

Reinventing Poetic Modes: Spanish and Latin American Visual Poetry



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1. Theoretical framework

A growing body of contemporary poetry in the western world can be classified as visual poetry; an ambiguous modality that is not considered art nor literature.⁽¹⁾

Considering this statement, visual poetry could be conceptualized within the context of a para-literary age and the issue of separation between art and literature could be seen as directly related to fundamental distinctions structuring western culture: language vs matter, word vs thing, thought vs perception, content vs form, mind vs body (A. Prohm 2008).

(1) Visual poetry has never been included in the literary canon apart from a series of avant-garde poems (Futurism, Dadaism, Creationism, Surrealism, etc.). This shows the complexities of this type of art that for many is marginal to literature. The notion of a literary canon has always been a controversial issue, especially with styles that do not fit into conventional generic patterns. According to Marjorie Perloff since World War II “there has never been a fixed American poetry canon” (2012). Visual poetry has been placed in the periphery of writing, and although it is a dynamic modality, always renewing itself.

- Alan Prohm “VISUAL POETRY: Artists’ Writing in a Para-literary Age” *Avain* 1, (2008): 77-87.

1. Theoretical framework

It might also be argued that the rise of modern visual poetry reflects a new awareness of the printed page, as W. Bohn discussed extensively in *Modern Visual Poetry* (2001).

For Bohn this art reveals the artists' wish to liberate language and poetic discourse from the tyranny of the verbal domain.

Visual poetry can be described as a form of intermedia art, which falls outside classical genres and other recognized styles of art, and can produce figurative discourse, with the help of parataxis, and other.

1. Theoretical framework

- Visual poetry is not a homogenous modality.
 - a. An intermedia art (Dick Higgins 1955) to mean that it falls outside of classical literary genres and other recognized styles of art.
 - b. A hybrid and open category of art.
 - c. A non-lyric form of poetry.
- Hybridity, open art and intermediality are useful concepts that allow us mapping visual poetry from the framework of the semiology of mediums.
- Another approach to reference this style is through the concept of canon. Visual poetry, although not a new style, has never been included in any literary canon, apart from a series of classical avant-garde poems (Futurism, Dadaism, Creationism, Surrealism, etc.). This shows the complexities of this type of art.

1. Theoretical framework

- Visual poetry allows for intersemiotic, structuralist and post-structuralist analyses but challenges genre and literary classifications.
- Visual poetry invites readers to pose this type of additional questions that go beyond aesthetic matters to include the fields of epistemology, phenomenology, psychology, biology, genetics, etc.
- Its multimodal nature generates theoretical discourse on knowledge formation.
- Visual P. is an interartistic practice that moves between the literary and the visual, between the analytic and the analogic, between the virtuality of several media and the objectual (3D) as fixed materialities, between the static and the kinetic.

2. Visual poetry in Spain and Latin America

- Visual poetry in Spain and Latin America has proved to be an ideal platform for combining both aesthetic and socially committed intentions, particularly in totalitarian periods, but also under corrupt democratic governments.
- Authors such as Joan Brossa (Spain), Guillem Viladot (Spain), Fernando Millán (Spain); Décio Pignatari (concretism, Brazil), Haroldo and Augusto de Campos (concretism, Brazil), Avelino de Araujo (Brazil), Edgardo Antonio Vigo (conceptual art, Argentina), Clemente Padín (mail art, Uruguay), among many others, have altered and expanded the limits of poetic writing while rebelling against institutional and corporative abuses of power, etc.

2. Visual poetry in Spain and Latin America

Spain and Latin America comprise a vast geographical area with countries that culturally and technologically are not at the same stage. The Hispanic region produces distinctive ideo-aesthetic styles that differ from similar literary and artistic traditions such as the Anglo-Saxon, the French, etc.

Even though it is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the various visual poetry styles in depth, one common feature is that formal experimentation tends to be ethically and aesthetically committed.

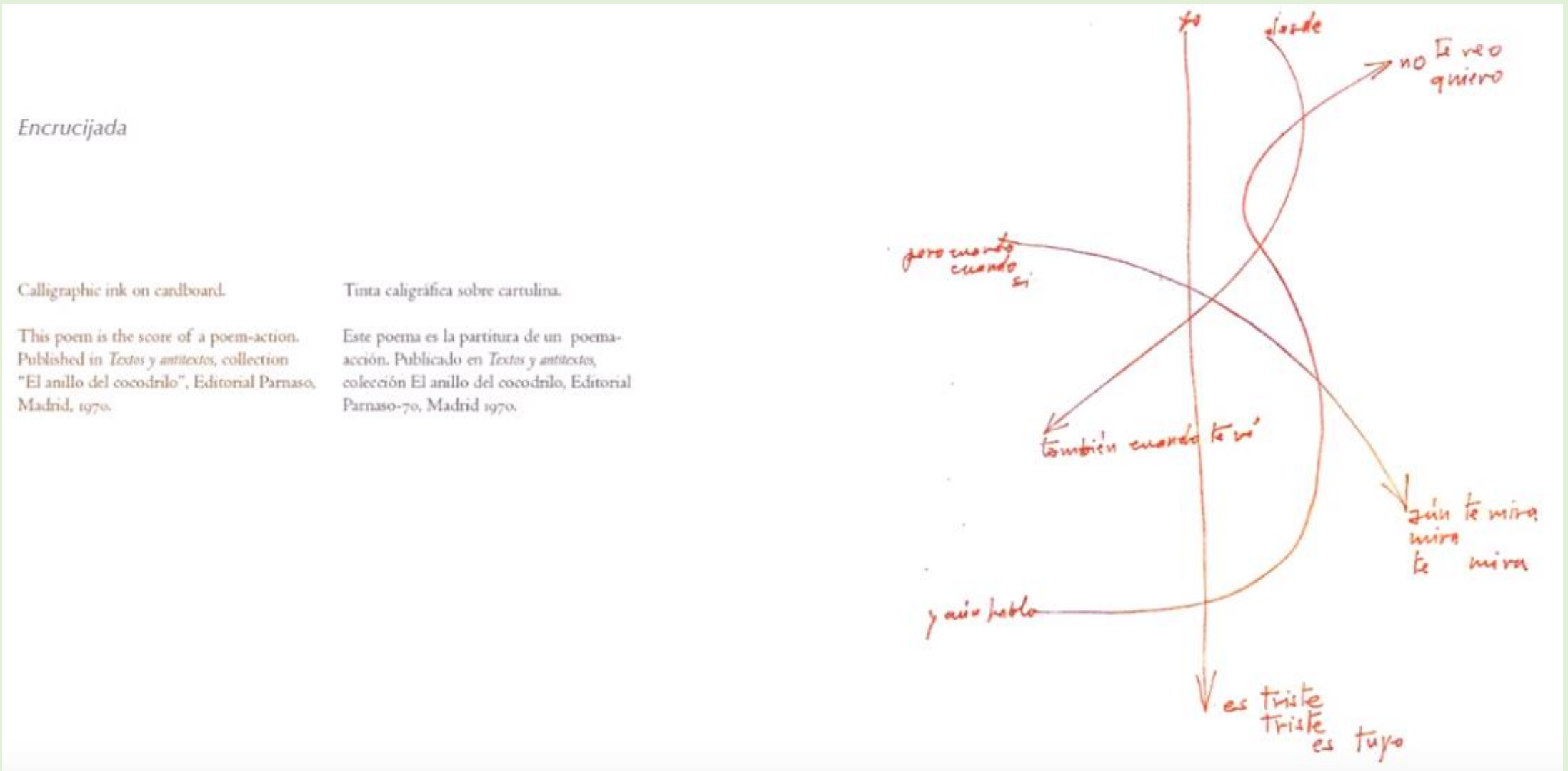
Form operates as a conceptual framework.

2. Visual poetry in Spain and Latin America

Spanish and Latin American visual poets maximize the multidisciplinary nature of text-images relationships placing meaning in form to be decoded by inference, spatial connectivity, visual analogy, etc.

In this study, I focus on distinctive features used by contemporary Hispanic visual poets, through close reading a sampling of authors working in different styles and historical and socio-political periods, such as Fernando Millán (Spain), David Pérez Pol “Ersilias” (Spain), David Fernández Rivera (Spain); Octavio Armand (Cuba) and Rafael Almanza (Cuba).

3. Fernando Millán (Villa Rodrigo, Jaén 1944) “Encrucijada” (“Crossroads”)



Fernando Millán, “Encrucijada” “Crossroads” *Expanded Poetry*, 2018

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRqgbxY-dE8>

3. Fernando Millán “Crossroads”

The video action “Encrucijada” (2018) is an interpretation and a recreation of a previous poem with the same title (1970) written by Millan.

This video-action is one of the twenty video-actions contained in the DVD of the bilingual book *Poesía Expandida, Expanded Poetry*, published by the Weber-Lutgen Gallery.

The version for YouTube has an introductory image and a watermark with the initials of the Weber Lutgen Gallery that are not in the original version.

3. Fernando Millán “Crossroads”

"Crossroads" (2018) is a new poem by means of remediation and transcoding techniques. In this poem Millan increases the number of artistic languages, and the original poem becomes a pre-text for the new poem.

The new poem combines the voice and movements of Millán, author of both poems, and now also actor and interpreter of the first poem. This adds a new dimension to being the author.

3. Fernando Millán “Crossroads”

The poem does not impose a hierarchical order between vectors, but each vector has one directionality indicating the order of reading within each vector.

The ink of the graphic poem is red. Another materiality of the poem is the author as an actor and an interpreter of the previous poem, with his voice and movements. This adds another dimension to the poem.

This video action poem integrates paratexts, metatexts, intertextualities, mediation, digital, performance, and sound in a combination of diverse units of languages.

This is a transcoded poem that embodies various materialities such as being an actor, and an interpreter which makes it a kinetic poem; there is a video recording and a phonographic material; in addition there is the textual materiality of the poem in the wall (an object poem), the digital materiality and the printed, textual and graphic (videographic, sound and theatrical medium).

3. Fernando Millán “Crossroads”

The author combines traditional and new technologies. He makes us consider the paratext as an integral part of the poem.

The marginal note, a sort of marketing strategy to promote the 1970 edition's book, is a sign of aesthetic rupture compared to traditional literary canon, expanding the traditional frontiers of poetry.

As Gerard Genette (1982) states, paratexts create a zone in between texts and off texts. Millan's paratext acts as a transitional (in and off text) and a transactional zone where meaning is negotiated by the reader.

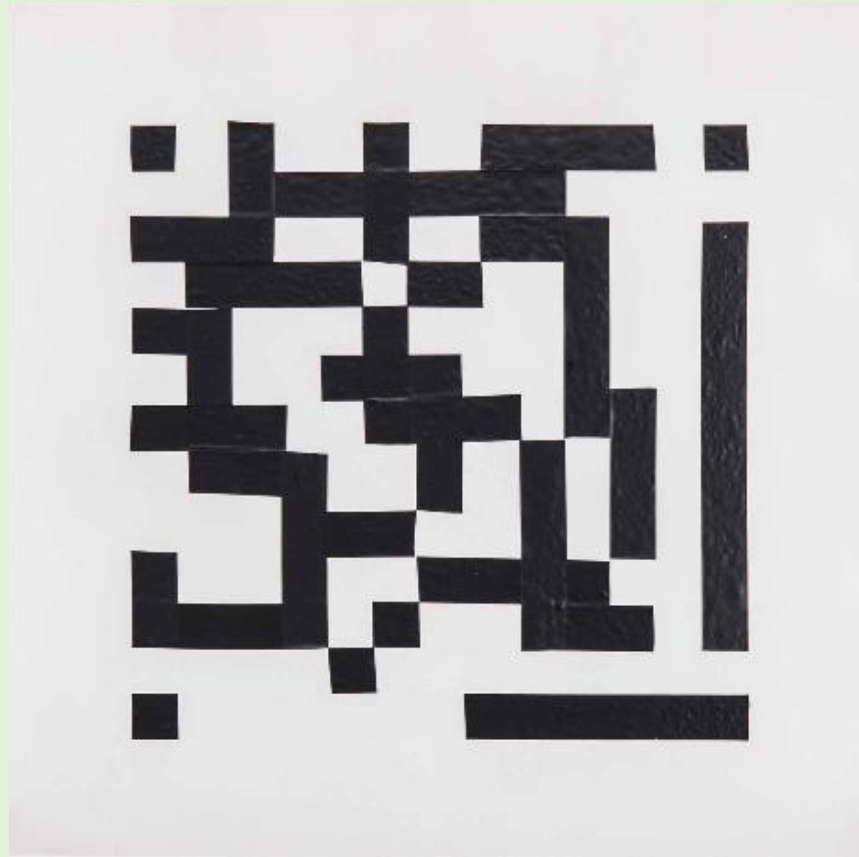
3. Fernando Millán “Crossroads”

Furthermore, the location of the paratext in this poem –concept studied by Philippe Lejeune (1975)–, acts as a counterpoint to the reader’s expectations– creating a palimpsest where we have a text with manifold relationships with prior texts (a poem and book with the same name, published in 1975 is recreated in 2018), altering the status of the previous text, prolonging the creative process and Eco’s notion of open work.

Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, 1975.

Gerard Genette’s *Palimpsest* was originally published in France in 1982.

3. David Pérez Pol (Barcelona, Spain, 1957) “Código Qutre” (“Crappy Code”)



David Pérez Pol “Código Qutre” 2017 n/p

<https://www.ersilias.com/codigo-qutre-poesia-visual/>

3. David Pérez Pol “Código Qutre”

“Código Qutre” (“Crappy Code”) maximizes the text-image relationships through the lexical and visual fields. The lexical plane, –the title “Código Qutre”– includes an original combination of words that belong to several semantic fields.

The word “cutre” means miser, shabby, stingy, crappy, and the word “Qutre”, is a neologism formed with the urban word “cutre” and the letter “Q” referring to the QR barcode (Quick Response Code).

The word “cutre” in Spanish has a derogatory meaning. It refers to something of very poor quality, or in bad shape. A barcode, as we all know, needs a machine-readable optical label to read different units of information about the object attached to it.

This visual and object poem is made with pieces of wood imitating a QR code. The only content of the poem is a code and its meaning cannot be decoded by humans, but by an artificial intelligence programme.

3. David Pérez Pol “Código Qutre”

The derogatory tone of the coined word “Qutre” serves to criticize and ridicule AI and the new social, global order.

Another mode of AI criticism emerges through visual mimicking the iconicity of a standard barcode with pieces of wood.

Mimesis as a form of representation becomes charged with ideo-aesthetic signification. Mimesis is, in this poem, a technique charged with ideoaesthetic signification and is only partially related to the popular technique of appropriation –deliberately copying images, objects, to recontextualize them—. In this poem there is no appropriation because the code is not a copy or a facsimile of a QR code, although the invented code imitates a QR code.

One of the central meanings of this apparent simple poem brings up a controversial topic where artificial intelligence incarnates control and dehumanization.

A classic example of appropriation art is [Andy Warhol's](#) "Campbell's Soup Can" series (1961). Appropriation has been used since the beginning of 20th century by Marcel Duchamp and his ready-made objects to create new forms of art and to criticize industrially produced utilitarian objects. It was a technique exploited by Picasso and other cubist artists and by other authors in different styles throughout the century.

3. David Fernández Rivera (Vigo, Spain 1986) “Zashima”

“Zashima” (*Freedom*, 2020).

Freedom is an intermedia and interartistic book (14 poems), made up of verbal, visual, phonetic, performance and graphic poems that deal with creation in its biological aspect (life and death) and as an aesthetic creativity.

Freedom questions the hegemonic continuity of the classic taxonomies of the literary genre and advocates a blurring of boundaries between the arts.

Freedom offers its own rhythmic and rhetorical codes, revealing a great autonomy and, at the same time, a semantic interconnection transforming the habitual readers' expectations.

3. David Fernández Rivera

Zashima

A María Couñago

Labrê
acth´dahara.

Selme
ahnina
nubut´si
dome.



(...)

Dêcre-me
indulâh...

Salôh...

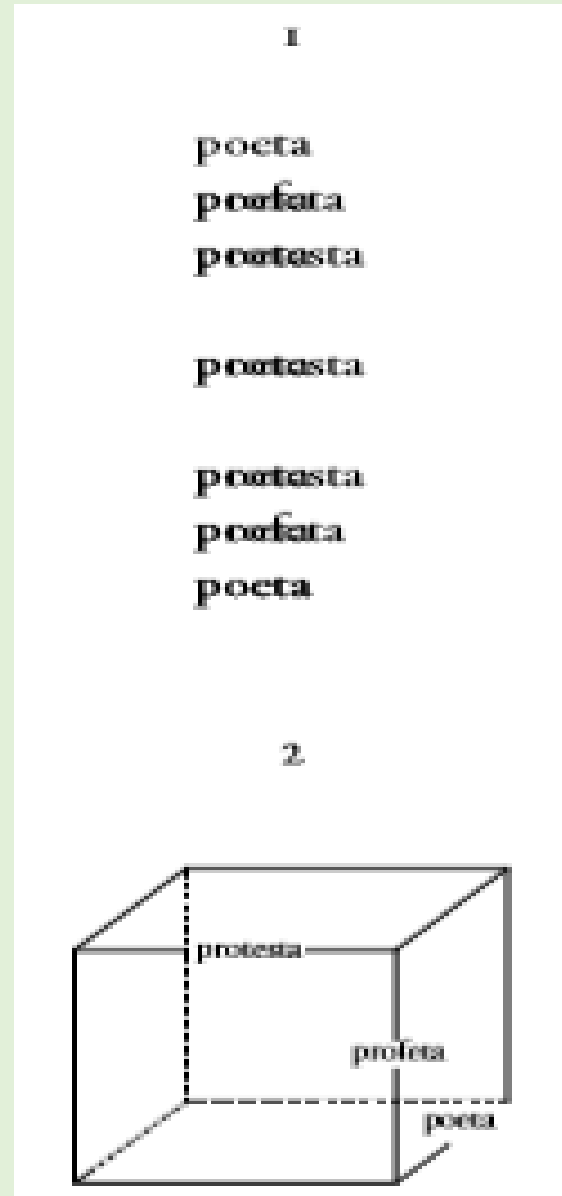
3. David Fernandez Rivera “Zashima”

Freedom’s poems are thematically interwoven with each other showing a desire not only to liberate us from language as a logocentric system of communication but from canonical genre codes, through hybridity and rupture.

“Zashima” is a phonetic poem with a graphic-textual transcription enhancing a multisensory reception of the text, emphasizing a verb-graphic, rhythmic and sound consciousness of creation. The language of the poem is unknown or invented. The poem transcends all cognitive processes.

The phonetic poem opens up a new semantic dimension that expands the limits of language –alphabetical or invented– and transcends centuries of logocentric predominance.

3. Octavio Armand (Guáantanamo, Cuba, 1946) “Palabra sobre palabra” “Word upon word”



3. Octavio Armand “Palabra sobre palabra”

“Palabra sobre palabra” (“Word upon word”), is composed of two sections, both highlighting text-image relationships.

The first section (section 1), is arranged as a conventional verbal poem, with seven lines of a single word each but five lines have additional words on top of each other.

The superposition of words on top of each other difficult the reading process to favour a visual reading.

The first and last lines can be read and are the same word “poeta”.

3. Octavio Armand “Palabra sobre palabra”

Section 2 is a cube with three words “poet”, “prophet”, “protest” positioned in different sides. The words give us the clues to read section 1 of the poem (five words and lines).

The cube’s words provide a more spatial reading. The visual aspect comes first and the verbal content comes second in section 2 and in five lines of the poem (section 1).

The interactions between form and structure are not without ideological implications, especially in works from poets experiencing repressive or dictatorial regimes.

The special placement of signs in a poem carry an ideoaesthetic charge.

3. Octavio Armand “Palabra sobre palabra”

The multidimensionality of “Words upon words” creates a ludic interplay of options for the viewer.

“Words upon words” condenses, in a very original way, an interplay of strategies where we can read images and see words that are not very legible due to being on top of each other, but there is a functionality in this special verbo-visual arrangement that enhances the visuality of words, and literal meanings.

The cube acts as a matrix providing a system for decoding the words-lines in section 1 which are set up in 2D.

3. Octavio Armand “Palabra sobre palabra”

The cube also projects other forms of spatial readability in 3D having words in each side of the cube.

The word “poet” that makes the first and the last line of the poem in section 1 suggests we are reading a metapoem, a poem about poetry.

One of the main motives of the poem is the role of being a poet.

A poet writes words (“words upon words”) but words can be placed in any order and position in space. A poet has to create.

A poet is also a prophet and a protester. A prophet is the person in contact with some divine entity that can see the future.

Similarly, the poem tells us that there is no poetry without creativity, without vision, and also without rebellion (“protest”) against conventions.

3. Rafael Almanza Alonso (Camagüey, Cuba 1957) “Ancora”



Rafael Almanza, “Ancora” Object Poem 2018

Francis Sánchez. *Árbol invertido* “Yo he escogido la libertad. Trece preguntas a Rafael Almanza” 8-07, 2018

<https://www.arbolinvertido.com/entrevistas/yo-he-escogido-la-libertad-trece-preguntas-rafael-almanza>

3. Rafael Almanza Alonso “Ancora”

“Ancora” the only word of the poem, is an Italian word that means that something is still happening. This is a very relevant meaning in the socio-political context of Cuba, a country that is still under a communist regime since 1959.

This is a minimalist artistic work that exploits minimal linguistic signs; the content of the poem has only one letter, the first letter of the alphabet.

But behind the apparent simplicity of the poem the author exploits the symbolism of text-image relationships.

3. Rafael Almanza Alonso “Ancora”

One of the central themes of “Ancora” is the conceptual meaning that emerges from the socio political and cultural context of Cuba, the country where the poet lives and works. In this Cuban context, the title “Ancora” is synonym of “again and again” as if nothing changes.

Since decades ago, Cubans have developed a sense of hope while at the same time endured the process of waiting for some change that never comes.

There is also the role of silence and silencing of any narrative or form of discourse.

The poem addresses the role of silence as a type of civilian resistance while suggesting the official censorship or silencing of any narrative or discourse.

4. Final Notes

In conclusion, Hispanic visual poets show commitment to various avant-garde principles such as rejection of fixed poetic forms and integration of different artistic and technological languages; erasure of the logocentric nature of language; an emphasis on the materiality and performativity of the signs; a tendency to exploit uneasy relationships between various forms of engaged arts and technologies removing the traditional sense of autonomy attributed to art.

These principles challenge the act of interpretation and revolutionize aesthetic reception creating a transgressive type of poetry by turning the reader into a writer and technology codes into sememes –minimal elements of meaning– activated through specific reading protocols.