Looking While Reading I, II, III

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Published by RIT Scholar Works, 2021
Part I: Space is Time

*Crot* is a term I didn’t learn until graduate school. An ugly word for a lovely thing, a crot is “a verbal bit or fragment used as an autonomous unit without transitional devices,” a “bit” or “blip” (Weathers 1). A collaged essay, like Lidia Yuknavitch’s “Woven,” is made up of many crots or text fragments—like little sips for the reader, the kind my cycling teacher encourages us to take from our squirt bottles every two minutes so that our bodies fully absorb the water we drink during her thumping, hour-long class. The word “Crot” signals that a text’s form has a function. I learned recently that *crot* is also the Indonesian term for the sound of a person ejaculating, which reminds me of how Carmen Maria Machado describes a character doing so into the dirt, “*pat-pat-patting,* like the beginning of rain” (Machado 12). A rhythmic accumulation. An acceleration marked by pauses. Citing Carole Maso’s *Aureole,* Kazim Ali writes, “Fragments bring silence in, the erotic moment” (30) which fits with Machado, and emphasizes that what arrives in the gaps between crots of text, in “silence,” is key—a flat patch of dirt, a wooded background, the reader sitting with the feeling rising in their throat.

In 2012, at the University of Arizona, I began using the term “visual essay” to describe the writing I was making that frustrated many of my teachers and peers because of its use of white space. What I submitted to them was shapely: more than a text-collage, less than a drawing, more than a “braid,” less than a diagram, too long to be a poem. “Why?” they asked me, in a hundred different ways. So I mashed “visual” from the visual poets who “drew with language,” and “essay” from the tradition of prose that Renee Gladman calls “the thinking text” (qtd. in Collymore). I made up the term “visual essay” to explain myself to myself and to justify the drawn-thinking-text. I had the “research” experience of an underread graduate student who is identifying literary companions only after having made work that responds to her contemporary context in ways that other writers once responded to the past.
Visual writing—making a text that behaves like an image—is an old practice. But the history of its practice is somewhat buried, is not stored in the regular compartments because of value and storage systems we’ve inherited that differentiate what is read from what is seen. After deciding on “visual essay,” it would take me a decade to understand only part of the lineage of shaped texts, which appear in many historic movements and mediums, from biblical illuminations and cave art, to Dadaism and fascist poetry. These briefly represent the wide range of social practices and historic contexts that have preceded and informed contemporary examples of words-as-images, including genres like concrete poetry, docu-poetics, the lyric essay, and “the painted word.”

While examples of visual writing vary as much in technique as they do in political allegiance, most practitioners have shared the basic idea that by breaking the form of the page, the writer is able to articulate something that would otherwise go unsaid. In 1976, Winston Weathers, coiner of the “crot” wrote:

What I’ve been taught to construct is: the well-made box. I have been taught to put “what I have to say” into a container that is always remarkably the same, that—in spite of varying decorations—keeps to a basically conventional form: a solid bottom, four upright sides, a fine-fitting lid. Indeed, I may be free to put “what I have to say” in the plain box or in the ornate box, in the large box or in the small box, in the fragile box or in the sturdy box. But always the box—squarish or rectangular. And I begin to wonder if there isn’t somewhere a round box or oval box or tubular box, if somewhere there isn’t some sort of container that will allow me to package “what I have to say” without trimming my “content” to fit into a particular compositional mode, that will actually encourage me to discover new “things to say” because of the very opportunity a newly-shaped container gives me, that will be more suitable to my own mental processes, and that will provide me with a greater rhetorical flexibility, allowing me to package what I have to say in more ways than one and thus reach more audiences than just one. (2)

That the “fitting” of text into “boxes” could feel like a limitation to some writers is one thing. That the “repackaging” of writing into a different shape could allow for new expressions is yet another: as Gladman describes it, “…drawing was a way to think with the body and writing was the story of the body in thought” (2016). What interests me is the notion of shape “in thought,” the specifics of Weathers’ second claim—how text as a “drawing,” how writing behaving like an image, could communicate new ideas, experiences, and perspectives to a reading audience.
Today there are new anthologies of concrete poetry, live spreadsheets tracking active visual poets worldwide, and spatially adventurous prose celebrated in anthologies like *The Next American Essay*. Many contemporary literary magazines welcome comics, image-texts and other “hybrid” visual forms. But despite the recent visibility of these works, and the range of modalities, histories, philosophies, and movements to which visual texts owe their strategies, there has been little critical discussion about the ways visual writing engages readers, delivers stories, and engage with ideas in ways that are unique from other image-texts (graphic narratives, poetry comics, text collage, video essays, etc). During what may be an instance of visual writing’s centennial heyday, I aim to unpack the ways that examples of visual texts create uniquely “complex utterances” in the twenty-twenties, and do so by inviting new kinds of participatory reading experiences that disrupt traditional ways of spending time with art (McCloud).

I began thinking seriously about “time spent” as a quality of visual texts while sewing. I had developed chronic pain from sitting too long to write on the computer and the doctor’s remedy was to stop writing, to rest in a different position. I decided to embroider a text. Embroidering language is very unlike tapping keys or drawing a pen nib across paper. Stitching is arduous and tedious, often demanding laser focus and sometimes drawing blood, but it leaves a mind time to wander, to become distracted, even bored. Editing a mistake in an embroidered text requires deforming, breaking, and discarding the material language one has made. Once finished, each embroidered word can be “read” for a long time as the eye receives texture, sound, shape, and implications toward “meaning” simultaneously. I ultimately gave up the embroidery project because of a cramp in my neck, but I noticed something about time in the spaciousness of writing once I returned to it.
A favorite example of the way space controls time spent comes, unsurprisingly, from an art critic. Anya Ventura has described the process of “Slow Looking,” coined by scholars like Shari Tishman and Jennifer L. Roberts, in an article called “Slow Criticism: Art in the Age of Post-Judgement.” Here, Ventura offers context for the theory by describing a visit she made to the Met with a painter friend, who “cruised the walls of a gallery at a pace that felt uncomfortable to her—ludicrously slow.” Ventura and her painter friend stood staring long at a canvas. “Our eyes just haven’t adjusted yet,” said her friend, and they continued to wait. “Soon,” writes Ventura, “the parts of the painting began to rearrange.” In parsing this experience, she applies what scholar of “slow looking” Jennifer Roberts has written about “deceleration, patience, and immersive attention” in the face of art (Roberts). Ventura writes, “The somber grays and blushes of rose shifted and brightened. Black was no longer merely black but a conglomeration of color, with all the iridescent richness of an oil stain in the sun…Depth had tendered itself to time.” Here, for the author and her painter friend, the “nontrivial effort” directed at art, the “higher form” of reading, was at first irritating, unfamiliar. But what it offered was a reward, a way of seeing that paid off, as Ventura writes, through “an act of temporal largesse that had yielded insights not readily available in any single passing look” (4).

To assert what visual texts do differently without employing “largesse” is to ask readers and writers to recognize that a visual text’s visual material is not simply a design framework, but that visuality is part of the literary gestures that are “slowing” a reader down so that visuality can “tender itself to time.” By this I suggest visual texts invite a “slowness” that is not actually about waiting, but rather about temporal and physical delays that require a reader to pause and refocus their eyes, to reorient themselves to the act of reading at both large and small scales, and to notice, regularly, the presence of their subjective viewpoint. This thinking extends from the writing of many others; most particularly the work of Briony Gillard, Ander Monson, and Jen Soriano.
The histories that divide literature from visual art can make it difficult to discuss writing of any kind in “art” terms. In traditional literary venues (journals, magazines, University Presses, conferences…), texts that incorporate non-text media are often grouped into additional categories like “hybrid” or “experimental”—as “something else.” Notably, the *Best American Essay* series has not yet included examples of shaped texts, though several types appear in *Best American Experimental Writing*. And despite the long history of visual texts, many readers and editors still consider visuality as adjacent to the work of literature because we have been trained to read visuality as separate from or extraneous to the work of language. In “Ekphrasis and the Other,” W. J. T. Mitchell reviews the historic “paragone of poet and painter”—Leonadro da Vinci vs. Poetry—which cemented the “‘otherness’ of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality…” in antiquity (7). Mitchell calls visual and textual mediums “metaphysical oppos[ites]” and describes several literary critiques of image-texts—“from the Marxist hostility to modernist experiments with literary space, to deconstructionist efforts to overcome ‘formalism’ and ‘closure,’ to the anxieties of Protestant poetics with the temptations of ‘imagery,’ to the romantic tradition’s obsession with a poetics of voice, invisibility, and blindness”—that inform the study and publication of literature today (6).
Over the past five years the movement of many literary magazines from print publication to online platforms has saved on printing costs, increased accessibility, and allowed for the publication of many forms that didn’t previously, physically, “fit” in physical literary space. Visual design has become integral to digital publishing. Yet similar challenges persist among both writers and artists who still consider images as “decorative” or even “counter-to” a text. Through my work publishing literary videos, writing visual essays, and installing texts at large scale in gallery spaces, it has been fascinating to observe that, from the perspective of the visual arts community, “text-based” works are also “unfit” for display spaces, where text is understood as didactic. Letters, in a visual arts context, are forms, or images, and too many of them together makes each form hard to distinguish. So gallerists often wish that “content” could be diminished (fewer words) in service of form, and to encourage the audience’s ability to appreciate words as shapes (images). Whenever text-based works are displayed in art galleries, they are hung too high, or presented using lighting techniques that can’t seem to decide if the audience should be seeing the whole or the parts. To one group of contemporary artists (writers), visual writing is less literary, too artsy, and difficult to read. To another group of contemporaries (visual artists), visual writing is less artistic, content-heavy, and too difficult to see. This is a complicated way to explain why, so far, very short poems have lived most happily in visual art spaces.

As a simultaneous member of disciplinary communities that often seem like “metaphysical oppositions” (Mitchell 12), I’ve come to understand that the central problem for any audience encountering visual texts is a problem with time. This is because our most familiar venues for dissemination and display (print pages, white-walled galleries), mediate types of audience interaction that suggest amounts of time spent, or more importantly, qualities of time spent encountering art. What seems most overlooked is that visual writing has a hard time being displayed in either venue because the basic work of visual writing is to shift and disrupt traditional modes of spending time with art (/writing), as codified by space.

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In writing about “slow looking” in visual arts contexts, Jennifer L. Roberts has called the effect of slowness “the formative powers of delay” (Roberts). Delay is a kind of disruption, of refusal, and my enthusiasm for visual writing is perhaps most deeply related to Winston’s assertion that through delay, shaped texts could be “suitable to [other] mental processes” and could “reach more audiences than just one” (Winston 2). I suggest, further, that through forms of delay across space, visual texts can articulate ideas, invite dialogues, and communicate experiences that have not been shared elsewhere or otherwise by inviting an audience to spend time differently—to look while reading.

Visual texts use both visual and textual strategies to disrupt expectations of reading pace by visually suggesting a shift in the writer’s relationship to their audience. In “The Designed Essay (Essay as Design),” Ander Monson calls this work “enact[ing] apertures: opening and closing off” (5). What is “challenging” about visual texts then, is a structure that feels like “work” to some readers because it actively slows physical reading down. It asks the reader to engage haltingly and for long enough that the piece can act upon them in the way it was designed to. As historic practitioners of visual writing have described, this process of looking and reading happens through several modes at once—what the Brazilian Noigandres group called a “multiplicity of concomitant movements,” or what concrete poet Mary Ellen Solt deemed the “verbiovocovisual,” or what comic artist Scott McCloud today calls a “complex utterance” (Gillard) (McCloud 15).
But how are visual texts not just nice words stretched like gaberdine across a jointed frame? Are they dust stirred by a ceiling fan, or old spider webs articulated made visible by that dust? How is visuality form a literary technique? What does “looking while reading” mean, exactly, and what does it feel like?

Specifically, in visual texts, what is visual extends not to reiterate what has been written, but instead contributes or extends qualities (tonal, conceptual, setting, voice or character) that aren’t explicitly present in the text, or that the reader expecting to read words-only might not notice in the text otherwise.

But can I myself conceive of letters as images, words as shapes, while I am also speaking in my head, as I do while I read syntax that register as the “voice” of another writer in my internal “hearing” over the cafe playlist and the space heater? Can I speak to myself in her voice through the smaller shape of words while also “seeing” entire paragraphs experiencing their shapely rhythms, the page?

Of course. The truth we learn through games—that we can read the phrase “I hvae a deram” almost as quickly as we could read it if the letters between the first and last were not reshuffled—is that we read a word at a time, not a letter at a time. We read up close and we read peripherally. So reading is not seeing, but involves it.
On a panel called “The Essay Blinks” at AWP 2015, the digital essayist Eric LeMay presented a series of slides on demonstrating eye-tracking technology. The venue assigned to us at the conference in Minneapolis was ballroom-sized, fully carpeted and boasting a massive screen. Before starting we handed out 100 full-color manifestos on visual writing that folded out from a booklet to a map-sized image-text, and quickly ran out of copies. At the start time an audience member stepped out from the sea of folding chairs to rescue onto the stage to rescue us by re-connecting several A/V cables that allowed LeMay to project images with red beams and points crisscrossing them. These marks described the pattern of a user’s eye recorded at “gaze points” across each image using tracking technology that noted the eye’s reflection of near infrared light beams to calculate duration attention and motion. LeMay’s images taught us that while looking, the eyes of users are drawn primarily to faces and crotches, and that neither reading or looking happens linearly.

My local eye-tracking lab has not yet approved my pitch for a study on subjects reading/seeing visual texts, which may have to do less with the technicians’ personal interest and more with the profit margins of advertising vs. experimental literature. Until we collaborate (hello, Cleveland Clinic), what we can glean from LeMay’s research is that readers read and then re-read sentences, even when formatted traditionally. Even when reading in “boxes,” we look, read, look, read, and even sometimes stop half way through a paragraph to look again. Though it’s true that concrete texts do not pair texts and images like full-page ads do—not like the smiling baby next to the description of his diaper. Instead, visual texts integrate two media. Text is image. Space is time. So the reading of concrete texts is about reading in two modes, and at two different scales, and also simultaneously. Looking while reading prompts re-reading, pausing, questioning, and refocusing, and the temporal shifts and reorientations of power that those gesture can invite.
Zoomed-out, a section of white space between crots becomes a visual tool when it is repeated often enough that a reader recognizes in that space a kind of rhythm.

In the case of the “collage” or “braided” essay, gaps in space have historically required readers to consider as integral two subjects that would normally be divided by book covers or entire floors of the library.

By pairing “crots” that alternate topics, A-B-A-B for example, Subject A becomes a lens for Subject B, and vice versa. A climax in Subject B can reframe the tone of Subject A: In “Woven,” a list of myths (A) alternates with stories of domestic abuse (B).

Whenever A is a narrative that is interrupted by B, readers have sometimes called fragmented texts “non-narrative” or “non-linear,” though these two terms most accurately describe the reader’s temporal experience of non-linear time in past tense, not the physical structure of the text they are encountering.

In seminal texts like Gloria Anzaldúa’s La Frontera, Susan Griffin’s “Red Shoes,” Maggie Nelson’s The Argonauts, and contemporary fragmented examples of prose like Mckenzie Wark’s Reverse Cowgirl and Lindsay Nixon’s Nîtsâhak, essayists use non-linear, fragmented forms as a tool for pushing back against systems of power that insist on divisions of public and private, center and peripheral zones.

Each of these texts serve as examples of “auto-theory,” combining the subjective modes of autobiography with engagement in a history of philosophy. Many examples of auto-theory also employ text crots with generous spaces dividing them, and which alternate personal and critical information that visually enact that old adage “the personal is political.”

Auto-theory is theory that unravels the myth of the artist, that refuses the gendered mind-body divide (Nochlin). It is theory, embodied; an engagement with literary discourse that is consistently interrupted by subjectivity, by reminders of the physical body writing from a specific context. By rejecting both traditional boundaries and linear progression, what is formal in auto-theory communicates conceptual and political aims.
In the arena of rhetoric, scholars use the term “multimodal writing” to describe the ways that accumulations of material like images, sounds, videos, and web-designs work alongside text to communicate and accomplish unique means through additional modalities, though this term is exceptionally broad. As a writer of essays, I am especially interested in how essaying can happen because of what a shapely “gap” communicates to readers, and how space traditionally seen as “vacated” can invite participation in different ways. What interests me are contemporary examples of visual essays that demonstrate this through space that pushes text beyond “crots,” and that extend the tradition of the essay through shape.

Long before 2019, when literary Twitter announced that auto-theory was “over,” Stacey Young anticipated the rhetorical experience of reading from lyric, feed-style platforms by describing works of auto-theory that “not only place personal experience within political contexts, but they also conceive of those contexts as multiple and shifting” (Young, 14). Moreover, wrote Young, these works investigate the ways in which “what gets encoded as ‘personal experience’ is always constructed through these multiple and shifting contexts” (Young). Texts like Anzaldúa’s, Griffin’s and Ward’s have been called essays for their ability to “think on or across the page,” by putting material from “outside” and “inside” in dialogue, and by asking a reader to read through the multiple lenses the author is inhabiting at once. This intermingling results in a collaged quality whose purpose is also to embody several “truths” that are still, to some, seen as radical when paired—that a personal anecdote is significant evidence for a theoretical argument, that racism is not a private pain but a result of intentional systemic efforts, or that childcare and domestic abuse are problems for Congress.
In her analysis of what she calls the “readerly movement” in Simone White’s “Angel of Death” A.M. Ringwalt describes White’s use of page space as an invitation for the reader to “perform her choreography” (Ringwalt). When White writes “Look at this page,” the reader’s eye must move from recto to verso, or, as Gillard describes the relationship of page space to body, “The small shift of rotating the text requires the reader to perform a physical action, either a turn of the head, or the page, to engage with horizontal and vertical planes” (Gillard). These readings of the ties between the shape of language and the shapes of reading/looking bodies signal the time-based nature of book forms, not only related to poems. In “The Designed Essay,” Monson establishes the different nature of readerly movement across prose:

Prose creates its own sense of time… but we are not accustomed to thinking about the time spent reading straightforward prose as part of how it can mean. Time elapses in the narrative. Time elapses in our lives as we read page after page. This is why a pressure builds when we are approaching the last few pages (we can see it, we can hold it in our hands and judge it) of a novel. (4)

And because of the multiple registers and contexts present in examples like La Frontera, a work of prose wielding space, the spaces between crots invite a performance of choreography that works in three ways. First, gaps between crots extend the total time a reader spends with each page (the “reader’s time” “elapsing in their lives”). Second, gaps signal time passing for the writer (both time “elapsing in the narrative” and time as in the temporal distance accrued between lived experiences of the near past—time and space required for writing and between moments of writing). Third, the gaps between fragments of text can offer, not simply a rendering of that writer’s leaping associative process, but a moment where the reader themselves is implied by that gap—-you, here—and is asked to pause in temporal space, to process material against, additionally, the backdrop of their contemporary experience. This is important as we consider why space becomes shaped in visual texts, and in noticing how shaped space can offer specific direction, and invitations into thinking away from the page, to the reader who is implied by gaps.
To assess how visual texts “say something new,” and by mapping how the visual text extends as a branch from “hybrid” visual movements like visual poetry, and literary genres like auto-theory, let’s further consider lyric and collaged examples formally, by looking into their gaps. If we consider that a “collage” is a text that comes together through many different “crots,” then a visual text might also be “read” as a collage in which the role of some crots—“blips,” “bits”—are played by shape, and that shape becomes a signifier. In other words, a visual text invites other representational modes into constellation, to behave like letters do formally, and to be used in the ways a reader has been asked to assemble fragments.

Back in 2012, when I was passing tiny scrolls, blueprints, and unbound stacks of paper around workshop tables in Tucson, I also began the “visual essays” series, encouraged by Ander Monson, that continues sporadically today at Essay Daily. In 2020, forthcoming collections of “visual essays” from several indie presses are being announced by a variety of authors. “Visual essay” has also independently been adopted by photographers to describe a series of photos that share a subject and/or develop a narrative. Film students occasionally use “visual essay” to describe a film made of found material. Visual essays, in the literary sense, remain compelling to me because they are “thinking texts” considered “prose,” rather than poetry, and because more words, made visual, pose an additional creative challenge—a spatial one. Certainly poems, stories, novels and librettos can “think” in the way essays do, but it’s true that the words “story” and “poem” are often synonymous with “art.” “Essay,” on the other hand, as claimed by “Nonfiction,” has defined itself against both genres by name, and perhaps therefore also against “art” (—see calls for submission or blurbs that praise “nonfiction that works like fiction,” or the phrase “prose that works like a poem” in anthologies of lyric essays). So the “visual essay” is a visual text that winds up further outside categorization.

In their essay “Ill-Fit the World,” T. Fleischmann explores how the lyric, or what Fleischmann calls “bent” or “permeable” essays, fit Juliana Spahr’s definition of avant-garde art forms in which a reader “is expected to cross borders and to explore her own limits while participating in the meaning of the text” (Fleischmann 43). Fleischmann distinguishes the traditional essay from the lyric essay primarily through the lyric essay’s interest in “exploring some truths together” rather than “convincing us of the truth.” Fleischmann notes that the “spatial and visual qualities of bent essays” like Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely work not simply to undo the authority of the text, but to use “accumulations” of additional material and media “that operate out of their own, self-defined rubrics and accomplish unique means” as “several of many accumulating realities” (Fleischmann 46).
As Fleischmann also notes, part of the lyric essay’s gesture at a participatory invitation includes its resistance to explaining itself, to holding the audience’s hand—after all, participation does not mean simply gazing:

And by combining text and image in unconventional ways, [the lyric essay] does not simply enact this disjunction between individual and society, but rather works for new combinations and analogues of meaning that strive to create and reveal our interconnectedness. (48)

So the lyric essay (texts made of gaps and crots) demands work from the reader that is physical and conceptual, but also political. By “ill-fitting,” the form itself suggests a reorientation of power, a text as a new vision of community. What I mean by describing qualities of time is that works, like visual texts (shaped crots) reorient power by interrupting the eye’s learned habits. Their “several accumulating realities” come to us in word and image, all at once.

Lyric essays that appear in what some call “found” or “hermit crab” forms, like Camilia-Berry Grass’s “Architectural Survey Form” which takes on modes of visuality, are not more fragmented than collaged or braided essays, but they might appear this way at first because the visual qualities of each section divide that text more completely. No longer are our eyes jumping or bridging “white spaces” as we read—in a visual text, there are hard lines and new fonts. Rather than simply “containing,” the addition of an architectural “form” to a lyric or fragmented essay pauses the reader in new ways, describes alternate relationships between sections, changes the channel more rapidly in our mind, and invites associative leaps. Space, once shaped, even within a found form, begins to apply shape in a manner some might call “literary.” Grass’s form illustrates, delivers metaphor, offers documentary evidence, and even suggests sound and motion in partnership with writing and for the sake of inviting the reader to participate further.
In Jenny Boully’s famous essay “The Body,” the referent “body” text is redacted. The pages present readers with blankness underlined by footnotes that read like a conversation about a movie you haven’t seen. The space of the page teases the reader’s eye ever upwards, towards what is missing though constantly referenced. Boully’s form has been called “hermit crab,” “erasure” and “lyric,” but the action it takes is to prompt the reader’s imaginative efforts while privileging a voice that is “marginal” according to its form. When reading a footnote like, “I never uttered that loose word; I only said, ‘I opened my legs and let him,’” the essay prompts the reader to imagine longer (redacted) descriptions of the writer’s “body” above. At the same time, the tension surrounding that blankness invites that reader to notice what their imagination does after reading this line as their eye is tugged toward white space (438). As the essay progresses, Boully’s footnotes make reference to further details of a redacted love affair, allowing for a type of averted vision to take place through her footnoted responses. Rather than asking the reader to puzzle-piece-together, or associate material in the wash between crotcs, Boully’s larger “space” has a stronger resonance determined by the page’s composition (more time), and the reader’s experience with footnotes as marginalia. Through their participation, the real essay—Boully’s footnotes—appears even smaller, more intimate, and also more primary. Through a “found” form, Boully has asked the reader to embody the page form by involved them simultaneously in recreating and silencing the main text.
Using what seems at first like an identical found form, but is not, the essay entitled “How to Discuss Race as a White Person” by Samuel Stokley features a redacted text with footnotes that invite the reader to “fill in” a gap. In Stokley’s version, each footnote is limited to just one sentence or fragment. Above these notes, Stokley has left small numerals hanging in space, signaling their attachment to individual footnotes below. This decision invites the reader to estimate how far apart the reference to each footnote appears. The first page of the essay includes short notes like “1 See: sweet-tooth; AriZona Beverages”, “8 Approx. 240 minutes, or 14400 seconds”, and “10 You have access to Google(dot)com.” As the footnotes continue, Stokley includes commentary like “6 Is this the longest you’ve gone without inserting your voice?” “11 Waiting isn’t listening”, “15 What if you’d called those cops?” that directly implicate the reader. Paired with the title, “How to Discuss Race as a White Person” the essay problematizes the idea of a discussion by demanding both a more attentive listening, and also an active, future role in self-education (research) from the reader. Here, the absence of the text presents a reading experience that seeks to extend itself into the reader’s life (time). If we are not already deeply engaged in reports of police violence against black Americans, and familiar with cultural artifacts that reference and keep alive racist histories, we may need to use Google to discover that 240 minutes, or 14400 seconds is the amount of time Sandra Bland was kept in jail without access to medication, or that as recently as 2008, AriZona “Southern Style Sweet Tea” featured images of plantation workers on their cans before public outcry forced them to re-design. At one point, the essay implies a moment of silence for such violences, “14 Their names were Sandra Bland, Kindra Chapman, Joyce Curnell…”. Where “silencing” also plays a role is that the essay asks the reader’s future voice to quiet down for the sake of time spent reading. Seen in this context, the role of “white space” also takes on a new resonance, and perhaps also begins to signal an understanding of the way traditional forms of engaging in dialogue through certain genres have not allowed for many voices to be included in conversation over the din of a few.
Some writers may call both Boully’s and Stokley’s texts “hermit crabs” or “false documents.” A poet might read them as “erasures.” Each of these terms, I believe, avoids addressing the role of text-as-image. What interests me about both “The Body” and “How to Discuss Race as a White Person,” is that space is beginning to do the work it does in visual texts. This happens when white space (a lot of it) demands its own resonance, to be read and to mean. Visual texts, too, are often described as “collage” and “lyric” because they break both narrative and the physical structure of a page. Collage is a process, and “lyric” is a sub-genre, but essaying is a verb that an image, too, can perform. Unlike lyric essays, the shapely gaps significant to visual essays physically “ill-fit” both printed pages and traditional venues for presenting literature (the public reading, the pull-quote, the anthology, the laptop screen) and therefore situate themselves further outside of definitions of genre and media.

In short, in visual essays, the visuals essay by asking to be read like a crot is read.

1. One of the first examples of contemporary essay in a visual form that I encountered was Amaris Ketcham’s “Recorded Lightning.” From the distance of a gallery wall, each of the four pages in this essay depicts an identical lightning-bolt made of white space both abutted by and

2. Ketcham’s first strand is a personal narrative describing several histories of people being struck by lightning. The second strand is almost a list—descriptions of some of the 13 types of observed lightning. The third retells an Acoma myth framed by the history of lightning designs

3. Though our eyes have been trained to read columns top to bottom, left to right, we arrive at the bottom of the first column (the left side of the page), we have to turn the page to read on, or decide to instead read the first portion of all three columns before proceeding to the rest. This
Reading words takes time; reading shapes takes time; visual essays ask us to do both, at once. But something else is happening. That a reader anticipates the ongoingness of prose is significant to the work of a visual essay specifically. Because anything articulated within a visual text is articulated within that gesture of refusal, as itself a form of delay, performing a hiccup in expected dynamics, a counter-effort to prose-logic and ongoingness. In “The Designed Essay” Ander Monson writes

Poets are used to thinking about text’s visual qualities because of line breaks: unless they occur in prose forms (and even in this case, it’s a conscious decision made partly for visual reasons), poems are visual artifacts. They are both read and seen. As prose writers, perhaps we are still thinking of our text as without a visual component, inputted into Microsoft Word or whatever we use with the standard letter-sized manuscript page, the standard margins.

And it seems that this is it—the shift in the quality of time required for recognizing visuality—that some critics, especially critics of the essay, are troubled by. But delay is the point. Like the auto-theorists, the visual essay both documents an embodied experience of thinking in time and space, and asks the reader to become self-aware of their participation in this, a process that is slower, that refuses their complete immersion. It does so visually.

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In *Prose Architectures*, Renee Gladman writes:

Drawing extended my being in time; it made things slow. It quieted language. It produced a sense that thinking could and did happen outside of language: I saw it as a line extending from the body, through the hand, as if something were being poured or pulled out of oneself, but here, finally, because it is impossible to achieve this in writing, with thought rather than chasing thought through syntax, as something already over, a moment we can now only describe. Drawing was going into time; it was pulling the process of thought apart, and what was most profound was that it left a record behind, a map: the drawing itself.

Mitchell has read the critiques of image-texts as rooted in the ways writers are taught to fear images: “...the notion of the image as a deceitful illusion, a magical technique that threatens to fixate the poet and the listener…” (6). While the threat of visual prose has led some to call it “less literary” (if it resists the codex, can it be literature?) and other to label it “too difficult,” the experience of reading these texts seem to me radically otherwise. We are already readers of screens and tri-fold pamphlets, social feeds, newspapers and internet poems. What the visual text truly upsets is the assumed primacy of the text in the page designs of literary spaces, and of the author as singular authority, and of the reader who does not want their gaze to be implicated.

In visual essays, as in found forms and lyric texts, space is time because space signals a time-based reorientation of the reader to the page. Does this mean visual essays, and all visual texts, should be “read” in a gallery, or in digital lit journals, or through another platform we invent just for them? Should there be a warning at the top preparing the audience for “work”? Wherever you are, let your eyes adjust. That halting you feel is what someone standing before a painting in a gallery might call an “art experience,” but don’t mind them. Look, read, pause, forget to differentiate.
Part II: The Gaze at “Work”

“One of the articles I came across... defined eccentricity in mathematical terms. The mathematical definition of eccentricity (not that I understand it) is ‘the degree of deviation of a conic section from a given circumference,’ so for example, ‘the eccentricity of a conic section like the circle is different to that of a different conic section like an ellipsis or a parable, [sic] or a hyperbola.’”

—Valeria Luiselli

My own fascination with visual texts lies with the critic’s regular complaint—the “work” these texts require, and the interruptions they present. But what some consider barriers or gimmicks in a visual text, others have long recognized as opportunities for new forms of meaning-making. Gloria Anzaldua described la faculad as “anything that breaks into one’s everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one’s defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes the depth to open up, causes a shift in perception” (Anzaldua, 203). In “Text Adventure” Monson applies the “somewhat clunky term ergodic literature,” which critic Espen Aarseth uses to describe texts in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text (86).” Nodding to Jennifer Roberts, Anya Ventura, author of “Slow Criticism,” points out, that time spent differently with art “is not merely some nostalgic bid in an age of instant communication,” but a radical act in an age when labor disputes involve “slowdowns” to refuse “a capitalist system based on speed and efficiency.” As we’ve established, visual texts force the reader to engage differently with time. By prompting a conceptual shift in the relationship of reader to text, forms of visual writing restage looking/gazing as something “other” than a passive mode of consumption.
This section’s epigraph comes from an interview with David Naimon in which Valeria Luiselli explains the relationship of ellipse to ellipsis, of parabola to parable, and of hyperbola to hyperbole, to unpack the ways mathematical language describing shape and space is connected linguistically to literary terms describing omission, narrative parallel, and exaggeration (Naimon, “The Story of My Teeth”). These parallels help demonstrate the ways concrete poets use text as composition to deliver meaning—marks on the page that designates or draw an emphasis, a parallel, a visual metaphor, or a tonal shift. To investigate how shape means, we’ll trace one branch of that lineage:

In “Architecture and Sound in Concrete Poetry” scholar of concrete poetry Antonio Sergio Bessa describes the contrasting relationship between aesthetics and social practice that divided two historic camps of the concrete poetry movement which, Bessa says, had often been considered homogenous in their aims (Bessa). Several concrete poetry groups had emerged internationally in the late 1940’s in response to shifts in technologies and new ways of disseminating information in a period when “language had begun to be rapidly reduced, consumed, reformed and circulated” (Gillard 1). Soon after, highly varied manifestos emerged from concrete poets in Brazil, Switzerland, Sweden, France, and Czechoslovakia that emphasized the pictorial role of language, or the “tension of things-words in space-time” (Campos, Pignatari and de Campos).
In his article, Bessa opens by suggesting that the “essential question” dividing practitioners of concrete poetry across the world was “writing versus sound, text versus performance.” By drawing comparisons between the rigid “concrete” poems of the Noigandres group who developed alongside modernist Brasilia, and the work of Swedish multimedia artist Öyvind Fahlström, whose organic, experimental “concrete” poems were allied to sound and to the “endless” possible interactions between content and form, Bessa grounds his understanding of this particular division in the varying international definitions of “concrete” among practitioners, and concludes that “The intrinsic problem in ‘concretism’ [is] namely the outward cultural impulse and its inward organic counterpart” (Bessa). One particularly relevant distinction that Bessa makes is the way concrete pairings of outer and inner—of shape and text—of form and of content—were informed by a shared understanding of concrete form as a “house” for text in both groups, and yet that this concept of “house” meant something very different for the Noigandres than it did for Fahlström.

Bessa writes that the Noigandres and Öyvind Fahlström had both been inspired by Europeans like Stéphane Mallarmé. But while “concrete,” to Fahlström, meant a structural material of “endless expressive possibilities,” a “structure infused with life—pulsating, secretory, always evolving,” it meant something very different for the Noigandres. The Brazilian group, who formed alongside the development of Brasilia and for whom graphic space was “a cultural agent,” “concrete” meant utilitarianism and the modernist, utopian promise to make what was conceptual, physical: “no more empty words,” associated with broader social concerns like sanitation and serial industrial production that likened the audience to a consumer and art to a product, a “beautiful useful machine” (Bessa). This meant that the language of Noigandres poems were also extremely economic, and rejected the traditional style of Portuguese language, and its ornate expressions. In this way, Bessa writes, a Noigandres concrete poem would function the way modernist architects thought “a house should ‘function’ [like] ‘a car’” (Bessa). The same car, we now know, that would become the center of urban development in the US, a capsule for separating the white-collar body from petrochemical industry via segregated, suburban living spaces.
The image above is of a “ROFL COPTER,” an example of ASCII art born of the early internet age, a time when users began to create and share images made inside text boxes, developing new forms of visual communication and “insider” vocabulary in a limited compositional environment. In the online culture of multi-user chatrooms, the ROFL COPTER was a visual feat and also a form of slang that reanimated the abbreviations “lol” (“laugh out loud”) and “rofl” (“roll on floor laughing”) which users had started to repeat and extend in examples like “lololololol” or “lolroflolrofl” so often that the acronyms alone had begun to lose meaning. The ROFL COPTER made communication of the same hyperbolic expression faster and more visual, while recalling both the sound of a helicopter and the emphatic, palindrome-like abbreviations of the era. By imagining the sound of a helicopter and the sound of typing “lololol,” even a reader who was not alive during the ASCII age might notice how, in a time long before iPhone cameras and emojis, an image like the ROFL COPTER could be used either to affirm and include a member of a large group chat, or to exclude and make fun of a member who was being hazed out of a group of “hackers” whose identity depended on code and specialized language that, despite its referent, takes language far beyond the original function of the machine.

Like the Noigandres, Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström used an architectural metaphor to describe the role of form in “The Manifesto for Concrete Poetry.” His unpublished manuscript “Project for Dine’s Home” was laid out in a floor plan of a house that had to be unfolded across a table. But to explain how Fahlström’s idea of form-as-home stood in contrast to the Noigandres group’s, Bessa likens Fahlström’s “organic” concrete structures to what Frank Lloyd Wright meant when Wright described a house as a “complicated, clumsy, fussy, mechanical counterfeit of the human body… The whole life of the average house, it seems is a sort of indigestion.” By indigestion, Bessa means a consumption and processing of many types of material, the many possible dialogues Fahlström himself described when he wrote “Concrete poetry is an instrument to analyze our wretched human condition,’ and the human element is translated into language through an organic relationship to reality” (Bessa).
Here, I’ll note the many ways Fahlström’s work is allied with the history of the essay through translation of an interior, embodied reality, and with the visual essay’s efforts to extend the work of a “thinking text” through form. Bessa writes:

Whereas the concrete poetry of the Noigandres group worked towards the dilapidation (with all its sculptural implications) of the Portuguese language, Fahlström seems to have worked in the opposite direction—to add more complexity to Swedish…. And he rarely submitted to the tyranny of the page’s format. His poems are rarely short, and when they are, the writing is still spread out and complicated, often undermining the simplicity of design.

In Bessa’s distinction we find, within a well-documented historical movement that informs today’s visual texts, the tension between outside (visual form) and inside (written content) that arises in discussions of visual texts among curators planning gallery exhibitions as well as editors reading concrete poems for literary journals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Noigandres</th>
<th>Öyvind Fahlström</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constructivist</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shape as “House”</td>
<td>Shape as “House”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form as function</td>
<td>Form as meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic language—utilitarian</td>
<td>Meandering sentences—maximalist</td>
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<td>“no more empty words”</td>
<td>“endless expressive possibilities”</td>
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Bessa goes on to say that “the impact of [Fahlström’s] particular concept of ‘concrete’ theory…in present day culture is signaled by events as distant in the cultural spectrum as, on the one hand, rap music’s ‘sampling’ techniques and, on the other, scientific experiments in ‘cloning’… Never one to underestimate the power of popular culture, Fahlstrom…would certainly have had a word or two to say on these subjects.”

Looking While Reading I, II, III ..25
Fahlström, the poet who introduced “whammo” to English, would likely have much to say about the ROFL COPTER and the new digital “page.” Bessa’s distinction is especially significant when we notice that at the fork where Fahlström and the Noigandres parted ways, contemporary visual texts followed the path leading to the expressive and expansive compositional strategies modeled by texts like Fahlström’s “A Project for Dine’s Home.”

For me, someone who is recreating her own lineage, this fork in the history marks a spot where some visual writers became divided from others because they had exchanged their interest in clarity and function for a deeper engagement with the multiplicity of meanings that visual strategies can draw from a text.

Textual shapes in both prose and poetry suggest an image, and thus an idea, through a shape. In the more contemporary examples of this genre, shapes are often abstract enough that the audience is not intended to recognize or understand the image as figurative, at least not until after reading the text. In each of Sumita Chakraborty’s poems entitled “Image 000” “Image 001” and “Image 007” a smaller orb made of text hovers above a much larger text orb—twin moons? A cracked egg? A toppled snowman? No. Instead, the smaller concrete circle ghost the larger, almost attaching to it, as the voice of a “chorus”, as a preface, as directions for navigating what is to come as the next sphere dilates with the progression of our reading eye. In examples of visual writing like this one, when shape is more abstract than it isfigurative, the concrete image works less like an illustration or a “container” and more like a landscape or a coach’s play. Across the abstract shape, the reader is directed to move and engage with multiple ideas through the layered mediums they are reading simultaneously.

From Chakraborty’s ““Most of the Children Who Lived in This House Are Dead. As a Child I Lived Here. Therefore I Am Dead” and Three Poems,” The Offing.
I took my first teaching job at an art college, teaching creative writing to students who spent a majority of their days in much different physical stances than I assumed at my writing desk. Outside of my classroom, my students spent long days standing upright in sensible shoes, wearing headphones turned up loud to cancel out the air filtration system, with their arms in constant motion as they manipulated paint, clay, hot metal, and molten glass. In this setting, Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics became useful in classrooms where students sat to discuss visual writing. Despite the book’s origins in line work, sequential frames, and the cartoon eyes of the comics world, I found McCloud’s vocabulary regarding different brands of “closure,” the act of a reader “closing the gap” between two images, useful in analyzing works that pair text with visual shape. McCloud calls “closure” the work a reader does to leap the gap between comic gutters (“Closure for blood, gutters for veins”)—work which involves different types of interactivity and efforts in light of different visual media.

McCloud’s terminology led me to the important distinction I’ve understood about visual texts, which has to do with the difference between illustrative and non-illustrative text-image pairings. Often praise for any image-text goes something like “the images add to the text, rather than taking away from it,” and this reminds me that many of us are first taught that images either make up for what a text is not doing, or reiterate what it is already communicating. When a reader approaches a visual text for the first time, they might come with the expectations that a work of literature is already capable of providing any type of representational experience, and that visual material is only ever “additional” to whatever would be clear in the hands of the right author. Perhaps ironically, I’ve observed that because of this expectation, a non-illustrative text can seem challenging to a reader expecting visuality to be ancillary or always explicitly figurative. As is evident in Chakraborty’s “Image 000” above, visual texts that conjure abstract shapes are often non-illustrative.
Instead, I suggest here that a writer who invites closure across written and visual material is making the same gesture as a writer who aims to develop subtext—a gap left for the audience into which, it is implied, they might “read.” Subtext in a visual text occurs through what I’ve previously called “multiple modes” that are simultaneously textual and visual—Mary Ellen Solt used “verbiovocovisual” specifically, as a way to bridge constructivist and expressive definitions of “concrete.”

In an illustrative text, the visual techniques that prompt closure and the written strategies that develop subtext are often nearly identical. In an example like the tale of “The Girl with the Green Ribbon” which was recorded in the children’s book In a Dark Dark Room (and later retold by Carmen Maria Machado in “The Husband Stitch”, the story where a character crots into the dirt), we can see how an author of the children’s version has created parallels in which moments of closure between images and moments of subtext between text are matched in parallel across the story.

Here we have Jenny introduced (illustrated) in an image. Jenny might seem, already, a little off. We wonder about her…

Here we have Jenny introduced in text. Jenny might seem, already, a little odd. We wonder about her…
Instead, I suggest here that a writer who invites closure across written and visual material is making the same gesture as a writer who aims to develop subtext—a gap left for the audience into which, it is implied, they might “read.” Subtext in a visual text occurs through what I’ve previously called “multiple modes” that are simultaneously textual and visual—Mary Ellen Solt used “verbiovocovisual” specifically, as a way to bridge constructivist and expressive definitions of “concrete.”

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As we read the story, the narrative role of text matches the narrative role of the images.

In both mediums, something remains amiss. Suspense builds as we move scene-to-scene between images and between sections of text.

All the way up until the final page, which leaves us with a cliffhanger—a trope native to the genre of scary stories in both image and text…

This type of narrative pairing is common in illustrated texts, though is especially important for books that children are using to learn to read, because the images—and the transitions between them—reinforce the text, and the images reinforce the subtext—the transitions between text blocks. This is not yet the complex utterance McCloud had in mind. But what if the transitions between sections of text and between frames of images were not as closely aligned?
In a non-illustrative text, visual and textual strategies are combined using a different recipe. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud uses the term “non-sequiturs” to describe pairings of images that do not mark shifts that are “Moment to Moment,” “Action to Action,” “Subject to Subject” or “Scene to Scene.” About “Non-Sequiturs” McCloud writes:

No Matter how DISSIMILAR one image may be to another there is a kind of—[here appears the image of a fork on a black background]—ALCHEMY at work in the space between panels which can help us find MEANING or RESONANCE in even the most JARRING of combinations…. By creating a SEQUENCE with two or more images we are ENDOWING them with a SINGLE—OVERRIDING IDENTITY and forcing the viewer to consider them as a WHOLE (45).

McCloud’s humble non-sequiturs offer what some writers would call *a poetics*, the kind of approach to delivering humor and figurative meaning backed by a distinct philosophy.
Essayist and illustrator Kristen Radtke, whose recent works have taken the form of graphic narratives, shows us many examples of non-illustrative pairings in her graphic memoir *Imagine Wanting Only This*. In these pages, a careful misalignment of closure across images, and subtext across text blocks invites a much different type of engagement from readers.

To name just a few new modes available to the reader in the above panels, the non-illustrative example from *Imagine Wanting Only This* offers: 1. An image as a backdrop for the writer’s own thinking (essaying) 2. The context of a place made visual, 3. A metaphor for decay (the broader subject of the chapter), and 4. A tonal irony in the dissonance between image and text (a clarification of the text’s critical tone).
We can also the illustrative relationship occurring outside comics, between visual and textual registers in concrete examples from Guillaume Apollinaire’s Calligrammes. In the concrete poem “La Cravate et La Montre” or “The Tie and The Watch,” the text of Apollinaire’s poem is designed in the shape of a necktie, and includes lines that calls the tie “SORROWFUL,” a garment that “ADORNS YOU OH CIVLIZED ONE” (Appolinaire, 89).

In the final line of the English translation of the poem “TAKE IT OFF IF YOU WISH TO BREATHE,” the word “BREATHE” escapes and breaks the structure of the designed tie, the civilization of the windpipe, and stands in white space on its own, having escaped constriction and the concrete object. Reading in 2020, the poem’s plea to “BREATHE” rings anew in an era of police violence against Black Americans where public suffocation is so often a method of murder.

In Appolinaire’s context, “THE TIE” is shaped like a tie. “BREATHE” escapes the tie as the poem suggests breath should; a tie is something to escape. Here (and in many similar examples from Calligrammes, such as “Heart Crown and Mirror”) the visual shape reiterates exactly an idea from the text that may already be evident to the reader who skims and reads only the title. “THE TIE”: the constriction of the work-a-day life, like taxpayers’ maintenance of police armories, is something to escape.
But illustrative relationships are not the fate of all visual writing. In a visual essay like Jennifer Wortman’s “Worst-Case Scenario,” the concrete image doesn’t duplicate the content of writing and instead becomes non-illustrative, though subtly so. “Worst-Case Scenario” takes the shape of two tall rocks with the word “C a s e” suspended between them. Let your eyes adjust. Hills are made of sentences. One word is also a man. In this piece, Wortman describes the time her husband fell thirty-five feet down a large gap while rock climbing. Because her husband had studied worst-case scenarios from a handbook entitled the same, he survived by turning his body “into the shape of a V” and landing on his sacrum. In this essay the crots—gaps of white space, moments signaling “thinking time” for the reader—have become shapelier.

The reading of visual prose in non-illustrative shape has a specific duration and tempo unlike the reading of other prose. It is different, even, than the reading of dense, unbroken pages of novels, or of airy, crotted braided essays. No “Estimated reading time” calculator (measuring reading as productivity and in terms of consumption rate, even before we begin) could guess the time necessary for experiencing a visual essay based on its word count (because “words” aren’t the only media demanding to be “read”).

A human body falling through the air in the shape of a V, sacrum-down, makes the shape of a bird in flight (almost the cartoon shape—almost a symbol). It’s the animal that Wortman’s husband said he would like to return as—the shape of his afterlife. But Wortman did not shape her concrete text in the shape of a V, but rather in a shape that conjures both a landscape and a theoretic scenario. “C a s e” said aloud, spaced triply, would be a slow word. And if we imagine that the word “case” is the silhouette of body falling slow-motion between rocks—Wortman’s husband’s body—then that body is falling the wrong way, according to the essay. It is a body experiencing the “worst-case-scenario and not contorting itself according to the handbook with the same title—not taking the shape of a V.
Wortman could have designed this signifier to say “body,” or “husband,” but she chose “case,” as if she is imagining what would have happened had her husband fallen upright, the way “case” is shaped. Thus, the concrete image doesn’t reiterate the narrative situation from Wortman’s text, but instead multiplies one of the tensions throughout—the notion that her husband might not have survived that fall—by depicting the moment in which fate is suspended. Here, space is used to offer the reader time to consider the layered implications that might not be explicit in the writing. Thankfully, Wortman’s husband did not become a bird, but his body did fly through the air, shortly after this fall, in a helicopter.
The tactic Wortman is using functions a bit like the one in the scene of the movie Sorry To Bother You when Cash (LaKeith Stanfield) wakes up one morning to see his garage apartment (an apartment inside a garage) morphing around him—the lamps craning into taller lamps, windowless walls dilating into windows—into a penthouse apartment. Time, for the viewer, collapses as it does in the protagonist’s perception of time. Wealth arrives, unfathomable in shape and process, and the change happens physically, while it is realized temporally, as it might for the protagonist experiencing a shock. Shaking the foundations, new money reshapes the old life at an unfathomable rate that conceals (as it does for Cash) the protagonist’s guilt about (and the viewer’s attention on) the dirty source of that new money, uniting the experience of character with that of the viewer for a moment.

For the concrete poets of Europe and the Americas, visual writing was a reaction to a quickening—the sudden availability of information, more immediately and more rapidly, and so the gradual discard of art, writing and information that by nature relied on time. How is “time” part of today’s new reading processes, and what are contemporary examples of visual writing attempting to interrupt or slow down?
Part III: “Decentered Form”

One myth about the page margin is that it became a norm for the reading eye during an era when books were designed to be housed in moldering libraries and at risk of being obliterated by the rats who came chewing at their sweet ink and treated leathers. On a page of text printed today, the inch of surrounding “vacant” space is still defined as “marginal” and experienced as a buttress for the eye—visual a rest, a silence. About “design as essay” Monson writes “It makes the perimeter, the border between those two spaces—writer’s and designer’s, the available and forbidden—very obvious” (Monson, 4).

Ventura writes “that state of being outside what’s considered ‘normal,’ can be transformative,” and explains that slowness directed at art might even offer the reader moments of empathy and insight, “a means of understanding the temporal realities of other periods in history” (5). The potential of the visual text as transformative has also been highlighted by its ability to communicate anew the lived realities of marginalized writers. Rather than silence, what contemporary visual texts offer is a distinct mode of utterance that decenters traditional relations of power, and allows for the expression of voices and ideas that have been excluded from historic literary forms and venues.

“Silence” is a subject my students bring up often in class. When we read visual texts, they notice that whenever a swath of page space unfolds, it feels like a held breath, a stop sign, a plastic seat unfolded, a moment for the reader’s gaze to linger and decompress. But other readers may see visual texts as the “shaped margin” or the margin, out of place. Perhaps the prolonged discomfort that silence-inside-prose invites for some readers is the thing we’ve been describing all along—the interrupted gaze. What that particular visual silence feels like to the reader—restful or disturbing—is determined by the surrounding text, and by who exactly is gazing.
In her introduction to the second edition of *Sister Outsider*, the poet and scholar of the Black Arts movement Cheryl Clarke describes Audre Lorde by writing, “Were she here among us in the funky U.S. instead of floating somewhere over the Guinea Coast, Lorde would still want and have to claim that ‘outsider’ stance. These prose works, much like her poetry, position her (and us), as Akasha Gloria Hull said many years ago ‘on the line,’ refusing the safety of that inside perimeter” (Clarke 6).

To describe the “work” of reading a visual text is to speak firmly from a western perspective that anticipates the design of the codex as natural. To a reader of Chinese or Arabic, the very idea of word as image is so integral to speech and writing that they may recognize any conversation about visual writing in the western world as boring—centuries delayed. To writers from oral cultures, the “formal” significance of letter shapes and the boxy “limitations” of the page margin on expressions of language might be laughable. The design of a codex page is ultimately one of the slightest among the limitations of western literature. Book forms from this culture have served as evidence of authority and documents of truth as much as they have represented any literary artistry. And one of the main activities of those books has been their participation in delivering an uninterrupted, singular narrative of divine right. The most celebrated volumes that emerge from this canon have often affirmed, in form and content, the easy gaze of a purported majority.

“Gaze theory” is a theory of representation. To apply it, we ask how bodies and stories are represented, formally, in order to invite the eyes of those in power and to affirm their position. For many writers who push the formal limitations of the page, it is the uninterrupted gaze from “center” to “periphery” that visual writing is rejecting. By changing how a text is shaped, how language is represented, contextualized by form, visual texts might repel the reader who is comfortably “onlooking” from the distance of their commuter car window.
Writing in the lineage of Audre Lorde and the auto-theorists, the lyric essayist and organizer Jen Soriano has introduced the term “intersectional form” after Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “intersectional,” to describe examples of “writing that breaks away from the confines of traditional narrative arc and instead moves through fragments and strands and strips, conveying multiple viewpoints to reject homogenous truth in favor of a more complex reality” (Soriano). Soriano’s analysis in “Multiplicity from the Margins” points to the layers of “outsider”-ness that non-narrative texts are able to convey through collaged, braided, and fragmented forms that use crots to position readers between and among “outsider” perspectives that are not limited to one identity, but are situated at the confluence of race, class, and gender. As in examples from Anzaldúa and Lorde, these forms serve to communicate multiple “outsider” stances that these writers embody daily.

Soriano opens “Multiplicity from the Margins” with a childhood scene from visiting the principal’s office that serves as an example of how written forms can break both traditional narrative and visual form to capture “the multiplicity of what must be told”:

“Silence like a third person between us. I am afraid that if I speak, one orphaned answer will spring from my mouth and all by itself that one answer will be wrong.

Because there are so many answers. too much space to take up

What do you use shoes for?

for rain
for color
to keep from stubbing my toe
to scrape on the ground to stop my bike with its broken brakes to keep from getting
that worm Mom says gets under your skin in bare feet
to dress up like my mom when she wears heels
to show I’m a girl
and have my own shoes
(even when I have to wear
my brother’s hand-me-down clothes)
to show that I’m a tomboy on days I don’t feel like being a girl
to show that we are lucky enough to buy nice shoes
but I’m ashamed of this too, because we live in America
(not like some relatives in the Philippines)
Surely this would be too much to say

in such a small dim room, with the once-smiling principal looking at me now in confusion”
(Soriano).

Throughout this scene, Soriano demonstrates that experiences of multiplicity not only “nec-
sitate a distinct type of form,” but that traditional narrative and page structures have functioned
in parallel with oppressive systems and master narratives like “Manifest Destiny, model minori-
ties, the American Dream, and the purity of religion and sexuality” that have limited expression
(Soriano). Her introduction also exemplifies how these forms of writing repel the easy, uninterrup-
ted gaze directed from “center” to “periphery” through interruptions that prompt questions.
Soriano writes, “If essays are a simulation of ‘the mind working its way through a problem,’ then
intersectional form allows for a more authentic simulation of the workings of marginalized minds
wrestling with power and ‘gifted’ with the multiple perspectives of the margins.” Soriano’s use
of “gifted” nods to W.E.B DuBois’s “double consciousness,” or what he termed as the ability
to inhabit both an individual perspective and the perspective of those who hold power over you
through internalized racism and misogyny.
In establishing her original definition of “Intersectional” through her seminal article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Crenshaw writes:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women (1252).

“Intersectional Form” as Soriano extends it, names the formal strategies that writers use to communicate the complexities of experience that these movements have failed to serve. The ABAB collage structure has been far surpassed. In writing from a place of so-called social “margin” and to the confines of the “literary” page, writers are using the skills they have gained in lived experiences of translation and communication, and it is these very gestures that move many to experiment further within the physical form of that writing. In “Intersectional Forms,” as Soriano calls them, the fragmented form of the text becomes a tool for reflecting the nuanced perspectives available only from those interstitial seats, poised between.

In viewing Soriano’s “Intersectional Form” through the fierce and historic divisions between visuality and textuality (“metaphysical opposites”), we can see that the disruption of one double bind becomes a tool for disrupting another. By using visuals (space and shape) to mean within a text that often becomes non-linear, writers are able to communicate multiplicities of experience in ways that extend the work established by other experimental forms. The divisions between media and layered identities are simultaneously exploded. Where “intersectional” forms are connected to concrete prose is in this act of decentering the power dynamics that printed pages expect. So visual writing can also serve as a means to interrupt not only the capitalist measure of consumption rates, but also the temporal space of the reader who expects that the book is written to the seat of power. It can additionally be a tool for the author to debunk the rhetorical position of the mythic artist/writer (Nochlin). This argument gestures toward a theory of visual text as “decentered forms:” The author of an intersectional is not speaking in a world separate from yours. The author, it seems, is not even one vocal register or one person. They are speaking to the reader—not to a theoretic audience but—you, here—an individual, who will or will not make the decision to keep reading after every gap implies—are you still with me(s)?
The poet and scholar of concrete texts Briony Gillard has noted that while visual texts have the potential to communicate the intricacies of lived identity, certainly the history of visual texts has not been “intersectional.” Gillard’s scholarly project has been to recognize the work of women concrete poets who have remained unrecognized, “locked out by phallogocentrism,” even in light of the recent contemporary interest in historic concrete poetry that Gillard has also attributed to the digital era (Gillard, 6). In “An Exploration of Verbiovocal Borders and Margins,” Gillard argues that the action of verbiovocovisual forms paired with the marginalization of women’s writing has meant that concrete poems by women have often been transgressive texts tied to movements like l’Ecriture Feminine, resulting in texts that push back against dominant structures through both their content and their shape (like the auto-theorists) by disrupting “…the organizational grid of language and embrace a position of multiplicity” (Gillard, 2). Where Gillard converses with Soriano, as well as with the auto-theorists, is through the notion that fragmented texts featuring marginalized perspectives often intentionally refuse the modes of meaning-making determined by power structures that would otherwise limit and silence what they might say. In both Gillard and Soriano’s analysis of fragmented expression and multiplicity, the structure of a text produces a multidimensional “third space,” which Soriano describes. The shape that arises in visual texts, asking the reader to look and read simultaneously and at multiple scales, fashions a temporal zone that extends the role of multiple voices, lenses, and theories simultaneously.
Looking at Lorde’s and Soriano’s work together through the framework of verbiovocovisual texts, we see how writers who make visual texts that communicate several between or outsider states are doing so by re-enacting the roles they play in their own lives on their pages, where “silence sits like a third space” (Soriano). Today, the world of concrete poetry is still dominated by writers who identify as men. But while many examples of visual writing are engaging in meta-narratives, problematizing the “oppositional” nature of text and image, most examples do not extend this work to elucidating the layered internal “othernesses” of race, gender, and class (Mitchell, 14). As Crenshaw writes, “The need to split one’s political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront” (1252).

The recorded tradition of concrete poetry is also very white. Reading Crenshaw’s above quote itself may be a source of pain for current readers who experience doubled othering daily and also simultaneously live with regular signs that others in their communities do not. Readers of postcolonial literature will recognize the term “writing back” as a gesture practiced by artists who write towards or against the colonial powers that have forever altered their lives (not after colonialism—that process never ended—but rather, in its wake). Storytelling is also a way of representing time by retelling it. And to be post-colonial is to be in process, to be continually living with the shock of mass violence and linguistic and cultural erasure. So for writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Jean Rhys, the effort of writing back to colonial power has often resulted in projects that used fractured forms to capture experiences of dissonance and cross-cultural silencing. These forms have always demanded that readers reorient themselves to times that preceded their own history, as well as to their current experience of time.

In each movement of concrete poetry, the philosophy of form emphasized “graphic space as a cultural agent” of things like utopia, or sanitation. Likewise, Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality was created for legal arguments under the specter of sexual assault experienced by women of color, and the challenges of representing these experiences in court. Crenshaw writes: “the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women” (1245). As Soriano has demonstrated, literary artists have applied experimental literary forms as cultural agents, wielding the “formative powers of delay” to communicate not only the “scattered” experience of trauma, but the layered perspectives of writers who experience that trauma from several “outsider” positions (Roberts).
In “Using CNF to Teach the Realities of Sexual Assault to First Responders: An Annotated Bibliography,” Christian Exoo and Sydney Fallone write, “Survivors of sexual assault are often unable to recount the details of their experience. Their narratives can be circular, lacking in a clear chronology. Their memories are dotted with lacunae…” (unfilled spaces, intervals, gaps) “…To police (and often, to medical personnel who lack specialized training), it appears that the survivors are lying” (Exoo and Fallone). As Dr. Rebecca Campbell explains in her talk “The Neurobiology of Sexual Assault,” this unclear chronology is the result of hormones that prevent the hippocampus from encoding sensory information during traumatic experiences, leading to hazy, scrambled memories that lead healthcare providers and law-enforcement to further traumatize victims by disbelieving them. To combat this process, Exoo and Fallone require the advocates who work in their program to train directly with victims of sexual assault and to simultaneously read essays like Jill Talbot’s “What I Learned in Homemaking” that incarnate what it is like for victims to struggle with gaps in remembering. Certainly not all visual texts are non-illustrative, and not all visual texts are interested in intersectionality. The multiplicity of Soriano’s “intersectional” forms involves both a project of delivering a collective, fractured truth, as Fleischmann has established of the “bent” (/lyric) essay, and demonstrating those truths across layers of marginalization (Fleischmann). In the twenty-twenties, writers are combining shape with fragment to make visual texts that communicate experiences of trauma, community, and selfhood to refuse the lineage of singular narrative and the “uninterrupted” racialized gaze. When this happens visually, we might recognize visual texts as a “decentered form.”
Some writers who make visual texts today began life as readers who adored books and pages, who loved the stiff covers and sharp text blocks and only much later made work in “shapes” that counteracted the page as a form of origin. It is another experience entirely to work as a writer of a drawn-thinking-text from a lineage of oral history, for which the page is already a form of translation to believing in the book, not the body, as the “house” of narrative. From the perspective of oral histories, the book itself is a finite container, a box determined by flat desk tops and ink pens, reading lights and permanent homes, individual ownership, immediate availability, the linear progressions of hours and pages.

The introduction to Al Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* tells the migration story of the Kiowa, who were driven from the plains after the slaughter of the buffalo, and journeyed to Rainy Mountain, “a single knoll” in Oklahoma. In framing the book as a retelling of this story, Momaday reiterates

> “the man’s idea of himself, and [its] old and essential being in language. The verbal tradition by which it has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, hearsay—and of course the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. That is the miracle” (Momaday, 4).

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* combines line drawings with crots formatted in three different fonts that visually signal the presence of multiple voices and time periods (Monson: “The font connotes: it means. So by using it, by designing, we …are adding meaning” [“The Designed Essay,” 2]). Each page of Rainy Mountain combines 1) a fragment of myth, 2) the historic retelling of the migration, and 3) the reflections of a contemporary writer who grew up in its wake (a visual gesture that recalls Fleischmann: “several of many accumulating realities” [46]). In an early section, the voice of migration tells of a moment during the long journey when the Kiowa stopped to pause and “wean their blood of the northern winter.” There, in the black hills, Momaday writes, “because they could not do otherwise, the Kiowas made a legend at the base of the rock” (8). *The Way to Rainy Mountain* contains many instances of waiting and delay as it considers time represented through the human voice. Its visual form emphasizes what is lost when oral histories are transcribed to pages. This polyvocal visual text has made way for contemporary works like Layli Long Soldier’s *Whereas* and Elissa Waschuta’s *My Body is a Book of Rules*. 
Jennifer L. Roberts, scholar of “slow criticism,” writes:

In the thousands of years of human history that predated our current moment of instantaneous communication, the very fabric of human understanding was woven to some extent out of delay, belatedness, waiting…. The teaching of history has long been understood as teaching students to imagine other times; now, it also requires that they understand different temporalities. So time is not just a negative space, a passive intermission to be overcome. It is a productive or formative force in itself (Roberts).

Space, when shaped, is time—A “formative force.” About the minimal, visual forms in her poems, Layli Long Soldier says “the shape comes first” and that the “content is pulled into the form” (Naimon, “Whereas”). The first poem in her book Whereas, entitled “Ȟe Sápa” addresses the story of a relative in Long Soldier’s family who was killed by being dragged behind a truck. The poem features a concrete shape made by four lines of text. A square that immediately reminded me of the translation of the word stanza: room, which explains why poets can’t forget that, on the page, space is time, though here Long Soldier accomplishes much more:

This is how you see me the space in which to place me

To see this space see how you place me in you

From Long Soldier’s Whereas

Looking While Reading I, II, III .45
*Whereas* is a book that often borrows clinical legalese—language that is a document of the way native peoples have been dispossessed of right and land—and repurposes or even reoccupies the text to develop counter-histories. In her poems, Long Soldier focuses closely on single words in a manner that consistently reminds the reader she is writing in English—a language that has dispossessed and erased Native people, and expressly so in periods when speaking languages like Lakotan was forbidden. In an interview about the poem, Long Soldier recalled “The history of native people with land and the disposability of our people for the sake of land,” which “is something you just can’t get past” (“The space in me you see in this place”) (Naimon, “Whereas”).

“Ȟe Sápa” is the name of the landscape Long Soldier comes from, and in these contexts we can see how the concrete shape inside the poem presents not a vacant space to be occupied, but a plot that is always already occupied, and draws the reader’s attention to the limitations many readers, as part of dominant power structures, may be placing on Long Soldier unknowingly, even as they read (“This is how you see me in the space in which to place me”). And yet, at the same time, the line of text on the leftmost side of the square, “This is how to place you in the space in which to see” invites the reader to think of the white cube, instead, as the kind of shared place (Long Soldier, *Whereas*). The kind of shared place Long Soldier has identified when describing her poems as “not always defined by resistance” but also to “create a place of belonging. Both resistance and belonging” (Long Soldier, “Poetry Reading”). Read counter-clockwise, the audience’s understanding of the nature of the concrete shape (what they actually “see”) adjusts, and avenues for meaning multiply as they read further.

Text occupies the margin, escapes the center. And with each re-scrambled version of Long Soldier’s original phrase the poem’s shape establishes itself as both the violent limitations on a group of people and a place to sit in alongside Long Soldier in a kind of re-making. What “must be told” here must also be told simultaneously, in a verbivocovisual manner, through the third, temporal space. When form and content pair in this manner, through a progression that feels like opening a folded fan, the poem also argues, perhaps, that the acknowledgement of violence is the first step to make way for the efforts of reparation.
At the end of her forward to Sister Outsider, Cheryl Clarke describes Lorde’s most famous line: “for the master’s tools cannot be used to destroy the master’s house” as a “seemingly easy aphorism” that angers her, but then translates the phrase using a line from Lorde’s essay “Eye to Eye”: “Who is it we must destroy when we attack each other with that tone of predetermined and correct annihilation?” (Clarke, 6). Those who would seek power through the oppression of many need those on the margins to turn against one another. To feel “metaphysically opposed.” But a wall cannot be toppled by nails. A staircase cannot be undone with risers and pliers. And the house is not what we are after. It was never a house to begin with. The mistake that a reader of “master narratives” will make when first encountering a visual text is the same mistake Gilillard describes the dissenters of concrete poems making when they see those poems as mimetic, gimmicky because they expect a certain relationship between art and time. It is this relationship that the visual text doesn’t resist, but refuses

Visual texts, especially examples of visual prose, demand a quality of time somewhere between the time we pass, suspended, just before stepping away from a painting (slow looking) and the time we spend, suspended, turning the page of a book (reading across space). What these works are capable of is a refusal of both consumptive reading pace and the uninterrupted gaze, formally, by wielding space to reject master narratives and the containers they claim. Space suggests time, controls it, situates the body in new relation to a language in order to fracture master narratives and the very notion of history as linear, singular. Through these modes, contemporary visual texts disrupt familiar ways of spending time with art to invite forms of reading that are embodied anew by both reader and audience.
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