WORD ~~AND~~ AS IMAGE

*After Words: Visual and Experimental Poetry in Little Magazines and Small Presses 1960-2025*, Steve Clay and M.C. Kinniburgh(Granary Books, NYC)

Poetry can be and has been defined and written in many ways. Anglo-Saxon poetry made use of assonance before – later on – balladeers told stories, Shakespeare wrote plays in Iambic Pentameter, Romantics rhapsodised about landscape and desire, and Modernism got tangled up with ideas of experiment ('the avant garde)' and self-expression, not to mention lots of rhyming.

Language changes, the way we use language changes and although words don't have an automatic link to what they mean or signify, they all mean something, something that changes in different contexts. 'Table' for instance probably conjures up a dining or work table for you, but it might also mean water table, times table, tide table, timetable, table of the elements and so on. Contemporary poetry – away from egotistical confessional poetry or versifiers desperate to share epiphanies, encourage readerly empathy or convey a message – tends to work with these complexities (or vagaries) of language, play with meaning, subvert grammar and syntax (word order) and expect the reader or listener to do some work for themselves. Instead of highlighting narrative or meaning it may concentrate on what a poem sounds like or looks like; after all, we often talk about 'the shape of a poem'.

This isn't to disparage rap or spoken word poetry (whose complex rhyming schemes can amaze) or those who wish to writer verse or make use of end-of-line rhymes (or indeed internal rhyming). Nor is it to denigrate poetry written for political or social aims, although it is often difficult to see how performing to the converted changes minds, or why letting rhyme dictate the form of a poem is a good thing. No, it's simply to point out that poetry, indeed language and words and letters, work in many ways, something that *After Words* concentrates on.

The book is a kind of catalogue of publications from the subtitle's timespan, with most of the discussion about visual and experimental poetry taken from other source material. After a few visual pages of handwritten notes, playful typography discussing ideas of DISTRACTION and INTERFERENCE, a grid of book covers and the title page, the first text – a statement by Dick Higgins – immediately declares that 'As soon as the visual aspect of a poem becomes not just incidental but is actually structural, the strategy of a poem is affected in several ways'. It then goes on to discuss how the visual interferes with 'linear thrust', moves away from a dependency on the words of the text, and how 'the verbal aspect becomes transcendent to its visual embodiment' when a poem is primarily visual.

In case that is too abstract, a few pages later, we get a great A-Z list of types of visual literature, from 'action poem, acrostic, algorithm' to 'typogram, visual poem, window etching', via 'anagram', 'banner poem', 'musical notation' and 'typewriter art/poems'. Having, hopefully, taken on board the wide range and possibilities of visual and experimental poetry, we then move on to the first of several sections which group similar types of or geographically clustered work together. So there are selections of collaged poems, sound poems with visual scores, beautifully made artist's books, work made by writing through or cutting up books, handwritten texts, patterns made by typewriting, and texts featuring 'Signs, Symbols, Characters, Glyphs'.

There are drawings, diagrams, posters, photocopies, comics; scruffy, badly photocopied and stapled booklets; ephemera and archived small press magazines here. There are reflective texts grappling with censorship, fragmentation, psychology, ethics, distribution, relevance and revolution, as well as brief, informative descriptions of every exhibit in the book. There is playfulness, surrealism, discontent, magic and possibility.

Henri Chopin suggests, in 'Why I am the Author of Sound Poetry and Free Poetry', that his work is in opposition to the Word (his capitalisation), stating that 'I do not have to have my life derived from the intelligible. I do not want to be subject to the true word which is forever misleading or lying, I can stand no longer to be destroyed by the Word, the lie that abolishes itself on paper.' In a similar manner, Serge Segay (who I used to exchange mail art with) declares that 'Oppression is beneath all great art' but also notes that, however strange of bizarre, unsettling or just plain weird, 'All wild leaps of fancy still land on earth.'

How refreshing not to be told about others' experiences, or have to read or listen to rhyming doggerel but to be offered images, texts, writing and art that we can interpret for ourselves in our own way and in our own time. This gathering up of work rooted in experiment, possibility and idealism, is a wonderful historical document that allows us to understand that 'Traditional writing is already an image, even if we tend not to recognize it as such' (Peter Schwenger) and how language can and might be played with and used in new and different ways. It is indeed poetry in action, or as Dick Higgins puts it, a 'necessary reminder to the cultural world that pluralism is indispensable, that realities are plural and not singular'.

Rupert Loydell

(870 words)