

Pre-print version

To cite this Article:

Portela, Manuel (2003), 'Untranslations and Transcreations', *Text*, Vol. 15, 305-320.

Published by: University of Michigan Press / Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30227797>

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UNTRANSLATIONS AND TRANSCREATIONS

My title is taken from words coined by the Brazilian poets Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos to refer to their experiments in translation. For the past forty years, the Campos brothers have redefined the poetics of translation with examples that range from classical Greek, Latin and Chinese authors to modernists such as Mallarmé, Pound, Cummings, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov and Joyce. Augusto de Campos, in particular, has applied many of the principles of concrete poetry to translation. His typographic translations are a clear instance of the spatial marking of textual meaning. I want to explore the relationship between linguistic meaning and typographical space that sustains the specific textuality of his translations.

i. Typographical Markers and Meaning

Modernist typographic poetry developed out of the observation of writing and typography in the modern world. The interaction between printed signs and verbal meaning was at the heart of its poetics. Writing and print were no longer the invisible and neutral tools for abstract and logocentric thought of the Western alphabetic print cultures. They became again that complex technology that turns orality into literacy and then literacy into its own secondary orality, reshaping our consciousness on a fundamental and sub-liminal level. In the 1950s and 1960s concrete poetry adopted the visual poetics of early modernism and continued to experiment with the interaction between language and type. Recently, many poets have been using the new medium of electronic reproduction to further extend the poetics of the visual poem by internalizing the electronic writing space.

Jerome McGann and Johanna Drucker have tried to account for twentieth-century poetry by paying close attention to the bibliographical and typographic features of modernist poetry.¹ McGann has been mainly concerned with the Anglo-American tradition, trying to establish a link between the forms of publication and design in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the more radical experiments of the modernists. McGann has argued that modernist poetry was "a direct function and expression of the Renaissance of Printing that began in late nineteenth century" (xi), which was epitomised in William Morris's poetry in Kelmscott Press format and other early collections.

By making writing more optical than aural, modernists were anticipating the spatial fields and multiple reading trajectories of hypertext. McGann refers particularly to Robert Carlton Brown's *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* (1931) and Louis Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology* (1932) as seminal works in the new textualization of poetry. Bob Brown expressed this new awareness of the semiotics of written signifiers that seemed to move on the page as "Moving Reading." The representation of the movement of reading was precisely one of the defining features of concrete poetics. Early concrete poets were especially influenced by Mallarmé and the several continental European futurist and dadaist groups, rather than by their Anglo-American counterparts.

Johanna Drucker has also tried to theorise on a more comprehensive and fundamental level the use of typography by modern art in Europe. Looking at the developments in Saussurean linguistics, she has argued that there was a general concern with the nature of writing and visual representation in the early decades of the twentieth century. The research on the specific materiality of the verbal signifier, carried out by philosophers, linguists and literary theorists, was paralleled in the experiments of those modernist poets who foregrounded typography in their writing. Nevertheless, the structuralist definition of language as a system of differential signs, which developed out of Saussure's concepts, still accorded a privileged position to the signified. Drucker argues that the manipulation of the signifier within art practices challenged some of the early concepts of the signifier within linguistics and semiotics. Designers and poets who reflected upon the typographic character have made a decisive contribution to the understanding of the specific materiality of the signifier and of the properties of writing as a visual representation of language.

¹ See Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), and Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).

Visual poetry makes it very easy to understand how semantic features may be transferred to or activated by typographic traits. This type of transfer or activation is the main principle of composition of concrete poetry, which has replaced or extended logopoetic tropes, such as metaphor and metonymy, by a specific design of typefaces, page layout and graphic forms. In this way the alphabet is made to recover the syllabic, pictographic and ideographic components of writing. The written and printed materiality of the signifier is not a mere function of the aural or oral signifier. It has a dimension of its own which interacts with the several levels of the linguistic sign in complex series of interlocking echoes and feedback loops.

In its modern forms visual poetry dates back to the religious pattern poetry of the seventeenth century, and it has been directly influenced by the graphic language of early newspapers and advertisements. It was precisely the newspaper and the printed advertisement, seen as the epitome of the technological language of the city, which early twentieth-century modernists appropriated. This sensual consciousness of the printed word led many poets to adopt display and headline types and to experiment with typefaces, font sizes and layouts in their texts. Rather than being the effaced transmitter of verbal meaning, typography was both functional and expressive in its materiality, coming between author and reader as a perceptual reminder of the elusive nature of meaning.

In literary production, textual realism – that is, the typographic representation of typographic signs – enabled writers to make direct allusions to the world of the modern city. They developed notations of sound and movement that exploded classical typography and allowed for a new plasticity of the printed character and of the printed word. Characters and words were re-assembled into second order signs in countless complex ideograms. This typographic revolution extended to many spheres of human communication, and it testified to the technological developments in the printing press, the enormous increase of display lettering, and the constant exposure to signs in the modern urban environment.

In the labyrinth of the modern metropolis, the identity of commodities and spaces became inextricably linked with all sorts of typographic designs. For a culture that was increasingly dominated by print, the visualisation of the verbal became a general strategy for communication and expression. These changes in turn originated a new poetics of the printed space. New possibilities opened up in the hierarchical organisation of elements with the conversion of linear and sequential reading into multiple and simultaneous spaces that punctuated texts. Iconic writing responded to a strongly iconic culture, frequently by demystifying or estranging the pragmatic use of visual and typographic signs.

Considered ideologically – that is, in terms of its function in the system of social semiotics – the development of typographic design came to be one of the key instruments in the development of the symbolic identity of commodities. Typographic manipulation of the signifier was highly effective in deleting any signs of the social relations involved in production, as Johanna Drucker points out (245). By its function in the production of signified value, typographic design had become essential for the advertising industry of corporate capitalism. Concrete poetry, an off-spring of the earlier revolution of typography, developed the sensationist aesthetics of the printed word in a context when graphic design was already institutionalised as an art form of the consumer society. Again, the critique of discourse undertaken by the minimalist concrete poems was in many cases a new source of inspiration for advertisers and graphic designers. Like some of the early experiments, such as *Un Coup de Dés*, the concrete poems often embody a paradoxical drive: an essentialist treatment of form, implying a metaphysical belief in writing and type, that tells of the malleability of the material, which implies the permanent fluidity of meaning. Verbal meaning and typographic form constantly interact and redefine each other.

ii. Augusto de Campos and the Concrete Poem

In the 1950s and 1960s, many aspects of the typographic marking of meaning became both the subject matter and the technique of concrete poetry, an international movement that originated in Brazil and Switzerland.¹² Whereas earlier modernist movements had explored the power of different typefaces and font sizes in long poems, the concrete poets became extreme minimalists, reducing texts to only a few words and characters.³ Augusto de Campos is one

² Augusto de Campos published *Poetamenos* in 1953, and Eugen Gomringer published his first *Konstellationen* in the same year. Campos's experiments were followed by the Noigandres group and their magazine, which appeared in São Paulo between 1955 and 1962. Concrete aesthetics was soon adopted by many authors and groups in Western and Eastern Europe, North and South America, and in Japan. An *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), edited by Emmett Williams and published by the Something Else Press in New York, was the first comprehensive anthology of this international movement. Edwin Morgan, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Bob Cobbing, and Tom Phillips are some of the early British concrete poets. Haroldo de Campos published the first essay on the new aesthetics of the text, "A Obra de Arte Aberta" ("The Open Work of Art"), in 1955. His views were developed into book form in *Teoria da Poesia Concreta* (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1965), in collaboration with Décio Pignatari and Augusto de Campos, and in *A Arte no Horizonte do Provável (Art on the Horizon of Probability)* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1969).

³ Examples of the use of newspaper headlines and advertising typefaces and layouts in poems and prose texts can be found in many modernist texts in French, German, Russian, Italian, English, Spanish and Portuguese, from the futurists to the surrealists. Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, Tomaso Marinetti, Vassily Kamensky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Wyndham Lewis, Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, Almada Negreiros, Mário de Sá-Carneiro and many others have made letter-forms and asymmetrical layouts essential to poetic forms. One of the landmarks of the new kind of typographic book was Mayakovsky's *Dlya Golosa* (1923), designed by El Lissitzky. Other classical modernist examples include Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés* (1897, 1914), Guillaume Apollinaire,

such case. He claims that his average of three to four minimalist poems a year, during the 1980s and 1990s, is still too high, and he quotes Fernando Pessoa: "Each one of us has, perhaps, a lot to say, but of that lot there is little to be said."⁴

Campos's texts are highly charged signs, where the semantic, the phonetic, the syntactic, and the typographic elements seem to amplify each other in multiple reverberations. In the mid-1990s he started to apply HTML software, including animation programs, to his earlier visual works, thereby adding another material layer to his texts. By applying movement to the characters, changing their colour, texture and background, new readings were being produced. The silent but pervasive reading movement (of the eyes and of the mind) which has always been one of Campos's topoi, has now itself been animated, thus re-engaging the reader at another level. In their printed forms, his visual texts were a microcosm or model for the many material elements (textual, typographic, and cultural) that enabled printed poetic language to produce meaning. On the other hand, the graphic interface on the display screen works as a second-degree level representation of the concrete text, but also as a new medium that has taken on its own material features, such as light and sound.

The transfer of semantic traits from verbal elements to typographic elements is generated by the spatial arrangement of letterforms and graphic patterns. One of the functions of this textualization is to make linguistic reference self-referential, highlighting how it produces meaning. Augusto de Campos has made a number of "untranslations" which show how this conversion and re-marking of meaning works. He uses the concept of "untranslation" to refer to his free visual translations, but also to the idea that a translation is always a new text whose connection with the original is mediated by the asymmetry of languages at all levels of description. By investigating the representational features of writing and type, Augusto de Campos opens up new creative spaces in those interlinguistic gaps derived from asymmetrical language structures.

Translation as a collision of language differences rather than a search for similarities was one of the concepts developed by a number of modernist writers. For modernist poetics, translation does not consist of conforming foreign linguistic objects to the structure and pragmatics of the translating language. On the contrary, the act of translation is an act of transformation of language and of its poetic forms. Haroldo de Campos calls this passage

Calligrammes (1916), Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, *Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (1913), and Tomaso Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tuum* (1914).

⁴ "Cada um de nós tem, talvez, muito que dizer, mas desse muito há pouco que se diga," quoted in Augusto de Campos, *despoesia* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1994), backflap.

between two languages a transcreation, that is, the invention of sound and sense links that cross the interlinguistic gap. Being language-specific, co-relations of sound and sense can only be translated by a creative texture of equivalences.

Paranomasia, the association of words motivated by similarities of sound, illustrates how transcreation works. If you take *Finnegans Wake*, you will see that this process is one of the compositional principles of the work at the word and sentence levels: many new words, expressions, and structures are generated by internal echoes, similarities, and distortions. In a different language, associations will move in other semantic directions because of the new co-relations of sound and meaning. As you also have to translate the co-relations and not just the individual items, the rule of composition of the original work now becomes a rule of translation or, in Haroldo's term, a rule of transcreation.⁵ Typographical space can be used in a similar way: in this case co-relations of meaning and sound can become co-relations of meaning and typography or of sound and typography. A poetical atmosphere and a verbal description turn into a typeface, and a recurrence of sounds becomes a graphic pattern or page layout.

iii. Translating into the Typeface and the Semantics of the Layout

Augusto de Campos has applied the graphical poetics of concrete poetry to his untranslations by adding visual co-relations to the sound and sense elements of poetic textures. Typography is made to carry some of the semantic traits of the original verbal forms. He begins by designing or adopting a typeface that can carry part of the verbal meaning of the text. Thus, many of his texts are type-specific. Type design is to be read semantically, because it conveys part of the verbal meaning. The application of this creative process to translation has a number of consequences for the way we conceive of the relationship between languages and their specific materiality.

Some of his typefaces will illustrate how particular texts and meanings have inspired his personal design or choice of type. For e. e. cummings's poem "solitude," he has used dark green and light green for the letters and has shaped their faces so as to evoke the leaves (*figure 1*, below). The typographic mimetic of the original, which made the letters on the page

⁵ Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos published several passages from *Finnegans Wake* that show transcreation at work. See *Panorama do Finnegans Wake* (São Paulo: Comissão Estadual de Literatura, Secretaria da Cultura, 1962).

function as a simulacrum of the perception of the falling leaves, has now been extended into the typeface. By applying the same layout to the original and placing the two texts side by side, the experience of reading is not a mere re-enactment of the original mimetic but also a metaphoric transfer of that re-enactment to the space between two languages. This "untranslation" becomes an essay on the gravity of languages, that is, on the unpredictable attractions and repulsions that govern interactions of sound and meaning. Augusto de Campos's Portuguese version is not only an imitation of an original that imitated symbolically the unity of sensation and perception, but it becomes an epistemological artifact about linguistic knowledge (*figure 5*).



Figure 1

My second example is not a typographic translation of a typographic poem, but a translation of the traditional stanza layout. Again, the translation begins with the typeface, which has been outlined and shadowed in such a way as to suggest movement (*figure 2*).



Figure 2

Campos adopts a conventional drawing notation and suggests an incoming movement, which is highlighted against a black background. Choice of colour and movement, the reader will learn, are typographical impersonations of the raven of Edgar Allan Poe's poem. The whole text becomes an ideogram for the appearance of the raven. Letters, words, lines, and stanza seem to fly into the page and, as often is the case with his poetry, each unit is treated as a mirror image of the whole. Micro-structure and macro-structure reinforce each other. It is not merely the feathers or the wings, but the bird itself that is standing on the window sill against the moonshine. The gloomy atmosphere of "The Raven" has been written into the typeface, which becomes a typographic omen and echo of the meaning. The movement of the typeface echoes the movement of reading (*figure 9*).

My third example is taken from an experiment with one of Virgil's *Eclogues*, a fragment that Campos has entitled "amaryllis" (1988). Contrary to a first impression, typeface design here is not simply decorative (*figure 3*). By drawing the curling and spiralling classical motifs, Campos is not just evoking Roman culture. He is using the design to simulate the floral elements referred to, and thus he is making the text ideogrammatic. Serifs become climbers of the letters, upper cases seem to shade and grow over lower cases, and flowers and eyes pop out within the letters. Eyes, hair curls and flowers, all of these motifs are also a graphic embodiment of the metaphor that connects the amaryllis and the young shepherdess in Virgil's pastoral.

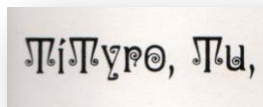


Figure 3

The last example is from a translation of the Russian poet Khliebnikov, "borboleta-pó" ("butterfly-dust"; 1985). The typeface is a discontinuous line of dots that imitate both the dust patterns on the wings of the butterfly and the marks left on the window glass (*figure 4*). The typeface is then a re-creation both of the foot-prints and wingprints of the butterfly, and the

act of reading the text becomes an assemblage of those small prints to form letters, words, and sentences. The dust of poetical and human meaning is powerfully conveyed by representing meaning as the signature of the butterfly. As in the previous examples, outside observation and inner emotion are split and then joined at the primary level of type-face. Materiality of the signs is both evanescent and overpowering.

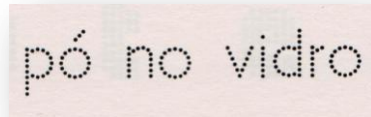


Figure 4

Translating into the typeface then extends to higher levels of the composition: font sizes, font styles, paragraph alignment, paragraph spacing, character spacing, type colours, etc. All of Augusto de Campos's texts adopt a specific page and character layout that is made to carry or reinforce a number of semantic traits inherent in the words. The texture of sound and sense patterns re-creating the original patterns (in the case of translations) is thus put into a dynamic relationship with the visual form. Texts are deployed as a closed circuit of verbi-voco-visual elements, which means that each poem has a particular typographic form that can be read as sign in itself. The following examples show all the features I have outlined so far.⁶

⁶ Here are the Portuguese titles for the poems in *figures 5 to 10*: 5, "renovar (confúcio/pound)"; 6, "chuva oblíqua de maiakóvski (perfil de maiakóvski-a. ródtchenko)"; 7, "so l(a (cumings)"; 8, "rosa para gertrude"; 9, "transcorvo de poe"; 10, "tygre de blake." Except for the poem in figure 10, which was published as a double-faced poster in 1977, all these texts are included in Augusto de Campos, *despoesia*, 45, 43, 47, 55, and 65. The original print version for "coração/cabeça" (*figure 11*) is also included in this book, as a double-page spread on pages 14-15. Copyright Editora Perspectiva, São Paulo, Brazil. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 5. make it new (confucio/pound) (1983)

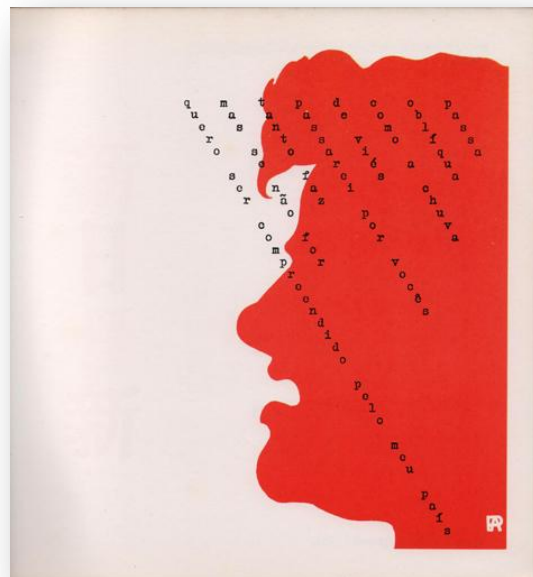


Figure 6. oblique rain by mayakovsky
(profile of mayakovsky by Alexander Rodchenko) (1982)

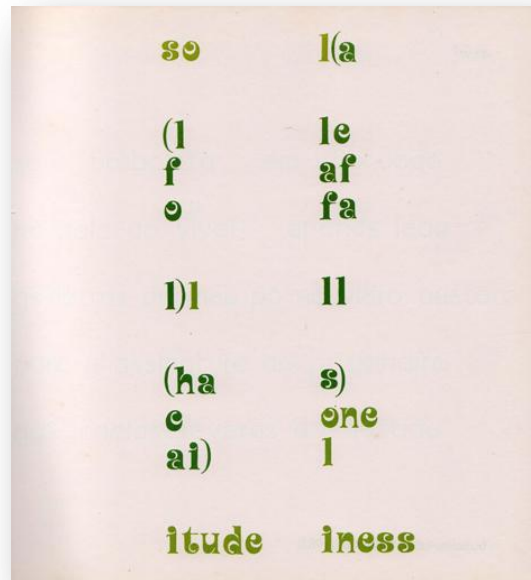


Figure 7. so 1(a (cummings) (1984)

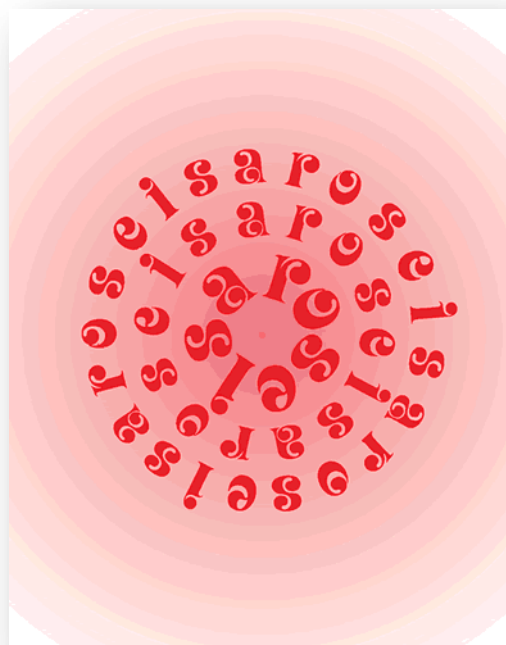


Figure 8. rose for gertrude (1988)

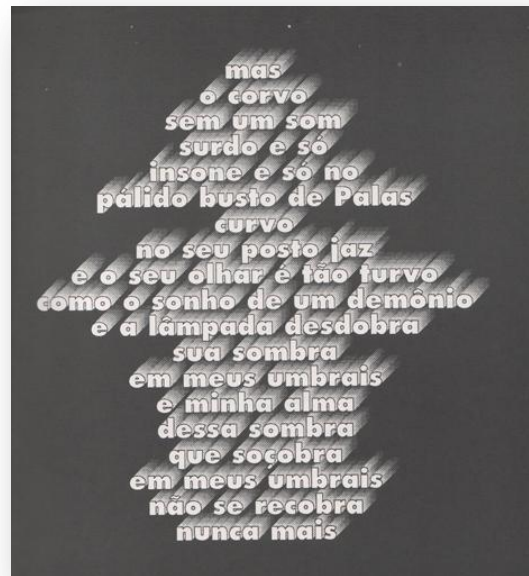


Figure 9. transraven by poe (1992)

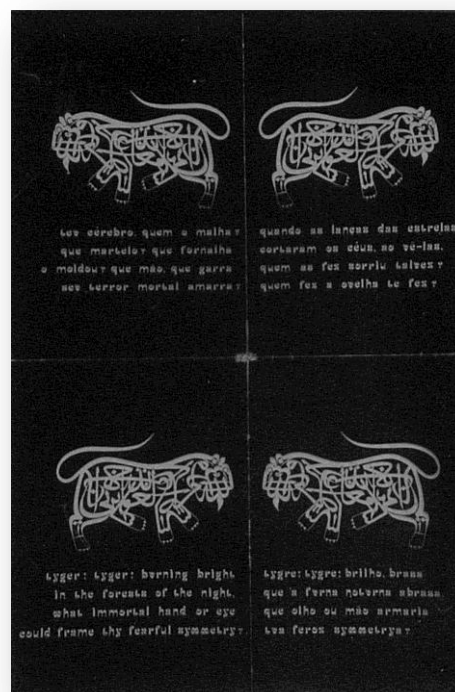


Figure 10. tyger by blake (1977)

iv. Textuality of the Graphical Interface in Electronic Presentation

Several authors have begun to use the graphic resources of HTML and other software languages to produce visual texts. Many features, such as texture, three-dimensionality, and movement, can now be displayed and manipulated on screen. The specific textuality of these electronic interfaces has been used both to represent printed or manuscript texts, which is the case with many on-line archives, and also to produce new texts that adopt the iconic nature of the new medium and make use of its specific material resources.

Augusto de Campos has recently made versions of his earlier poems in electronic media. In many cases, the original printed typefaces have been redesigned in such a way as to integrate colour, texture, and size variation, three-dimensional features, movement and other elements peculiar to screen display. The adoption of the new medium shows that Campos is extending the poetics of typography into a poetics of the electronic graphic interface. Electronic mark-up is not just a way of re-reading typographic marks, because it draws our attention to its own specific iconic space and the ways in which this space re-marks texts. The following poems can be seen as a simple double-frame animation at the official site of Augusto de Campos:⁷



Figure 11. coraçãocabeça (1980)

⁷ <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/biografia.htm>

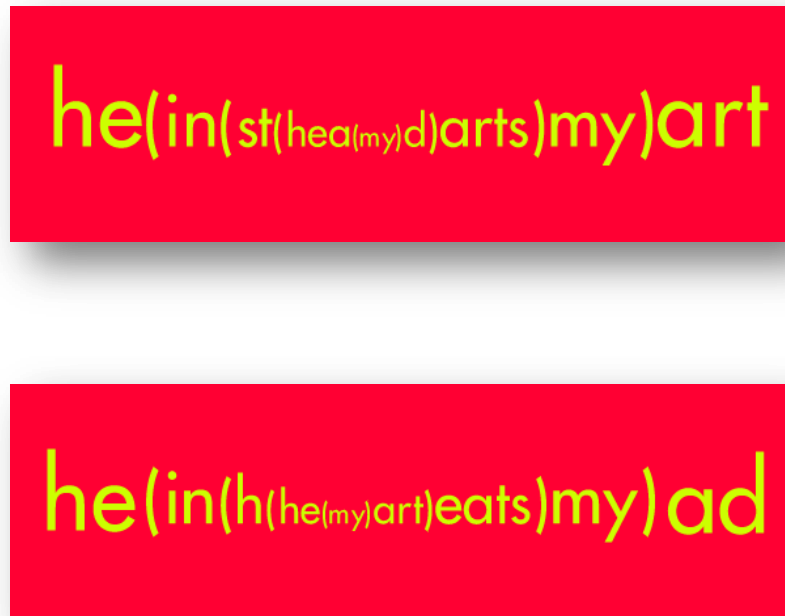


Figure 12. hearthead (1980)

The use of several levels of brackets inside brackets and a continuous line of differently sized characters re-enacts the proverbial conflict between heart and head, emotion and reason (*figure 11*, above). The way the words are interrupted by brackets that contain other words or fragments of other words in a recursive pattern becomes a pictogram of those conflicting meanings. The reader is asked to remake the words and reconnect the broken sequences of letters. A tension is created between individual characters, font size, word spacing and brackets which echoes the meanings of the words used in the text. In the HTML version colour and movement have been added to suggest the diastole and systole of the beating heart. Brackets change places, thus changing words and meanings.

Again, by comparing the Portuguese and the English versions one can see untranslation at work: the choice of words is determined by the compositional principle of the text and not exclusively by its semantics (*figure 12*, above). The processing of signals that defines the act of reading is foregrounded when moved across the gap between languages. External reference to a previous body of signifiers and internal coherence of the new signifiers interact to produce a different alphabetic ideogram. Language is shown here as throbbing and fluid matter where there is only room for translation. Typography has become a way of fixing that flux in a temporary snapshot.

Visual texts highlight the semantic function of typography and explore its potential for meaning. Even at its most straightforward uses, typography is never entirely accidental to meaning. It is essential for the system of differences that sustains written meaning, and it is an important level of articulation for many textual spaces. It punctuates space and differentiates writing, defining parts and relations between them. In concrete and HTML poetry, typography is an important dimension of meaning as an effect of material signifiers, rather than a mere notation for the verbal levels of discourse. With his poetics of the typographical space, Augusto de Campos turns meaning into an accident of textual marks confronting the reader. Typographical design and textual meaning develop, in language and across languages, as series of reinforced and interactive echoes. Reading becomes a semiotic simulacrum of the reading experience itself. Textual meaning is now self-similar to its iconic structure. No longer transparent, but untranslated by typography, the poem is co-extensive with its material form.