Visual Poetry and Connections with Plastic Arts

Submitted by

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Abstract

Visual poetry is one of the most renewable genres of literature which adopts many techniques and mediums of both writing and reading that complicate the process of reading and interpreting it. Visual poetry adopts a wide range of movements, forms of plastic arts, and human activities. Recently, these movements and artistic forms have changed visual poetry from just a mere literary production into intermedia or a complicated piece of art of multiple human activities. Consequently, this study aims at establishing an understanding of visual poetry movement as intermedia between poetry and plastic arts. Thus, it aims at highlighting the genre's connection to plastic arts, illustrating how poetry can deal with other human activities through the process of popularizing literature. Moreover, it will highlight visual poetry's association with modem modes of plastic arts. In addition, the study will discuss the process of digitalizing plastic arts in visual poetry's arena through using modern technological devices as mediums of both visual poetry and plastic arts.

As a part of visual arts, visual poetry is the artistic form of art that expresses feelings, philosophy, emotions, and the imaginative expressions of the artist and his society. Like visual poems, visual arts are the optical process of creativity made by an artist or a designer using his own tools. Both modern visual poems and visual arts utilize mediums such as ceramics, collage, *origami* drawing, painting, sculpting, photography, etc.

In spite the difficulty to define the genre, most literary theorists define visual poetry as the logical development of concrete poetry; however, modern visual poetry redefines the genre as intermedia in which non-representational language and visual elements are used as aids or substitutions for the traditional verbal elements. The genre represents an experimental poetic practice which is associated with an intermediate. As a multimodal literary genre, visual poetry can be defined as a combining employment of visual, verbal, and manual or digital human artistic activities that aims at constructing the meaning through introducing different hybrid representational techniques of writing or designing the poem (Huisman 41).Gil McElroy defines visual poetry as "an ongoing return to and encounter with the creative ground state and the charged space of the working surface (10). According to W.J.T. Mitchell, visual poetry represents a verbal-visual relation between "image/text," or "text-image" in order to present synthetic relations between multi-human literary and artistic activities (2).

Visual poetry as a form of performance arts that represents the expressive creative pieces of arts that combine more than one artistic activity, such as drama, music, dance,

theater, and performance poetry. Unlike the other artistic works, the artist in the performing arts is a performer rather than an author. Performance visual poetry has the ability to combine the three major forms of arts as it represents visual art.

Modern visual poetry reflects the most modern techniques of writing and reading literature. In addition, it highlights poetry's ability to discuss the most recent themes and issues such as fragmentation, chaos, and absurdity. Modern visual poetry's themes and issues refuse the visual limitation of the genre as they assert visual poetry's freedom and creativity. This freedom made the genre a crucible of most of human intellectual, artistic, and social activities. Thus, the genre has the ability to cope up with plastic arts in order to introduce a full human piece of art.

Throughout the development of the genre, visual poetry has been associated with, intermedia, a term used during the mid-sixties by Dick Higgins (1938-1998), a British composer, poet, printmaker, and early Fluxus artist (Higgins 11).The term is used to describe various interdisciplinary art activities that occurred between different genres of art and literature. The notion "intermedia" has been developed from rearranging the text of poetry-besides using the symbols in concrete poems-into using direct illustrations in modern visual poems. Thus, "intermedia" is always concerned with merging poetry and the most recent human activities into one piece of art. These human activities include fine arts, music, and most recent techniques of technology such as animations and three-dimensional computer graphics. Visual poetry will likely continue to keep its main characteristic as intermedia due to its outstanding ability to adapt to the most recent social and artistic movements.

The connection between poetry, as verbal- creative human activity, and plastic art has Classical roots. Plato was the first to highlight the relation between visual and verbal art as he notes that "the imitative poet must be placed beside the painter, since the tasks undertaken by each were concerned with an inferior part of the soul and thus had no place

in a well ordered state" (qtd. in Farmer 3). In *Ars Poetica*, Horace bridges the gap between the art of painting and poetry, asserting that the more the reader approaches the work, the more he⁄she can achieve the goal of the work. Thus, merging a poetic work with a painting confirms the major idea of the poetic work, and helps the receiver to perceive the meaning (qtd. in Farmer 3).

Visual poetry's association with plastic art has a long fascinating history. This association can be highlighted through the random attempts to merge art and literature into one piece of art. The degree of this relation can be varied according to the writing system of each civilization. For example, in the civilizations of alphabetical writing, the relation between art and written text is not as firm as their relation in the civilization of ideogramic system of writing. The strong relation between art and literature in the civilization of ideogramic system of writing appeared as a result of the interchange between oral and verbal communication in their human productions (Christin 1-5). The Egyptian hieroglyphic script was the earliest example of the relation between art and literature as it adopted logographic, syllabic and alphabetic features for religious literary purposes

The Pharaohs, Greeks, Jews, Christians, Muslims and Asians introduced glamorous literary and religious works which witnessed a strong relation between literature and plastic arts. (Sokar, *Three* 15). Here, it is worthy to mention that the early connection between literature and plastic arts was a verbal-visual communication, which consequently led to the appearance of the first modes of "intermedia" between art and literature that is calligraphy.

Calligraphy is associated with visualizing texts, especially religious texts. Claude Mediaville describes it as "the art of giving form to signs in an expressive, harmonious, and skillful manner" (17). It is noticeable that calligraphy is a dynamic source of inspiration for visual poetry movement, especially its concrete form. However, calligraphy

cannot be considered a typical form of literature because it is a pure form of religious arts, not a literary work.

The first real connection between visual poetry and plastic arts appeared during the early experimental attempts to visualize the text through attributing illustrations to poetic works. This association clearly appeared in the 17th century throughout the poetic works of Robert Herrick, John Milton, and George Herbert. The following poem by Robert Herrick represents one of these attempts to combine poetry with fine arts:

> Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
>
> Old Time is still a-flying;
>
> And this same flower that smiles today
>
> Tomorrow will be dying.
>
> The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
>
> The higher he's a-getting,
>
> The sooner will his race be run,
>
> And nearer he's to setting.
>
> That age is best which is the first,
>
> When youth and blood are warmer;
>
> But being spent, the worse, and worst
>
> Times still succeed the former.
>
> Then be not coy, but use your time,

And while ye may, go marry;

For having lost but once your prime,

You may forever tarry.

(Herrick*, To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time, Robert Herrick Selected poems* 72-73)

The poem reflects the ability of poetry to combine past, present and future altogether. Moreover, it reflects poetry's mystical and fascinating force as a mirror of humanity which is able to express many human artistic and spiritual activities such as literature, painting, philosophy and religion in a poetic crucible of creativity. The poem was written by Robert Herrick in the 17th century; it adopts *carpe diem* philosophy which was introduced by Horace's book of poems, *Odes* in 23 BC. (Brackett418). The opening line of the poem reflects poetry's association to the precedent poets as it is highly affected by the theme of *carpe diem* in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,

When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

(Shakespeare, *Sonnet 18* XVIII)

Moreover, the poem predicts visual poetry's appearance as a new form of literature through the illustrations made by the English painters, John William Waterhouse and Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale.

Thus, the poem highlights the early unconscious connection between poetry and plastic arts; however, this connection cannot be described as a typical visual poetry. The visual element of the poem, represented by the illustrations, made by John William Waterhouse, was an unconscious attempt to visualize the poem long after it had been produced.

The art of writing or "typography" is associated with visualizing texts, especially religious texts. Claude Mediaville describes it as "the art of giving form to signs in an expressive, harmonious, and skillful manner" (17). It is noticeable that calligraphy is a dynamic source of inspiration for visual poetry movement, especially its concrete form. However, calligraphy cannot be considered a typical form of literature because it is a pure form of religious arts, not a literary work.

The first real conscious connection between visual poetry and plastic arts appeared through the impact of Cubism on Imagist and Objectivist poets such as William Carols Williams, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore (1887-1972), Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961), Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), Max Jacob (1876-1944), André Salmon (1881-1969), and Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960). Their works introduced Cubism as an artistic literary social movement. Seen in this light, Cubism, Imagism, and Objectivism were the gates through which all traditions of poetry were destroyed. The relation between Imagists and Objectivists' poetry and Cubism can be described as:

> The conscious, deliberate dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity made self-sufficient by its rigorous architecture. This is quite different from the free association of the Surrealists and the combination of unconscious utterance and political nihilism of Dada. (Rexroth 253)

The German poet, translator and critic, August Schlege (1767-1845) who led the first wave of Romanticism in German literature, points out that the term "plastic arts" involves not only visual forms of art, but also poetry.

Viktor Shklovsky's iconic work, "Art as a Technique" emphasizes defamiliarization and unlimitation of literary techniques and devices in a work of art (5-15). In addition, his rejection to familiar imagery in poetry is a strong pretext for adopting plastic arts forms as substitution for traditional imagery in poetry. Thus, Shklovsky's claim rationalizes visual poetry's connection to plastic arts as an interactive creative mood of art.

Both poetry and plastic arts share some characteristics and functions, including 1) focusing on imagination; 2) human instinct for harmony, balance, and rhythm; 3) imitation of nature; 4) mysterious power of creativity; 5) communication; 6) achieving pleasure for sender/author and receiver/reader. These common characteristics led to the appearance of the term "intermedia" which aims at breaking the borders between poetry and art.

Modern visual poetry is strongly associated with plastic arts' forms such as calligraphy, painting, sculpture, graffiti, and even 3D animations. 3D animations have recently represented the engagement between plastic arts and visual poetry. Plastic arts not only affect the common practices of visual poetry, but they also can affect the Futurist forms of visual poetry such as electronic poetry, a subclass of visual poetry in which 3D animations are heavily affected by plastic arts' key movements such as Tachisme and Neoplasticism. These movements and modes of art can change the mediums of reading or writing visual poetry according to their techniques, devices, and possibilities.

In this regard, graphic art is a subclass of plastic arts which include a wide range of two-dimensional and three-dimensional nonlinear visual artistic activities (Gell 191). In spite of the heavy influence of modern technology on graphic arts, the key traditional artistic movements are still the most dominant source of inspiration of the most complicated graphic works of arts. Literature, especially poetry, must cope up with the new visual revolution, so the visual poet decides to attribute illustrations, shapes, and symbols to his poem

In spite of the long list of intermedia forms which are associated with visual poetry, still plastic arts are the most influential form in the visual poetry realm of intermedia. Plastic arts include a wide range of artistic forms, including painting, sculpture, photography and film. The term "plastic arts" has two definitions: narrow and wide. The former involves the carved or shaped pieces of arts such as wood, stone or metal, whereas the latter has expanded to include any form of visual arts. Here, Willard Bohn states that "poetry and the plastic arts have provided the most fertile ground for experimentation" (Bohn 262).

The relation between visual poetry expanded from simple experiments for imitating calligraphy to an open circle of human activities. The term "pastiche" has been developed

to what Dick Higgins describes as "intermedia" (Kostelanetz 305). In other words, the mixture between verbal and visual elements in visual poems has been widening to include other human activities as a substitution for the traditional visual element of painting. These activities include sculpture, textile, videos, and 3D effects. Therefore, modern visual poetry's inherent connection to plastic arts is associated with the medium through which the poem is presented. This medium has been developed according to the most recent techniques of writing and reading.

Modern visual poetry emphasizes the ability of popularizing poetry through mingling it with all forms of human activities, especially plastic art forms (Sokar, *A Postmodern* 20). Besides plastic arts, these activities include music, textile, 3D animations, and sculpture, as the following poem clarifies:
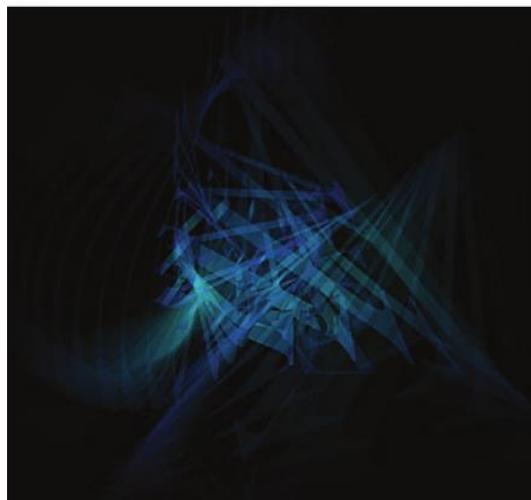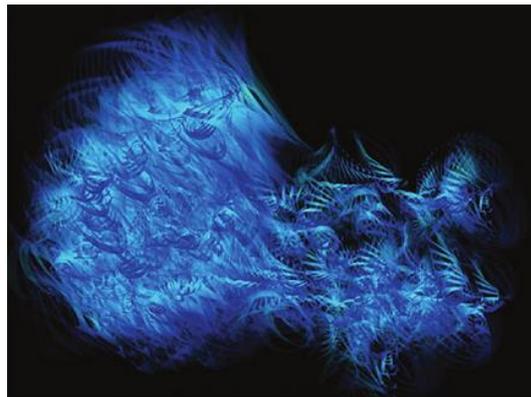
(Jim Andrews, "Nio" Vispo.com)

The poem is designed and written by Jim Andrews, artist-programmer, visual Poet, essayist, and technical writer. As a digital-visual poem, the poem reflects an unfamiliar visual-audio-electronic performance of a work of art. In terms of aesthetics, this unfamiliarity may completely destroy the notion of visual poetry, and mutate it into the term "performance poetry" as the poem represents human multi-activities which totally destroy literary traditions.

The variety of these artistic-social activities has created new subclasses of visual poetry which are generated from the womb of the mother genre. These subclasses include "performance poetry," "sound poetry," "3D poetry," or "electronic poetry." Generally, the relation between poetry and medium (usually plastic arts) aims at establishing multi-activities in each piece of art. The following poem highlights how visual poetry can be popularized by mixing its textual form and the simplest artistic human activities:

(Kaikkonen, "Paper Flowers" qtd. in Hill and Vassilakis 34)

The poem is designed by Satu Kaikkonen (1976-   ) to express the power of the verbal element of poetry and its ability to integrate into other human activities through creating a relation between the verbal element and the visual element. This harmony between visual poetry and other artistic human activities, especially plastic arts is the major concern of popularizing poetry. In "Paper Flowers," visual poetry is popularized through *Origami*. *Origami* is a mood of plastic arts in which a flat square sheet of paper is folded to be finished as a sculpture (S. Smith 8).

Plastic arts' association with visual poetry led to doubts concerning the originality of the genre as a literary production. These doubts led to more dependence on dual approaches of reading and understanding visual poetry. These approaches depend on understanding the visual poem according to two levels: the literary level and the artistic level. For example, the following poem highlights how plastic art is related to visual poetry:

(Helmes, "untitled poem" qtd. in Hill and Vassilakis 26)

Here, it is noticeable that the common definition of visual poetry must be taken into consideration before categorizing each visual poem according to its medium. This medium (usually plastic art form) will define the degree of de- aestheticizing in the poem as it will clarify if this poem is a literary work or not. Artistic explanation can describe this poem as a king of Surrealist piece of art that represents the chaos of society, whereas literary explanation can introduce the poem as an anti-poem that convey the message of Surrealism without using the verbal element.

Noteworthy, modern visual poetry is not only a word/painting- painting/word literary-artistic work, but also it represents a combination between literature and other forms of plastic arts such as sculpture, *origami*, textile, etc. Sculpture is a form of visual arts that can be performed in three dimensions. It is one of the plastic art forms that are

clearly connected with modern visual poetry. In modern visual poetry, sculptural processes utilize carving (the removal of material) then modeling materials which have spread during Modernism and Postmodernism to include free practices of art.

American Minimalist artist and poet, Carl Andre (1935-   ) describes the relation between plastic arts and poetry mentioning: "For painting, I will have about me my Japanese spring toy which pumps out targets of infinite…variety; for sculpture, I will have three one-inch bright steel ball bearings; for my novel, I will take the New York Telephone Directory" (*Dialogue* 237).

Thus, he focuses on the freedom of art by neglecting both traditional materials and forms of both art and literature. Andre's point of view asserts removing the boundaries between art and literature by mixing all available human artistic and literary productions. Andre refused artistic traditions through making sculptures from unmodified industrial materials such as bricks, metal pieces, and timber blocks. For example, his remarkable work, "Equivalent VIII" (1966) represents a rectangular sculpture made of two layers of 60 firebricks:

(Andre, *Equivalent VIII*)

The piece of art is a Minimalist sculpture that criticizes Materialism and Capitalism as it clarifies that taxpayers' money had been spent on paying an inflated price for a collection of bricks. That is why, Jonathan Jones describes the works as boring and controversial artwork mentioning:

> Most works of art that cause controversy are by their nature sensational. They are sexually graphic, or violent, or politically contentious. Carl Andre's Equivalent VIII is different. It is the most boring controversial artwork of all time… Equivalent VIII was a crushing disappointment. It is a work of art that leads nowhere, that inspires nothing. (par 2-8).

The sculpture is not a typical poem as it completely neglects the verbal element; however, it highlights the ability of visual arts to convey the meaning and to communicate with no words. The work is controversial, simple and communicative, so it conveys the artist's

point of view, philosophy, and message in an artistic way. Through this Minimalist sculptures, Andre's visual works are oriented towards visual poetry through an innovative use of poetic and visual forms. These forms are portrayed in a poetic form through creating a sculpture-text and text- sculpture relationship.

To sum up, visual poetry's connection to plastic arts is associated with the relation between poetry and other artistic human activities. "Plastic arts" is an umbrella term which includes a group of artistic human activities which depend on creativity and imagination through artistic productions. The connection between visual poetry and plastic arts has four main stages: the first represents the unconscious attempts to describe the iconic poetic works through painting. The second stage is highly influenced by calligraphy which was the main source of inspiration for concrete poets as both concrete poetry and calligraphy depend mainly on the rearrangement of the text as a device for visualizing the text. The third stage of this connection is highlighted through the conscious attempt, made in the twentieth and twenty first century to mingle poetry with plastic arts or other human activities in terms of popularizing poetry. Finally, the most recent stage of this connection is linked to digitalizing poetry by changing the medium of reading from the traditional printed paper into electronic devices such as laptops, iPhones, and other electronic devices. This evolution led to the appearance of new technology-driven forms of visual poetry such as electronic poetry and 3D poetry. In spite of the remarkable influence of modern technology on the newborn technological forms of visual poetry, the classical schools of arts can still play an important role in making up the artistic sense of the modern visual poet. Painting is known as the most dominant form of plastic arts in visual poetry; however, modern visual poetry emphasizes that the genre can utilize all plastic art forms as it can break the boundaries between art and literature. Furthermore, visual poetry's connection with sculpture as a form of plastic arts, redefines the genre's concept or word/painting- painting/word relation into word/shape-shape/word relation. Visual

poetry's connection to plastic arts led to the de-aestheticization of art as this connection degenerates the standards of poetry as a literary-aesthetic production.

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