

Syntax: The Final Frontier

In their investigation of Language, the last generation of poets—especially those working with the New Sentence—sought after a minimal unit of meaning, and found syntax. Although the Language Poets did not explore the ramifications of this minimal unit in their poetry nearly as much as they wrote about it in their poetics, poets working at the same time (often considered peripheral) *did* explore and are still exploring the ramifications of minimalist syntax, challenging poetry in ways the Language poets cleared paths for but never really investigated.

Poets working on the fringe of the Official Verse Anti-Culture that is the Language “Movement” include A. Etlinger, Cecelia Vicuña, the so-called MetalPoets and new visual poets, Steve McCaffery and bp nichol (as well as their Canadian inheritors, young poets such as Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Stephen Cain, but to a much lesser extent), Nick Piombino, John Cage, Arakawa and Madeline Gins, Robert Smithson, and concrete poets such as Ian Hamilton Findlay. Not *all* of the works by these poets and artists embody the special valuation of syntax that I will describe in this essay. When I mention Piombino, I mean *specifically* his collage works; with McCaffery and nichol, I mean such works as *Carnival* and *Zygal* but not *Ow’s Waif* or *The Martyrology*; with Bök I mean parts of *Crystallography* and his collage-like UBU works but not *Eunoia*. All of these works have a very specific use of syntax in common, and that is a particular readable materiality that is independent, but not completely separable, from Saussurean “meaning.”

In order to explain the material syntax that is not only the minimal unit of poetic meaning but also the next area of poetry ripe for real exploration (now that the Language poets have destroyed all grid-like poetic structures, leaving the language sculptable in ways previously unimagined), I will concentrate on two poets: A. Etlinger and Cecelia Vicuña. I think that it is important that both of these poets are women coming into the art form of a patriarchal language. They are working after Stein, Riding-Jackson, and Howe, and have had a way cleared for them, but at every step upon the path of changing poetry there is an implicit whispering to women to overhaul the language or stop using it... whether Etlinger or Vicuña heard this whispering or merely responded to it subconsciously is uncertain, but their effect on poetic language serves, at some level, to answer the challenge of the woman writing. Although the other poets mentioned above often use language in ways similar to Etlinger and Vicuña’s use, their motivations are dissimilar and their resultant work not a tenth as drastic as these two poets’.

Etlinger’s work, created in the 1960s and 1970s in central New York State, is currently housed in the Poetry and Rare Book Collection at SUNY Buffalo. Etlinger began writing relatively normal free verse poetry, usually taking nature and love as her subject matter. After an extended illness, her writing changed dramatically, and she began situating a few words on a page and covering the page with chaotic stitches of fragile threads, pollen, leaves, dried flowers, dirt, sand, and other natural objects. In some pieces, the poems—still usually about nature and love, but now said minimally, such as “Eric / love / blue / butterfly” with each word situated in each other word’s space (four groups of four words)—are enclosed in sewn-up paper cards that barely open, offering the reader only a glimpse of the words through the weblike threads and soft white pollen. Eventually, after informing herself of the concrete poetry movements of the times, Etlinger dismissed the word parts of her poems altogether, sending the Library boxes of pollen, rocks, sticks, and thread, and, eventually, small tapestries with abstract patterns. Etlinger’s tapestry patterns were meant to so fully embody meaning that words were unnecessary—the colors of the thread make meaning just like Paul Sharits’ Structuralist films do, just as Cecelia Vicuña’s *precarios* do.

Vicuña’s *precarios* are made meaningful not by *patterns* of thread or objects, as in Etlinger’s work, but by the *performance of making* the work. Vicuña’s own actions in making the *precarios* are *significant*, syntactical. She weaves her *cloud-net* in the same way in the movie by that title. In her presence, one senses the insignificant being delineated, made important, demarcated, just as language perhaps originally was when we were very young and were just coming into sense. To make a *precarios*, which is a conglomerate of pieces such as string, wood, and feathers—again, natural objects—Vicuña takes these natural objects from their natural places and very carefully, even ritualistically, places them in a new context, together, tied with thread, yarn, or string in a sewing of language. Vicuña’s primary interest is in the Chilean word for “language,” which is the same word as “to weave” (in that language). The interplay of fabric and fabrication, of *real* thread and the “thread” of narrative, is central to Vicuña’s redefinition of poetry through the focus on the automatic signification of syntax. Her *precarios*, which, like Etlinger’s work, have no attached words (spoken or written, though her rites that bring *precarios* into being often involve nonsense chanting and purring), challenge poetry as such and border on “art”—but their syntax, their message-in-the-medium, lets them occupy a poetic territory and reconfigure its borders.