**"Sundial"**
Ian Hamilton Finlay

"Sundial" by Ian Hamilton Finlay and cut by Michael Harvey. Slate and cast concrete. The work is located at the University of Kent, Canterbury, England.




Visible Language, XI 2 (Spring 1977). © 1977, Visible Language, c/o The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio USA 44106.] Author's address: Stonypath, Dunsyre, Lanark, Scotland.

**The Public Word**
Alison Sky

# . . .Walls which speak and

Prior to the last hundred years, poetry functioned as a catalyst between language and environment. As Archibald MacLeish observed in Poetry and Experience,[3] "There was no difference between public world and private world so far as the meanings of poetry were concerned down to the time we live in... By the end of the last century all this had changed." The change MacLeish acknowledges is one of literary content, rather than fundamental concept. The issue that I shall address is concerned with the role of poetry as part of the iconography of the public domain.

Within conventional definitions, poetry has "tried everything." It has evolved from legend, passed through generations by word of mouth, developed a complex and formalized written discipline which (particularly in this century) has been transformed into visual imagery, and dematerialized into sound and silence. It has been constructed, re-constructed, integrated, and disintegrated--yet always as part of a recognizable continuum. If it has ever ventured outside the written or spoken page, it has usually not been considered poetry.

The evolutionary process of this development has been an issue of urgent public concern. Even its disintegration has met with intense reaction (as the rioting audiences at Dada events of sound poetry illustrate). Yet at some point in the increasing "privatization" of poetry, it receded from our vocabulary as well. As MacLeish continues, "Poets and politicians both agree, though for opposite reasons, that poetry has no place in the public world... It is a curious situation for many reasons and not the least because the public street is precisely where we live our lives in this century... Our dreams are public. Even our terrors are public, and nevertheless we won't have our poetry out-of-doors."

In the decision to abandon the "public domain" to a totally pragmatic development of our environment, a certain urgency was lost in poetry--a combination of avoiding gut concerns and a failure to deal with those concerns in a way that communicated emotional response. A case in point is demonstrated by the many fine but ineffectual poems pertaining to Vietnam when contrasted with the emotional intensity of one graphic poster illustrating the Mi Lai massacre.

We have now lived with our totally utilitarian cities and have come to find them somewhat deficient. Pragmatism has proven to be like a question with only one answer, and it is always the same no matter how the question is rephrased. This is not the only confusing revelation we have been forced to face. We have come to realize the only infinite aspect of earth is the imagination of man, and it is this imagination which has been abandoned.

Woodrow Wilson once said, "Business underlies everything in our national life." Christopher Tunnard[6] has added to this, "And nowhere is it more true than in these cities where American business has created its own work of art, the skyscraper."

## blow bubbles, balloons carrying words into the sky

Figure 1
Our public language is comprised mainly of commands and inducements aimed at consumption.


The "public language" of our streets has been left to the business enterprises--and they have, predictably, formulated a public language of consumption. To deliver their messages, the most advanced technologies are employed, guaranteeing total obscurity to any poetic infringement of this domain.

In Letter and Image, Massin [4] writes, "New York's great artery, Broadway--and its epicenter, Times Square--have the greatest typographical density in the world... An average American can see as many as 1,500 signs a day... walls which speak and blow bubbles, balloons carrying words into the sky where capricious aeroplanes trace their messages."

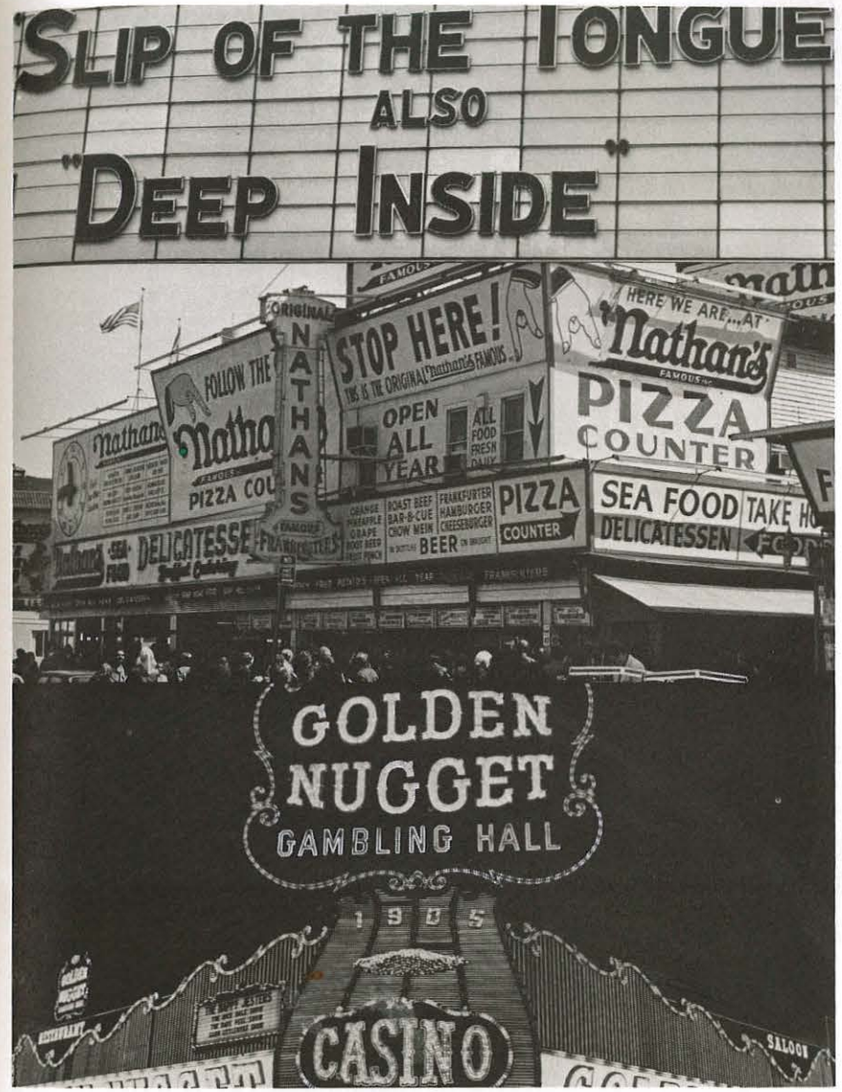
The message conveyed by this technological expertise is, however, totally objective. The content of the sign still does not go beyond a well conceived command. It certainly does not challenge our assumptions in any way, or provoke questions of any subjective nature. As Charles Jencks[1] has indicated, "We live with plural interpretations of a pluriverse rather than a unified theory of a universe." The sign, on the other hand, is predicated upon simply what and where we eat and drink. The subjective level of a public language is yet to be developed and this, rather than technical effect, should become the new province of poetry.

A slightly varied utilization of language is illustrated by the movie marquee. Advertising is concerned with words as graphic objects. The movie marquee goes one step further,



## where capricious aeroplanes trace their messages. . .

Figures 2, 3 and 4
The movie marquee employs the language of our environment to trigger a dialogue in the imagination of the viewer. The building as a sign or sign as a building--Nathan's, Coney Island and Las Vegas, Nevada. Two spectacular examples of the high pressure message at its best. A multiplicity of inducements and commands merge to form a total word/image.



## In a total merging of sign, symbol, color, light and

Figure 5
Graffiti subverts the intention of the command creating a language inversion. It replaces control with a fragment for further fantasy.

Figure 6
An anonymous and rare example in Barcelona, Spain, of word/image in our environment not in the employ of the dollar.

employing the elements of the language of our environment to trigger a subjective dialogue in the imagination of the viewer. In contrast to the objective content of billboards, marquee words are generally used as a direct extension of our role-playing fantasies. It is still, however, the same message/command which is being expressed.


There are certain moments where the direct assault of advertising transcends itself, providing spectacular examples of urban aesthetic. Occasionally, and quite by accident, these commands may be transformed into a different level of experience, though this is never the intent. These are rare instances when a multiplicity of commands lose their individual identities and become a total visual entity--the most splendid example represented by Las Vegas.

The development of a Las Vegas is an end in itself. In a total merging of sign, symbol, color, light, and architecture, language and space become one statement. The risk of following this example too closely is certain superficial repetition, or doing the same thing but not nearly as well. At best, a second Las Vegas would be created; at worst, merely a self-conscious and superficial replica.

Marcel Duchamp, for example, when confronted with the Mona Lisa had the wry humor to paint her a moustache. Rather than marvel at or attempt to duplicate what already existed as a masterpiece, he created an inversion which commented on the "condition of masterpiece."

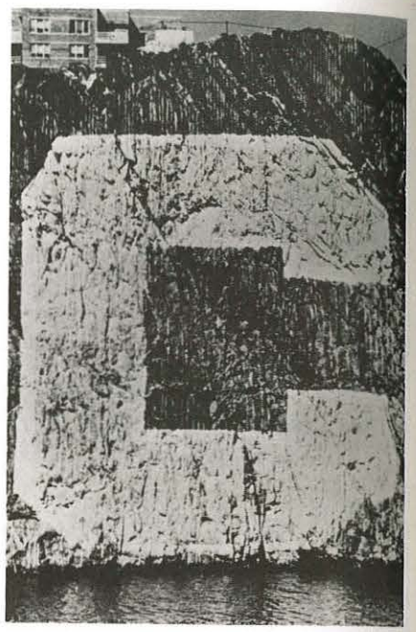


## architecture—language and space become one statement.

Figure 7
"There was no difference between public world and private world so far as the meanings of poetry were concerned down to the time we live in" (Archibald MacLeish). Column in Delphi, Greece.

. . .the graffitists represented an infringement of

Figure 8
"Totale Poesie," Tims Ulrichs, New York, 1964. Photograph: Karl Ulrichs.



Similarly, the most interesting use of language in approaching a new sensibility in public poetry is suggested by urban graffiti. It is, in a sense, the original moustache on our urban landscape. It is curious that it should have evolved out of a totally hybrid circumstance. Graffiti has resulted as the effect of the objective command/ message fusing with the subjective imagination.

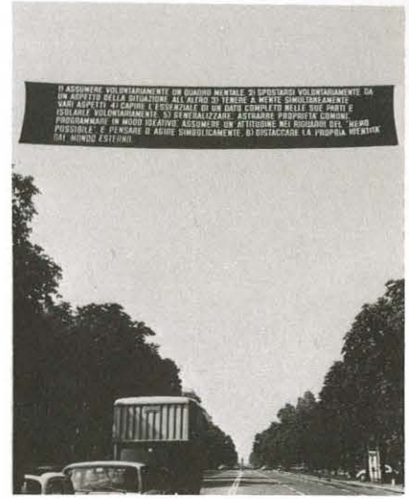
In graffiti the intent of the command is subverted, creating a language inversion. Money is replaced with identity; control is replaced with a fragment for further fantasy. It is no wonder that a tremendous amount of hostility has been vented on the graffitists. A publicity campaign, staggering in the amount of time and money involved, has been spent in arousing public passion to condemn people who merely write on oppressive walls. When all else failed, the graffitists were ultimately bought out by the very financial structure they threatened. It becomes very clear that the graffitists represented a far more ominous implication to the good business sense of America. They represented an infringement of something other than a commercial message upon our public domain. They represented a chance for public poetry.

These examples of a successful use of language in the streets offer a point of departure. The inherent danger, other than in not trying at all, is that the result will become merely a facsimile of what it intends to learn from. The distinction is definitely one of message or content.



something other than a commercial message upon our

Figure 9
"The Seventh Investigation, Proposition 1," Joseph Kosuth, Banner in Turin, Italy, 1970. Photograph: Paolo Mussat Sartor.

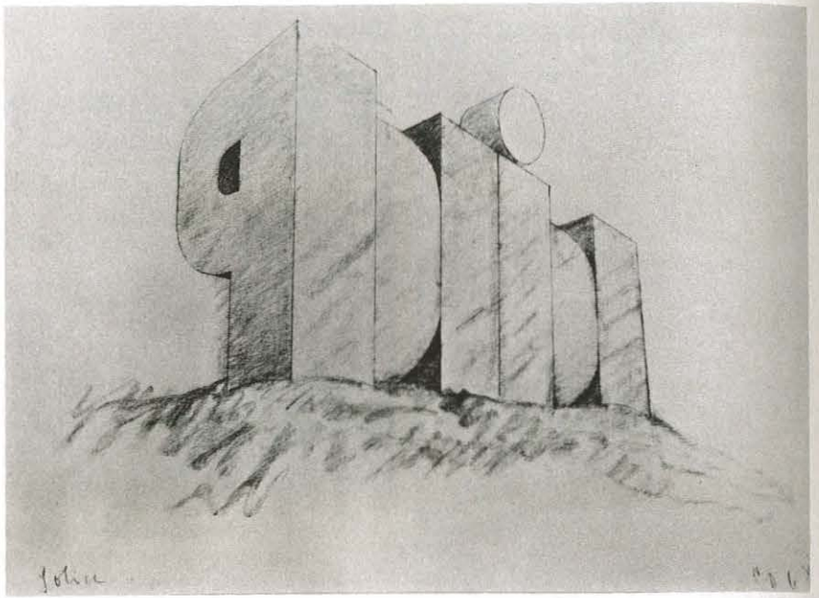


There do exist other eccentric and isolated examples, totally anonymous, where words and symbols have been successfully used in the public domain, not in the employ of the dollar. Many visual poets and artists have also begun to experiment in this direction; e.g., John Giorno's stencilled street poems, Dial-a-Poem Poets series and Consumer Product Poetry in which "words appear on all the things you buy and most things are covered with words," Joseph Kosuth's "The Seventh Investigation" which appeared in various urban contexts, Tim Ulrichs's "Totale Poesie" which covers an entire cliff, and Claes Oldenburg's Design for a Police Building Using the Word Police.

Archibald MacLeish was correct in his assessment that "You will find no generation of mankind which has lived as publicly in the world as we do." I would qualify that statement by adding to it a change in sensibility which makes us very different in a public sense than the ancient Greeks or Romans. László Moholy-Nagy [2] wrote, "We have through a hundred years of photography and two decades of film been enormously enriched in this respect. We may say that we see the world with entirely different eyes." We see the world with TV vision. Our house becomes a public plaza through a tube. We view the rise and fall of governments and nations while reclining on our Posture-Pedics in the intimacy of our bedrooms.

public domain. They represented a chance for public

Figure 10
Design for a Police Building Using the Word Police, Claes Oldenburg, 1968. Collection John and Kimiko Powers, Aspen, Colorado.



The public dimension of poetry (or new public language) if we are to develop one, must express in both message and form this changed imagery. It cannot integrate relevant public issues effectively while presenting them within a sensibility of the past. What seems indicated is a use of language formulated out of the symbology and iconology of our era. Perhaps not even a "poetry" as we are now familiar with, but some hybrid merging of language, space, and architecture.

"In a future perhaps remote (we shall see) the end of art as a thing separated from our surrounding environment, which is the actual plastic reality. But this end is at the same time a new beginning" (Piet Mondrian[5]).



poetry. . .

Figure 11
"Fading Fur," Alison Sky, 1974. First prototype developed for a random street poetry project. A different word is cut into the fur of each cat and they are released. Each can be considered a poem in itself or in any combination--to be read as they are passed by pedestrians.

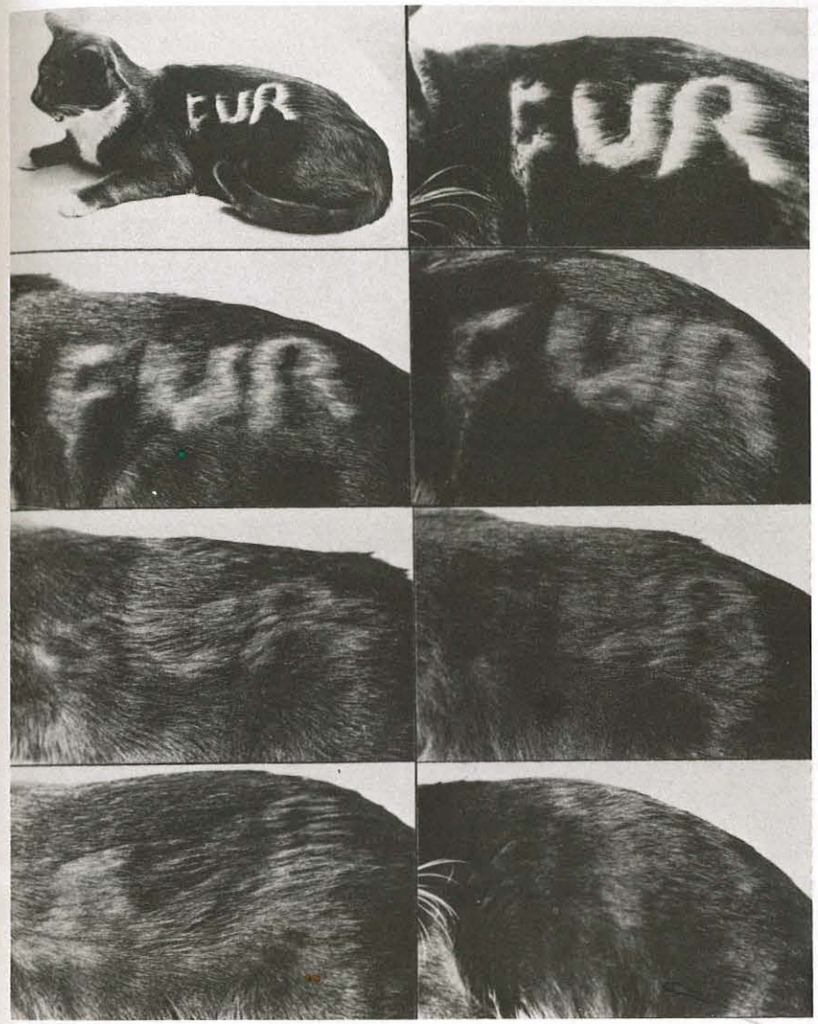
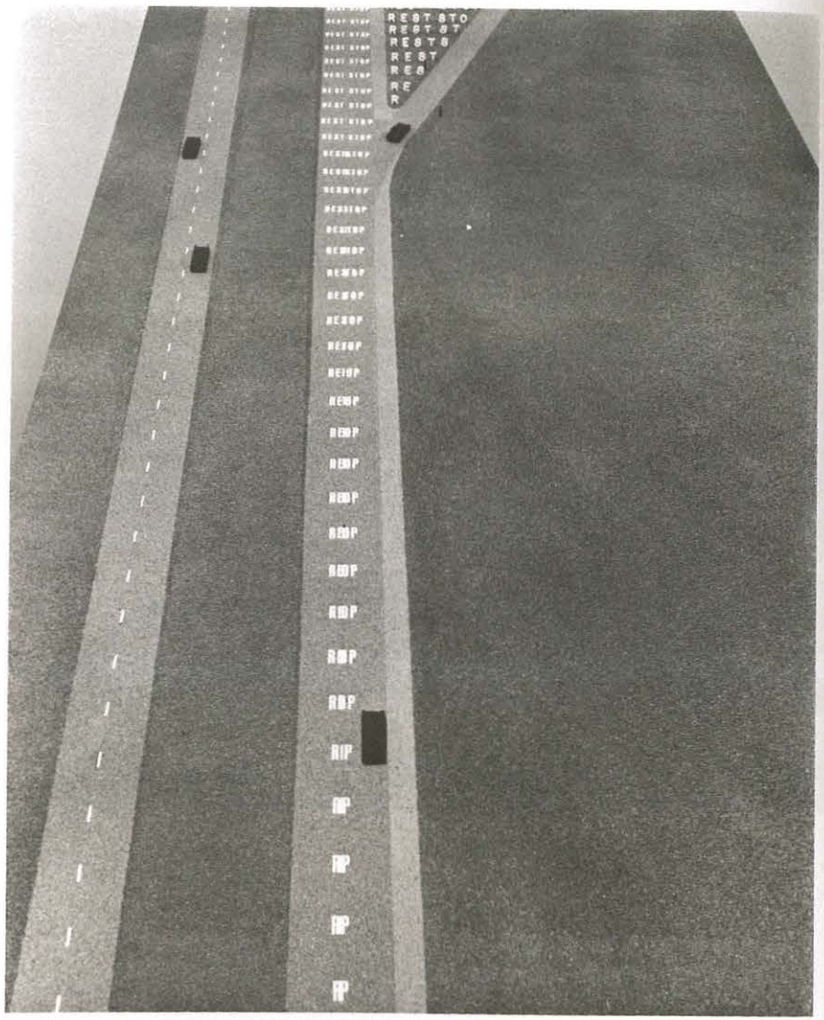


Figure 12
"Prototype Rest Stop" developed for the Nebraska Bicentennial Interstate 80 Sculpture Project, Alison Sky, 1975. The stencilled words REST STOP begin to appear on the roadway approximately one mile before the actual rest stop site. The letters begin to grow slowly out of the dotted highway line–moving outwards until the words are completely formed–approximately one quarter mile from the actual site. REST STOP continues to repeat itself. Upon reaching the grass strip the letters begin to build on the strip in three-dimensional form starting with the letter R until the words are repeated in both two and three-dimensional form. At the center of the rest area, the three-dimensional letters begin to drop away until they finally disappear at the exit tip. At this point the stencilled letters reverse themselves and slowly return into the pavement until they finally disappear. The reversed letters can be read through the mirror of the ongoing automoblie, indicating that the rest area has been passed.







**Reflections on the Theme: At the Edge of Meaning**
Fernand Baudin

As a book designer
I am concerned with the Latin alphabet
and with literate communication.
In this context new technologies do not add new meaning to any particular copy;
yet, in the last quarter century
there has been such a change in the reproduction of texts alone
that one may call it a revolution—or an evolution,
depending on the point of view adopted.
The essential fact is, of course, the passage from lead to film,
from mechanical to photocomposition,
with all the consequent technological, industrial, social, and artistic developments.

In any changing situation, as well as in a changing world,
we naturally look for a point of permanence,
a constant.
What is the one constant among the changing technologies?
Writing.
That is what the symbols and their layout have always been about,
no matter if the materials are hot metal, film,
pens, pencils, brushes, chisels, punches, paper, papyrus, or parchment.
However, it is not a matter of one particular material,
or one particular form of physical virtuosity.
By writing I mean the systematic ordering and recording of thought.
This is what made the difference between prehistory and history:
the ordering, editing, recording, and publishing of intelligent, rational thought.
Past symbols and past symbol systems
may or may not have been better than Latin script.
Whatever the case, I can not see why and how we should or could possibly
return to Sumerian or any other previous system of symbols.
Here and now we are essentially concerned with the roman alphabet
and its future.
There are, of course, a number of other living systems of symbols;
however, unless Asia suddenly overturns the present political balance of the planet,
we may assume that the future of the roman alphabet
spells the future of writing.