

APPENDIX

Interview with bpNichol

Toronto June 26, 1974

Q: How and when did you become interested in concrete poetry?

A: Actually, I began to get into concrete through Apollinaire and the Dadaists, and subsequent to that, through the publications of Blewpointment which Bissett put out in Vancouver. I just began by exploring the visual aspects of poetry. The specific occasion was about 1964 when I really got into the serious thing. That was mostly because I was really bored with what I was doing with using the same forms, trying to write convincing lyrics. It didn't satisfy me. It occurred to me that I was being arrogant; that I was sitting down and making occasion to write, trying to dominate the act of writing the language I was using as opposed to simply letting myself learn from it. I thought I wasn't giving the language a chance to teach me anything. I was assuming knowledge that I didn't really have, so I just sat down and began to play with words, and to see what I would come up with.

Q: Did any concrete poet have any direct or indirect influence on your work at that time?

A: Well, I wasn't really aware of that stuff till about I guess the middle of 1964 when Andy Phillips went to Europe and sent me a couple of issues of the London Times Literary Supplement. It was at that point, but prior to that, literally I was only familiar with Apollinaire and the Dadaists, and I began to take my own approach to it, to use my imagination. And when George Bowering first published an issue of Imago he asked me to contribute some poems. I did, but he didn't think they were concrete at all. Anyway he did send me Cavan Mc Carthy's address and I wrote to Cavan, and he sent tons of addresses of poets in Europe and other parts of the world. And that was my access.

Q: Initially then, you began to get into concrete on your own, and later you became aware of others who were doing the same thing?

A: Yes, initially I started to do it by myself, and mostly it was Bissett, his influence too. Just seeing him busting out, and I said to myself I can bust out too. And Michael Mc Clure, his work opened up new possibilities for me. So there were influences, but I did not set out to copy someone else's poems.

Q: What aspect of Apollinaire's work and the Dadaists' influenced you the most?

A: I remember what impressed me most at the time was Kurt Schwitters' "w" poem. He had simply taken the letter "w" and made a poem from it. The poem was the letter "w", and that blew my head really. It was a minimal statement. You don't get much more minimal. And when I thought about it, I realized that there was tremendous power in that simple letter, and that was very exciting. So that sort of opened up the idea. At that time I couldn't think further than the excitement of that poem. So when I think of the Dadaists I think about Schwitters, and specifically about the sound poems of Hugo Ball, and about the typography that some of the Russians were exploring. At that time I called it all Dadaism, so that's why I still refer to it as Dadaism.

And with Apollinaire, it was two things. I did some translations of his poems, there was the experience of the translation itself, and in the process of translating his poems I discovered his Calligrams, his visual use of the page, which led me to Mallarmé and what Mallarmé was doing. At that time I was in Vancouver and sitting in on a bunch of workshops that some people from Tish were conducting, heavy discussions about the relationship of form and content. At that time this was very new to me, I used to sit there and shudder at the implications of what was discussed. Anyway, this opened up another dimension for me. And when Bissett once again came out with the Blewpointment issues, I got a sense of inspiration, the kind of inspiration that comes from a person that is also interested in the same thing, the inspiration of somebody communicating exactly what you are interested in and are doing.

Q: Are you saying then that concrete in Canada started on the West Coast?

A: In a way it started with Earle Birney. Earle Birney was interested in specific notations, that is to say the rise and fall of the line on the page which approximates the human voice, or which approximates the action of something falling. It's simple in a sense. That did not particularly influence me because I wanted something different, but it was there as

an idea. Other than that, it began with Bissett and Lance Farrell. I was out there doing those things, but I didn't know anyone doing the same thing at the time. I didn't know Bissett at all at the time.

Q: Were you responsible for bringing concrete to the East then?

A: Yes, I guess so. I don't really know in '64-'65. What happened was David Aylward and I started Ganglia about this time. And my specific thinking was to get some of the West Coast people like Bissett and others in the Eastern scene. The first issues of Ganglia were not pure concrete, as I later began to understand the term.

Q: Which brings me to the question of how do you define the term?

A: Well, it's really a tough thing to answer. It would be simpler to say that I define it in Dom Silvester Houédard's term, "borderblur". That poetry which arises from the interface, from the point between things, the point in which poetry and painting and prose are all coming together. That's what is referred to as "borderblur".

The term concrete, see, if you get into Gomringer's very pure sense of the poem which he calls "constellations", he has very specific definitions of what the concrete poem should be. So in a sense I can't really call all I produce concrete, at least not in the terms that the guys who started the movement call it. That's why in a way, other than using the term humourously, as I did in the title of An Evening of Concrete [The Cosmic Chef], the Oberon Cement Works, and all that thing, I never thought about my poetry as concrete. I thought about it using the fact that the page is a visual field to do visual things.

Q: Would you consider your visual poetry, poetry?

A: Well, yes, I would, in a way. Some of it I would and some of it I wouldn't. Steve Mc Caffery and I did an essay as part of the TRG, [Toronto Research Group] thing, on why you would call concrete poetry, poetry, and why it is a valid term. It's because the left hand and right hand terminal points, like in poetry, the left hand margin and the right hand margin have a function based either on the breath prosody or metrical prosody or whatever, but it has a function. It is important where the poem breaks off and where it picks up again. It's very important in poetry. It's not in prose. In prose it's simply because you can't have a book that runs out. In prose, the line is a horizon upon which words stick out.

In concrete or visual poetry, in the constellations or whatever, the left hand and right hand terminal points

once again are functional. They are there for a reason therefore, I call it poetry. As you know, one of the hoariest questions has always been the difference between poetry and prose.

Q: Would you say then that the basic difference between poetry and prose is the function of the terminal points?

A: Yes, the essential difference. Then there are things like rhythm, intensity of image and so on, And then you get into the long poem. Now the long poem is very close to prose and very close to story. One tends to think of poetry as imagistic and prose as story, but I think those terms are arbitrary.

Q: How would you define the term "concrete"?

A: The same way, the importance of the left and right hand margins, the terminal points. From the sound point of view you see, then that goes into what my values are in writing. My values in writing tend to be governed by sound and the music I hear in the spoken word. In the Martyrology for example, the page becomes a printed score, and the right and left hand margins as it were are important as notations for breath pauses for emphasis, and so on, and so on. So yes) I would still think of sound poetry as poetry.

Q: Is there a particular national characteristic that is typical of what is being produced in Canadian concrete?

A: Well, I used to think there was. I don't know if I still do. But, the most underlying basis of most Canadian concrete seems to be sound. There is of course the visual and rhythmic kind of poetry too, but Canadian stuff tends to be, I think, it was Steven Scobie who used the term, "dirty-clean". The visual stuff I mean, say in relation to Mayer's work which is super clean. Whereas if you take somebody like Bissett, or someone like D. A. Levy who use the mimeo look, this is what Scobie was referring to as the "dirty-clean" look in Canadian concrete. He called me "clean-dirty-super clean". But that's the underlying characteristic of visual concrete here.

Q: In one of your GrOnk mailout sheets you wrote that it functioned as a "free information service to get stuff into print from the language revolution in this country back into the general stream." What did you mean by the "language revolution"?

A: Well, I simply meant to provide as many entrances and exits as possible, to alter consciousness. To reconsider the value of words, to reconsider the language, the value of translation, a total reconsideration of the language.

Q: In the same mailout sheet you also mentioned that you were planning to give away Canadian publications by David Uu, John Riddell and others to people outside of North America because they simply had not sold here despite appearances on various book racks. How do you account for the lack of interest in this kind of medium in Canada?

A: I really don't know what it is. I haven't reached any conclusions yet. All it seems to me is that there are a lot of questions that people don't seem to ask. There doesn't seem to be a big audience in Canada in the sense of considering some of the basic issues that are being raised about language, about prose and poetry. Even among writers the interest seems to be negligible.

I know that when Steve and I worked on the TRG, we sat down to try and tackle the issue of what is narrative? It's a term for which there is no useful working definition. It's a vague term which gets used and used, it's confused with the idea of plot. It's not plot, but people just don't seem to be interested in asking themselves these questions. I think it's because once you start to ask yourself these questions, you have to ask yourself why you write?

There is also a kind of freak element in some of the things that Bissett or I do. I remember when I first began to do sound poetry, I did it because I had something to say. But, I remember the first time people were shocked. It was total shock. The audience was not prepared for someone to forsake the traditional role of the poet-reader. Someone who stands and reads or does monologues. They were not prepared for that. Now that attitude is changed. Now for instance, people are not as shocked. They are more open to that kind of experience.

Q: To those who are not familiar with its basic principles, concrete is somewhat enigmatic. Are you at all interested in making your poetry more intelligible to your audience?

A: Well, sometimes it's just a result of a bad piece of writing on my part. I think it's a kind of thing which raises questions by its nature. I think sometimes that's part of the problem. In a way, what I am into is research. I know that, I am into research writing. I am not, say, in the Martyrology, this is a completed piece. Actually, everything that I publish I see as complete, but it's research. Whereas in the Martyrology, for example, I have taken everything that I've learned, I've incorporated it and now it's coming out. So there is an element of research in most of what I do. So in a way I have no anticipation of what an audience reaction would be.

Q: Are you interested in making your audience understand what it is you are trying to do, or does it not matter to you that much?

A: Well, I would be a liar if I said that I was not interested in communicating with my audience, that I didn't have the desire to please. But, if I was mainly interested in pleasing and making a name for myself as a popular author, I certainly chose the wrong kind of work to get into. On the other hand, I have had two feelings. One is I always like to be two jumps ahead of what I write, so that by the time I publish it it is a phase that is behind me. And I think if you are growing as a writer you are always ahead of the last piece of work that you did. There is an element of wanting to please, but in the end you can't let it govern your life.

Q: There is very little theoretical or critical work being written on concrete in Canada, and for someone who is interested in knowing more about it, there is little material available.

A: That's why Steve and I are into the TRG. See, I don't think there is anything to explain, because there is a way in which visual and sound poetry is completely reactionary. There is a way in which it is not evolutionary, and that is, it is a return to such basic principles that people often are looking for things that are not there.

I have done some theoretical writing in which I outlined what I understood to be basic principles behind visual and sound poetry, but there is a point at which the thing itself says it better than any explanation ever could. I think it just makes people more secure, in a way; not that it makes them understand it better. Where I thought I had something of general value to say I tried to say it. I don't believe in theory for its own sake.

In the work that Steve and I are doing, we are doing research. We are researching writing, trying to get at the basic understanding of some of the labels. In fact there is so much weird categorization that most people are confused about the different kinds of writing anyway. I guess at the back of the question you are asking if I am interested in communicating. The answer is yes. It's a question which I've often heard before. But the whole thing is that people come to concrete with so many expectations. In a way, what I am saying is, look, abandon those expectations, play a while, and see what emerges from that. Basically it's a game which you have to play. You can't read down line by line and come to a satisfying conclusion.

Q: If what you are saying is, this kind of poetry is a game, how do you feel about those who insist on the seriousness of poetry?

A: Many people don't realize that play is serious. It's a serious thing. It's enjoyable and it's a serious thing. If you watch children play, they are very serious, it's their work. Games demand work and involvement.

Q: How much of an influence was Gertrude Stein on your work?

A: Well, as you can see here, my shelves are filled with her books. Her theory, her writings, her involvement with language. Yes, she has been a tremendous influence in many ways.

Q: Do you see any similarities between visual poetry and Chinese ideograms or other kinds of picture writing?

A: Oh, yes. There are many similarities. When I started writing I was very attracted to Kenneth Patchen. There was Kenneth Patchen and there was Chinese poetry. I was really excited by the haiku and the Chinese characters. They opened up another dimension for me. I like the purity and tight quality of the use of words, their relation to the real world was fantastic.

Q: What is the significance of concrete or visual poetry as you see it?

A: By getting into the visual or concrete poem you are forced to play with it. To discover new meanings for words, to re-evaluate the use of language in general. The only way to get into it is to play, to examine the structure, to evolve new meanings and new relationships. When you are writing ideational poetry, the emphasis is on thoughts and symbols not on language. For me the importance of sound poetry is that it takes poetry back as a spoken art, as it was meant to be. It brings poetry back to its aural tradition. In visual poetry, it is more or less an assertion of different values which say that since the advantage is not of reading but of print, the whole iconicity of language comes out, the meditational aspect. I can take this page, I can meditate on it, it's not a quick thing, it's not an instant high. Its value lies basically in exploration.

Q: Are you not in fact advocating values contrary to those promoted by our pre-fab, buy-now-pay-later culture?

A: Yes, in fact that's what I meant by the term "reactionary". But then, this is happening in a lot of the arts today. You encounter pure colour, pure shape, pure event. It's a return to the old values in art.

Q: Do you foresee a major change in this direction as far as visual poetry is concerned?

A: I don't think so. But I think that the work that some of us are doing will certainly change or alter some of the writing that is coming out in Canada. There is a lot of exciting things happening in poetry here. There are people like Phyllis Webb, Frank Davey. This is a very exciting time to be writing in Canada. I don't think there will be a big wave of concrete in the future, but I think that we will certainly help to alter a few perceptual systems.