

of Art took on the exhibition of the visual artifacts of the movement, *Visible Language* provided sympathetic publication (analogous in many respects to the Letterist publications themselves) and scholars — suddenly finding themselves working in a focused but flexible context — the critical content.

I wish to offer my thanks to the many individuals who ultimately made such a unified approach to this subject possible. Iowa's Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts (a program based in the University's School of Art and Art History) and its expert coordination by Estera M. Pollock provided me with the context out of which the whole project was formulated and offered. Robert C. Hobbs, newly appointed Director of The University of Iowa Museum of Art, well understood the potential and implications of such an enterprise and undertook his collaboration with the journal with considerable interest. In like manner, the editor of the *Visible Language*, Merald E. Wrolstad, saw the rich possibilities of a journal-produced catalog and lent his full cooperation. The scholarly expertise and advice of Professor David W. Seaman was crucial to the success of the project as was the guidance of artist/writer Jean-Paul Curta who, among other things, secured the support of the Letterists themselves. It was the cooperative basis of such a program that persuaded Ruth and Marvin Sackner (The Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry) to lend the major part of the exhibition from their extensive collection, the work around which these combined events finally center themselves.

Stephen C. Foster

Letterism: A Point of Views

Stephen C. Foster

Letterism is, as were most manifestations of the avant-garde throughout the past one hundred years, sensitive to the pivotal role of language in the conduct of most of our activities. The twentieth-century crises in language were seen to affect human affairs broadly, just as crises in non-language affairs were ultimately traceable to the corruption of language. Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism offer obvious and important historical examples of twentieth century avant-garde movements committed to visual language experimentation. Based upon Isidore Isou's belief that the reconstruction of poetry required the deconstruction of words into letters, and that painting could be revitalized only through the introduction of the concrete characteristics of language, Letterism presents a subsequent but no less essential chapter in the continuing tradition of interaction between modern painters and poets. What the Letterists seek is nothing less than a total restoration of language, an *ur-language* composed of the most basic communicative functions. Common to the avant-garde in general is the Letterist conviction that any conventionalized language, by itself, is insufficient; therefore these artists engage, in the course of establishing as broad-based a platform as possible, in the visual arts, music, performance and theater, dance, film, architecture and the minor arts, in which they find an equivalent "plan of evolution" for art (Figure 1). For Isou, the evolution of art could be characterized by two phases, an "amplic" phase and a "Chiseling" phase. The first seeks its limits in its enlargement into other domains, the second, in its narrowing its researches to the "particles" from which an art may be developed anew.

HYPERGRAPHICS (formerly metagraphics): ensemble of signs capable of transmitting the reality served by the consciousness more exactly than all the former fragmentary and partial practices (phonetic alphabets, algebra, geometry, painting, music, and so forth. . . .)

— Lemaître, *Qu'est-ce que le Lettrisme?*

For the Letterists, the crisis in language lay primarily in its exhaustion, in the fact that everything that was done in its name was a "neo." The "particle" constituting the aesthetic mechanism for their new art was the letter in all of its value, richness and novelty. Initiated as a literary or poetic movement, Letterism's value in establishing creative footings in the other arts soon became apparent (Figure 2). Letterism has never become painting or music or poetry — nor have painting or music become Letterism — but the evolutionary phases of all these enterprises coincided at significant places.

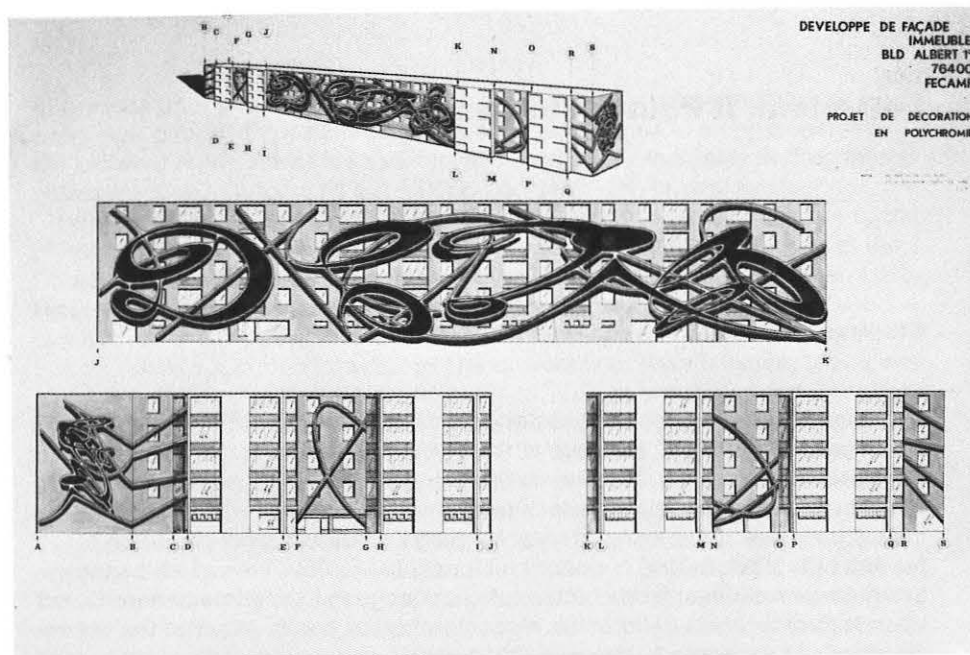


Figure 1.
Alain Satié,
Architectural
project, 1978.

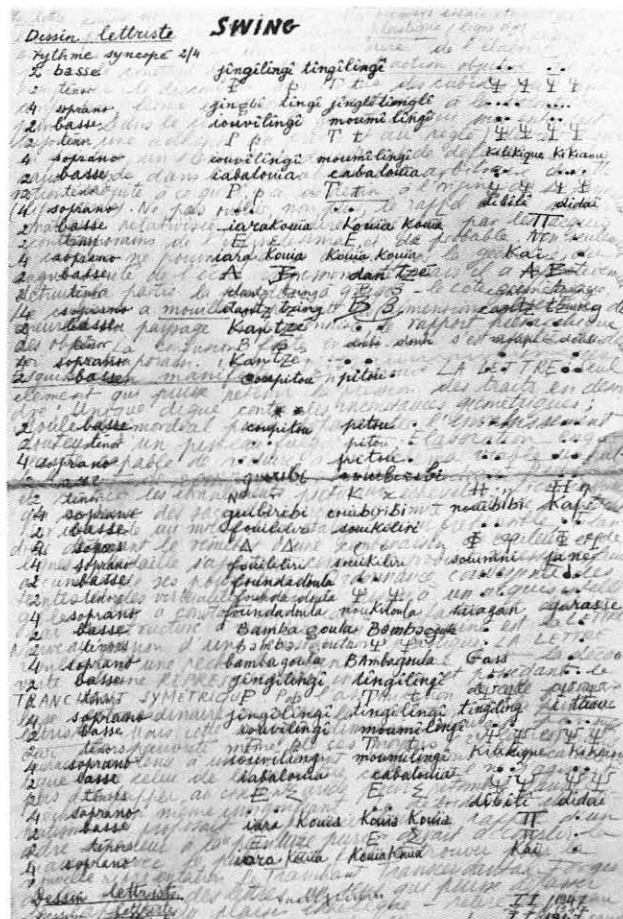


Figure 2.
Isidore Isou,
Dessin lettriste,
1947, Collection
of the Centre
Georges Pompidou.

Variously referred to as "metagraphie," "post-écriture," "hypergraphie," or "superécriture," Letterism is not a language, is not poetry, is not music, says Maurice Lemaître, one of the movement's early and major spokesmen. Rather, the letter is perceived as a "constituent" of a "new art" which offers an informative model for and, in cases embraces, all the arts. It is in many respects similar to what we now designate as "intermedia" (Figure 3).

The Letterist revolution in language responds to what these artists perceive as the social failure of language and art; it seeks to satisfy the broad imperatives of our time. The Letterist revolution is based on restoration of art to its fundamentals, but a fundamental aspect of language is its visual dimension. It is the visual dimension of the movement that is particularly underscored in the composition of this exhibition (Figure 4).

The Letterist visual artists state that "... the 'letter,' which had never been systematically depicted for 'itself,' in all the prior history of painting, should be taken as a 'new object' of visual and subsequently related art." The idea is not new. Paul Klee, among many others, recognized the power of the letter. The Dadaists' photomontage and the Surrealists' object poems explored similar areas. It was left to the Letterists to explore these possibilities systematically.



Figure 3.
Letterist event:
Choreography by
Roberto Altmann
and Michel
Joffrenou,
performance by
Françoise Canal,
Romainville, 1969.

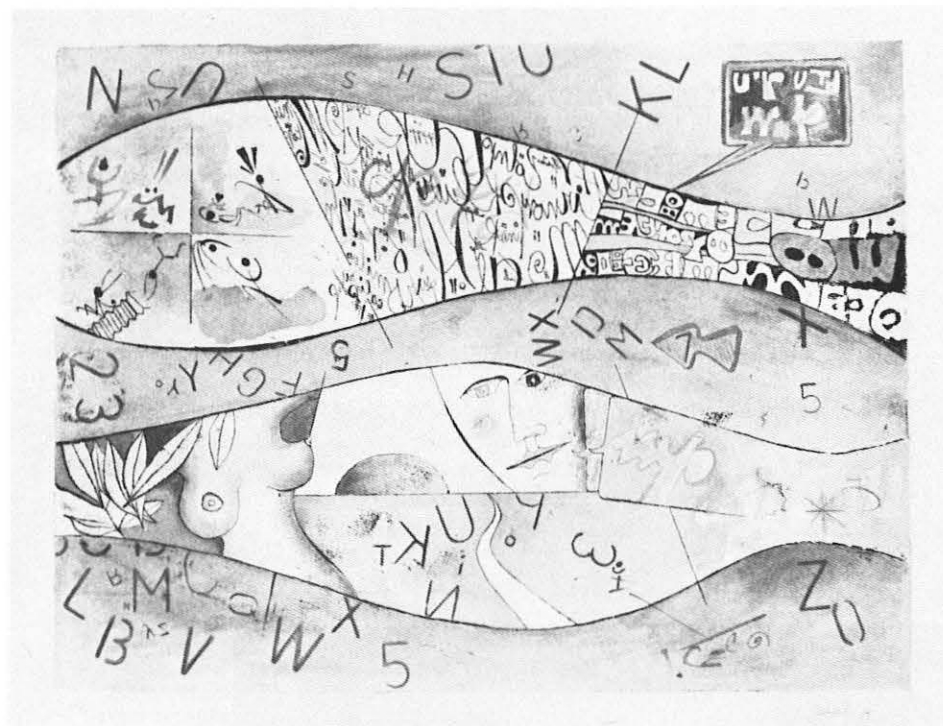


Figure 4 [44]. Maurice Lemaître, Untitled, 1974.
The Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry.

For the first time with poetic Letterism and pictorial Hypergraphic Letterism, PAINTER AND POET are one and the same (because the genre has become the same.)

— Lemaître

From the beginning, Letterism has been the subject of heated debate. It is remarkable that the claims and counterclaims offered thirty-five years ago are still being offered today; this situation certainly reflects the skill of the Letterists' strategies in pursuing their avant-garde aims. One can claim, on the one hand, that Letterism has conceptually operated at the frontiers of art. The work in the exhibition clearly indicates that the Letterists' best work far exceeds in quality what the critics of the movement have thought. The movement has contributed something important. The very word "Letterism" has a kind of magic. As a concept, it compels and has created a mythical aura around itself. It has promoted itself energetically and has enjoyed significant French and international successes. Letterism was welcomed as the "new art" in the late forties and early fifties by individuals no less influential than Cocteau.

At the same time, one can maintain that the movement is relatively unknown, its influence rather limited, its principles and theory questionable or even absurd in some of its claims. Letterism's public posture is typically belligerent,

aloof and perhaps unwarranted by the facts. In spite of the Letterists' frequent attention to producing works of very fine quality, many of their works look to be "tossed off" in a way that the Dadaists, for example, would never have permitted of themselves. One suspects that instances of shoddy presentation of work and poor materials may reflect a presumed theoretical authority which has (from their own point of view) granted them license to take shortcuts in the work itself.

The following catalogue essays clearly reflect, and attempt to resolve, these apparent contradictions. Letterism is seen variously as a dogma, a transition between the "heroic years" of the early twentieth century avant-garde and the present, and as a case of historical shortfall. Zurbrugg (and through him, Chopin) takes the Letterists soundly to task from the position of one advocating and practicing in art/language areas with a different emphasis. Seaman's essay presents a detached and sympathetic approach — "as the years go by, the germ of inspiration seems more important than the elegance of presentation." Curtay, as the group's historian, is praiseful but in a balanced way reflecting both his past involvement in the group and his newer work in "body sound poetry." Devaux, in addressing Letterism, speaks as an insider with all the conviction of an evangelist. My own position favors looking at Letterism as more related in its aims to movements earlier in the century and in its formal devices to more recent developments. Its awkwardness can partially be attributed to members' attempts to establish a myth of total revolution (familiar to the earlier twentieth century) on a "factual" or theoretical basis formulated in the present.

In any event, no attempt has been made here to disguise the controversy. On the contrary, the cross-section of essays was composed deliberately with an eye not to sedating the questions but to clarifying them. It is my own conviction, as curator, that for the controversy to become constructive, the debate must be framed in its entirety.

At the same time, by virtue of the selective choice of works, the exhibition tries to combat the conventional perception of the movement through the unrelenting pressure of its dense and oftentimes difficult theory.

In spite of disagreement on certain levels, one can discern through the debate a belief, in even the fiercest critics of Letterism, that the early years of the movement were pivotal in the evolution of the post-World War II arts. Such conviction is based on the Letterists' radical perpetuation and expansion of language critiques that have been present, in one form or another, for half a century. Letterism evoked a myth of great power and made it the thrust of a conventionally composed and expertly executed avant-garde. Like that of most avant-gardes, its points of view on history were ambivalent. The movement perceived itself historically; that is, its significance was measured by its recognition of and seizing on a favorable position in a rather deterministically conceived historical scheme of things. Yet, Letterism vigorously (and typically) rejected its connection with history with a persistence and to an extent rarely encountered in other movements. The "arrogant isolation" referred to in the Seaman essay describes not only the Letterists' sweeping rejection of history

but also their rejection of a position in the history of the avant-garde and in French culture in general. They have refused to make alliances with other movements (their attacks on Surrealism serve as a case in point), and they resist identifying themselves with others working in the same basic areas.

Their comparative isolation aside, the Letterists have exerted a certain kind of influence; they have, in fact, created a myth. While it would be difficult to trace anything like a stylistic or even conceptual diffusion of Letterism to other individuals or groups, the movement, after the fashion of Dada, provided an important covering term for those working in visual language areas. Furthermore, and rather unlike most other language-oriented groups, their footing in language was taken as the basis of an infinitely expansive aesthetic not so unlike, in many of its features, the totalistic arts offered by Futurism, Dada, De Stijl and Constructivism. Like them, Letterism is positive, field-encompassing and even utopian in its outlook. Like them, Letterism, by formulating a world-view, requires our taking a serious point of view and deserves our respect. The museum goer, critic, historian or artist is here faced with a live and volatile situation with a long history. It is hoped that the exhibition will provide the reviewer the opportunity to engage in the issues.

Nicholas Zurbrugg quotes Isou as saying that "for my part, I introduced something to be explained" (Figure 5). That may be the last word.

Pietro Ferrua notes in the essay preceding the bibliography that several spellings occur in the literature: "Lettrisme," "Lettrism" and "Letterism." I have retained "Lettrisme" for the title of the exhibition to denote the movement's French origin but throughout the manuscripts have deferred to the individual authors' preferences.



Figure 5.
Isidore Isou,
1983.

Chronology

Jean-Paul Curtay

1942-1944 Isou, in Romania, formulates ideas of Lettrist poetry, Lettrist painting, chiseling theater and new aesthetics.

1945 Isou visits Ungaretti in Italy and finally reaches city of his dreams, Paris • Isou launches Lettrist movement with help of Gabriel Pomerand • First pamphlets against Poetry of Resistance (Aragon, Eluard).

1946 First Lettrist event (Salle des Sociétés Savantes) • Letterism becomes known world-wide after interruption of lecture on Dada by Michel Leiris at Vieux-Colombier Theater • First publication of *The Manifesto of Lettrist Poetry* • François Dufrêne and dozens of short-term adherents join Isou • First lecture on Lettrist painting by Jean Caillens (Salle de Géographie) • Lettrist drawings, paintings and sculptures are shown at Porte Latine Bookstore by Jean Caillens.

1947 Gaston Gallimard publishes Isou's two first books: *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* and *L'Agrégation d'un Nom et d'un Messie*.

1948-1949 Isou and group try to change economic and political status of creative people and youth in France (with very little success).

1950 Jean-Louis Brau, Gil J. Wolman and Maurice Lemaître join Isou • Three metagraphic novels: *The Gods' Diaries* (Isou), *St. Ghetto of the Loans* (Pomerand), *Canailles* (Lemaître) • First publication of the *Outline for a Manifesto of Lettrist Painting* • Foundation by Lemaître of two periodicals, *UR* and *Front de la Jeunesse*.

1951 Jean Cocteau gives Isou's first chiseling film, *The Drivel and Eternity Treatise*, Avant-garde Award at Cannes festival • Lemaître produces *The Film Has Already Begun*, first performance film.

1952 *L'Anti-concept*, film by Gil J. Wolman • *Dawnsday Drums*, film by François Dufrêne • *The Current Life's Boat*, film by Jean-Louis Brau • *Screaming for Sade*, film by Guy-Ernest Debord • Marc 'O edits one-issue periodical on Lettrist film (*ION*) • Isou produces film where discussion on the film is the film (*Film Debate*) • Idea of super-writing presented by Isou in texts he dedicates to theater • Foundation of first dissident group, Lettrist International (Gil J. Wolman, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, Serge Berna).

1953 Point du Jour Gallery shows Isou's *The Figures* • First painted photographs (*Amos*) • *Manifesto of Isouian Dance* (*La Revue Musicale*, no. 219) • Robert Mitterand sponsors publication of first volume of Isou's text on