

POETRY foÆEVER
A NOTE ON THE VERBIVOCOVISUAL IN AUGUSTO DE CAMPOS
AND ERNST JANDL

Stefan Lesseman
Yale University

Abstract Augusto de Campos and Ernst Jandl are key representatives of experimental poetry in their languages. Their meeting in 1971 in Texas provides the framework for a first-time comparison of the authors through a close reading of two exemplary poems. Centered around the verbivocovisual dynamic, this piece adds to the understanding of Brazilian and Austrian literature in relation and contributes to the transnational perspective on experimental poetry across linguistic and political borders.

Keywords transnational poetics / materiality / vision / sound / archive

On December 2nd, 1971, the University of Texas at Austin announced a multi-media presentation of concrete poetry in their college newspaper. “Three masters”, as they put it, gathered the next day at the Academic Center Auditorium to show their works: Augusto de Campos, US-poet Mary Ellen Solt and, from Austria, Ernst Jandl (1925-2000) turned the city of Austin into the center stage of poetry, sound and media experimentation.¹

Now, on its 50th anniversary, Augusto’s and Ernst Jandl’s joint performance – a climax of Austro-Brazilian poetic encounters – is still worth commemorating. It highlights the international perspective of experimental poetry and asks readers to trace the connections the poets made across

¹ See the Jandl papers in the Austrian National Library: Literaturarchiv der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, *Nachlass Ernst Jandl* (ÖLA 139/99), regarding Austin 139/L346/4 ; I wish to thank the members of staff for their generous support. See also the footnote in Katja Stuckatz, *Ernst Jandl und die internationale Avantgarde: Über einen Beitrag zur modernen Weltichtung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 62.

linguistic and political borders. But it also shows the artistic and historical differences within poetry even as poets share the stage.

Augusto and Jandl share their experience as visiting professors at Austin in the fall of 1971. There, Augusto gave classes on experimental poetry for students in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and Jandl in Germanic Languages. It was a welcome change for Jandl. In Austria, he was still working as a high school teacher, despite the success of his collection of poetry *der künstliche baum* (1970, ‘the artificial tree’). Not always had his work been well received – his previous volume *Laut und Louise* (1966) had caused a scandal for being too experimental and blasphemous amongst conservative readers. The playful nature of this collections’ title is difficult to capture in English: The German noun ‘Laut’ means ‘sound’, the adjective ‘laut’ means ‘loud’ and the name ‘Louise’ echoes ‘leise’, the word for ‘quiet’. In *Laut und Louise*, Jandl published for the first-time visual poetry and more importantly, his so-called ‘Sprechgedichte’, ‘speak-poems’, that unfold their effect when read aloud. Precisely through public readings of his poetry in front of cheering crowds, Jandl became a major figure in Austrian poetry. As recently as 2019, Myriam Ávila² (Federal University of Minas Gerais) published new translations of Jandl’s work in Brazilian Portuguese. In this work, she presents some of the author’s most popular poems such as “lichtung” (“dileção”) “ottos mops” (“o totó do otto”) and “calypos” (“calipso”). The latter poem expresses the desire to visit Brazil in a combination of German and English in a special orthography: “ich was not yet / in brasilien / nach brasilien / wulld ich laik du go.”

The poem “lichtung” allows for a comparison with Augusto’s work “rever”. Both deal with the ambiguity of direction, and the interplay of light and shadow. But a close reading will show how

² Ernst Jandl, *Eu nunca fui ao Brasil*. Translated and selected by Myriam Ávila. Belo Horizonte: Relicário. 2019

effectively Augusto engages with the verbivocovisual dimension of his language material, while Jandl prefers an approach characterized by sound poetry.

Connections between Brazilian and Austrian Poetry: Reading “rever” from Reft to Light

A version of Augusto’s “rever” can be found in the literary remains of Jandl, preserved in the archives of the Austrian National Library. It was very probably given to Jandl by Augusto himself during their stay at Austin. The most striking aspect of ‘rever’ is its hyper-compression: (1) It is a poem that consists of one word. It means to ‘see again’, to ‘repeat’. As a palindrome, the poem invites the reader to be read from the other side (from right to left). This is reinforced by the inverted printing of the letters (e, r). (2) The version that Jandl had received has ‘rever’ printed on a square piece of transparent foil. It allows the reader to do what the poem is doing: to turn the piece around and find the same word on the other side; the poem lets the reader follow its movement. (3) Because it is transparent, the poem can be put over any other surface. It is mobile and allows the reader to see things again, through the foil. This way, ‘rever’ speaks to Augusto’s engagement with the work of Marshall McLuhan. Rafael Lemos³ has analyzed the impact of theories of technology and communication, especially by McLuhan, for Augusto in the 1960s: When Augusto states that the medium of communication “creates a new context, a new extension of sensorial life”⁴, then this is the case for the transparent and mobile ‘rever’. Moreover, the letters of ‘rever’ cast a shadow on what is underneath. It is a poem that opens a proto-virtual reality: Through superimposition, the poem allows the reader (the observer) to see everything in its context, to see it again.

³ Rafael Lemos, “Augusto de Campos: Política e tecnologia na mira da poesia de vanguarda”, in: *Circuladô* (2017) 7, pp. 18–28.

⁴ Augusto de Campos, “A arte na era eletrônica”, in: *Correio da Manhã* (January 1st, 1967) 4.

In ‘rever’s’ light and shadow, it is possible to reflect in a different way on Ernst Jandl’s poem ‘lichtung’. The German noun ‘Lichtung’ means a clearing in a forest. The poem consists of one stanza, in which the letters ‘r’ and ‘l’ are exchanged, turning the German ‘rechts’ to ‘lechts’ and the ‘links’ to ‘rinks’. In the English translation by Anselm Hollo⁵ (in the edition compiled by Rosmarie Waldrop) this sounds as following: “some think / terring reft flom light / is a piece of cake. / boy are they evel / long!” Hence, reading the poem deciphers the title and ‘Lichtung’ becomes ‘Richtung’ (‘direction’). Reading back to the title, as the poem invites to do, means to read *rever*, to overshadow the ‘Lichtung’ with an ‘R’.

Both poems manipulate direction through their own strategies and in their own languages. Like levers, they push against the notion of linear direction in reading. But unlike Jandl, Augusto’s ‘rever’ engages with direction in a concrete way, on the verbivocovisual level.

The verbivocovisual is one of the key concepts of Brazilian concrete poetry. Even though Jandl did not travel to Brazil, his sporadic interactions with Brazilian poets left a mark on his work: Before coming to Austin in 1971, Jandl had even maintained a correspondence with Augusto’s brother Haroldo and exchanged poetry with Pedro Xisto, a look into the archives of the Austrian National Library in Vienna shows. As a result of these correspondences Jandl was included in *Teoria da Poesia Concreta*.⁶ At the end of the book, in the Synopsis of the Concrete Poetry Movement, Jandl’s recital in the Albert Hall in London in 1965 is praised with a quotation of *The Times Literary Supplement*. It was Ernst Jandl himself who had told Haroldo de Campos from his performance in a letter. Furthermore, Decio Pignatari assisted a congress on Industrial Design

⁵ Ernst Jandl, *reft and light* (Providence: Burning Deck, 2000), p. 5.

⁶ Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos & Décio Pignatari, *Teoria da poesia concreta: Textos críticos e manifestos 1950-1960* (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2006 [1965]), 276f.

in Vienna 1965 and (through the organization of Haroldo) met with Jandl, his partner Friederike Mayröcker and Eugen Gomringer in Jandl's apartment in Vienna.⁷

All these exchanges, preserved in the archives, allow for a re-consideration of the link between Austrian and Brazilian literary history. And with the commemoration of the joint event by Augusto and Ernst Jandl, a re-reading of two of their poems shows the similarities and differences between two poetical approaches, the verbivocovisual dynamic and the tradition of sound poetry, in comparison.

Bio Stefan Lessmann is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature at Yale University. Email stefan.lessmann@yale.edu

⁷ I have offered a detailed analysis of the correspondence between Haroldo and Ernst Jandl here: Stefan Lessmann, “Fiar a fala: A correspondência inédita de Haroldo e Ernst Jandl”, in: *Circuladô* 10 (2019). Translated by Rafael Lemos. pp. 80–86.