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Iconicité et typographie chez Steve McCaffery: les poèmes-panneaux

Fiona McMAHON

(Université de Bourgogne, France)

Résumé

*Cet article se propose de retracer les étapes d'un projet d'écriture qui se rattache historiquement aux mouvances internationales de la poésie concrète comme à l'émergence d'une poétique de l'iconicité chez l'avant-garde nord-américaine du vingtième siècle. Le matérialisme dont se réclame la poésie de Steve McCaffery se traduit dans son œuvre typographique *Carnival* (1967-75) par une pratique mettant en jeu la lettre, le plus petit dénominateur de la langue, et la page, qui doit se laisser transformer pour que se réalise un nouvel espace de signification poétique. Le dialogue qui se joue entre le lisible et le visible prend forme grâce à un répertoire de techniques expérimenté avec la machine à écrire et de concert avec le lecteur, devenu acteur de l'œuvre poétique. La pratique architecturale du poème-panneau chez McCaffery sera envisagée dans son rapport actuel avec le prolongement des problématiques de la poésie visuelle chez l'avant-garde nord-américaine.*



Iconicity and Typography in Steve McCaffery's Panel-Poems

Fiona McMahon
(Université de Bourgogne, France)

Dr. Fiona McMahon lectures in American literature at the University of Burgundy (Dijon, France). She is the author of various articles concerned with patterns of testimony and of the archive in North American poetry, including specific studies on Charles Reznikoff, Ezra Pound, Elisabeth Bishop, bp Nichol and Rosmarie Waldrop.

Experiments with typography within the context of the latter part of the nineteen sixties and the early nineteen seventies attest to a renewed interest in the « print experience »¹ among North American poets intent upon bringing pictorial concerns to writing. The work of Steve McCaffery, termed « typestract » (abstract typewriter art), first issued in paper by Canadian small presses, is representative of this direction in North American poetry. With McCaffery, the materials of writing are explored in relationship to how poetry is both crafted and perceived. The poet employs the typographical medium as a means of formalizing poetry's relationship to time and to space, thereby concentrating upon the patterns that grow out of narrative constraints, along with those determining the composition of the page and of the book. Working from the premise that the poem can be construed as an object of typographical fabrication, poetry is realized through the techniques of « typestract » as part of an iconic environment:

Perceived optically as a complete unit the page is qualified to such an extent that it ceases to function as an arbitrary receptacle, or surface, for the maximum number of words it can contain (functioning thereby as a random-sized unit in a larger construct), becoming instead the frame, landscape, atmosphere within which the poem's own unity is enacted and reacted upon. Page and type function as the two ingredients in a verbal sculpture.²

From a chronological perspective, the exploration of iconicity among a generation of writers contributing to what might be called *post-concrete* or

¹ Steve McCAFFERY and bp NICHOL, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine*, Vancouver: Talon Books, 1992, 60.

² *Ibid.*, 61.

late-concrete writing can be dated from the publication of Emmett Williams' collection, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* in 1967 and the equally important, internationally focused 1968 anthology by Mary Ellen Solt: *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Various defined as « material », « elementary », « kinetic », « total » or « visual » poetry, concretism grew into an international movement in the 1950s, and boasted members who were almost simultaneously publishing manifestos in three different parts of the world: Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland (*Konstellationen*, 1953); Öyvind Fahlström in Sweden (*Hipy Papy Bthuthdth Thuthda Bthuthdy*, 1954) and the De Campos brothers, Augusto and Haroldo, along with Decio Pignatari of the Noigandres group in Brazil (*Plano-Piloto Para Poesia Concreta*, 1958)³. Regardless of the language in which one was to read these manifestos – German, Swedish or Portuguese – they shared a common denominator, namely the aim of arriving at the greatest simplification and compression of language. This they intended to achieve by stressing the functionality and morphological make-up of words reduced to their individual elements of letters.

The year after Mary Ellen Solt's anthology was issued, the poet Steve McCaffery published some of the early drafts of what would become his longest « concrete » project entitled *Carnival*⁴. The latter is divided into two phases, each of which amounts to separate books putting to use a repertoire of technical procedures relying on modes of type and of reproduction. Steve McCaffery locates the first phase in the period from 1967-1970 and defines its outcome as a « panel » that is advertised in *Carnival's* instruction sheet as « sixteen square feet of concrete »⁵ (published in 1973). From the outset, by appropriating the means of polyptych painting, typewriter art sets out to define a book of poetry as a component in a larger body of work – a panel destined to join with a second or even a third. Furthermore, McCaffery's panel poetry highlights the composition of the page over that of the individual line of poetry. For the sixteen pages that make up *Carnival* also function as « panels » once they become part of the overall composition of the book. As McCaffery indicates in the instructions for the reader, the intention is to have the

³ For a chronology of concretism and a presentation of its international scope, see Mary Ellen SOLT, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970, 7-66.

⁴ Early drafts for sections of *Carnival* appeared as *Two Simultaneous Texts* (Anonbey and Press, 1969) and *Ground Plans for a Speaking City* (Anonbey and Press, 1969). To view the complete project, including Panels 1 and 2, see Steve McCaffery, *Carnival* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967-1975), *Coach House Books Online*, <http://www.chbooks.com/archives/online_books/carnival/>, 12 July 2006.

⁵ The critic Peter Jaeger points out that *Carnival's* first panel falls short of the measurements initially advertised by McCaffery, thereby reinforcing the theme of art as illusion: « Each of the sixteen pages actually measures only eleven inches by eight and a half inches, the actual contents of the package are less than the number advertised on the label ». See Peter JAEGER, *ABC of Reading TRG*, Vancouver: Talon Books, 1999, 16.

focus shift from authorship to craftsmanship, from the written page to a supporting surface for composition. He goes on to explain that only once the reader has torn each of the pages out of the book, « carefully along the perforation », designed for this effect, and laid them out in a square of four, is the book « destroyed » and the composition complete⁶. Thus the aim of reduction in concretism takes shape in this instance through a creative process that is paradoxically tied to a destructive gesture:

In its initial state, *Carnival* is a « book, » i.e., a bound sequence of regular pages. Each page is perforated at the top, and the panel-object can only be realized by the wilful destruction of the book-object. As an « unripped book, » *Carnival* remains merely a virtual panel, whereas a mounted panel is a « book destroyed.⁷ »

Therefore, for the project to be realised, it is required that the book be disassembled and then that the parts that remain be combined, as though the components of a multi-panel painting. This is done by a reader, who in doing away with the book, initiates poetry's transferral to a painterly medium.

In contrast to the poet's sole reliance on the typewriter for the first panel, in the second panel, extending over the period from 1970-1975 and published in 1977, McCaffery builds on his method to include what he calls different forms of « scription »⁸: in addition to rubber-stamps, tissue texts, hand-lettering and stencil, the poet introduces experiments with photocopiers through a technique labelled xerography, or « xerography with xerography (i. e. metaxerography and disintegrative seriality ». As with the latter example of accretion applied to technique, McCaffery's panel books express an amplification of the kind of typographical experiments concrete poetry of the 1950s has acquainted us with⁹. Furthermore, they point to aspects of the theoretical climate of the early to mid 1970s that were brought to bear upon some North American poetry. Without overlooking the place typewriter art occupies in contemporary writing, a consideration of these prior contexts will shape a discussion of how a preoccupation with the reduction of language has evolved into forms of ritualistic proliferation exemplified in Steve McCaffery's xerography poems.

⁶ Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: The First Panel 1967-70*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973, n.p..

⁷ Charles BERNSTEIN and Jay SANDERS (eds.), *Poetry Plastique*, New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books Inc., 2001, 70.

⁸ Steve McCaffery, introduction, *Carnival: The Second Panel 1971-75*, Toronto: Coach House Press, 1977, n.p..

⁹ This approach to visuality in poetry can be placed along a twentieth-century timeline of experiments uniting poetry and the visual arts, established by historical movements dating back to the early years of the last century, such as futurism, vorticism and the *calligrammes* or *idéogrammes lyriques* experimented by Apollinaire in France.

International and Theoretical Grounding

Despite the divergences among concrete poets over the degree to which aesthetic reduction entails semantic reduction and the subsequent difficulty for practitioners and critics alike to arrive at one comprehensive definition, the basic aims of concretism are evidenced in the work of Steve McCaffery in the early 1970s. This is true first in so far as it foregrounds the material functionality of language. To quote the definition provided in the introductory pages of Mary Ellen Solt's anthology, this meant « concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made » for « the essential is reduced language »¹⁰. Steve McCaffery has consistently met this requirement, even outside of the strictly visual strains of his work¹¹. Furthermore, his transnational credentials prompt associations with the internationalism of concrete experiments. If we consider the particulars, McCaffery's itinerary falls in step with a concern for organizing linguistic materials outside a monologic concept of experience or of nationhood. Born in England, and, to quote the brief biographical sketch that is appended to *Carnival*, « uneducated in Canada », McCaffery is also considered as one of the leading theorists of the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry group. Bob Perelman ranks him as such in his 1996 historical overview of Language, *The Marginalization of Poetry – Language Writing and Literary History*. In fact, a brief bibliographical survey shows that Steve McCaffery's work is featured in most of the major studies on poetics to come out of the United States since the late 1980s. These include, to name a few, George Hartley's *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (1989), Peter Quartermain's *Disjunctive Poetics* (1991), Michael Davidson's *Ghostlier Demarcations* (1997), Marjorie Perloff's 1990 *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*, as well as one of her most recent studies *21st-Century Modernism, The "New" Poetics* (2002)¹².

Considered as a whole, McCaffery's body of work suggests a model that allows for an overlapping of the architectural and spatial

¹⁰ Mary Ellen SOLT (ed.), *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, 1968, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970, 7.

¹¹ Steve McCaffery is usually categorized as a « sound poet » on the basis of a substantial number of experiments in the « phonetic » branch of concrete poetry over a period of more than thirty years. Apart from his most recent performance poetry which is published on the World Wide Web (EPC project at SUNY Buffalo) McCaffery is remembered for the role he played in the 1970s and the 1980s in the Canadian group of Sound poets, The Four Horsemen: Rafael Baretto-Rivera, Paul Dutton, bp Nichol and Steve McCaffery. During the same period McCaffery also provided an entry on sound poetry in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984, 88-91.

¹² Within the context of aims of Language poetry, McCaffery's work has also been stigmatized by critics for what is perceived as its self-consciousness and failure to provide an effective critique of capitalist ideology. See Michel DELVILLE, *The American Prose Poem. Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, Gainesville, Florida: The University Press of Florida, 1998, 237, 267.

elements handed down from the international concrete movement and a foregrounding of linguistic materials against the specifically polemical backdrop of Language poetry's critique of capitalist ideology. In other words, it is a combination of the desire to place visualization at the forefront of poetry and the drive to take apart the myth of direct communication. As an example, for George Hartley, McCaffery's 1976 essay, « The Death of the Subject » is a foundational text, given that it was the first to explicitly associate « language centered » poetics with attempts to challenge the « socially contrived basis of any writing »¹³. To do so, in McCaffery's view, means advocating a change affecting our sense of reader and writer. By upsetting their socially defined functions of producer and consumer, the goal is to have the writer and reader participate simultaneously in an empirical experience giving prominence to the signifier. However, theoretically speaking, McCaffery's concentration on the physicality of language is by no means limited to a political project. His definition of language, to quote his 1976 essay, « as a direct event, a "seen" thing (in concretism) and hence a "felt" thing (in language-centered writing) »¹⁴ pertains to the perceptual qualities European concretism sets out to explore visually and phonetically. Indebted also to European philosophical currents, particularly to semiotic theories of the writing subject¹⁵, Steve McCaffery emerges as a kind of theoretical middleman arbitrating the relationship between European theory questioning the transparency of language and a generation of North American poets departing from expressions of materiality inherited from the American modernist tradition of poetry.

From Reference to Linguistic Presence: a « fleshless call to language »

The panels that make up *Carnival* demonstrate how Steve McCaffery transposes a critique of semantic referencing onto the page. It is less clear however whether these typewriter poems match the broad aims of language-based experiments. These, as one interviewer explains, are attributed by McCaffery and other Language poets to « an interest in the question of reference, a question which they see as having its social and political as well as aesthetic consequences »¹⁶. The way this very issue of « reference » is played out in *Carnival* begs to be considered, I would

¹³ George HARTLEY, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, xii, xiii.

¹⁴ Steve McCAFFERY, "The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing", *Open Letter* 3: 7 (Summer 1977): 62.

¹⁵ See Michel FOUCAULT's 1967 essay, « Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? », *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, Paris: Gallimard, 1994; and Roland BARTHES' 1968 essay, « La mort de l'auteur », *Le Bruissement de la langue*, Paris: Seuil, 1984, 61-67.

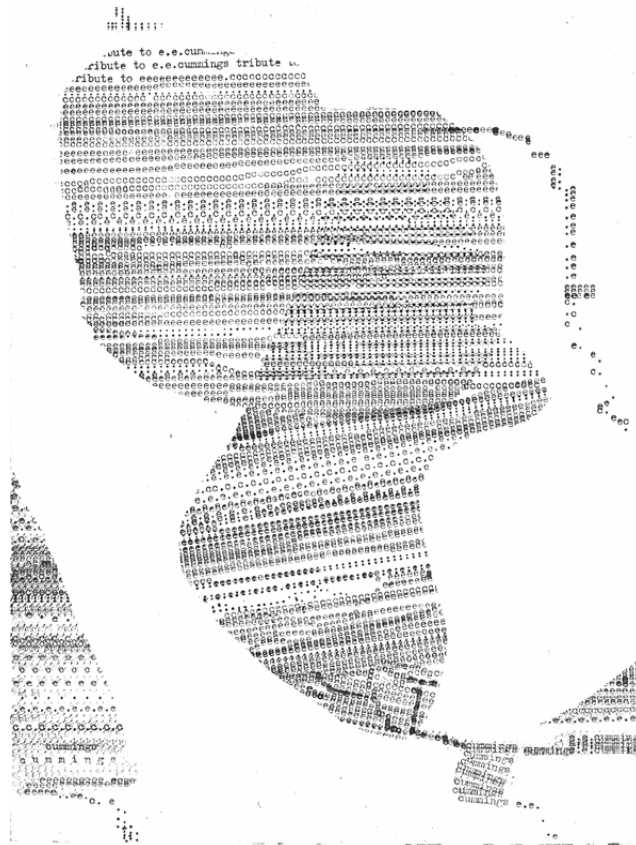
¹⁶ Steve McCAFFERY, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986*, Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986, 110.

argue, predominantly from an aesthetic perspective. I would also contend that Steve McCaffery takes a rather circuitous route to plot out his view of poetry as a primarily material construction. To begin with, the poet takes special care to steer the reader away from any interpretation of the title « Carnival » that might bring forth representations of his work as a formal celebration of means or as an example of random amusement. This is brought to light in the introduction to the second panel. Here, the reader is invited to employ an etymological approach that strips the word « carnival » down to its less playful Latin roots, *carnelevare*:

[...] a putting away of the flesh and hence a prelethal language game in which all traces of the subjective « I » are excommunicated. In this way to consider the sheer weight of linguistic presence in our lives and to confront it as material without reference to an author or to any otherness. As such, it constitutes a call that is a fleshless call to language out of language, a call we enter as components to become a part of that macro-syntax.¹⁷

The violence that the poet wishes to lend to this gesture is not lost on readers of *Carnival*, given that the poet construes his craft as a means of excluding, or using the papal metaphor, to « excommunicate » subjectivity. In other words, the aim is to have the lyrical subject, the « I », reduced to « the sheer weight » of its « linguistic presence » organized in a larger structure. If the intention is to have the linguistic sign or syntax capture the substance or content of the lyrical subject, this falls in step with a view put forth earlier in *Carnival The First Panel 1967-1970*, whereby form is construed as a source and expression of spirituality: « the duality between form and content can no longer be maintained thus for the modern writer form will have a directly spiritual meaning. » The heightened sense of concentration realized in the visual performance of type stands out as something of a contrast to the rhetorical flourish of the previous statements. As an example, Steve McCaffery's « tribute to e.e. cummings » renders some of the deliberateness of the ceremony that typewriter art attaches to the exclusion of subjectivity:

¹⁷ Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel 1971-75*, op.cit., n.p..



Here the poem appears to grow out of a prescribed procedure, as if the page's adherence to the letter « e » and to the letter « c » were part of a mechanized ritual. This page of typescript comes under the heading McCaffery designed for the preparatory drafts of *Carnival*: « outtakes »¹⁸. As a tribute, this preliminary work and unpublished « outtake » can be interpreted in several ways. First, its layered type projects the tactile, palpable quality reduction requires of the linguistic sign: the tribute goes to language itself and its means of production, as the reader focuses on the single letters as well as the overall abstract shape the poet has crafted with a typewriter – what McCaffery himself has labelled « painterly shape(s) »¹⁹, using a terminology reminiscent of Cummings' phrase for some of his own work: « poem pictures ». As a tribute to the work of one of the American forerunners of the twentieth-century concrete mode, the poet disassembles E.E. Cummings' name and has his initials evolve into indistinct signs thanks to techniques of ink overlay. Fittingly, the historical figure, E.E. Cummings, blurs into materials of typewriter poetry, as the « weight » of his presence (as persona) is transferred onto the linguistic sign. In turn, the phonemes bleed into the ink of the other occurrences of the letter « e » and « c » on the page and consequently become indistinguishable from the others.

¹⁸ <http://www.chbooks.com/archives/online_books/carnival/outtake_02.html>, 16 July 2006.

¹⁹ bp NICHOL (ed.), « The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checklist of the Published Works of Steve McCaffrey », *Open Letter*, 6: 9 (Fall 1987), 72.

If we consider next the overall page design, its amorphous character lends extra metaphoric weight to the notion of dispelled subjectivity. It also sheds light on some of the historical precedents McCaffery is building upon. First, using a term such as « macro-syntax » recalls the expository discourse describing forms of letteristic composition that construe the page as a larger open space or field. In the « Research Reports » McCaffery wrote in concert with the Canadian poet bp Nichol, Eugen Gomringer's concept of poetic « constellation » along with the example of Ilse and Pierre Garnier's theory of *spatialisme* are held up as precursors for the composition of the page and of the book used in *Carnival*²⁰. In reference to the French poet's work in the 1960s, the spatial metaphor is singled out for its comparison of composition with a form of energy and of individual letters with « galaxies »²¹. When Garnier speaks of « energy », as in his manifesto, *Position 1 of the International Movement*, it is first to be understood as the embodiment of the concretist ideals of freedom, universalism and action:

Men are less and less determined by their nation, their class, their mother tongue, and more and more by the function which they perform in society and the universe, by presences, textures, facts, information, impulsions, energies.
[...] Poetry turns from art to action, from recitation to constellation, from phrase to structure, from song to the center of energy.²²

When associated with the arrangement of linguistic signs, letters and words, the impetus behind concretism is expounded in celestial and musical metaphors: « Les lettres, les voici galaxies. Apparitions de courants, de tourbillons, de souffles. Jazz pour les yeux »²³. The notion of the page as an « active space »²⁴, carried over from Eugen Gomringer's earlier concept of poetic « constellation » (1954) – « The constellation is the simplest kind of configuration in poetry which has for its basic unit the word, it encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster »²⁵ – is one which McCaffery and Nichol view in conjunction with the applications of *spatialisme*. Within the larger unit of the page, letters and words become important variables: words are compared to « stars », which when broken up into their individual letters and reorganized in new patterns, « clusters » or « constellations »,

²⁰ Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²² Mary Ellen Solt (ed.), *op.cit.*, 79.

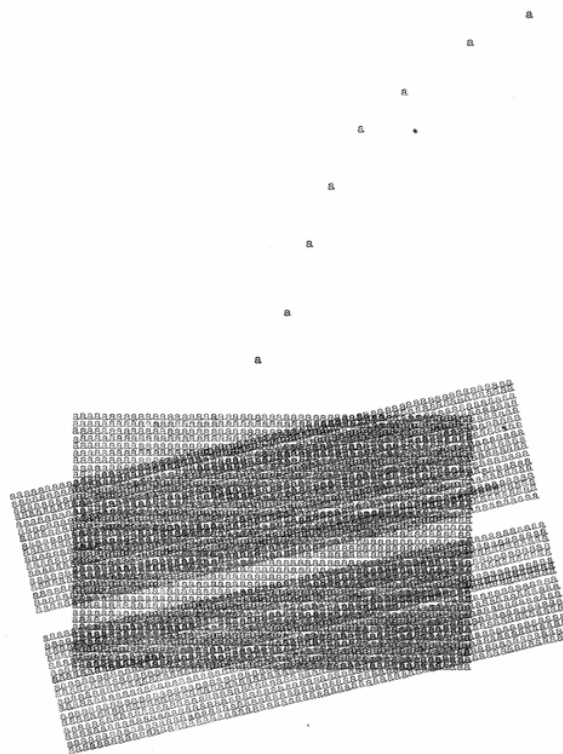
²³ Ilse and Pierre Garnier, *Poèmes mécaniques*, Paris: Éditions André Silvaire, 1965, 16. This is translated as « Suddenly the letters become galaxies. Apparition of currents, turbulences, gentle breathing. Jazz for the eyes », in Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 52.

²⁴ Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 65.

²⁵ Mary Ellen Solt (ed.), *op.cit.*, 67.

retrieve their auras of semantic meaning (somehow lost or concealed in previous patterns).

The page as a metaphor for space, understood as « spatially interacting region »²⁶, is a compositional analogy that is put to the test in *Carnival*. A second example from the group of « outtakes » associated with McCaffery's project demonstrates how the poet views the page as an active linguistic environment where a single letter is used as its compositional starting point. In this instance, the page features the letter « a » depicted individually and compressed into three rectangular shapes. In addition to these, in the interval between the two widest rectangles, the shaded area represents a fourth rectangle, achieved through a technique of superimposition, framing a sequence of « a's »:



As in the previous « outtake », the type composition allows for various degrees of both graphic exposure and concealment. In fact, one might surmise that the staging of this difficulty is partly what motivates and shapes the composition. As McCaffery puts it, « The hardest thing in reading is just to see the seeing that you're seeing. To let the word receive your sight »²⁷. However, at the same time, in an authorial note to *Carnival*,

²⁶ Steve McCaffery and bp NICHOL, *op.cit.*, 65.

²⁷ Steve McCaffery, « The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing », *op.cit.*, 62.

McCaffery aligns his lettristic compositions with a symbolical reading, upon which he builds an explanation for his sculptural configurations of the letter « a ». The poet begins by arguing that the alphabet is a trace memory of some greater mystery: « (one thing i like to feel in these constructs is that i can bring the normally neglected mental & physical processes of composition to a conscious concrete level) »²⁸. In fact, as his argument unfolds, it becomes clear that the poet perceives typewriter poetry as a means of exploring myth and its logocentric roots: « the total idea is for a phonetic semantic allegory, i start with the creation myth – God as the ultimate alphabetical source of A/Adam the first man & first letter. »²⁹ Aside from the emphasis laid upon « sculptural potential »³⁰ – the « a » as the first building block in a world of personal and cultural reference – a symbolical reading of the composition would place the graphic release of the letter « a » in parallel with a desire to retrieve an original presence: « a » for « Adam », as if exhibiting the search for an original, Adamic language. However, in light of the geometrical composition on display in *Carnival*, the hypothesis of an alternate formula may be entertained: « a » for abstraction. Indeed, for the reader familiar with McCaffery's 1976 essay, « The Death of the Subject », the example of the biblical allegory may come as something of a surprise. This is the same author who was to write: « ... the foremost task at hand – a more linguistic and philosophic than "poetic" task – is to demystify the referential fallacy of language »³¹. In fact, years later, in a 1987 interview with bp Nichol, McCaffery would dismiss the Biblical content of *Carnival* as « naïve », arguing « All of this I would now scrap »³². However, in 1973, at the same time as he was composing *The First Panel*, McCaffery legitimated the notion that meaning is located beyond the play of graphic form, and preferably grounded in some kind of spiritual plane. The *O.E.D.* definition of geomancy is provided to support an analogy between spirituality and textuality: « Geomancy is defined as "the divination by means of signs, derived from the earth, as by the figure assumed by a handful of earth thrown down upon some surface. Hence, usually divination by means of lines or figures formed by jotting down on paper a number of dots at random. »³³

²⁸ "A Selection from *Carnival*", in *GrOnk* 5.2 (Toronto: Ganglia), n.p. <http://www.chbooks.com/archives/online_books/carnival/selection_1.html>.

²⁹ *Idem.*

³⁰ Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 66.

³¹ Steve McCaffery, « The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing », *op.cit.*, 1.

³² bp Nichol (ed.), « The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checklist of the Published Works of Steve McCaffery », *op.cit.*, 72.

³³ Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 153.

An example taken from *Carnival The First Panel* illustrates how McCaffery would have some of his figures assume the randomness of dots on the page:



In this case, by emphasizing the combinatory possibilities of phonemes – « when »; « whenever »; « ne »; « ver » – the poet is performing the function he attributes to paragrams, namely to counter « the supposition that words can "fix" or stabilize in closure »³⁴. On this same page of « typestract » there are allusions to the supernatural powers associated with the art of geomancy, whose lineage is explained elsewhere in the TRG reports as dating back to arts « practised in ancient China and by the lost builders of Stonehenge »³⁵. The desire to have graphic form arrive at some kind of meaningful pattern transpires in the manner in which the page gravitates toward a centre, both semantically and typographically: « All lines lead to the centre for everything / inhabits the centre for the centre is the pulse / of silence where / every living sound directs us ». The relationship drawn between the non-

³⁴ Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986*, Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986, 63.

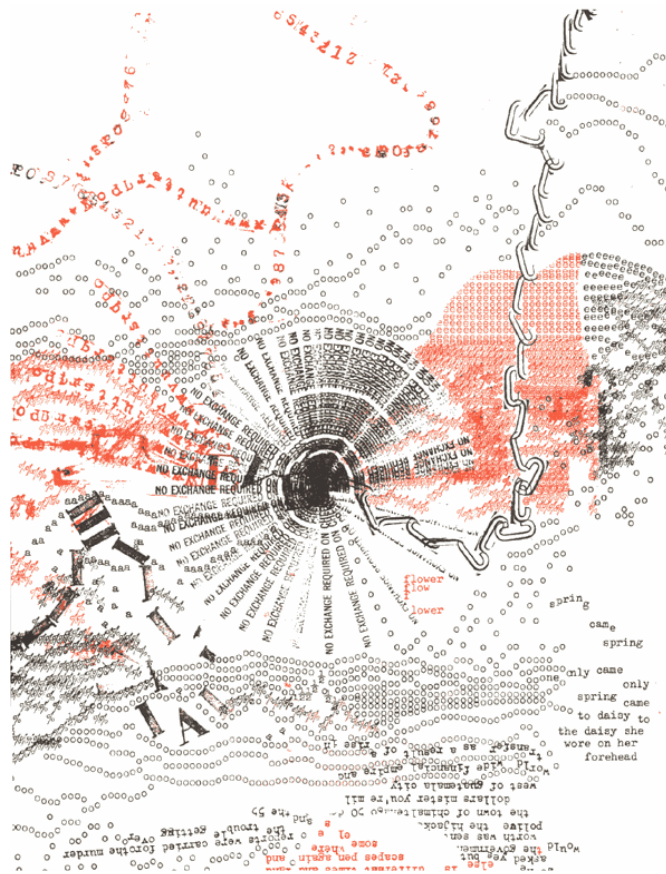
³⁵ Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 33.

referential graphic sign and the signifying « center » in this instance clearly reflects McCaffery's introductory remarks in *Carnival The Second Panel*:

The roots of *Carnival* go beyond concretism (specifically that particular branch of concrete poetry termed the « typestract » or abstract typewriter art) to labyrinth and mandala, and all related archetypal forms that emphasize the use of the visual qualities in language to defend a sacred centre.³⁶

However, it is significant that while graphically directing the reader's vision to a central point of focus, the page relies just as heavily on techniques of scattering and layering that undermine centrality. Similarly, references to enigmatic origins such as the « pulse of silence » and the « pulse of purity » compound the issue of centrality and of readability. These words are grouped in fragments that recall the fact that the entire project is bent upon « creating a semantic texture by shaping an interference with the clear line of statement »³⁶. In other words, according to this rationale, networks of signification ultimately remain surface structures, or at least are represented as such. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on composition does not dispel the ambition to have the textures arrived at through typographical means echo the semantic referencing of a « pulse ».

Multiplicity and Mechanics: the xerox poem



³⁶ Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel 1971-75*, op.cit., n.p..

The means used to create semantic and typographic « texture » and the kind of « interference » it entails is carried over in *The Second Panel* through metaphors of mechanics, referred to as « mechanicity »³⁷, and metaphors of conflict. The imprint of the circle and of the chain on the above page suggests a commentary on the mechanisms and modes of production of typewriter art. This commentary is taken up elsewhere in the second TRG report, where the degree to which typewriter art can not only accommodate but celebrate « a lexicon of techniques » comes under scrutiny³⁸. First, the report points to a need for a relationship between « precision » and a « mastery of multiplicity »³⁹ and, in this regard, Celtic poetry is singled out for its conception of « craft as involving the control of a multiplicity of forms ». Likewise, the ideal poet acquires this skill in a manner modelled on a tradition of Irish poetry from the Middle Ages, named *Dan Direach* – « literally "The Precise Gift" »: « In essence his art was one of allowing poetry to shape itself through a readily available repertoire of types ... »⁴⁰. The concept of poetry as a kind of profuse precision is one for which Steve McCaffery provides several models. What the poet calls « the percolation of the word »⁴¹ is yet another example. As its root meaning suggests, « percolation » is used to define how a word is filtered through paragrammatic play to arrive at multiple variables. The above example of a paragram from *The Second Panel* lodged in the central circular figure makes a case for the multiplication of letters and phonemes construed as circulation: the letter « f » along with the words « flow » and « lower » run out of the word « flower ». Aside from directing our attention towards the materiality of the signifier, paragrams highlight a fascination for mechanisms of all kinds. The methods used for what McCaffery calls « xerox poems » are outlined as follows:

you take a text and duplicate it, then duplicate the duplication, then duplicate the duplication systematically with exact 'duplication' never occurring. there's always visual change, textual shift—an insistence on the piece's emergent self and through the agency of the mechanical means of composition an insistence on the piece's uniqueness at every stage.⁴²

The celebration of craft is grounded in a form of ritualistic repetition that aligns aesthetic uniqueness with vitality derived from manufacturing. The rubber stamp used to create the centrifugal core in the seventh page

³⁷ Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 60.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁹ *Idem.*

⁴⁰ *Idem.*

⁴¹ Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986, op.cit.*, 63.

⁴² Steve McCaffery and bp Nichol, *op.cit.*, 143.

of *The Second Panel* – « No exchange required » – is one expression of this analogy. The manner in which it stands in contrast to other typeface and colour and at the same time blends in with others is suggestive of the notion that, unlike a commodity in consumer culture, the aesthetic construct is neither exchangeable nor interchangeable. Furthermore, the xerographic process upholds the paradoxical view that every duplication is unique.⁴³

The xerographic process also rests upon the assumption that poetry can be apprehended as a form of « direct physical impact »⁴⁴. In other words, language is viewed as staging a conflict through « mechanical means of expression »⁴⁵. The mechanics of the procedures used involve the extraction of words from other sources, including those borrowed from either the poet's own work or from any other kind of printed matter. These intertexts, or what McCaffery has plainly called « supply-texts », not only add to the profusion of signs on the page but also point to the theme of conflict. The latter is suggested in the collage effect, as different shapes, sizes and colours of type collide on the page, and semantically in this instance, through the inclusion of fragments from an incomplete narrative at the bottom of the seventh page of *The Second Panel*: « murder » and « hijack ».

Steve McCaffery oversteps the restrictions set by narrative while enlarging upon those set by the mechanics of type and by other practitioners of typewriter poetry. For example, the analogy proposed by Charles Olson between the technology of the typewriter and his breath-based poetics implies a form of artistry which would take different directions with McCaffery. For Charles Olson in 1950, the mimetism of typewriter technology is a means of creativity and expression:

[...] from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had.⁴⁶

The expressiveness that McCaffery works to extract from the machine differs to some degree from that perceived by Olson in « rigidity » and

⁴³ In his study of the paradox surrounding McCaffery's de-politicized xerographic process weighed against Walter Benjamin's analysis of the political context of mass duplication in «The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction » (1935), Peter Jaeger writes: « the TRG returns the aura to the reproduction ». Peter JAEGER, *ABC of Reading TRG, op.cit.*, 115-117.

⁴⁴ Steve McCAFFERY, Introduction, *Carnival: The Second Panel 1971-75, op.cit.*, n.p..

⁴⁵ *Idem.*

⁴⁶ Charles OLSON, *The Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, Robert CREELEY (ed.), New York: New Directions, 1966, 24.

« space precisions ». For the precision McCaffery equates with the typewriter entails the mastery of variables and essentially of difference – working to acquire the « control of a multiplicity of forms »⁴⁷, as evidenced in the « Precise gift » of ancient Irish poetry. With the two panels of *Carnival*, McCaffery performs a transition from the exacting rules of meter to the layering of type and the profusions of signs in the « Book-machine » genre, as he characterized his writing in the TRG reports⁴⁸. The emphasis shifts to visualization and thus to the reader's participation. « To let your seeing be what your reading was »⁴⁹ are the words that capture the challenge the poet put to his readership in the mid-nineteen seventies.

Conclusion

In a context where the mechanics of type is preferred to that of meter, where the physical attributes of print ultimately override the play of symbolical reference, the poems of *Carnival* take shape before the reader's eyes as visual objects. The display of print by the poet-artist is part of a performance that blends artistic genres. In doing so, it allows for the possibility that a poem express its iconicity, namely its existence as a visual artefact. Problematizing the means of such a performance, as well as the perceptions and sensations derived from it, continues to excite interest among poets today. In fact, *Carnival's* relationship to visual art in a more contemporary context has not gone unnoticed in recent years. In a 2001 exhibition entitled « Poetry Plastique », curated by the American Language poet Charles Bernstein and Jay Sanders of the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, Steve McCaffery's work is ranked in the exhibition catalogue among the « classic works » from the 1960s and 1970s, alongside contributions from John Cage, Jackson Mac Low and Robert Grenier, to name a few⁵⁰.

In *Poetry Plastique*, McCaffery's retrospective comments on *Carnival* bring to light the relevance of the project in a contemporary context. The « performative gesture »⁵¹ required of the reader and thus the virtuality of the poem that awaits creation are indicative of both the vitality and the tenuousness of the « print experience », as it continues to take shape off the page. Today, for the vast majority of « reader-traveler(s) »⁵², to quote McCaffery, this means viewing the panels of *Carnival* at an electronic

⁴⁷ Steve McCAFFERY and bp NICHOL, *op.cit.*, 154.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁹ Steve McCAFFERY, « The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing », *op.cit.*, 62.

⁵⁰ Charles BERNSTEIN and Jay SANDERS (eds.), *op.cit.*, 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69.

venue. However, we are also reminded that at the project's inception, years prior to the collusion of poetry and the web page, the approach to visuality was to mean a pairing of poetic and architectural space. The project included a plan to create a « large environmental assemblage »⁵³ from the panels, which would cover every surface of a designated area. In an earlier text, McCaffery mentions that he had even contemplated having them made into wallpaper⁵⁴. Ultimately then, the panel-poems were to occupy a three-dimensional world, in the form of an « architectural dwelling »⁵⁵, thus defining an alternate territory for language and for the poet. That this project was never fully realized is perhaps symptomatic of artistry grounded in experiment. Efforts to define a set physical perimeter might suggest other difficulties as well in a context where compositional techniques are used to simultaneously induce both compression and amplification. For the « territory » envisioned in the typewriter art of *Carnival* is synonymous with a changing topography, akin to that of the page and that of the book. What remains, however, is the model for an environment that encapsulates an ideal of poetry as an object of performance and of the poet as a polyartist plotting experience in new spaces.

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⁵³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁴ bp NICHOL (ed.), *op.cit.*, 80.

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