

## Carl Andre: A Concrete Poet?

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«For more than thirty years I have tried to create English poetry by mapping language on the conventions of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstract art and on such basic mathematical modes as the prime number theorem» (Andre 2005d, p. 215).

### *The Square*

In 1963, the American artist Carl Andre created his text series *One Hundred Sonnets*, which later became famous as an example of the linguistic manifestation of minimalism.<sup>1</sup> The series is made up of 100 typewritten sheets, each of them repeating a different word 80 to 100 times. Visually, the repeated words assume the form of a block. In 1964, the Italian artist Maurizio Nannucci realized his large series *Dattilogrammi*, dedicated to the keys of a M40 Olivetti typewriter. On each sheet, a different letter is repeated several hundred times. In this case, the repetition takes on the form of a perfect square.

What strikes the viewer is that both artists more or less simultaneously create vast series of typewritten works based on the mere repetition (of words or letters) wherein the material is visually organized in the form of a square (or, to be precise, in Andre's case, a form very close to a square). Another fact is even more striking: Nannucci's works can be found in some of the early anthologies of Concrete Poetry, for example, in Emmett Williams' legendary anthology of 1967 and in the publication

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the author of the present essay had the occasion to present a paper on Carl Andre's *Sonnets* and their relationship to poetic concretism at the annual ACLA meeting at the Georgetown University (American Comparative Literature Association, March 7-10, Seminar: Concretism – A Global Dialogue). This article for "piano b. Arti e culture visive" is based on the ACLA-presentation.

accompanying the international Concrete Poetry exhibition at the Biennale di Venezia in 1969.<sup>2</sup> Nannucci's *Dattilogrammi* were and are evidently considered excellent examples of Concrete Poetry even though his works from the late 1960s onwards should probably be considered conceptual art. Instead, Andre, who had already started doing experimental texts towards the end of the 1950s and who was very prolific in the 1960s, is not only completely absent in the historic anthologies of Concrete Poetry of the 60s and 70s, but – with some very rare exceptions – also in the following decades.

This text tries to answer the following questions: Why is Andre absent from the anthologies of Concrete Poetry? Or, in other words, why did the Concrete Poetry community fail to take Carl Andre into account? And why does Andre himself insist that his texts are not Concrete Poetry?

### *One hundred sonnets*

After unsuccessful beginnings as a sculptor in the years 1958-59, Carl Andre worked as a railroad brakeman from 1960 until 1964. In those years, he didn't even have a studio. For his sculpture, these are admittedly years of stagnation and self-doubt. As Andre recounts: "Between 1959 and 1964 I could never get together the \$250 necessary to make the works which would have made a complete gallery show. I asked dealers and people for the money and they couldn't put the money together either, so at that time I despaired" (Siegel 2005, p. 61). Andre's close friend Hollis Frampton confirms that in those difficult years, he returned to his early passion of writing poetry with a typewriter; as he remembers: "Portability was paramount" (Frampton 2006, p. 77).

Out of this difficult period comes the important work of typewritten texts entitled *One Hundred Sonnets*. Andre's texts play with the traditional poetic form of the sonnet; like the classical sonnet, they consist of 14 lines though the division in two units of four lines and two units of three lines is eliminated. Andre's typewritten sonnets are organized in the form of

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<sup>2</sup> Williams 1967; Mahlow and Lora-Totino 1969.

blocks (squares or rectangles). Above all, they are made of the repetition of a single (mostly short) word. Each of these texts has a different visual rhythm depending on the length of the word and the specific letters it employs. As Andre explains: "In the *Sonnets* I attempted to generate a form by the repetition of the dissociated elements. [...] I was trying to map a poetry on a plastic rather than a musical system" (Andre 2005b, p. 197). Another definition Andre uses in this context is "crystallization" (*ibidem*, p. 198). In other words, Andre decided to concentrate on the visual aspect of language. On the one hand, Andre's *Sonnets* are an homage to the sophisticated poetical form of the sonnet; on the other hand, there is an ironic intertextual allusion. Marjorie Perloff, emerita professor of English literature at Stanford University, distinguishes a number of word categories: "pronouns, body parts, body functions, colors, numbers, minerals, nature" (Perloff 2014, p. 294). Generally speaking, the choice of words follows a materialistic orientation, while language itself is used as material for a visual construction.<sup>3</sup> At this point, it should be mentioned that, while writing the *Sonnets*, Andre was also working on *King Philip's War* (1965), a poem that can be defined as the deconstruction of a text about American history. In *King Philip's War* syntax is effectively transformed into word lists (Andre 2005b, p. 198).

To better understand the spirit of Andre's *Sonnets*, it is helpful to have a closer look at some of his earliest poems published in *Carl Andre. Poems 1958-1969* (2014): for example, the poems *h* (1959) and *white* (1960). The first text consists of a single deconstructed word (*white*), its letters are randomly distributed on the page. The second text is composed of three linguistic units (*white, white, not white*) distributed on the surface of white paper. Both texts are about the relation between a word and the letters it is made of, the word and what it refers to, the dialectics be-

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<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Di Liberti's intention is to demonstrate the substantial continuity between Andre's poetic and his sculpture. He underscores the plastic dimension of Andre's typewritten texts: "To sum up, Andre treats the words as modules to be reorganized on the plane of the page in an attempt to bring out the plasticity and tactility of the words and to introduce new poetic relations created not by the metre or syntax but by visual composition" (2019, p. 139).



that the forms of visual organization chosen by the artist tend to transform texts into something ornamental. Andre's texts are often characterized by an oscillation between the meaning of the words and the visual form.

In the introduction to her anthology of 1968, Mary Ellen Solt lists some of the main criteria for defining Concrete Poetry. Among these criteria, there is the "concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made" (Solt 1970, p. 7). Solt explains: "Generally speaking the material of the concrete poem is language: words reduced to their elements of letters (to see), syllables (to hear). Some concrete poets stay with whole words. [...] The essential is *reduced language*" (*ibidem*, p. 7). Solt makes it clear that the linguistic reduction is compensated by an augmented visual dimension: "the concrete poet is concerned with establishing his linguistic materials in a new relationship to space (the page or its equivalent) and/or to time (abandoning the old linear measure)" (*ibidem*). A concrete poem is, she writes, "an object in its own right for its own sake" (*ibidem*, p. 8).

Further, Solt writes: "emotions and ideas are not the physical materials of poetry" (*ibidem*, p. 7), a statement that could be read as a reference to Gomringer's unsentimental, somehow scientific or technological approach to poetry and underscores its substantial distance from the emotional dimension of traditional poetry. What Concrete Poetry has in common with all exponents of new poetry from Marinetti through the Brazilian Noigandres is the "conviction that the old grammatical-syntactical structures are no longer adequate to advanced processes of thought and communication in our time" (*ibidem*, p. 7). As Solt concludes: "the concrete poem communicates first and foremost its structure" (*ibidem*, p. 8) and "all definitions of concrete poetry can be reduced to the same formula: form = content / content = form" (*ibidem*, p. 13).

If we apply Solt's list of elements characterizing Concrete Poetry to Carl Andre's early experimental poems, it is hard to discover serious differences. And there are no major disagreements with Andre's own theory either. Andre always defined his texts very clearly as poems, but at the same time he underscored their materialistic or constructivist nature.

Often, Andre spoke about the importance of the isolated word in his concept of poetry. Poetry in his eyes means rediscovering the worth of the single word; he writes in 1962: "I insist that the great natural poem about anything is its name" (Andre 2005a, p. 133). He expounds: "I have attempted to write poetry in which the sentence is not the dominant form but the word is the dominant form. Words do have palpable tactile qualities that we feel when we speak them, when we write them, or when we hear them, and that is the real subject of my poetry" (Andre 2005d, p. 214). With the *Sonnets* in mind, we could say that Andre uses language as a material without any kind of metaphysical dimension. This result does of course not stand in contradiction with Concrete Poetry. The conclusion of all this is that a certain number of Andre's early texts correspond rather precisely to what contemporary Concrete Poetry was conceived of in the second half of the 1950s by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Eugen Gomringer.

It is thus a (surprising) fact that Andre took the position that his texts are not Concrete Poetry at all. In an email to the author of this essay, his wife Melissa Kretschmer quotes the artist: "I am not a Concrete Poet because concrete is poured. I do not pour, I write."<sup>4</sup> This answer does not refer specifically to his early texts and, apart from that, is more a kind of joke or play on words. But it makes clear that Andre does not want to be linked to the concepts and the history of Concrete Poetry. Kretschmer concludes: "If he is included in anthologies of concrete poetry, it's an error and [a] misunderstanding on the part of the authors..."<sup>5</sup>.

### *Why quibble over a definition?*

A poem or a work of art is, above all, simply what it is. For assessing the significance of an art piece, art historical definitions are of secondary importance. The fact that Andre is contradicting what in reality seems evident is a challenge for a researcher.

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<sup>4</sup> E-mail from Melissa Kretschmer, January 2, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> In 2012, Andre was included in the MoMA show "Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language" together with some concrete poets.



### *Sonnets and metal plates*

Carl Andre's poems of the years 1958-62 are not simply examples of Concrete Poetry, but they are very early manifestations of Concrete Poetry to the degree that Andre could be considered one of the pioneers of this movement.

There is the relevant point that the majority of critical texts don't question Andre's position and don't take up the notion that Andre's texts might be Concrete Poetry. Critics dealing with Andre's poetry tend to indicate the work of authors like James Joyce and Ezra Pound as influences for his poems. But what goes unmentioned are works by an American concrete poet like e.g. Emmett Williams. This might be due to the fact that most of the writers are art critics and not literary critics.

Apart from the hypothesis that Andre's texts might have been rejected by some of the curators of the early Concrete Poetry anthologies,<sup>6</sup> there is also another, very simple reason why Andre's texts are absent from the Concrete Poetry anthologies of the 1960s.

This reason is related to timing and placement: Andre wrote most of his important experimental texts between 1958 and 1965, but he never published anything until 1969, when his *Seven Books About Poetry* appeared. Moreover, when he published them, it was in the art context, which means they never really reached the world of literature. And maybe they weren't supposed to. The same is true for his first show dedicated exclusively to his poems in 1974, which took place in the John Weber Gallery and was addressed to an art public. Even though Andre started writing experimental (concrete) texts very early, he published them too late for important publications and shows. Andre's idiosyncrasy in relation to Concrete Poetry is probably due to the fact that he considered this definition reductive and not able to adequately grasp the variety of texts developed by him over the years, often in a dialectical relation with his minimalist sculpture.

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<sup>6</sup> I was informed by an Italian artist that he had been told directly by Emmet Williams and Dick Higgins that not only Carl Andre's texts but also text works by the New York conceptual artists had been rejected by Something Else Press.

Since Andre's texts were embedded in the art system and not in the literary system, and since they were seen as direct continuation of his highly important (and expensive) sculptural work, Andre's poems were able to conquer the art market, obtaining incredible prices when compared to those of "normal" Concrete Poetry. Andre used to sign his texts and prices were calculated based on the different levels of originality: original (unique) typewriter pieces, carbon copy pieces, photocopies, artist books.

My analysis supports Rider's and Perloff's claims that Andre's early poems should be categorized as Concrete Poetry, even if the artist himself disagrees. His early poems and *Sonnets* contain all the typical elements of Concrete Poetry. As Andre himself observed in 1963, these early texts "are the first poems in which I took the English language for subject matter. All my earlier poems originated in some conceit or observation or sentiment of my own. These poems began in the quality of words. Whole poems are made out of many single poems we call words" (Andre 2005b, p. 196). Language as language: this corresponds to his legendary statement from 1970 about his sculpture when he said "I want wood as wood and steel as steel, aluminum as aluminum, a bale of hay as a bale of hay" (Andre 2005c, p. 142). In both his Concrete Poems and minimalist sculptures, Andre uses the materials of society (metal plates, words) in a way that society does not use them. Also, in this case, there is a convergence with Concrete Poetry. Apart from the early (concrete) poems, in Andre's works, there is a huge variety of forms that, on one hand, could still be linked to Concrete Poetry, but which, on the other hand, are connected dialectically with the materialistic approach of his sculpture. As Nicholas Serota writes "Andre uses words in his poetry in the same way that he uses particles in his sculpture" (Serota 2006, p. 216). In the field of poetry, Andre demonstrates his ability to work with a wide variety of formal solutions. Of course there is, at the same time, a clear separation between sculpture and poetry expressed in the following statement of Andre's: "I don't like the incorporation of the namable in sculpture" (Sharp 1970, p. 25).

The art critic Vincent Katz deplores the “ancillary status” given to Andre’s poems by many critics who see these works as a transcription of sculptural themes into literary form (Katz 2014, p. 261). The present essay intends to underscore that it is time to see that Andre’s poems are not *ancillae sculpturae* at all.

In her essay *Mapping*, Lynn Kost gives a very concise description of Andre’s different poetical procedures (Kost 2014, p. 22). She writes: “It was in his deep exploration of language though (...) that Andre’s thinking formed in full. This finds full expression in his poems” (*ibidem*, p. 21). The analysis of *One Hundred Sonnets* leads to the conclusion that, together with Andre’s earliest sculptures, his concrete poems of the years 1959-63 laid the groundwork for crucial characteristics of his mature sculpture. When, in 1964, Andre started showing sculptures again, they were clearly influenced by his poetry.

From 1964 onwards, Andre conceived his sculptures as “cuts” into the surrounding space. Yet, his early poems from 1959-60 and the *Sonnets* from 1963 likewise constitute “cuts” into the “aboutness of words” (Andre 2005a, p. 133). The terrain for Andre’s extreme simplification of sculptural forms was laid by his poetry, especially the *Sonnets*, which are preparatory works for his legendary metal plate pieces that he started creating towards the middle of the 1960s. If we were to imagine the *One Hundred Sonnets* presented on a wall, it would become clear that the typewritten blocks are an ephemeral prefiguration of the metal squares. The *Sonnets* are not inspired by Andre’s metal plates or works with bricks, but vice-versa: the poems precede Andre’s sculptural works. So, let’s stop talking about the ancillary status of Andre’s concrete poems.

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