for long periods of time by stringing together stock phrases, guided by the combination of story and what fit metrically. A “line” was something his audience heard but did not see: that is, it was a sequence of sounds.

Whether it be epics, from *The Iliad* to *Beowulf*, or songs from the Chinese *Shi Jing* to the Biblical Psalms to the Central Mexican *Cantares*, we find the same patterns still used in oral-formulaic poetry among non-literate people around the world into the 20th Century. The sonic “line” was not something scribes duplicated on the page. Ever-frugal, they filled as much of the writing surface as they could without paying any attention to what we now think of as line endings. A “line ending” was something a reader discovered by reading the poem aloud and hearing the pattern. In later periods, the definition of poetry remained so profoundly fixed on strict regularity of sound frames that many rhymed works were considered prose. It is instructive to note that Aelfric’s 10th Century Anglo-Saxon *Saints Lives* was not considered poetry, because however highly rhythmic and filled with alliteration it may be, the rhythmic patterns weren’t regular enough.

Classical Greek and Roman authors usually didn't actually write their poems: they dictated them to scribes. Still, a "line" was something meant to be heard not seen. The use of lineation on a page came into practice after the advent of printing, and didn't become firmly established for some time after that. Part of the use of lineation on the page was ornamental and a feature of design in its early phases. They only become important with the growth of silent reading. As silent reading became more common, line breaks on the page began to have a function. As books proliferated, prose fiction came into being and expanded. Although many readers, probably the majority, continued to read aloud, quite often for an audience of family or friends or paying clients, the novel grew as the regular sounds of traditional poetry became less important. Beginning in the 19th Century and reaching full bloom by the middle of the 20th, meter ceased being essential to poetry for an ever growing percentage of the audience that remained. Early in the process of abandoning meter, poets maintained the notion that lines had auditory significance, in that they registered melodic patterns such as those found in music. This occurred at about the same time as composers such as Arnold Schoenberg pushed meter out of their music. Charles Olson reinvented the purpose of the line by breaking it up to map sonorities not dependent on metrics. Other poets began basing their sonic patterns on hybrids which played off the ghosts of metrics past, while those who listened to jazz continued to pick up real melodic ideas from musical sources, but for most poets the use of broken lines was serving an ever greater decorative function which often had nothing to do with sound or vocalization.

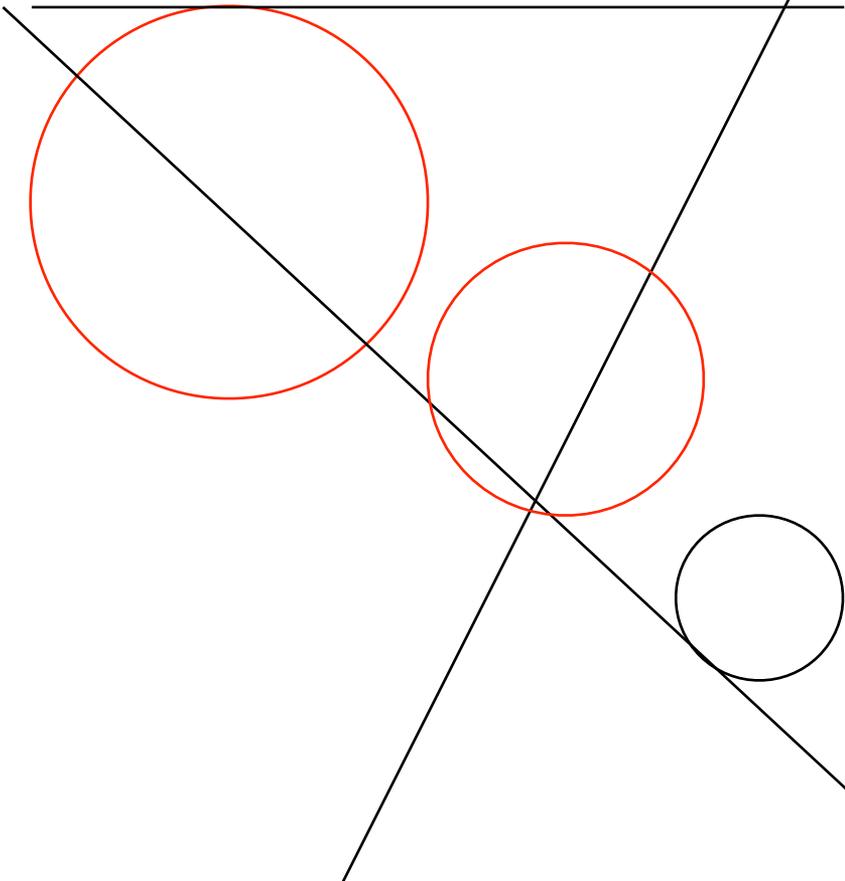
For the majority of poets, there's little left in poetry itself to define it in any sort of consistent sense. Many have ceased using verse lines altogether. For some, verse lines mean no more than that the poets have taken creative writing courses and use lines to make up for the fact that they have no real artistic forms to work with, but are only using poetry as an excuse to gossip about themselves.

At present, those who identify themselves as poets have nothing in common but a heritage and a history. In situations where literary history is no longer taught or learned, and poets insist that all that matters is what's happening now in my clique, there's not much, if anything, left. A "line" takes on the character of something phony that someone wants to use to con you with.

Fortunately, there are possible places to go from here. The ways that image can create new patterns for sound certainly exceed those you'll find catalogued in metrical dictionaries. The possibilities for words shaping images should be at least as great. The syntax of images in iconographic systems is complex enough in historical examples: how much more can it grow if the possibilities of images and icons can expand indefinitely? The lines on the page can take on new significance from their interaction with images. Images? During the period when meter has been disappearing, literary criticism has become more and more obsessed with the poetic "image." In the context of mainstream poetry, the image is supposed to be something that occurs in the reader's mind in response to words read silently. It would be foolish for critics to constantly blabber about images and expect poets not to literally make images. The possibilities for creating interactions between sound and image seem to have taken a leap into something like hyperspace with the increased access to information and particularly art history which everything from archeology to science makes more comprehensible and may make more widely available.

Lines have been used in visual art since the beginning of time.

Part of their purpose has been to clarify images. Current neuroscience demonstrates that areas of the brain specialize in marking the boundaries of objects, and that the drawing of lines in art has a deep base in our biology. One of the main purposes of the world's most advanced nuclear particle accelerator in Cern, Switzerland, is to create readable images of the most basic level of physics, which mathematics and language alone can't make comprehensible. The more advanced our science becomes, the more we need all the resources of the combined arts to understand it.



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Mallarmé had quipped that everything existed to find its way into a book a bit over a century ago. I later found a more intense and, to me, more appropriate statement of what the French savant had been fumbling for in the Aztec oral poems, collectively known as the *Cantares Mexicanos*

Only as painted images
in your books
have we come to be alive
in this place.

