



ARTIST PORTFOLIO

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Digital Typoetry: An Asemic Continuation

Abstract: This artist portfolio contextualizes my work with “typoems”—typographical asemic poetry exploring aphasic experience as a source of inspiration that reflects on the contingency of our interpretations. Collaged typographic fragments have a specific lineage within Concrete and Visual poetry made by graphic designers and artists engaged with printing processes. Digital design software extends and expands these earlier possibilities that were constrained by the physical limitations of typography by allowing the fluid conversion between letterforms and vectorized graphics, changes that facilitate an exploration of the boundaries between lettering and imagery. Included in this portfolio are examples of my work with typoems published by RedFox Press, Timglaset Editions, and the Post-Asemic Press; the book *CMYK – 52 Typoems :: 4 typefaces | 4 letters | 4 sections* (Timglaset, 2023) won a 45th *STA100*, The Society of Typographic Arts, Chicago, IL in 2023.

Keywords: Asemic Poetry; Typoetry; Concrete Poetry; Glitch Art; graphic design; Visual Poetry.

Treating language as a communications medium, or graphically as a visual material defines a tension that runs through the avant-gardes of the twentieth century and their heritage that continues with contemporary poetics. The visual compositions of Concrete poetry¹ link the visual aspects of printing and typography to pictorial concerns separate from the demands for legibility and ease of recognition that typically inform assumptions about both graphic design² and reading.³ My work with fragmentary and collage letterforms develops these concerns by linking them to issues of asemic poetry⁴ and aphasia: specifically the instability of language recognition: I have been exploring an experience I had while driving behind a truck with a big logo painted on the back—large, gothic capitals—that simply refused to resolve into coherent lettering for me. I knew there were letters there, and I could recognize that the curves and uprights were text, but it refused to become coherent as *lettering*.

¹ Nancy Perloff, *Concrete Poetry: A 21st-century Anthology* (Reaktion Books, 2021), 35–39.

² Beatrice Warde, *The Crystal Goblet* (The World Publishing Company, 1956).

³ Herbert Spencer, *The Visible Word* (Lund Humphries, 1968), 18–21.

⁴ Peter Schwenger, *Asemic: The Art of Writing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 66–67.

Transforming this experience into a specifically *poetic* engagement⁵ reveals its semic ordering and perceived *language* content as a product of completely autonomous “bets”⁶ that attempt to resolve ambiguity into meaningful order.⁷ My process of investigation and exploration is guided by semiotics,⁸ decomposing the recognition of “text” into the perceptual encounter; this attention to instability links typoems to my work with glitching via the essential role of human perception as mediator—typoetry and Glitch Art both center the human act of recognition as the foundation of poetic meaning.

This term, “typoem,” is a product of the Concrete poetry movement: it was proposed by the Brazilian Concrete poet Haroldo de Campos to describe the typographic-focused poems by Hansjörg Mayer.⁹ However, Mayer’s work is not merely typography, it includes flaws and errors from the printing processes—incorporating glitches—into his arrangements of letterforms, but his work also included printer’s marks, technical errors, and the interference patterns created by overlapping texts in different colors which allude to color separations. Unlike other Concrete poetry, Mayer’s *typoems* are frequently illegible, fragmentary, unintelligible. And unlike poems that use Letraset transfer lettering,¹⁰ or composed using the fixed size letters of typewriters,¹¹ his engagement with printing and letterforms reflects his professional work in graphic design and printing. This engagement with the materiality of type is not unique to Mayer.¹² American designer and printer Jack Stauffacher worked during the same period,¹³ and produced convergent works that reveal the connections between typographic technology and the emergence of the typoem from concerns with the materiality of printing and the processes employed in creating prints. This commitment to the technologies of production links my contemporary typoetry to their precedents: digital software (*Adobe Illustrator*) extends and expands the possibilities for fragmenting and reconfiguring lettering that were constrained by the physical limitations of printing with metal or wooden type by allowing the fluid conversion between letterforms and vectorized graphics. This transition potentially destabilizes language, recalling the avant-garde’s use of typography as a graphic material parallel to its capacity to communicate meaning.¹⁴ The digital typoems I create exploit the

⁵ Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (Mouton Publishers, 1981), 25.

⁶ Roy Harris, “The Integrational Conception of the Sign” *Integrationist Notes and Papers 2006–2008* (Bright Pen, 2009).

⁷ Mark Garrison, “The Poetics of Ambivalence,” *Archetypal Psychiatry* (Spring 1982), 213–32.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1979), 216.

⁹ Stefan Ripplinger, *Typo: Hansjörg Mayer* (Walther König, 2014), 147.

¹⁰ Derek Beaulieu, *Kern* (Les Fignes Press, 2014).

¹¹ Marvin and Ruth Sackner, eds., *The Art of Typewriting* (Thames & Hudson, 2015).

¹² Stephen C. Foster, *Lettrisme: Into the Present* (University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1983), 9–11.

¹³ Chuck Byrne, ed., *Only on Saturdays: The Wood Type Prints of Jack Stauffacher* (Letterform Archive, 2023).

¹⁴ Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography* (University of California Press, 1996), xxviii–xxx, 76–78.

potentials for compositing and fragmenting the letterforms in themselves, allowing an exploration of the threshold where mis/recognition becomes an ambivalent, contingent zone of poetic contemplation.

The liminality implicit in Mayer's typoetry becomes explicit in my asemic collages that explore the boundaries between design, typography, and visual art. Typoems exploit how reading and legibility depend on the arrangements of their parts and the relationships imposed on them by their audience. This instability is apparent in the type constructions made by designer Norman Ives in the 1960s and 1970s¹⁵; however, unlike Ives' works which transform the lettering into abstract patterning (the recognition of language often vanishes), for the typoem this language-recognition is crucial to its poetics. It modulates the identification of letters to become contingent, forcing an acknowledgment of language as an artificial construct: legibility is more than just how in/complete the letterforms may be, nor only the recognition of a familiar language, but instead depends on the articulation of elemental parts as discrete units¹⁶ which are organized into recognizable and familiar arrangements.¹⁷ Without this formal order, intelligibility collapses even if the parts remain familiar.¹⁸ This metastability connects my typoems to the instabilities that define Glitch Art—through the typoem's capacity to become an expressive vehicle for semantic order in a multidimensional, nodal "space."¹⁹ [Connecting language identification to the ambivalence of Glitch Art is common in contemporary asemic poetry.²⁰]

These poetics of recognition versus interpretation are extensions of potentials in visual poetry²¹ and continuations of Concrete poetry's concerns with arrangement and composition, drawing attention to how we engage with language depends on a question about order and intention that we typically ignore and reject as irrelevant when confronting language.²² It is a reminder that meaning is not "real" but an imposition, even for the apparently stable physical world we perceive.²³ My typoems exploit how expressiveness depends on the 'intentional function' to assign them an *interpretive status* as-encoded.²⁴ Meaning emerges even if that identification is not matched by

¹⁵ John T. Hill, *Norman Ives: Constructions & Reconstructions* (Powerhouse Books, 2020).

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon, 1972), 88.

¹⁷ Eero Tarasti, "The semiotics of A. J. Greimas: A European intellectual heritage seen from the inside and the outside" *Sign Systems Studies* 45, 1/2 (2017): 33–53.

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1979), 232–33.

¹⁹ Michael Betancourt, *The Critique of Digital Capitalism* (Punctum Books, 2016), 153–90.

²⁰ See for example: Marco Giovenale. *Glitch Asemics* (Post-Asemic Press, 2020); or Kristine Snodgrass & Karla Van Vliet, eds. *Glitchy Womyn: An Anthology of Women Glitching in 2022–23* (Van Vliet Gallery, 2024).

²¹ Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry: 1914–1928* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4–6.

²² Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1979), 208–217.

²³ David Albert, *Quantum Mechanics and Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 15.

²⁴ Michael Betancourt, "The 'Intentional Function' in Still and Moving Photographic Images" *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 253 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2020-0065>.

a familiar decoding framework²⁵—the absent or unknown language system confronted in asemic poetry becomes the source of expressive modulation; the identification as-language is the subject of these poetics which “disenchant”²⁶ the world by drawing attention to human imagination as the source of wonder.

My engagements with typoetry are coincident with my aesthetic researches into glitching and Glitch Art: I break things and play with the pieces; I realize this act is an historically nihilistic gesture, but that is not my interest: the flash of recognition—faces, words, stories, spaces—is my focus. My work challenges understanding the computer as only an instrument of valorization, seduction, or assault. The reason I began systematically corrupting and damaging media in 1990 was to create a critical expression by rupturing the illusionistic perfection of technical images, but my intentions are irrelevant to my semiotic approach: the audience will see what their hopes and fears, education and desires taught/allow them to see. The immanent give-and-take between those quotations the audience recognizes, what’s called “intertext,” and what’s produced using the medium, the “text,” connects glitches to the visionary tradition by crafting a dramatic art from perception itself—the shapes and patterns of this iconography are performers whose actions can neither be anticipated nor described in advance, but arise directly from digital technology—an unknown adventure in an unknowable space. Yet I’m not interested in technological determinism, formalist exploration, nor anything arbitrary and capricious: I’m interested in articulating basic human emotions—ecstasy, sensuality, fascination—via glitches that encourage viewers to find poetic meaning in their everyday life.

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Umberto Eco. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1979.

²⁵ Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁶ Villem Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

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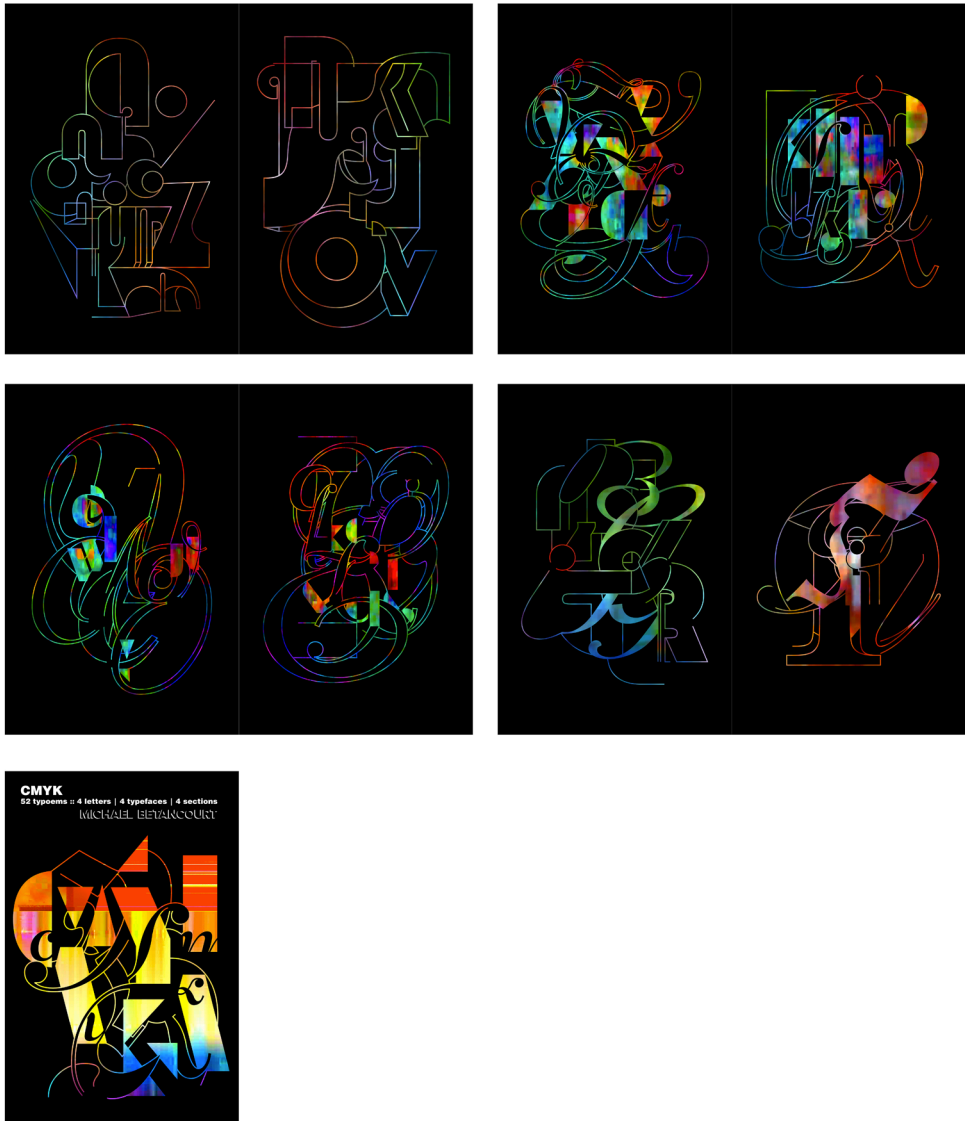


Figure 1. Four double page spreads from the book *CMYK – 52 Typoems :: 4 typefaces | 4 letters | 4 sections* (Timglaset, 2023); was part of the 45th *STA100 award*, The Society of Typographic Arts, Chicago, IL in 2023.

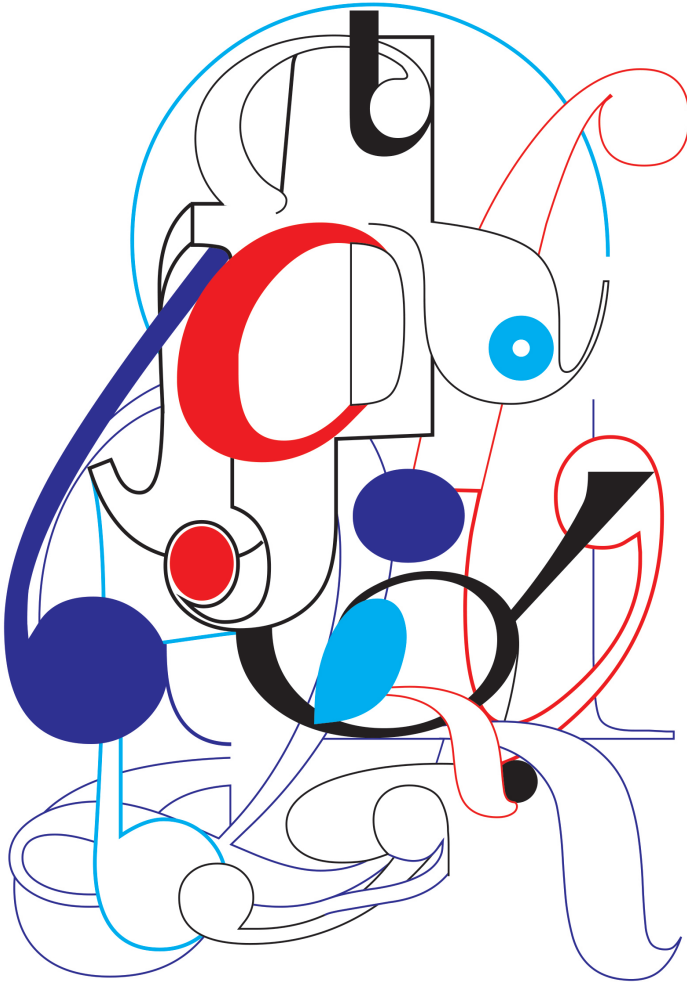


Figure 2. Typoem (2022-037) from *Type Faces* (RedFox Press, 2023).

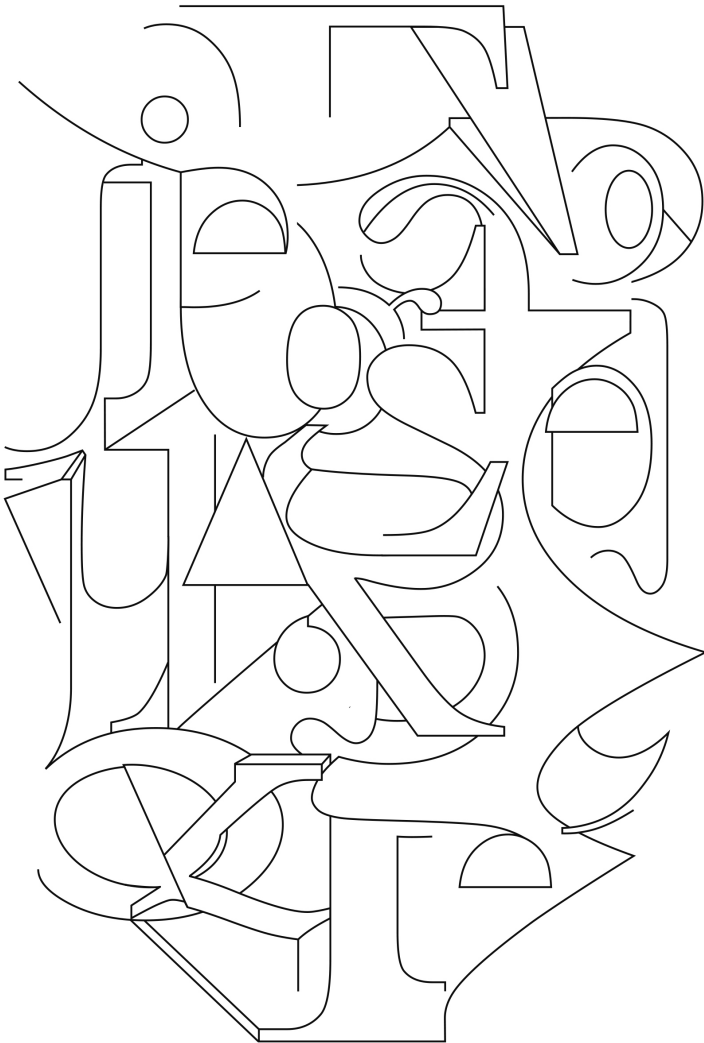


Figure 3. “Aphasic” (2023-053), published in *Twin Bird Review* (Winter, 2024)



Figure 4. “Asemic Santa” print, Cinegraphic Media LLC (2024).

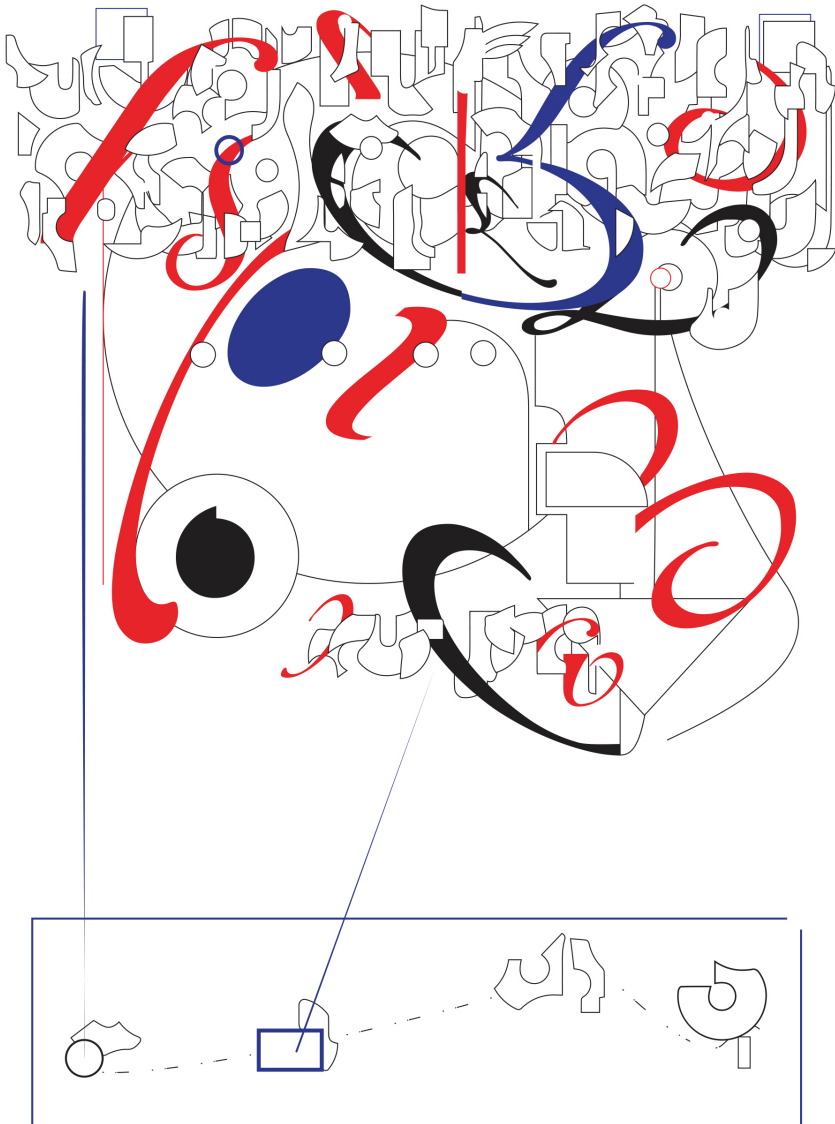


Figure 5. Typoem from the folio *Thoughts Without Words* (nOIRZ, 2022).