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Al staan jy op jou kop — Concrete poetry gets a new jacket

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Die meeste van daardie goed [kykafrikaans] is geskryf om te doen wat mense sê jy nie moet doen nie. As hulle sê jy moet ekonomies skryf, dan het ek te veel woorde gebruik. As hulle gesê het jy moet dît en dît doen, dan het ek presies die teenoorgestelde probeer doen. So dis meer 'n verset teen skrywersnorme. Dis ook 'n politieke verset.

— Willem Boshoff (2007)

Most of those things [kykafrikaans] were written to achieve what people say you should not do. If they said you have to write economically, I used too many words. If they said you must do this, I tried to do the exact opposite. So, it's more of a rebellion against norms of writing. It's also a political resistance.

— Willem Boshoff (2007)

In the *Transgressions of the page* artist's book project, poetic texts are used in a number of works. In, among others, the works of Louisemarié Combrink (the pursuit of meaning in a new language by poets/ translators), Leon de Villiers (20 love poems on tractor tyres), Franci Greyling (in *Tinboektoe toe* the Middelste Meisiekind [Middle Girl] writes her postcards in poetic form), Leti Kleyn (*Sanity on the line* – collection of cut-up poems), Hennie Meyer (concrete poetry in the form of a wallet, matchbox book and handkerchief book), Alwyn Roux (prose poem printed on an x-ray photograph) and Paul Schutte (biography in poem format) poems are visually presented, and this represents a break from traditional views of poetry to the extent that some of these works can also be regarded as concrete poetry.

Poetic forms are generally divided into two main categories: (i) fixed and (ii) organic forms. The first is characterised by a cohesive link between theme, content and structure, while in the latter, theme and form characteristically develop together into a unique structure, which also gives rise to its own form (Ricco, 1980:62–63). However, free verse is not a fad or a

recent phenomenon, and has been in existence for many centuries. Neither is the so-called picture poem something new: "Apollinaire suggested the term *calligramme* to describe a poem in which the typographical arrangement is designed to reinforce the theme or sense" (Ricco, 1980:63). Ricco further suggests that the mere use of indentation or notching of lines of verse add points to this technique, so that such devices constitute part of the visual play of a poem. "[...M]ost concrete poetry relies on a special use of the language medium: typography. This may manifest itself either as a mix of different typefaces and sizes and intuitive design arranged with typographic virtuosity or as a block of text (in some cases, a design profile produced by the text) from which some startling effect evolves" (Ricco, 1980:123).

Concrete poetry — poems with a definite focus on typographic presentation — is also known as conceptual poetry (Kowit, 1997:113), experimental or explicative poetry (Michelson in Wildman, 1969:vii), visual poetry or the poetry of looking (Van der Elst, 1992:233). Ricco explains that a parallel exists between the manner in which the onlooker observes the concrete poem, and the way in which the reader of a haiku would read this poem — both depend on immediate impact and realisation, rather than studied conclusions: "One does not 'read' such a poem; one *looks* at it and *absorbs* it" (Ricco, 1980:123).

Van der Elst (in Cloete, 1992:230) propounds that, "[e]ie aan die *konkrete poësie* is [... die] eksperimentering met materiaal, tegnieke en vorme van tekstuele rangskikking. Die konkrete poësie bevraagteken die konvensionele sintaksis as 'n *sine qua non*

vir die poësie." [*Concrete poetry* is profoundly characterised by experimentation with material, techniques and forms of textual arrangement. Concrete poetry questions conventional syntax as a *sine qua non* for poetry.] Furthermore, the purpose of these poems is for them to be dealt with as functional items that wish to be handled, interpreted, deciphered … rather than as mere art objects with aesthetic value (Van der Elst, 1992:231, also see the work of Hennie Meyer).

Michelson (in Wildman, 1997:xi) suggests, however, that concrete poetry is also concerned with more than expanding the notion of poetry, or the idea of "making the familiar new" as held for a long time; he proposes that concrete poetry works against elitist approaches of literature — the power game and manipulation of the presentation of the printed poem: "In short, as the poet becomes his own printer [...] he is at one with not only its symbolic but also its material form. He has demechanized the material cause of poetry … [He] has scattered the printer's type, shattered his plates, unlocked his page frames, and given the inevitable finger to economy. The poet has thus become united with his poem [...] so much so that the concretist asks his 'reader' to stand on his head if necessary to read it" (also see the views of Kostelanetz in Van der Elst, 230—231 and Boshoff in Marais & Kleyn, 2007).

Van der Elst (1992:231) concurs when he refers to the idea that, "[d]ie tradisionele, en in die besonder die simboliese beskouing van poësie, nl. dat die dieper betekenis van die gedig onder die oppervlakte lê, strook nie met die standpunt van die konkrete digters nie. Die konkrete

digter lê nl. klem op die fenomenologiese werklikheid van die oppervlak (*surface*) van die kunswerk." [The traditional, and particularly the symbolist view of poetry — namely that the deeper meaning of the poem is found beneath its surface, cannot be reconciled with the views of concrete poets. The concrete poet emphasises the phenomenological reality of the surface of the artwork.] The concrete poem requires participation from the reader/spectator who receives the raw material (and instructions — as is the case in the work of Meyer where a "key" has been added to some of the works so that one can use this in order to decipher the poem).

Different forms of concrete poetry:

- Form onomatopoeia or *form poems* are poems that are presented in pattern format and where the form depicts the content to a large degree (see, among others, the works of Christene Gouws and Antoinette Pretorius in *Sanity on the line*).

- *Typewriter art* and handwriting characterised much concrete poetry before the computer age and its concomitant manipulation techniques. The use of handwriting (as in the tradition of among others Paul van Ostaijen, also see Peter Fabré in *Sanity on the line*) in the work of Hennie Meyer is important in terms of the collaboration between message and presentation, as seen in the poem "ekke" (also see Van der Elst, 1992:231 in this regard).

- *Cut-up poems* are used, among others, when creating (i) collages:

"a juxtaposition of disparate elements to form a new meaning" (Ricco, 1980:125–126) where a combination of sources such as magazines, newspapers and the like are either transformed spontaneously (read, unedited; see for example "rangskikkings" series in Dan Roodt's *Kommas uit 'n boomzol*, and the work of, among others, the Beat generation) or with the necessary editing, into fully-fledged "legible" poems (see among others Talita Hugo and Wynand Louw in *Sanity on the line*, and also Suzan Grobler's technique in *Cake quotes*). Kowit (2007:102–110) also points to techniques such as (ii) *ransom notes* (cut-up text arranged in patterns, see, among others, Nadine van der H. in *Sanity on the line*), cross-out poems in which the original text is retained, and the words that do not form part of the poem are scratched out. A variation of this technique is the (iii) white out-poem, where superfluous words are deleted so that only the ones remaining are used, but the typography of the poems shows the places where the words in the original text stood (see, among others, Hannes Toerien and Henali Kuit's work in *Sanity on the line* .

• *Found poem* — unpoetic text that has been "found", for example a shopping list or newspaper report is transformed into a poem, using little or no editing — by, for example, only changing the line breaks (Kowit, 1997:113–114. See Hennie Meyer's "Op soek na die g-kol").

• *Chance poems* are created by means of words that are selected based on numbers in, for example, one's date of birth and applying these to the source from which words are selected (Kowit, 1997:118). A further example of this is the aleatory poem that is composed by means of a non-intentional method by finding words and linguistic units of the word of origin, phrase or name and to compose the poem in this manner. This results in a poem that offers a "diastic reading thru text-selection method" (Kowit, 1997:114–115).

• *Sound poems* are more closely related to the sound of the poem than with its meaning, and are created for elocution purposes rather than for publication (see, among others, the work of Hennie Meyer which depends heavily on sound rather than on meaning). One example of such an experiment is to present only sounds (not words) in poetry format. Another example is the translatics method — here a poem comes into being when one creates the poem in a foreign language (without any knowledge of the source language) by selecting words based on their sounds. The poem can then be translated into an understandable format, but would not necessarily make any sense. An adaptation of this information can, however, give rise to an amazing poem (Kowit, 1997:115–118).

• *Open verse* consists of, for example, a conglomeration of word clusters on the page, as is the case with Willem Boshoff's "Pro patria". This is a form of "verse [that] leans heavily on tactile detail. The poet is consciously and deliberately concerned with the dynamics of language, breath intervals, the 'rests' — expanses of white spaces on the page — and the visual impact of text organisation" (Ricco, 1980:128–129).

In (South) African literature, little appreciation has been voiced for this type of literature (Marais & Kleyn, 2007, but also see the view of Michelson, 1969:vii–xi for international views) and Willem Boshoff is, to date, the only visual artist (also poet) who has had a full collection of concrete poems published locally (*Kykafrikaans*, 1980). Van der Elst (in Cloete, 1992:230) feels, however, that there are many individual examples; at least two studies have been undertaken in Afrikaans literature (Reynecke and Hugo), the journal *Wurm* by Phil du Plessis has opened up space for the publication of experimental texts, and *Orgie* by Brink can also be regarded as an experimental text that has been exceptionally influential in the field of Afrikaans literature.

The recent exhibition of works by Hennie Meyer (*Winkel van wanklanke*), the interest and utilisation of these techniques in the current project, as well as continuing current discussions regarding the prose poem in Afrikaans (see, among others, Naudé, 2010a & 2010b) suggest that the boundaries of poetry, as well as this particular type of poetry, may soon be revitalised.

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