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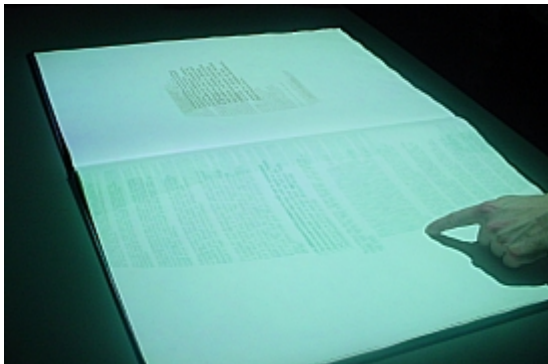
Concrete poetry in analog and digital media

By Roberto Simanowski

No. 28 – 2003

1. Concrete and visual poetry in print

One of the projects shown at *Documenta 2002* in Kassel, Germany, was an over sized empty book. The book was 'written' by David Small who entitled it: *The Illuminated Manuscript* (www.davidsmall.com). Of course, the 26 pages did not remain empty. If one moved one's hand over it, sensors wired around the book caused a projector from high above to send down text according to the page the viewer had opened and according to the movement the viewer's hand undertook at each page. The text was revealed in an unusual, astonishing manner. It ran from one side to the other, it overwrote itself like a palimpsest, or it circled around on a transparent 3 D tube¹ In any case the text's appearance was quite impressive, more so because it was initiated by the integration of the viewer's finger movements.



David Small: *Illuminated Manuscript* (2002)

The title of David Small's book installation is in itself suggestive because it aptly and succinctly describes what is happening: writing with light. This includes both the projection from above as well as the plastic pages illuminated from inside and initiated by viewer contact signaling to the projector the number of the current page.

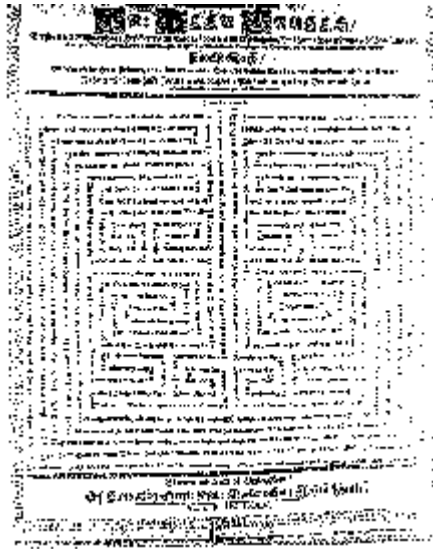
However, the title not only marks a technologically innovative method of text presentation, it also leads us back to the past. *Illuminated Manuscript* is the technical term for handwritten books from the Middle Ages, which are embellished with brilliant inks and dyes. The technique of illumination – elaborately conceived initial letters, ornamental borders and gilded illustrations – sought to let the light shine through the text, which did not mean so much to illustrate the text as to reveal its inner qualities. The light was intended to release the truth of a text from within. Illumination and ornament served the purpose of the message rather than just to illustrate the text.



William Blake: *Illuminated Manuscript*

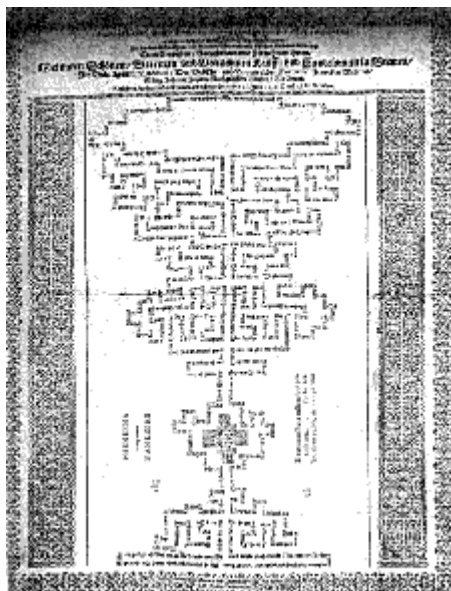
William Blake revived the illuminated manuscript – as a vehicle for the revolution of the imagination – at the end of the 18th century. His *Illuminated Books* object to the capitalist mode of mass production and present a fusion of the visual and the

literary into a form, which cleanses the relationship of the senses to the imagination. This fusion of the visual and the literary is always an existent although rarely recognized aspect of the history of books and writing. As early as antiquity there has been text, which developed an additional meaning by the way it was presented.



1674

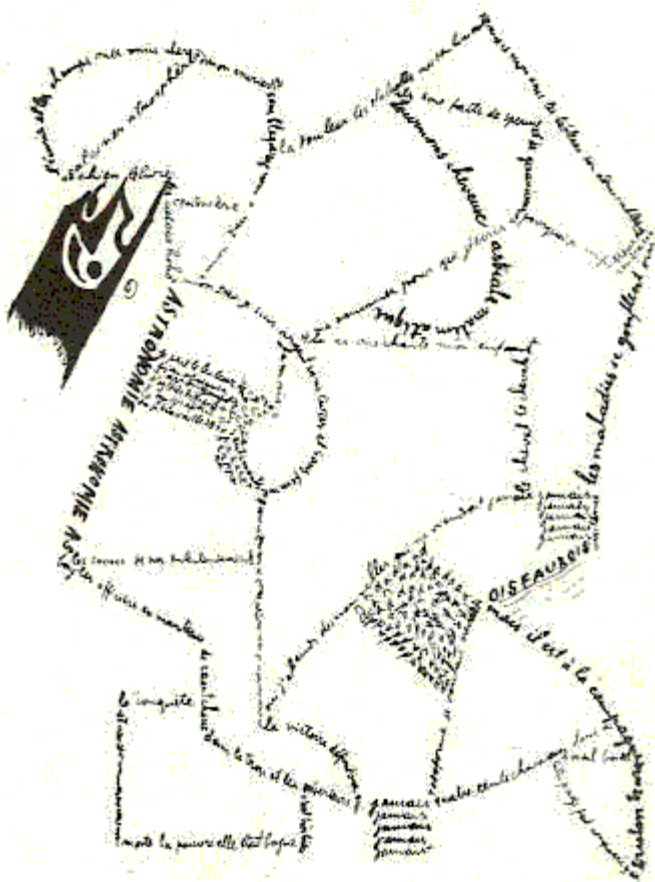
In the so called *labyrinth poems* the text line winds its way over the paper like the path through a maze, thereby adding the labyrinth metaphor to the message of the text itself. Our example from the Baroque represents a coherent labyrinth with a clear way forward to the destination, an optimistic labyrinth without the danger to get lost. In the figurative poems the text shapes a certain figure, in religious context often a cross, in Baroque secular figures as well as here a goblet as a wedding poem for a couple from Bremen in 1637. This poem is an early version of interactive writing, which calls the reader either to turn around the paper or their head in order to perceive the text. The deeper wit of this playing with form lies in the fact that after this performance one feels dizzy as if one had just drank a goblet full of wine.



1637

The *philosophy* behind this playing with form, behind this shift towards typography, is to free the word from its pure representational, designational function. While in literature the physicality of language – such as its graphical aspects – normally is neglected and even considered to poison the authority of the text, the relation between signifier and signified, here the visual form of the word was used as an additional meaning. The word not only represents an object it *presents* it on the visual level. The goblet is to be seen before one even starts to read.

This attention towards the visual materiality of language increased between 1910 and the 1920's when Futurists such as Marinetti or Dadaists such as Tristan Tzara or Kurt Schwitters undertook their typographic experimentation.²



Tristan Tzara: *Calligramme*

The legacy for such exploration was Mallarmé who once condemned the tedious patterns of verbal presentation in newspapers and conventional books and experimented with typography. His *A Throw of a Dice* was first published in 1914. The occasion for such exploration was as well Saussure's deconstruction of the sign into two independent, only incidentally linked elements: the signifier and the signified. Dada attempted to render problematic a linguistics in which an 'absent' signified might be construed to exist independent of its relation to a material signifier (see Drucker, 9-47). In the wake of this development poet practitioners such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Ilia Zdanevich gave theoretical treatment to the materiality of typographic character.

Such experiments on the physical level of language were dismissed by Surrealism, which experimented with language only on the level of mental representation. The area of experimental typography was reopened in the 1950's and 60's, now entitled Concrete Poetry.³ This only "worldwide movement in the art of poetry" (Williams, VII) after World War II is marked by writers as Franz Mon, Eugen Gomringer, Reinhard Döhl, Ernst Jandl, Gerhard Rühm, Konrad Balder Schäuffelen, and Daniel Spoerri to name only a few from German speaking countries. Representatives from other nations include Augusto de Campos,⁴ Emmett Williams, and Jiří Kolář. The unifying element of these author's texts is that one cannot read them aloud. In oral form they would lose their design, they are to see or, as Franz Mon entitled one of his essays on concrete poetry, they are "Poesie der Fläche" (poetry of space).⁵



Reinhard Döhl: *Apfel* (Apple), 1965

schweigen schweigen schweigen

schweigen schweigen schweigen

schweigen schweigen

schweigen schweigen schweigen

schweigen schweigen schweigen

Eugen Gomringer: *Schweigen* (Silencio), 1954

A famous example of this more recent period of concrete poetry, which is also to be found in Emmett William's *Anthology of concrete poetry* from 1967, is a piece by Reinhard Döhl where an apple is shaped by the words »apple« plus the word »worm«. Another example is Eugen Gomringer's piece *Schweigen* (Silence) from 1954, where in horizontal and vertical lines the word »schweigen« surrounds an empty, silent space. This gap is the point in Gomringer's piece for which all other words are just a preparation because the gap conveys the message that, strictly speaking, silence can only be articulated by the *absence* of any words. The message does not lie in a semantic sense between the lines but in a graphic sense between the words. However, this piece does not dismiss the representational function of the word in favor of its visual value. Certainly, the message is to be *seen* but it will only be revealed on the basis that one *did* read the surrounding words before.

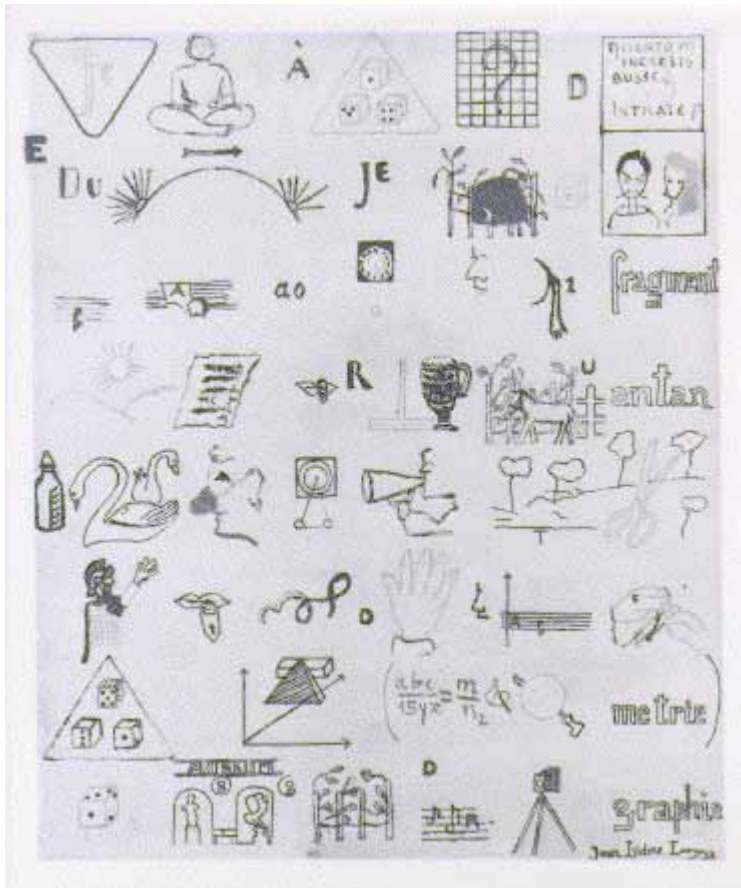
This cooperation portrays the concept of concrete poetry very well: it is concrete in its vividness in contrast to the abstraction of a term. Thus, concrete poetry deals with the relation between the visible form and the intellectual substance of words. It is visual not because it would apply images but because it adds the optical gesture of the word to its semantic meaning - as completion, expansion, or negation. The

intermedial aspect does not lie in the change of the medium but in the change of *perception*, from the semiotic system of *reading* typical for literature to the semiotic system of *viewing* typical for art.⁶

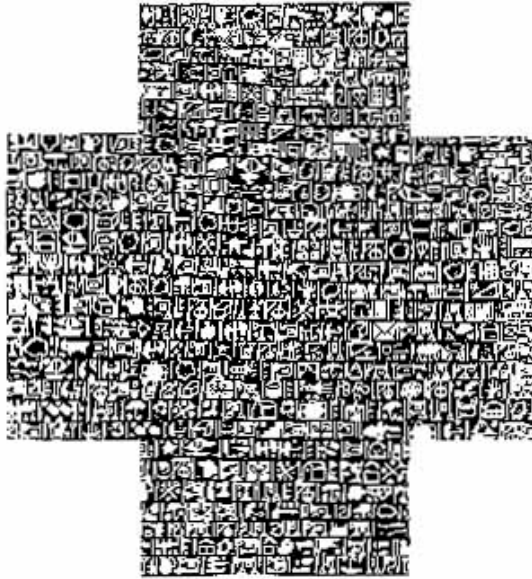


Johannes Jansen: *Nachtwache* (Night-Wach) (1990)

Whereas concrete poetry stands for the iconization of language, *visual poetry* indeed applies images as can be seen in the image-text-collages by Klaus Peter Dencker and Johannes Jansen which are much more complex and difficult to understand than most pieces of concrete poetry. Another example of visual poetry is *lettrism* founded by Isidore Isou in 1945, like Isou's *Les Nombres* from 1952 and Roland Sabati's figurative poems from 1998 referring to webdings and windings alphabet in writing programs as Microsoft Word.⁷



Isou: *Les Nombres* (1952)



Roland Sabati: figurative poem (1998)

A version of visual poetry where text and image are combined but also can exist independently from each other is the *Luminous Poetry* by Günter Brus,⁸ where Brus uses his own and other writer's prose and poems and combines them with drawings. Till the end of the 70's, Brus called his *Luminous Poetry* "illuminierte Manuskripte" (illuminated manuscripts) in reference to William Blake's *Illuminated Books*.



Günter Brus: *Leuchstoffoesie* (1998/99)

Thus, we are back to our starting point whose historic context should have taken shape in this short recapitulation. Now we may discuss the deeper sense of David Small's installation. Is his *Illuminated Manuscript* intended to release the truth of a text from within as its Middle Age predecessors? I want to postpone this question to discuss it in a broader context once I have introduced the further development of concrete and visual poetry in the digital realm.

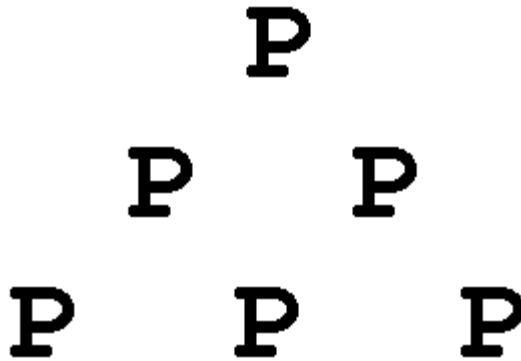
2. Concrete and visual poetry in digital media

As David Small's piece already renders, in the digital realm concrete poetry gains two more levels of expression. While concrete poetry in print combines linguistic and graphic qualities of words, in digital media time and interaction are two additional ways of expression. Words can appear, move, disappear, and they can do this all in reaction to the perceiver's input.

A good example for using time as an aspect of concrete poetry is Augusto de Campos' *poema-bomba* (1983-1997). While the original version in the static realm of print captures the concretization of an exploding poem in a specific, silent moment, the digital version goes beyond the state of a still and realizes this explosion in time as motion and sound. If a still can progress into a movie, the worm of course can eat the apple as in Johannes Auer's digital adaptation *worm applepie for doehl*.



Johannes Auer: *worm applepie for doehl*



Ana María Uribe: *Gymnasia* (1998)

As much as Augusto de Campos proceeded from concrete poetry in print to its kinetic version in digital media, the Argentinian Ana María Uribe proceeded from *Typoems*, as she calls her concrete poetry pieces in print, to *Anipoems*, her name for animated pieces of concrete poetry, which combines an elegant minimalism with a refreshing humor.

A recent German representation of kinetic poetry is *ER/SIE* (HE/SHE) by Ursula Menzer and Sabine Orth. This contribution to the German competition of digital literature in 2001 materializes and comments on the meaning of a word by the way it appears on the screen. Thus, for example, the first syllable of *Erbauung* (*Building* or *Edification*) is thrown in the ground like a concrete block, which cannot be removed, followed by the other letters built up floor by floor.

An example of kinetic poetry, much more difficult to program, is *A Fine View* by David Knobel, a short text about the fall of a roofer. The point here is that the text rises up like the smoke a cigarette (the roofer's cigarette), grows and finally speeds up as if the text came towards the reader's face in the same manner as the roofer's experience as he fell rapidly towards the ground. An audiovisual example with a strong reference to the predecessors of kinetic concrete poetry is Grunewald's animation of a verse by William Blake.

While this form of kinetic concrete poetry is reminiscent of the text movies and television poetry since the 60's (like *So is this* by Michael Snow from 1982), the *interaction* between a piece and its perceiver leads beyond this cinematic situation. An example is *Das Epos der Maschine* (The Epic of the Machine) by Urs Schreiber, the award winner of the competition of netliterature by the French-German TV

channel *Arte* in 2000 (for a review see dichtung-digital.de/7/2000). This piece addresses technology as a doubtful god that controls us. At the same time it lets us *feel* the pressure exercised by technology because everything is programmed. We have to follow certain hidden patterns before we get access to other parts of the text and reading is not as free as it used to be with books or hypertext.

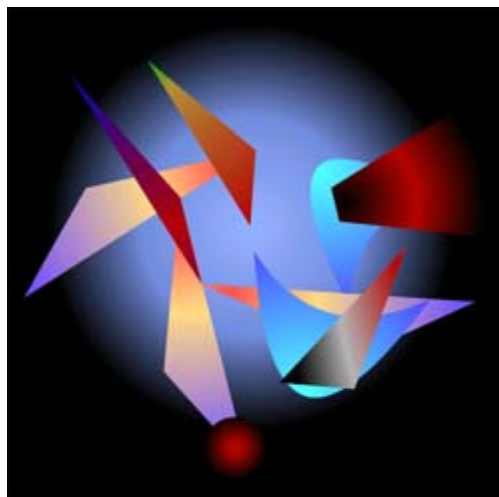


Urs Schreiber: *Das Epos der Maschine* (The Epic of the Machine) (2000)

One remarkable effect is when the words, which call technology into question are *themselves* formed into a question mark. The visual realization separates all words from the word »Wahrheit« (truth), which remains immobile in contrast to the other. It is stiff and rigid as assumed in the text. If we click on this word the other words disappear behind it, ambiguously suggesting that doubt has escaped into unshakeable truth or truth has swallowed, what called it into question. However we read the removal of these words, we soon realize that it only lasts a short time. Once we move the mouse these words reappear. They adhere to the word truth, they follow truth wherever it goes, and they can be 'eaten' again, but never erased. Once a question has arisen, the message would seem to be, one can't get rid of it any more, one will encounter it again and again, provided there is movement in the discourse. That this movement lies in our hand is literally the message the interaction conveys.

Completely based on users' action is the audio-visual rollover poem *YATOO* by Ursula Hentschläger and Zelko Wiener (for a review see dichtung-digital.de 1/2002). These net-artists from Vienna, who call themselves *Zeitgenossen* (contemporary), present a star that utters text on mouse-over contact. The text does not appear on the screen but as an audio file; one side of a star corner activates the female speaker; the other side activates the male speaker. Nevertheless, the text's materiality is realized in the graphics, which transform in shape according to the way one navigates. If one always touches the right or the left side of the corners of the star, one gets a whole sentence and a new harmonious shape of the visual parts of the star. The sentences are admittedly simple –»You are the only one«, for example, which also explains the title's abbreviation– and certainly do not represent the state of art in English poetry. However, this is partly due to the poetics of constraint on which the poem is based because each line can only consist of five words - one for each corner within the star.

On the other hand, the piece gets interesting only via the user's reaction, which adds to the poetics of constraint a perception in constraint. In order to understand the given text one has to navigate the star in a certain order. If one does not care and contacts randomly both sides of the corners one will only hear the chaos of words mirrored by the chaos of the visual parts.



Zeitgenossen: *YATOO*

This may be the comment to the romantic statements in this poem: relationships need to understand and take into account the underlying setting. If one does not, conversation will not take place. Thus, the poetics of constraint -respectively the

perception in constraint - is part of the message, a wordless part, which cannot be overheard in our interaction with the piece.

After these examples of digital forms of concrete poetry I want to discuss the poetics of concrete poetry in print and digital media.

3. Decoration and Message

Experimental poetry – which concrete poetry is part of – has been accused of being an autistic language and therefore of being incapable of having an impact on the reader's consciousness. Thus, concrete poetry seems to be useless in terms of political interventions. The counter argument is that focusing on the text's materiality implies a reflection on the use of language thereby impeling the audience to identify and perhaps even reject all attempts of language instrumentalization. (Einhorn). "By the isolation of words from the usual setting of language," Gisela Dischner points out, "the natural way of speaking suddenly appears in a different light, questionable, incomprehensible. The intended patterns of language are being undermined." (38)⁹ The American scholar Johanna Drucker states the same intention for the typographic experiments of Dadaism, which "was concerned with opposing the established social order through subverting the dominant conventions of the rules of representation." (65) In this perspective, the deconstructive play with the symbolic order of language is considered to question social patterns and to even have revolutionary potential.¹⁰

However revolutionary concrete poetry may be considered by manifestos and academics, it is "a kind of game," as Emmett Williams states (VI); the revolution happens as a playful event. There is a sensual pleasure involved, a release from reading words in favor of enjoying their visual appearance. There is the likelihood that this sensual pleasure is not combined with the pleasure of reflection, that the linguistic play remains harmless as Gisela Dischner points out (39). Other theorists have addressed the focus on form for its own sake with regards to other periods of concrete poetry. For example, Wolfgang Ernst considers the "optical poetry" ("optische Dichtung") of the Baroque period, especially labyrinth poems and artistic reading-parcours, to be rooted in the attitude of mannerism (211f.). Is concrete poetry manneristic rather than political?

Mannerism established a shift from the rhetoric of conviction and persuasion to a specific emphasis on entertainment which used effects, amazement, grotesquerie and the fascination of paralogism. (Hocke, 133ff.).¹¹ This applies to mannerist works in the 17th century as well as other epochs of mannerism such as in Hellenism, the late Middle Ages, Romanticism and Art Nouveau. Mannerism always favors form

over content and is in love with decoration.¹² Considering the revolutionary gesture of concrete poetry suggested above, it seems to be absolutely inappropriate to compare it with mannerism. However, within the international movement of concrete poetry, the given examples may be a representation of militant social reform, which Emmett Williams sees side by side with “religious mystics, lyricists of love, psychedelic visionaries, engaged philosophers, disinterested philologists and poetypographers.” (VII) Besides engaged examples, which literally intend to set the reader out of line like Claus Bremer’s *immer schön in der reihe bleiben* (keep in line) from 1966,¹³ one finds equally philosophical pieces such as Max Bense’s *Cartesian concrete*¹⁴ or playful visual renditions of words and people such as Gomringer’s *Wind*, Kolář’s *Tinguely*, and Döhl’s *Apfel*.¹⁵

We see the same diversity in the beginning of the 20th century when Futurist, Dadaist, and Cubist artists in literature and visual art emphasized materiality. Their emphasis either embodied the intervention into the symbolic order as a kind of political and social critique (Drucker considers this “strain of modern art practice” typical for Dadaism). Other artists realized this materiality to facilitate revelation and the representation of truth similar to the illuminated manuscripts in the Middle Ages.¹⁶ A third group finally denied both religious and political aspirations and was concerned with the autonomy of the sign existing on its own right, presenting rather than representing, relieved of designatory functions.¹⁷ According to Drucker, even the last approach proves a “persistent investigation of the process of signification such that the relations between formal manipulation and content could not be dissolved”, which is why the relations between formal manipulation and content never have been dissolved (67). However, the question remains whether such formal manipulation really increases a reflection of the patterns of representation and a desire of subversion or whether it rather supports a playful approach to text freed from meaning in order to focus on the surface effect.

With respect to kinetic concrete poetry one should realize that concrete poetry in print and concrete poetry in the digital paradigm are not only separated by their media but by decades of history. The revolutionary pathos of concrete poetry in the 50’s and 60’s will hardly be found in our contemporary times. Since the arrival of postmodern philosophy, the reverence of grand narrations of enlightenment and revolution has dissolved. The postmodern condition caused disillusion and a resignation from ideologies and social utopia towards individual, sensual and playful settings.¹⁸ This tendency results from general skepticism towards any kind of teleology or claims to know the truth – a skepticism, which itself is the result of what Foucault calls postmodern enlightenment.¹⁹

Despite the conservative turn of politicians and intellectuals in the wake of September 11th, this anti ideological attitude is still to be found in younger generations, though hardly with the reflexive background of postmodernism. Florian Illies, feature writer of FAZ, described this consciousness with anecdotes in his book

Generation Golf, sociologist Heinz Bude discusses it in his study *Generation Berlin*, and media researcher Norbert Bolz celebrates in his recently published *Consumistic Manifest* the substitution of consumption for ideology as “pragmatic cosmopolitanism” and the global society’s immune system against the virus of fanatic religions (14 and 16). Whatever one may conclude from the comments of these authors, one certainly has to agree with their description.

The aesthetic consequence of such a cultural disposition is obvious: if emphatic messages seem to be inappropriate, the focus of art will shift to form. This was the case in mannerism, which has been a result of crisis similar to postmodernism, which is why Umberto Eco considers postmodernism the modern name for mannerism (77). And indeed, as Andrew Darley notices in his book on *Visual Digital Culture* there is “a shift away from prior modes of spectator experience based on symbolic concerns (and ‘interpretative models’) towards recipients who are seeking intensities of direct sensual stimulation.” (3) The “prevalence of technique and image over content and meaning”, manifested in computer designed movies such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Total Recall* (1990) or *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), leads to a “culture of the depthless image,” to an “aesthetics of the sensual,” which puts the audience “in pursuit of the ornamental and the decorative [...], the amazing and the breathtaking.” (193 and 169) Darley speaks of movies, MTV, and computer games. However, the turn of the “reader’ or interpreter” into a “sensualist” (169) can be discovered with regards to print and screen design as well. Thus, David Carson’s design of “post-alphabetic text” “refashions information as an aesthetic event,” (Kirschenbaum) and text in multimedia environments on the screen embody a shift from protestant enlightenment to catholic revelation, as the German linguist Ulrich Schmitz puts it. Lev Manovich even sees a shift in the official presentation of net art from the self-reflexive conceptual art of the early 90’s (with a huge influence from Eastern Europe) to Flash-art at the beginning of the new century (with stars representing the world’s key IT regions San Francisco, New York and Northern Europe).²⁰ To quote Robert Coover, advocate of hyperfiction, who in 2000 declared the passing of its Golden Age: there is “the constant threat of hypermedia: to suck the substance out of a work of lettered art, reduce it to surface spectacle.”

This transfer of attention from semantics to the surface spectacle is the cultural context of digital concrete poetry. It is to no surprise that the legacy of meaningful reflection cannot always be discovered. Often enough the play with material is only focused on impressive effects, flexing ‘technical muscles.’ In these cases, language – as in mannerism – celebrates itself. In the digital realm language of course is more than the word seen on the screen. The language of digital media is composed of letters, links, colors, shapes and action, which is all based on the code beneath the screen. The language of digital media is the program; which is why Lev Manovich sees the “software artist” as the new type of artist.

According to Manovich, the software-artist outdates the media-artist, who, in the 60's outdated the romantic artist. While the romantic or modern artist "creates from scratch, imposing the phantoms of his imagination on the world", media-artists "not only use media technologies as tools, but they also use the content of commercial media," re-photograph a newspaper photograph or isolate and manipulate a segment from a movie or TV show. This 'art of the second hand'²¹ is now overcome by the software-artist, "the new romantic", who "marks his/her mark on the world by writing the original code". This software-artist "re-uses the language of modernist abstraction and design – lines and geometric shapes, mathematically generated curves and outlined color fields – to get away from figuration in general, and cinematographic language of commercial media in particular. Instead of photographs and clips of films and TV, we get lines and abstract compositions." The announced retreat away from the language of commercial media seems to contrast the transformation of artists into designers, which occurred in the 1920's, helping to change "the formal radicality of early modernism into the seamless instrument of corporate capitalist enterprise," as Johanna Drucker states (238). That the *Generation Flash* "does not waste its energy on media critique," as Manovich states, may weaken such an assumption. Another argument is that the non-cinematographic Flashaesthetics²² actually is well equipped to serve as the new language of an emerging, rapidly commercialized medium. Finally: most software artists work as designers as well, creating commercial products like online games, webtoys, and multiuser environments.

To visit the websites Manovich cites as examples, illustrates the departure from cinematographic language and seems to prove that *Generation Flash* indeed "does not waste its energy on media critique." Manny Tan's interactive spider on uncontrol.com is an example for all the versions of 'mouse magnetism,' installing a closed circuit between the user and a digital entity for the experience of playful interaction.²³

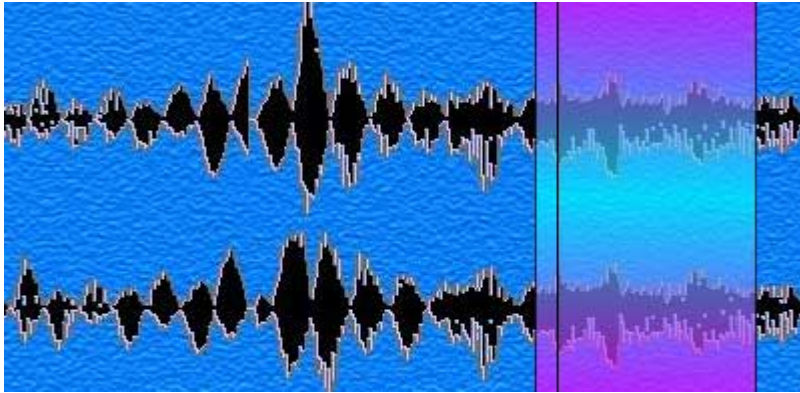
A good example for non-figurative *software-art*, which at the same time works with "post-alphabetic texts," is Untitled by Squid Soup a group of designers, artists, and musicians, who create commercial products like online games, webtoys, and multiuser environments, as well as experiment with spacial materialization of sound. *Untitled* is such an audiovisual 3-D-environment, which presents written letters and mumbled words just to create "a feeling of being somewhere."²⁴ What we see and hear is the transformation of text into sound and design, a fascinating, somehow hypnotic experience, which has absolutely no intention to be investigated from a semantic point of view.



Suid Soup: *Untitled*

An example, which almost paradigmatically embodies the development of concrete poetry, is *Enigma n* by the Canadian programmer and net artist Jim Andrews. *Enigma n* was first developed in 1998 in DHTML as anagrammatic play with the word *meaning*. In print one could have concretized the change of meaning by a specific order of letters in horizontal and vertical lines reading one direction as »meaning«, the other direction as »enigma n«. This setting would have revealed the anagrammatic surplus of the letter »n«. In Andrews's digital version from 1998, the letters, which at first form the word »meaning« in contrast to the title »enigma n«, change position and meaning constantly – until stopped by the user – thereby giving meaning even to the letter »n« as the sign for a variable number.

Andrews calls *Enigma n* "a philosophical poetry toy for poets and philosophers from the age of 4 up". This description stresses the playful character, which goes far beyond the play of concrete poetry in print. In 2002 Andrews published an audio-visual version with increased sensual effects. In *Enigma n^2* the letters of the word *meaning* are not shown in changing positions, but the word is spoken, manipulated by software. As Andrews explains in a private email November 2002: "The sound itself starts out with the word 'meaning' backwards and then there are two normal repetitions of the word 'meaning'. The program randomly selects a starting point in the sound and a random end point (after the start point). And it selects a random number of times between 1 and 6 to repeat the playing of that segment" – with the option for the user to set the start point by clicking on the wave form.



Jim Andrews: *Enigma n^2* (2002)

Andrews is certainly right seeing *Enigma n^2* “as a kind of continuation of *Enigma n* in that it’s concerned with the enigma of meaning.” (private email) And indeed, hearing these endless, interrupted, randomly looped attempts to articulate the word »meaning« may support this aim. However, whereas *Enigma n* required contemplating the deconstruction one sees on the screen, *Enigma n^2* allows just dipping into the hypnotic atmosphere of sound mix and visual effects. The original philosophical effort of the anagrammatic play in *Enigma n* has been released; concrete poetry has turned into music.²⁵

Thus, we can say that concrete poetry at least partly carries out the same shift from symbolic concerns to sensual stimulation Darley sees for visual digital aesthetics. There are good reasons to assume an irresistible ‘mood for technology’ itself behind this transition, on both sides of production and of perception. This mood for technology can be marked as digital kitsch on the basis of Ludwig Giesz’ definition of kitsch as giving up the specific distance between I and the object in favor of a feeling of fusion and surrender to the object (407). Such a mark, of course, would display an absolute “meaning-centered approach” to aesthetics, which Darley questions in his book: “Is ornamentation, style, spectacle, giddiness really aesthetically inferior or, rather, just different (other) from established motions of literary, classical modern art? Is an aesthetic without depth necessarily an impoverished aesthetic, or is it rather, another kind of aesthetic – misunderstood and undervalued as such?” (6)

Darley seems to have the support of Susan Sontag, who wrote in her famous essay *Against Interpretation* as early as 1964: “In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.” Sontag recommends a deeper interest in “form” in art and Darley suggests we approach the

“poetics’ of surface play and sensation” (193) open mindedly and without reservations resulting from concepts of cultural pessimism.

However, Darley even seems to have the support of particular moments in art history. In a certain way the “aesthetics of the sensual”, the “culture of the depthless image” is reminiscent of the debate of formal aesthetics in the beginning of the 20th century, when the visual sign was considered self-valuable, and ought to be freed from its meaning-bearing role to the “pure visual”. Shall we consider *Enigma n°2* – and moreover those pieces of software-art which deliberately focus on “surface play and sensation” – a return to formal aesthetics? Is the autonomous self-centered technical effect – the code as a self-sufficient presentation on the screen – the contemporary equivalent of the “pure visual”? Is, again, this aesthetic of the “surface play and sensation” appropriate to the character of our time and of this technology?

In an age of theme parks and progressing semi-alphabets, in an age of “spectacular dictates of the culture industry”, as Hal Foster complains, one feels the need to stand up against the sell-out of meaning and to fight for artifacts which still demand to invest and practice hermeneutic energy. One even feels reminded of the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, stating in 1908 in his essay *Ornament und Verbrechen* with regards to the aesthetic hybridity of Art Nouveau: “The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.” (20)²⁶ However, the question is not only whether one should fight or not, but to what extend this fight may succeed within the realm of digital media. The response of a reader of *Epos der Maschine* proves that the reading of kinetic concrete poetry easily can miss the author’s intention. In this case, the author hoped for readers using the mouse with curious passion and promised the serious reader a spectacle not only on the screen but in their head as well.²⁷ His fascinated reader, however, writes: “just the way it deals with script and typography! I don’t need to read anymore! How words shove into each other and circle and appear and disappear and and and and and!” (webring www.bla2.de; entry to *Epos der Maschine*)

The medium itself seems to foster such an attitude towards surface reading, and an attraction to programmed effects. The medium’s click gesture seems to favor curiosity which cares for what is promised behind every link rather than for what is to be discovered between the lines and signs. Lev Manovich says about his first visit on the Flash-site praystation.com: “I was struck by the lightness of its graphics.” Of course, in this case lightness is different from lightness in Middle Age illuminated manuscripts where the light was intended to release the truth of a text from within. Lightness of graphics on praystation.com stands for ease and lightheartedness. In the light of this difference we are finally back to our starting point, which now deserves a second look. What about lightness either way in David Small’s *Illuminated Manuscript*?

4. Lightness, Lighting, and Irony

Let's recapitulate which situation of perception Small's installation provides. The embellished book in a dark room attracted many visitors, gathering around this 'virtual camp fire,' curious how the display of text was working. In order to read the text one had to stop moving the finger and wait till the text settled down. One can imagine how hopeless it was to decipher the words with five or so pushing people eager to experience the power of their own fingers.

However, this does not change the fact that the book did provide certain texts. These texts draw the attention to a third meaning of the title, which does not stand for a technology of presenting but of thinking. Illumination refers to Enlightenment; the famous *Illuminatenorden* (illumination order) may bridge the association. And indeed, the assembled texts all are dedicated to a specific topic of Enlightenment. Smalls' piece is, as he himself explains, "a collection of writing on the subject of freedom." Among these writings we can find the *American Declaration of Human Rights*, Franklin D. Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms* speech to the congress at January 6th in 1941, Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham jail from April 16th in 1963, and Georg W. Bush's *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People* from September 20th, 2001. Is this thematic orientation pure chance? Is the viewer intended to consider together both aspects of illumination: freedom and truth?

The arrival of the text in September 11th adds the perspective of contradiction and inconsistency to the topic of enlightenment and religious or secular truth.²⁸ To those who did not release themselves into the simple logic of friend or enemy, right or wrong, September 11th made clear the extent to which freedom still remains an unsolved problem. Though, president Bush in his *Address* promised: "Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done," one knows the subject matter is much more complicated than this statement in the wake of the terrible events of September 11th implies.²⁹ As increasingly different positions of politicians and public writers have shown, there is no clear indication about how to be just – and as Derrida states in his book on justice, justice is an experience of the impossible: one cannot objectivize justice, one cannot say »this is just« and even less »I am just«, without having already betrayed justice (33). Freedom of the subject, one should conclude, includes the freedom not to side with one of the offered 'truths,' but to remain in the process of doubt and search – because the actual problem is the illusion that we are in the right. One can also say: "Absolute truth abolishes a habitable planet."³⁰



Günter Brus:
Absolute Wahrheit schafft einen bewohnbaren Planeten ab.

This statement brings us back to the illuminated manuscripts by Günter Brus, from where this is quoted: "Absolute Wahrheit schafft einen bewohnbaren Planeten ab". With this piece, if not before, the illuminated manuscript has given up its genre specific gesture of revelation. Now it uses this gesture only to call it into question. The poetry of revelation has turned into *Luminous Poetry* (Leuchtstoffpoesie), as Brus calls his illuminated manuscripts; the light has lost its symbolic value to release the truth of a text from within. One could say: enlightenment has moved on to postmodernism.

We encounter this mutation of illumination as revelation into illumination as lighting in Small's installation as well. Small's *illuminated manuscript* obviously does not intend to reveal the inner qualities of its text. It rather suggests playing disrespectfully with the text. The way the text appears undermines all of its authority. The ironic precondition of this understanding is that one nevertheless finally reads these texts, for example on the Internet. Here, on our home computer, Small's installation would find its completion. And here we would realize that kinetic concrete poetry might play with formal effects in a manneristic way and still provide a deeper message, which we ought to discover. Behind design and surface spectacle is still room for deeper meaning. If artists make the effort to hide such meaning beneath the technical effects they deserve an audience that is patient and curious enough to have a second look.

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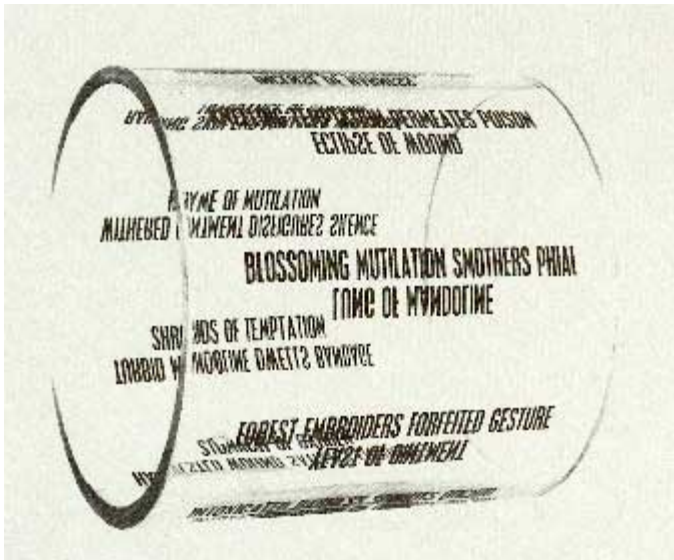
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Notes

1. The tube reminds of Schuldt's *Glastextkörper* from 1965; a glass tube whose surface displayed several sentences.



2. See Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tuuum*, first published in journals between 1912 and 1914, and Tzara's cubistic calligrammes.
3. Gomringer and the Noigandas poets of São Paulo agreed upon this term to describe the new poetry in 1956 unaware of Öyvind Fahlström who had already written his "manifest for konkret poesie" in 1953.
4. See his homepage: <http://www.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/>
5. 'Prose of Space' would be a text like Lewis Carroll's *The Tale of a Rat*, which is presented in the shape of a rat tale.

6. Whereas the system of reading consists of discrete elements which possess meaning as such, as words (lexems) one can look up in a dictionary, the system of visual perception consist of non discrete elements, which will be structured as an amount of discrete signs only on the base of the projection of hypothetically assumed signifiers onto the visual object. Only within this projection a specific shape or a specific color will have a specific meaning. - For a differentiation between concrete and visual poetry see Dencker, 174f. and Weiss. Note Emmett William's focus on *poetry* rather than *concrete* and his objection against the de-emphasization of poetry by too strong analogies of concrete poetry to the visual arts (Williams, V).
7. For the 'lingualisation' of painting at the beginning of the 20th century see collages such as Carlo Carrà's *Manifestazione interventista* (1914) or Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbilder*. A former version of such 'lingualisation' are Giuseppe Arcimboldo's allegorical portraits in baroque, a later example are Niki de Saint Phalle's readable sculptures like *La mariée* from 1963 with the weddings dress out of little objects such as a snake, baby, plane, car, birds or shoes.
8. End of the 1990ties Günter Brus' exhibition "*Leuchtstoff - Poesie und Zeichen - Chirurgie*" was shown at places like Kunsthalle Tübingen, Kunsthalle Kiel, and Neue Galerie der Stadt Linz.
9. Translation by the author, see the German original: "Durch die Isolation von Wörtern aus dem gewohnten 'Ablauf' der Sprache erscheint das Selbstverständliche der Sprachgewohnheit plötzlich neu, fragwürdig, unverständlich; die intendierten Sprachgewohnheiten werden aufgebrochen. Das ästhetische Nicht-Selbstverständlichnehmen des Selbstverständlichen könnte modellhaft sein für das gesellschaftliche Nicht-Selbstverständlichnehmen des Gewohnten, 'Normalen'."
10. Chris Bezzel speaks of an "aesthetical alienation from the social alienation" and states: "revolutionary writing means the revolution of writing." ("ästhetische Entfremdung von der sozialen Entfremdung", "dichtung der revolution bedeutet revolution der dichtung.") (35f.)
11. Hocke speaks of a "manieristische Para-Rhetorik" (146)
12. Hugo Friedrich notices the hypertrophy of artistic means and the atrophy of content (597). Ernst Robert Curtius states the randomly and meaningless plethora of ornamentation in manneristic epochs (278). Hocke differentiates between Mannerism and Baroque and states for the latter to revitalize *docere* against *delectare* (146). This statement follows the thesis of Erwin Panofsky who considers Baroque in his essay *Was ist Barock* (1934) a return to the principles of Renaissance classicism, a "reaction against exaggeration and over-complication [...] a new tendency towards clarity, natural simplicity, and even

equilibrium" (23). For a new exploration of this perspective see Peter Burgard *The Poetics of Irony: Opitz and the (Un)Grounding of German Language*, who reveals the various forms of Baroque art to subvert the systematic principles underlying Renaissance art.

13. Bremer writes the title line for line one under the other until the page is covered with the intention that the reader will have difficulties to really read line for line and rather be provoked "not to keep in line but, on the contrary, to get out of line [thereby setting] the reader free in the realm of his own possibilities, the realm in which we are brothers." (Williams, see entry for Bremer). See as well Ivan Steiger, who builds the word NEIN (no) out of many YES (ja) words, suggesting that (or asking whether) obedience will finally turn into resistance.
14. This piece from 1966 sets the words »ich«, »denke«, »etwas« »ist« in a circle so that it can be read in a different order. See the word painting *The Fall of the Tower of Babel* (1964) by John Furnival, where the letters of the phrase "peace for the world" and its Russian translation mingle more and more to build a house of meaningless noise. Both pieces are included in Emmett William's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*.
15. In *Wind* the letters w-i-n-d all over and back and forth build the word »wind«; in *Tinguely* the letters t-i-n-g-u-e-l-y shape an object, which looks like a Tinguely sculpture (see Emmett William's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*).
16. Wassily Kandinsky considers material effects to "endlessly augment[s] the reserve of spiritual values" (123, quote from: Drucker, 62).
17. The Cubist Maurice Raynal states: "But the truth picture will constitute an individual object, which will possess an existence of its own apart from the subject that has inspired it." (Quote and further discussion in: Drucker, 65). For a discussion of the concept of the image for image's sake as an aspect of formal aesthetics see Wiesing. For the contemporary attention to the material components of signification in linguistic theory (Saussure, Russian Formalism, Prague School) and essays by poet practitioners see Drucker, chapter one.
18. For this tendency in art and design see Wick, 11. For examples in literature, which dismiss the grand narration of the 68's movement see Christian Kracht's novel *Faserland* (1995) and Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre's novel *Soloalbum* (1998).
19. Indiscussing postmodernism I refer to Michel Foucault's understanding of postmodernism as an attitude of mind rather than a phenomenon of a specific time in history. In contrast to humanism as a theory about mankind tied to a certain point of view such as Christian, atheistic, and Marxist humanism this attitude is

skeptical against teleological ideas and the belief in progress and opts for building identity on the base of the hermeneutics of the other (see Foucault: What is Enlightenment?)

20. Manovich compares the Tirana Biennale 01 Internet exhibition with exhibitions in the early 90s.
21. Manovich speaks of the media-artist as “a parasite who leaves [sic!] at the expense of the commercial media” and concludes as reaction to thirty years of media art: “We are tired of being always secondary, always reacting to what already exists”
22. See Manovich’s note: “Many of the sites which inspired me to think of ‘Flash aesthetics’ are not necessarily made with Flash; they use Shockwave, DHTML, Quicktime and other Web multimedia formats. Thus the qualities I describe below as specific to ‘Flash aesthetics’ are not unique to Flash sites.”
23. A more philosophical version of *mouse-magnetism* is Antoine Schmitt’s gallery of entities “avec determination” – www.gratin.org/as/avec-determination (see review in *Paris Connection*).
24. This is the answer from Squid Soup in a private email when asked for the intention of their piece. In the same email Squid Soup explains the production of meaningless text as follows: “1. take a random book off of a random shelf and open at a random page; 2. read a random passage; 3. repeat steps 1 and 2 a few times; 4. take recorded passages and cut them into small pieces (samples); 5. Change the speed and direction of some of the samples; 6. stick them back together in a different order.”
25. Or should one say concrete poetry has turned into sound poetry? In his email Andrews states: “A kind of strange generative/interactive sound poetry/music. I have my stereo hooked up to my computer, so my computer speakers are my stereo’s speakers. I play it sometimes (fairly loudly) for a few minutes to hear if I can figure out more about that sort of music.”
26. Cited by Forster, who discusses Loos in the context of total design almost a century later (14). For the original text in German see Glück.
27. See interview with Urs Schreiber in: [dichtung-digital.org 6/2000](http://dichtung-digital.org/6/2000) (www.dichtung-digital.de/Interviews/Schreiber-23-Aug-00)
28. On the one hand, it is emphasized that the Islamic ‘truth’ of Dschihad against the western world and culture cannot be taken from the Koran and that Islam is a peaceful, tolerant religion. On the other, western intellectuals underline that western convictions and values are not universal and cannot simply be imposed on other civilizations. Both cases rely on hermeneutic procedures and exemplify their immense practical consequences.

29. This is even more true in a country that, as Noam Chomsky reminds us, the World Court has condemned for international terrorism (84).
30. An example for the political consequences of such linguistic and philosophical understanding of the relativity of all systems of thinking is Jean Paul who, in the time of Napoleons attack of Germany took an in-between position between German nationalists and Bonapartists stating: I am neither biased nor conceited enough to absolutely side with one party. In a different context he declares he wants to keep himself open to the partly truth from all sides since he does not want to make his I to a temple, altar or even representative of the absolute truth. (See original version: "[Ich bin] weder einseitig noch eingebildet genug, mich mit aller Meinung für eine Partei zu entscheiden", and: "[Ich will mich der] theilweisen Wahrheit von allen Seiten offen halte[n], weil mein Ich kein Tempel, Altar oder gar Repräsentant der himmlischen Wahrheit sein kann."] (Bertram, 93, and Berend, 81f.)