# A Socio-Poetics of Typewriting a Machine

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Welcome to the Typewriter Poems exhibit. You may have never used a typewriter let alone seen a typewriter poem. You might find it surprising to attend an art exhibit filled with poems especially poems that look more like abstract paintings than poems you read in English Lit. 101. Where are the literary themes and imagery or even any syntax? How does one even read what appears illegible? Where does one begin this explanation: with the machine, the artists, the typings, or the cultural milieu that these works respond to? It is more difficult than simply tapping out words on my Royal portable. Just imagine trying to explain IM lingo and emoticons to someone unfamiliar with computers. Even those who used typewriters regularly probably never gave the machine's aesthetic constraints and potential effects much thought. The typewriter's peculiar abilities to produce art usually appear in footnotes to larger art movements or schools like constructivism, concrete poetry, op art, or Bauhaus modernism. The daunting task of contextualizing and explaining the significance of this type of art and poetry has three paths: the processes and procedures used to make these works; the context of contemporary art; and the cultural situation to which typewriter poetry responds.

## How To Make A Typewriter Poem

In terms of the procedures to make your own typewriter poem, you should know at the outset that you cannot make corrections, so any unintended strikes force the artist to start over. Because the artist cannot simply back space, as in the computer, an accidental strike makes the precisely aligned geometric compositions unusable.

We can generate a list of the range of effects possible with the typewriter that fall on the general procedures of turning the paper in a thousand different directions and aligning the characters in a precise pattern. More specifically, one can disengage the line-spacing mechanism to slide the paper around and then carefully align and repeat the procedure without benefit of the rectilinear grid of the machine's mechanism. These procedures result in straight and wavering lines. To produce crosshatch marks, the artist inserts the paper at right angles. One uses horizontal and oblique keystrokes

to create three-dimensionality. To superimpose one character over another, one simply moves the carriage forward or backward half a space or go over the entire line and type over that line again. Superimposing text is much easier on a typewriter than setting type, which requires one to put one line of type down then another. It is extremely difficult in standard word processing in a computer to superimpose text.

   To create the perfect alignments and geometric shapes, the artist appreciates that the print letters vary in width as do most computer fonts, for example, an m being wider than an i, in the typewriter all the characters have the same standard width, so this same width allows one to type each successive line with each line reduced in length by one letter to produce a perfectly straight diagonal outline. In print, this effect would come out irregular. You can try it in your word processing program, but the geometric design will not appear aligned. To produce a scale of tone values using type, the full stop produces the lightest tone and the s typed over the w produces the darkest (according to one artist who designed a way to produce photorealistic portraits from type using this tone scale strategy) (Collins quote in Riddell 15). Finally, the narrowness of the paper that the machine accommodates forces the works to usually take on limited sizes. Steve McCaffery, also a member of the Four Horseman sound poetry group, did produce a larger work by planning
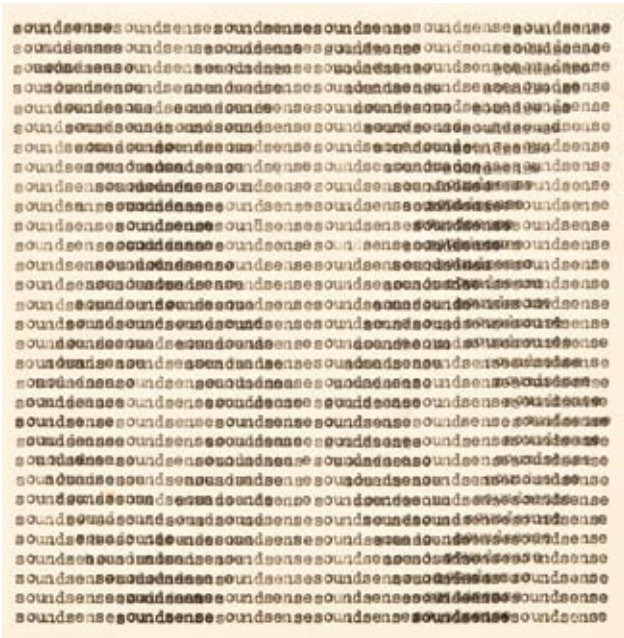


**MICHAEL GIBBS** (British)
*Sound Sense*, 1968
Typing on paper, 6½ x 6½ inches
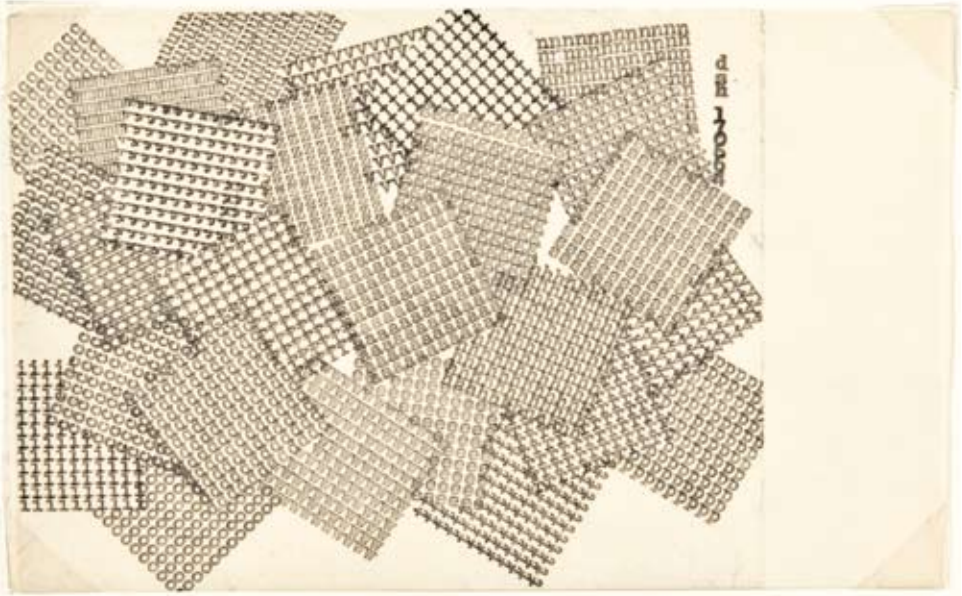
**DOM SYLVESTER HOUEDARD** (British)
Untitled, c.1963
Typing on paper, 5 x 8 inches

how individual panels linked, but most typewriter poems appear within the standard page size.

Instead of looking to painting, drawing, or even typesetting as an analogy for typewriter poetry, one might look to a traditional folk art, embroidery on canvas, because both use a rectilinear grid on which to build the design one keystroke or stitch at a time. Instead of different colors, the typewriter artist changes the shade and tone using particular letters or the intensity of each strike or superimposition. This outsider quality perhaps attracted two Cleveland poets, d. a. levy, who was a fascinating mix of street poet and sophisticated studier of cultural innovations, and Geoffrey Cook, a human rights poet and historian-journalist, who produced many startlingly controlled mandalas that summarize much about typewriter poetry's power and allure.

# A Socio-Poetics of the Machine

Typewriter poets used a machine and process ubiquitous in every office: a central component of newsrooms, business offices, and government organizations. Typing was everywhere throughout the first three quarters of the twentieth-century. In 1971, Alan Riddell, claimed that "it is hard to imagine our present society without" the typewriter (10). Using it to make art resembles contemporary efforts, like David Byrne's, to make art from the PowerPoint program [http://www.davidbyrne.com/art/eeei/index.php]. The typewriter epitomized

the bureaucracies created to manage the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth-century and the emergence of office culture in the twentieth-century. It removed reproduction and writing from its connection to the voice and allowed for every business and government to have what we might call today a personal word processing machine. Printing no longer needed to be reserved for permanent and important documents and books. As early as 1898, another unintended use for the typewriter appeared: a visual art machine. Something intended to produce rapid transcripts and multiples by secretarial pools in service of large systems of organizations now was producing one-off typed prints by one artist for a niche audience. The term for a press smaller than small is fine press, and, along that spectrum, typewriter poets were self-publishing with their personal press imprints.

Elsewhere, I have coined the phrase intimate bureaucracies to illuminate the use of the trappings, systems, and machines of large mass-oriented machine-like organizations especially governments and corporations for intimate aesthetic productions. It is as if these meditative quiet little poems suggested an emerging system, using something related to a steam-punk aesthetic, born from the machines of an industrial machine age but used for different ends.

Some of the poems stressed uniqueness further by typing through the paper. The possibilities range from the whimsical picture poems, like one from one of the most prominent typewriter poets, Dom Sylvester Houedard, a Benedictine monk, to the trompe l'oeil, in another Houedard poem, to the profound found in another of his poems.

Houedard, who typed his name dsh [and hereafter referred to in this text as dsh], also produced concrete poetry that stresses the semantic meaning of individual words in relation to the abstract, rather than figurative, visual design. These poems usually could just as easily appear typeset as produced on a typewriter, eventhough they were, in fact, produced on typewriters.

The typewriter's ability to superimpose letters, change the visual tonal-value of each strike, and, especially with the Olivetti machine favored by typewriter poets, to move backward a half-space makes this art technology both tightly constrained the artist with limited set of techniques and effects and made each attempt unique.

As Guy Brett notes, in a catalogue essay for an exhibit dedicated to dsh's *typestracts*, the typewriter used to serve as a "slave of longhand script" and to highlight the machine's rhythms, repetitive and percussive, rather than handwriting's undulations, suggests a shift away from conceiving of writing as separate from, and preceding, media production technologies. Perhaps, it highlights what I would call our scriptocentric heritage as it introduces an alternative literacy involving an interconnected assemblage of hand-

typewriter-paper-eye-visceral instead of the binary writing-reading.
We live in an era so immersed in electronic technologies that now
all writing passes through an electronic stage of computers, phones,
iPods, and other devices. We may not use manual typewriters, but we
increasingly use keyboards and other similar input devices.

In this shift away from what literary scholars call logocentric
writing, actual words might appear in these poems, but they no
longer have priority over other visual imagery. Some of the poems
are figurative; many seek to explore possible effects of the machine
not noticed outside these artistic and poetic uses.
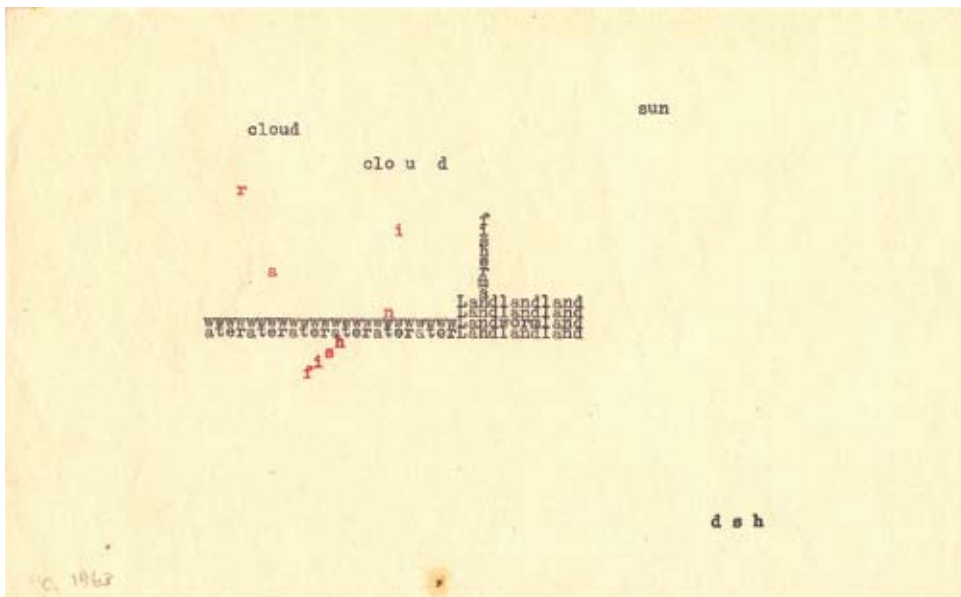


**DOM SYLVESTER HOUEDARD** (British)
*Nature Poem* (300663) [Landscape with Fisherman], c.1963
Typing on paper, 5 x 8 inches

dsh produced his poems in his monastic cell, and sought to produce a
direct poetry, "concrete objects themselves" as a meditative process
not representation of, or "windows into, souls" (as quoted in Brett,
n.p.). With a minimum of words, absence of syntax, dsh sought a more
direct visual and visceral connection to the reader rather than the
traditional hearing the author's voice through reading. In this
sense, words in typewriter poems return to a function reminiscent of
mosaics, stain-glass windows, coins, comics, and media; they are, in
dsh's words, "integrated into the composition so as to be parts of
the aesthetic as well as of the factual information communicated"(as
quoted in Brett, n.p.). As dsh explains, "there is a link between
the Western abstract writing-painting and Eastern Zenga and Haiga [.
. .] paintings and poems that are not about life but that ARE live
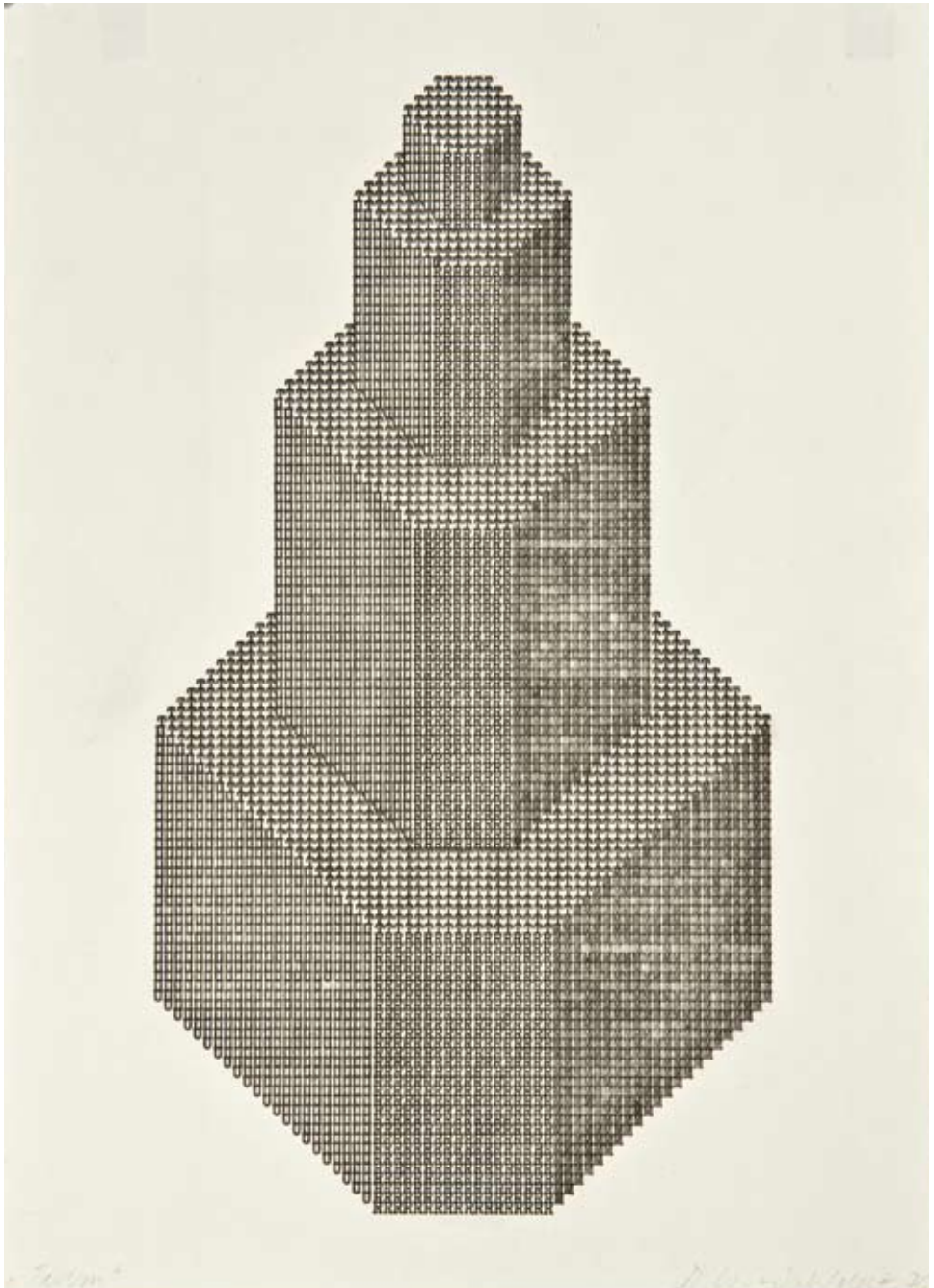
**RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT** (German)
*Turm*, 1976
Typing on paper, 12 x 8¼ inches

direct living acts--that are controlled accidents ... tastes of the aimless-moment"(as quoted in Brett, n.p.). The culture of organized systems demanded that words matter; for typewriter poets words as matter creates an entirely different situation: a literacy in which aesthetics and visceral sense is not an ornamental value but crucial to the meaning.

# Typewriter Poetry in Art History

Although constructivist, concrete and visual poetry are better known, typewriter poetry was an important variant that also illuminated two aspects of the modernist approach not highlighted by the typeset versions. The Bauhaus sought to infuse everyday design with modernist aesthetics and to think of design-engineering and machine operation as part of an artists' training. To that end, Eugen Gomringer introduced concrete poetry and typewriter poems became a way to teach graphic design in the machine age. In Joseph Albers's students' typewriter "construction" exercises, the geometric shapes resemble sketches for minimalist modernist architecture. Albers influenced American artists when he taught first at Black Mountain College [BMC] and during the 1950s at Yale. One can see this geometric modernism in examples from the 1950s through the early 70s -- the twenty-year heyday of typewriter poetry.
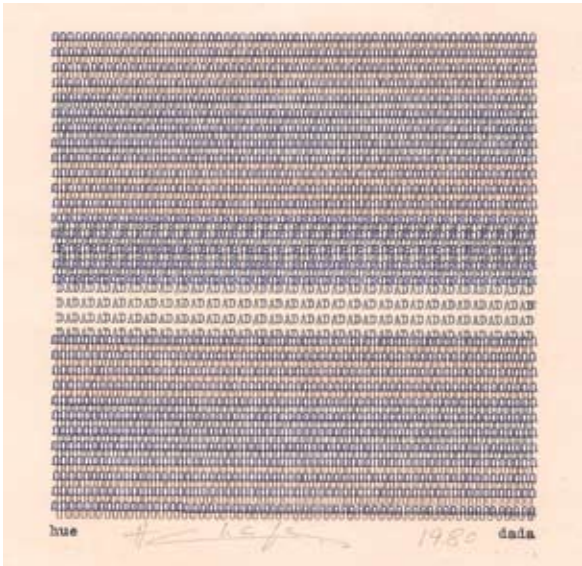


**HENRI CHOPIN** (French)
*Hue Dada*, 1980
Typing on paper, 11½ x 8¼ inches

Students of Charles Olsen and Robert Creeley at BMC began reading Brazilian concrete poetry and exploring the "projective verse" of typewriter poetry. As typewriter poetry re-emerged in relation to experimental art movements in the 1960s, like Fluxus and other students from BMC and Olsen's students at SUNY Buffalo, it had a liberationist agenda and D.I.Y. sensibility as well. One did not need a linotype press and lots of capital or even electricity. Everyone could have a personal printing press anywhere anytime, and one did not need an art gallery or publisher. Fluxus associated artists produced many typewriter poems, and, for example, Michael Gibbs, who co-founded Fluxus West in England, began producing works in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The constructivist filmmaker Dziga Vertov's slogan was "constraints encourage invention," and the typewriter poets embraced that challenge by using only the machine. They did not mix painting, drawing, or hand-writing, but instead sought the inventiveness from using the same constraints as every other type writer poet -- to see if one could produce something startlingly new and sometimes beautiful with the same limited set of constraints.

Every artist and poet confronts the same problem but usually effaces this essence of artistic production. The typewriter poets do not hide the struggle with formal and aesthetic constraints.  Poetry and art always involve following technical and formal constraints,
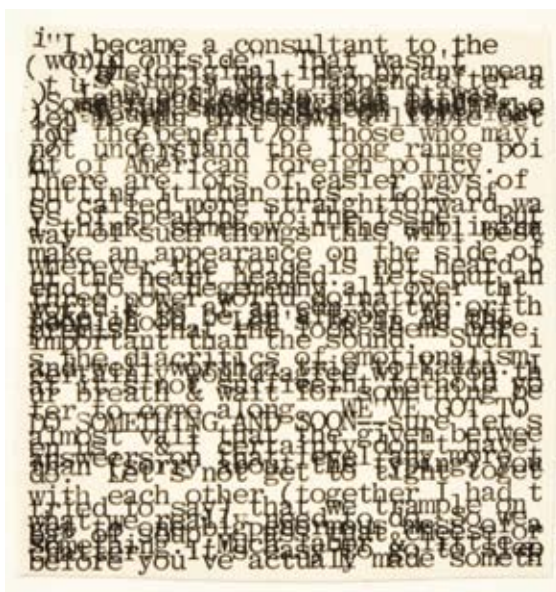


**CHARLES BERNSTEIN** (American)
*Veil,* 1978
Typing on paper, 5¾ x 5¾ inches

but they sometimes hide the aesthetics and poetics behind Realist stories or illusion. Like other examples, of modern and contemporary art, the typewriter highlighted the machine's tracks and formal constraints.

In 1991, Robert Creeley, Charles Bernstein, and a group of other important poets founded the University of Buffalo's Poetics Program that brought a new group of students into the experimental tradition of poetry described here. Bernstein, a founder of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry movement and a crusader against the "official verse culture," produced a series of typewriter poems in the 1970s, and at Buffalo began writing scholarly treatises about these works. Craig Dworkin's important digital press, Eclipse, makes a number of these works available online, but not these particular typewriter poems. Bernstein overtypes several layers of poetic compositions producing a palimpsest or veil. He sees this work as a literary theory that argues that "our language is our veil of language, but one that too often is made invisible. Yet, hiding the veil of language, its wordness, its textures, its obstinate physicality, only makes matters worse."(Bernstein quoted in Golding 273). You can read some of the words in the overtypings as palimpsests, but one rarely notices the physicality in text that appears invisible.

Visual poetry has always had a popular following as well as the avant-garde and experimental lineage. The popular poems of e.e. cummings used layout and design as crucial components of the literary meaning, and cummings recognized that the typewriting was so important that he suggested to Augusto de Campos, one of the founders of concrete poetry who produced many Brazilian translations and editions of visual poetry, that the publishers photograph the typed version of "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" rather than typesetting the result for publication to preserve the meaningful layout that the typesetting would loose.

In France, Henry Chopin, inventor of sound poetry, also began experiments with typewriter poetry. In England, another sound poet, Bob Cobbing, produced typewriter poems as scripts for his wild cacophonous sound mixes. Also in England, Paula Claire was producing typewriter poems that suggested movement. In German, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt produced the geometric figures reminiscent of the Bauhaus constructions, but much more involved and elaborate.

More recently, Willem Boshoff from South Africa has returned to the typewriter and some of the same visual motifs to produce beautiful meditations on repetition and the paradoxical combination of meandering aimlessness and intense focus and precision. In that way her poems suggest the concern with process as effect seen in Houdard and others.
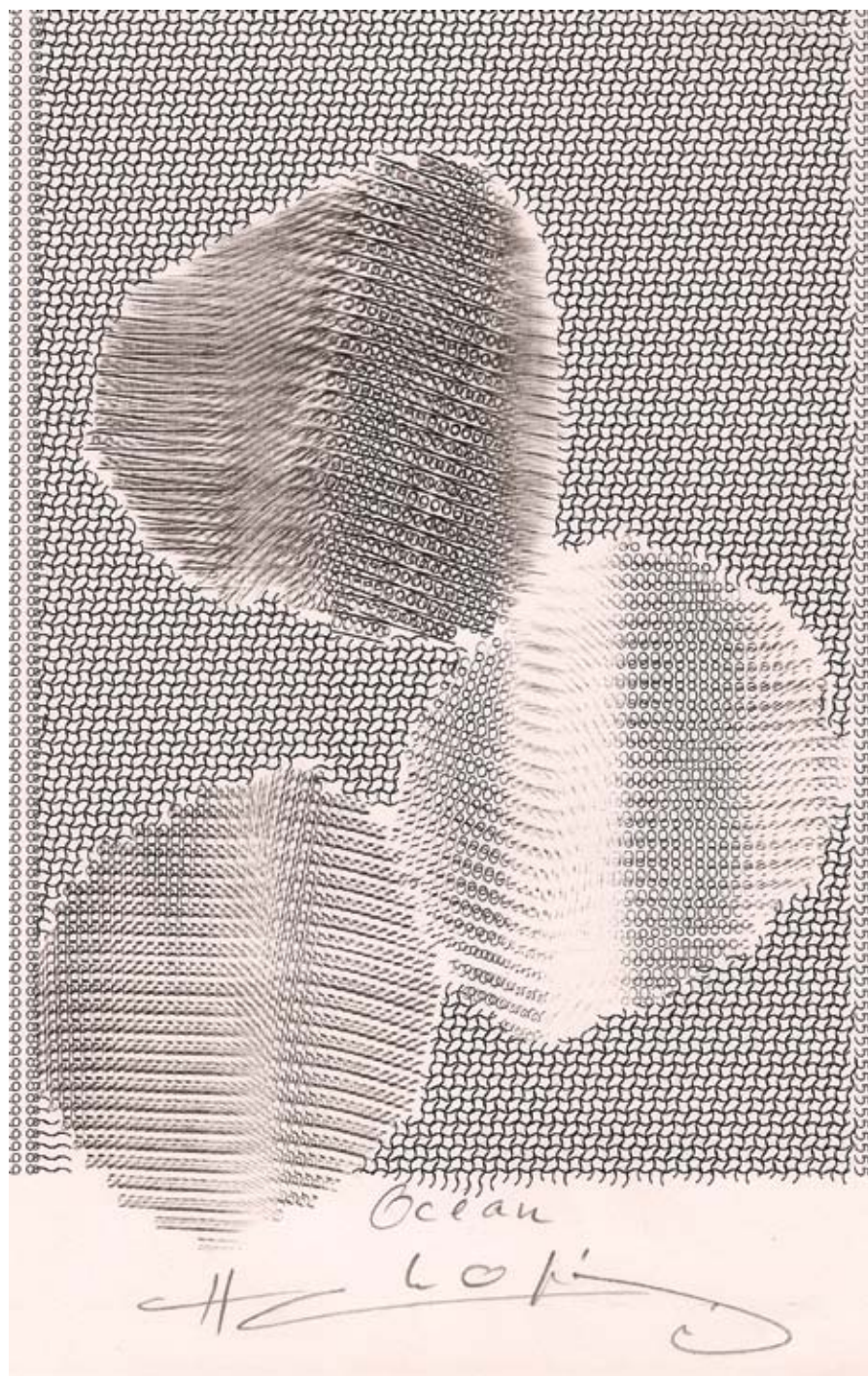
**HENRI CHOPIN** (French)
*Ocean*, 1989
Typing on paper, 11¾ x 8½ inches

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**PAULA CLAIRE** (British)
*Etherealight*, 1985
Typing on paper, 11¾ x 8¼ inches
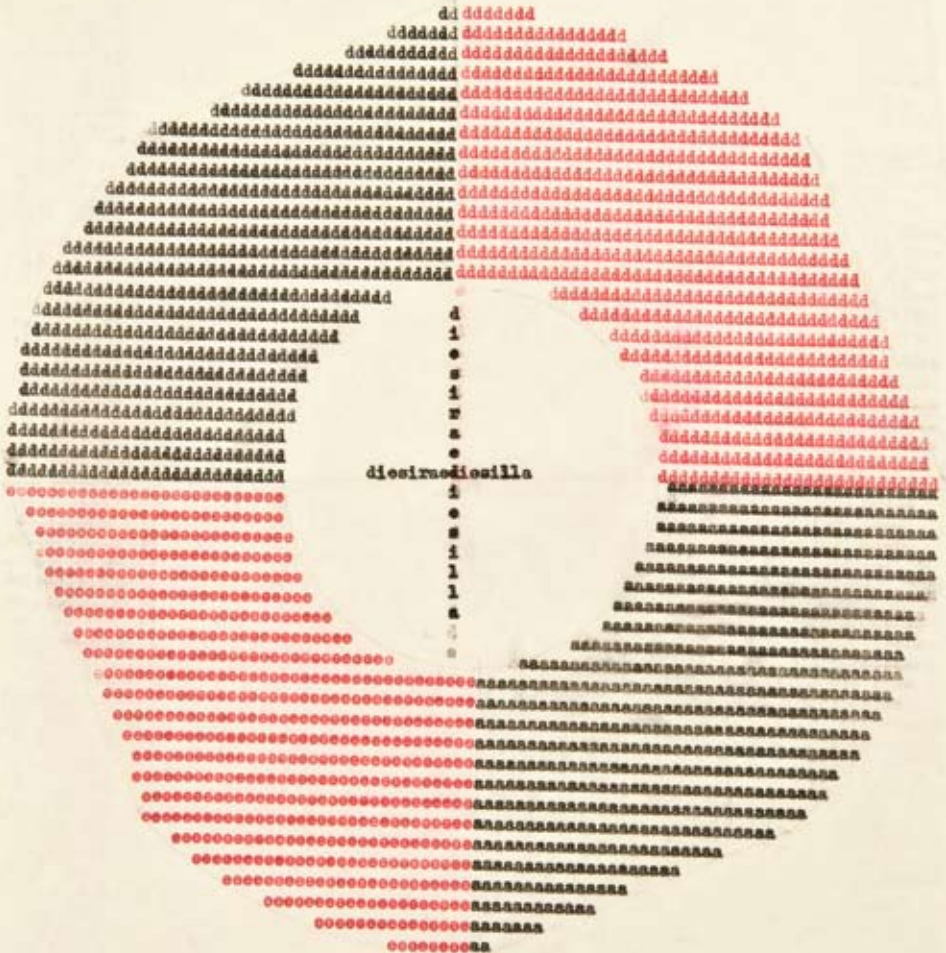
GEOFFREY COOK, (American)
*Mandala #2 (after C.G. Jung),* 1980
Typing on paper, 11 x 8½ inches

# Reading Visual Poetry

    William Everson argues that the typewriter, while it empowered
the poet to be his own typesetter, also led to an over-emphasis on
the eye. "Everything goes the way of the eye and the contact with the
ear is lost. But, poetry begins with the ear, the tongue and the ear.
The eye is for the printer." (52). One of the ongoing debates about
typewriter poetry and visual poetry in general concerns whether the
marks on the page should serve the voice, serve to represent what
a voice speaks. Is writing a slave to speech? Are there poetic and
aesthetic effects that have no translation in speech? The typewriter
poets set out to write a poetry not intended to represent an author's
voice, but to directly imprint a process and a visual aesthetic
that has no equivalent in speech. It demands a tactical visceral
literacy.

    It was the machine of modernity and standardization. It was a key
mechanism, and fitting metaphor, for the rise of large corporations,
bureaucracies, newsrooms, and governments. In the initial marketing,
it was championed as the machine that would improve spelling,
punctuation, and liberate women by allowing them to gain employment
in offices. It also has another secret history as an art and visual
poetry machine that types beyond speech's anchor.
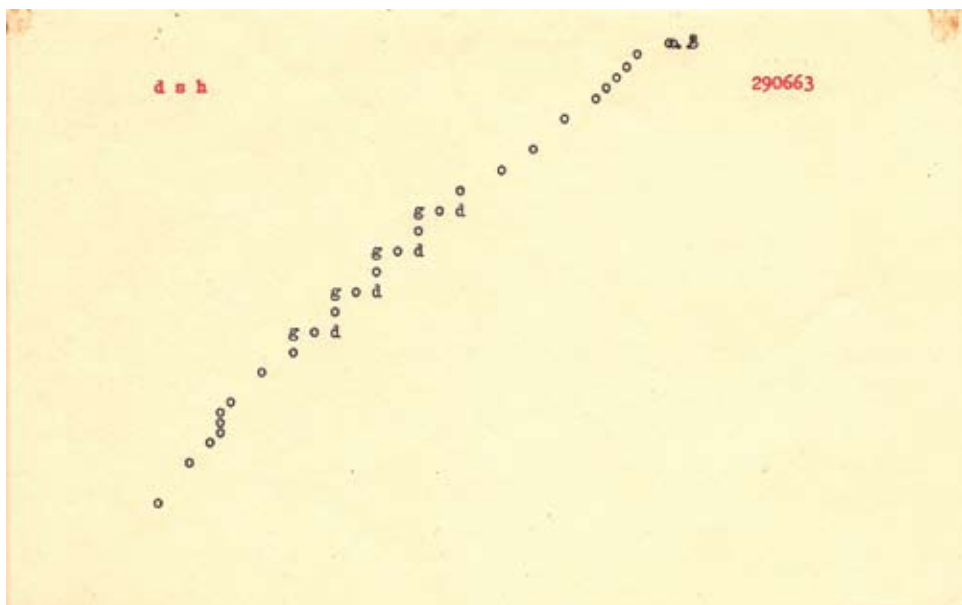


**DOM SYLVESTER HOUEDARD** (British)
*God* (290663), 1963
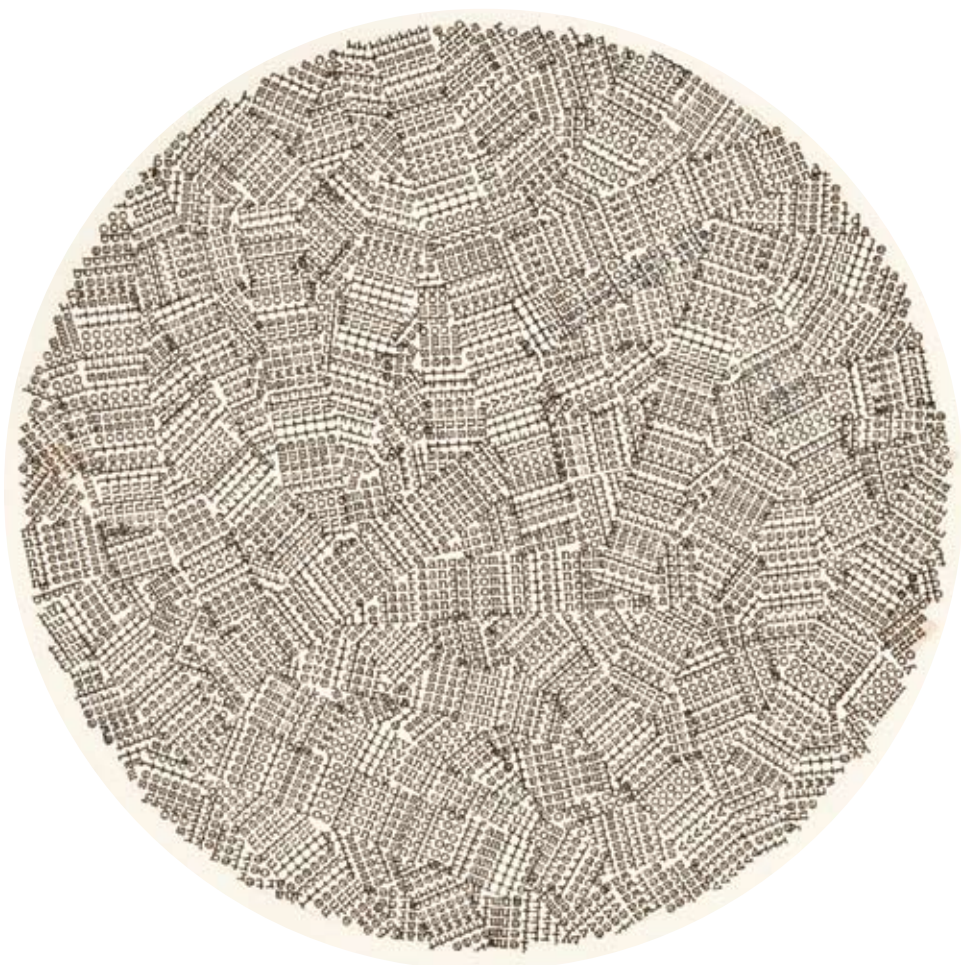Typing on paper, 5 x 8 inches
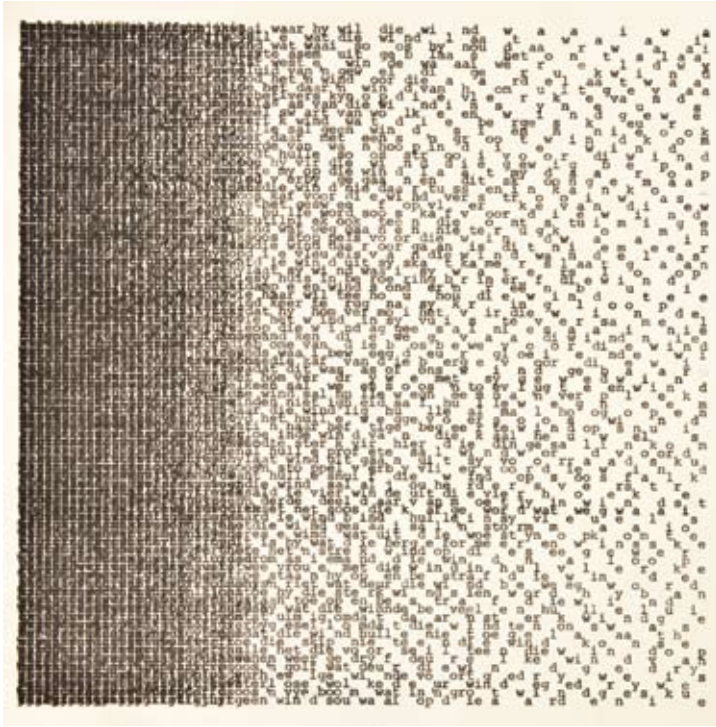
**WILLEM HENDRIK BOSHOFF** (South African)
from *Kykafrikaans,* 1980
Typing on paper, 14 x 11 inches


# Further Reading and Bibliography

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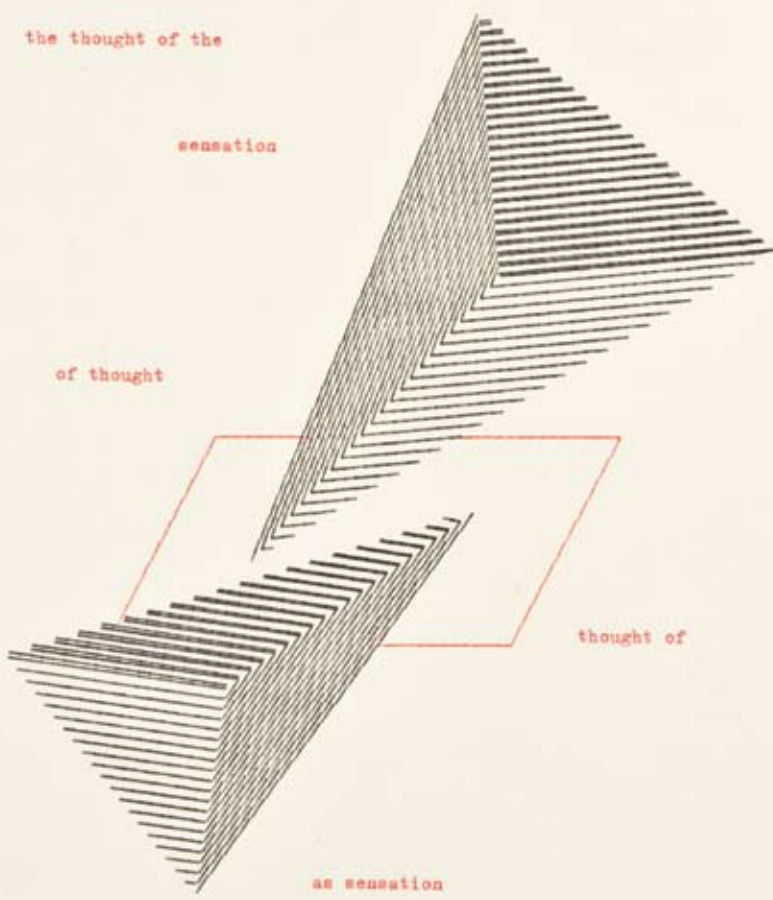
**DOM SYLVESTER HOUEDARD** (British)
*The Thought of the Sensation (71/12/30),* 1971
Typing on paper, 11½ x 8¼ inches

**WILLEM HENDRIK BOSHOFF** (South African)
from *Kykafrikaans*, 1980
Typing on paper, 8½ inches diameter

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