

# The Use of Colour in Visual Poetry

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***Abstract :** Poetry first existed as a strictly oral practice, and long before writing was invented, let alone printing. It relied on the sound characteristics of each language. Now we are used to print our poems on the whitest possible paper with the blackest possible ink, forgetting that in so doing we are using colours. In the middle of the twentieth century there appeared throughout the world a number of poets willing to make use of the other possibilities of the visual signs: form and colour, in addition to the usual sound characteristics. They were stimulated in doing that by the progresses made in the printing techniques. Of course form was readily usable even in black print, and there were many forerunners, even in the Greek antiquity. Colour began to be used in the Middle Ages, but to very little import. The possibilities of modern printing totally changed the situation, and the Visual Poets,- as they came to be named,- took full measure and advantage of these new means. In the present paper some of the significant achievements in this field will be presented and commented.*

**Keywords:** color, pattern, harmony

## 1 Introduction

Poetry, all over the world and across all civilizations, relies on the same characteristics of language : rhythm, pitch, duration, and distinctive features of phonemes, in vowels as well as in consonants. This is obviously a survival of the time when poetry was invented. Thus long before writing,- let alone printing,- was invented. Poetry being strictly oral, colour could not be one of its dimensions.

Now we are used to print our poems with the blackest possible ink on the whitest possible paper, and that's all. We simply forget that in doing so we are using colour. The theory of codes tells us that a minimum of two levels of any given dimension are required for the transmission of information. The first perhaps to realize that, was a Swiss poet named Eugen GOMRINGER, who gave as title to his major poem collection *Worte sind Schatten* (1951-1968). By doing that he forced us to forget, for a moment, the individual meaning of the printed words,

and to look at them as black surfaces on a white background: as *shadows*. Beyond the shock produced by this unusual injunction, a more subtle metaphor can be perceived : the words as signifiers are distinct from their signifieds, just as the image of an object is distinct from the object itself (cf. the well-known painting by Magritte *This is not a pipe*). We are reminded that in poetry we are not in the real world, we are using codes made of symbols, and symbols are, only and inescapably, indirect and remote ways of looking at things.

In experimental psychology there is a well-known teaser showing the names of several colours printed in a colour different from the one they are naming (Fig.1). One discovers that it is extremely difficult to tell rapidly in which colour each of these words is printed. This effect can only be neutralized if all the words are printed in the same colour (preferably black but this is only a matter of cultural convention). When we are switched on the linguistic code, it blocks (or considerably inhibits) the perception of images as such. The reverse is also true: the two codes are strongly interacting and tend to be mutually exclusive.

Colour, as everyone knows, is a dimension of the visual sign, together with form and texture. Visual signs, on the other hand, are one of the two main media used for the transmission of language (the use of touch, while possible, remains in practice restricted to the blind).

In the middle of the twentieth Century, there appeared throughout the world a number of poets willing to exploit more fully the other dimensions of the visual sign, namely form and colour. Of course form was already readily usable, even in black print. And there were many forerunners, including in the Greek antiquity, where *rhopalic verses* were in favour. In modern times however, shaped poems or calligrams have known a tremendous development.

Colour has also been used in the past, but to a small extent and to very little import. One is hardly able to mention more than the use of red characters by Hraban MAUR (Fig.2) and a few other instances. For these authors colour was only a way to underline or emphasize part of the content. This does not imply that poets and writers were not responsive to colour. One memorable instance is the abundantly quoted lines by Andrew MARVELL (*The Garden*, end of 6<sup>th</sup> stanza):

Annihilating all that's made  
To a green thought in a green shade.

Poets *wrote* about colour but did rarely *use* colour. The possibilities of modern printing totally changed the situation, and visual poets,- as they came to be called,- took the full measure of these new means, and were able to employ colour as an integral means of signification instead of a mere ornament.



Fig.1

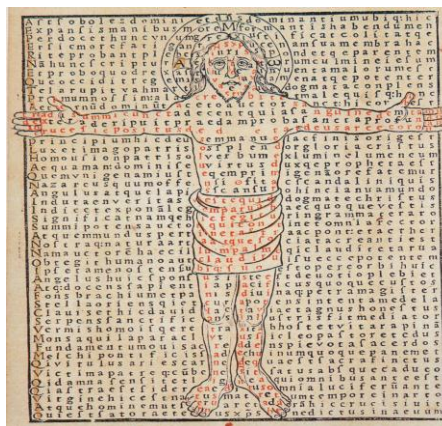


Fig.2

In the present study I shall endeavour to review some of the most significant achievements in this field, presented in an order of increasing complexity. But in the first place I want to apologize because, due to the lack of space, I'll be explaining the works, thus depriving the reader of the pleasure to discover by himself the subtleties and the craftsmanship of the artists.

## 2 Survey of the Corpus

### 2.1 Tibor Papp

I am very glad to open this short display with a Hungarian poet: Tibor PAPP. Tibor lives part-time in Paris and part-time in Budapest. We have been close friends since 1956, when he flew away from Hungary and landed in my city of Liège, without knowing a single word of French. But since, he has become a prominent member of the well-known French circle POLYPHONIX, and produced a variety of sound and visual poetry making use of all the technical devices that are available today.

Here is a poem named “evanescence” (Fig.3), showing, with the help of colour, the fleeting aspect of words and of reality, appearing, disappearing, inducing us in error with fallacious similarities.



Fig.3

## 2.2 Pierre and Ilse Garnier

By the several publications and reviews they have produced, Pierre and Ilse GARNIER have been among the principal introducers of concretism on the European continent. But their personal creation is also very important, even if colour as such is only, in their output, marginally present.

Ilse, the German wife of Pierre, has taken a fundamental step in deciding to compose most of her major portfolios on grey paper (*Canson mi-teinte*). So, whereas in ordinary practice one has only one degree of freedom (black on white, or white on black), she has two, the intermediate grey allowing simultaneous white and black printed words. I consider this discovery as fundamental from the point of view of information theory. The first example (Fig.4) is taken from a portfolio whose title is, appropriately, *ORPHEUS im Tal der Schatten* (ORPHEUS in the valley of Shadows). The first sheet shows the hero stepping over the threshold of Hell. The two further examples are extracted from the *Conte de la forêt profonde* (Tale of the deep forest).

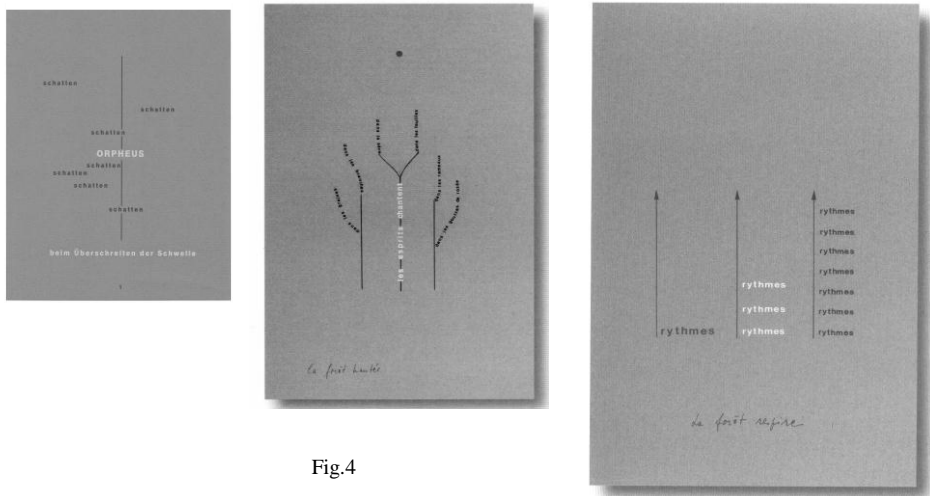


Fig.4

From Pierre I am always pleased to show two delightful poems, well expressing the ecological concerns of their author (Fig.5). The first presents the five vowels as colourful twittering birds, while the second is probably the most synthetic representation of a butterfly one can imagine, but still maintaining a full and convincing visual evidence.

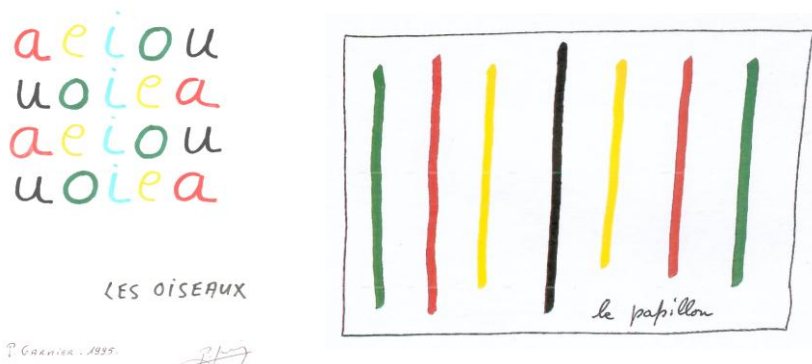


Fig.5

## 2.3 Timm Ulrichs

In Germany was created and developed since 1960, under the name of *Totalkunst*, a very original kind of artworks. Its founder and sole promoter is the Totalkünstler Timm ULRICHs. I won't describe in any detail what Totalkunst is about: suffice it to say that the word *total* is fully justified, and to refer those interested to the selected bibliography that I have provided. Among Timm's works in which colour plays a significant role, I have selected the following two (Fig.6). All these works are surprisingly simple and self-explanatory, warranting their strong effect.



Fig.6

## 2.4 Thomas A. Clark

Thomas Alexander Clark is a Scottish poet, who started writing shortly after the beginnings of Concrete Poetry. He soon created his own hand-press to produce his poems (*Moschatel Press*), always to the highest professional standards. His personal interest in colour is already apparent in one of his earliest visual poems, stating *A hunger for green / A thirst for blue*. But I'll be showing you the delightful and efficient folder he sent to his friends last December, as a New-Year's present (Fig.7). The title, *Unfolding brightness*, plays on the word *fold*. The poet had already been using the word *unfolding* metaphorically elsewhere, in connection with sheepfolds. This time, as one unfolds the folder, the gesture displays at the same time the full and bright sunlight, as fit for a solstice, in the form of three sheets of a bright yellow paper. Brightness comes out and increases as one continues unfolding the sheets, just as the sun will do in the following months. Being himself a printer, and used to bookmaking, he spontaneously incorporated the gesture in this work, whose efficiency also comes from its brevity (two words) and extreme formal simplicity.



Fig.7

## 2.5 Ian Hamilton Finlay

Apart from his celebrated garden, this world-famous Scottish artist published many poem-prints, among which several have colour as an essential component. The first I'll describe is the grammatical fusion of ME and YOU into US, which is paralleled by the mixture of two colours (Fig.8).

My second example is a visual poem of the category known as *semiotic poems* (Fig.9). They comprise two parts. In the largest one a small number of visual signs (ideally only two) are displayed in a meaningful arrangement. In a corner of the work one finds a *lexical key* proposing the translation of the selected signs into concepts or words. In my example the horizontal blue line suggests the sea and the oblique brown ones the hill slopes.

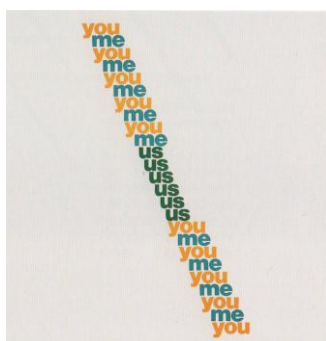


Fig.8



Fig.9

## 2.6 Francis Edeline

If I am allowed to quote one of my own works, here is a construction around the vowel U (Fig.10). If you rotate the letter four times by 90°, giving to each stage a different colour, you obtain a perfectly symmetric figure, apparently made of a circle inscribed in a square. This is also the basic structure of a tantric Mandala. The original work is made of four transparent sheets of paper, carefully aligned, each one with the letter U printed in a single colour. The four selected colours (yellow, blue, green and red) are the traditional colours used in Mandalas.

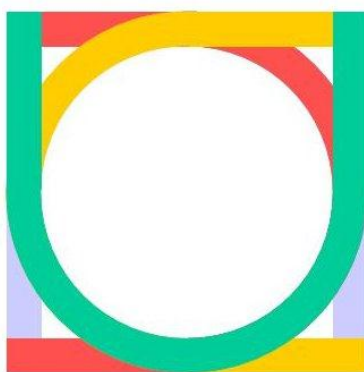


Fig.10

## 2.7 Arnaldo Antunes

ANTUNES is a Brazilian poet, younger and clearly influenced by de CAMPOS : in his circular poem *Chromosome* (Fig.11) he uses the type face created by the latter. He cleverly takes advantage of the close resemblance (in Portuguese) of words like *cromossomo*, *como*, *cosmos*, *somo* and emphasizes the only outlying letter R by printing it in red. This reminds us of the greek root χρώμα (colour) and σῶμα (body), and also (for those who know the fact!) that chromosomes were discovered and received their name (in 1888) because of their affinity for certain dyes, among which the red dye fuchsin. The circular form of course evokes the living cell and the endless chain of life.





Fig.11

## 2.8 David Bellingham

Another Scottish poet is David Bellingham, of whom I'll show a group of poems I have gathered under the French title *Agrumes* (Citrus fruits) (Fig.12).

A poet inevitably melds words and colours, just as a visual artist fuses colours and shapes. This is why David Bellingham, being both poet and visual artist, is so able to present us with these three expressions of his deep reflection on the subject.

Figurative form places limitations on the artist's palette of colours. And one of the major battles for abstract artists has been the dissociation of form and colour, which, nevertheless, still cling stubbornly one to the other, all the more so since they are bound together by language.

All developed languages have around ten words for specific colours, of which yellow and green are two. Other colours, outside this category, can be referred to only by reference to an object that *is* of that colour, so that finally the meaning of the name of this object will expand to include the colour as well e.g. violet, lilac, fuchsia and, in particular, orange. The short poem *lemon yellow lemon* eloquently illustrates this characteristic of the vocabulary of colour. The orange is the only one of the citrus fruits to have developed in this way. Whereas it takes three words to describe a lemon or a lime – the name of the colour placed inside the encircling boundary of the repeated name of the fruit – it takes only two words to describe an orange, since the names of the fruit and the colour are one and the same.

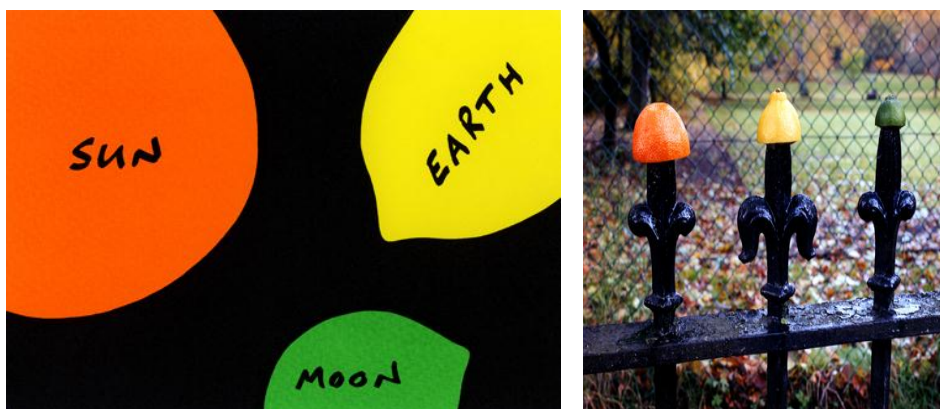


Fig.12

In the main image, the eye is first drawn to the three blocks of pure colour. The lemon and the lime are identifiable by their shape, and are distinguishable one from the other by their colour and size. The unique roundness of the orange is not what enables us to identify it : only the presence of the other two fruits steers our interpretation towards the paradigm of *citrus fruit*, which is then superimposed by the paradigm of colours. Then the respective size of the three fruits in turn leads to a third paradigm, that of the heavenly bodies, which, with three words, are *inscribed* on the background of undefined cosmic darkness.

*citrus finials* adds a humorous, ephemeral dimension to the theme. The shape of the fruit, after the juice has been squeezed out of it and enjoyed, combined with the waterproof firmness characteristic of its skin, allow it to be made into coloured finials, just right for tempering (if only briefly) the ferocity of the wrought iron spears.

## 2.9 Arrigo Lora-Totino

Arrigo LORA-TOTINO is an Italian poet living in Torino. Since more than fifty years he has produced an immense amount of sound and visual poems, as well as gymnastic performances. During several periods (notably in 1977 and 1978) he was specially interested in colour and used it in a very personal way. He thought silk-printing was the best way to obtain vivid, strongly saturated colours, even on black paper. His titles are evocative : Cromofonemi iridescenti and Incandescenze. One of the most fascinating properties of colour is that one can easily use it for so-called OP-effects: scintillation, dazzling, iridescence etc. LORA-TOTINO is a skilful user of these possibilities. From the first portfolio I extract sheets n°1 and 2 (Fig.13), where he managed to obtain pleasant optical effects of scintillation and lustre by placing contrasting colours close together, in addition to the pointillistic effect produced by the typographical characters. As most of his fellow artists of the time, he used the FUTURA font. The second portfolio contains five large silk-

prints (51x61) under the subtitle 5 itinerari litoranei (Fig.14). They portray the colour atmosphere, the fleeting and scintillating impression of light at different hours of the day (dawn, morning, noon, afternoon, evening), on the Arno estuary. Of course the interest of such visual poems is not limited to their use of colour: it is enhanced by the sonority of the words: fluire – affluire – confluire etc.

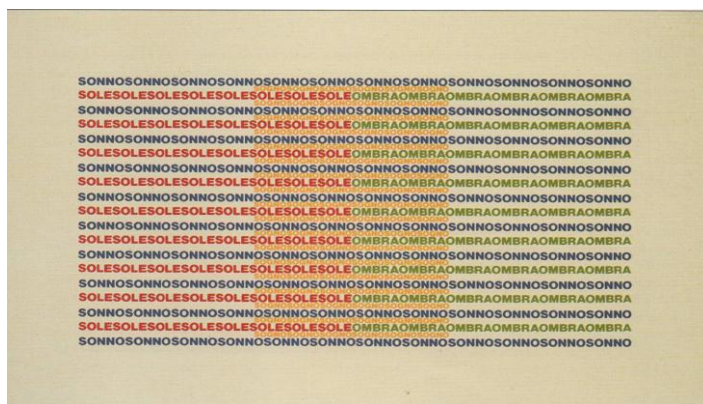


Fig.13

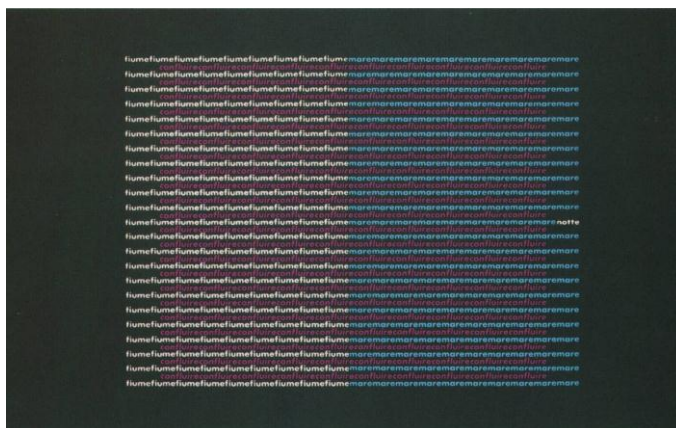


Fig.14

## 2.10 Augusto de Campos

The Brazilian poet Augusto de CAMPOS, together with his brother Haroldo, and in conjunction with the Swiss poet Eugen GOMRINGER, created in 1955 the movement of Concrete Poetry, soon to become an active international community of poets. Augusto de CAMPOS is famous for his inventiveness, and since the beginnings he never ceased to explore new techniques: light bulbs, pop-up poems, video-poems, holograms etc.

A great many of his creations rely on colour.

*Sem saída* (*Without exit*) has to be sequentially projected on a screen: what I am showing here is the final result (Fig.15). First appears for instance a yellow sentence, written along an undulating line. Then comes a second phrase, in another colour, also zig-zagging on the screen, and crossing the first. A total of 7 sentences appear successively, finally covering the screen and composing a full square and a complete poem. Each line is constrained in the square, a space from which the poet cannot escape, as the text repeats. The text also has a double meaning, and is reminiscent of the dictatorship period that the Brazilians had to suffer in 1964. In the final result, only colour allows to discover and to read the individual sentences.



Fig.15

lygia      finge  
 rs      ser  
 digital  
 dedat illa(grypho)  
 lynx lynx      assim  
 mãe felyna      com ly  
 figlia me felix sim na nx  
 seja: quando      so lange so  
 ly  
 gia      la      sera      sorella  
 so only lonely ti-  
 l

Fig.16

*Lygia fingers* proposes a more complex process (Fig.16). Besides being a poet, Augusto de CAMPOS is also a musical critic who was much admiring Anton von WEBERN. In 1909, Schoenberg conceived the *Klangfarbemelodie* (Tone-Colour Melody), a new method for composing music. The idea was to replace, or to complement, the usual tone-scale with a series of timbres. The timbre is the specific frequency spectrum of each musical instrument, that dimension of sound by which one immediately distinguishes a guitar from a piano, or an organ from a flute. In German, timbre is named *Klangfarbe*, which is of course a metaphor translating sound into colour. Webern, a past-student of Schoenberg, developed and used this new mode of composition. In this musical style the composer

selects several different instruments and has them to play only specified notes. But de CAMPOS took the colour metaphor at face value. To that effect he retained the first bars of *Quartette opus 22*, in which 5 instruments are performing (a violin, a saxophone, a clarinet and the two hands of a piano). To each tone was attributed one colour, and with these simple data a short story was built. *Lygia* is the name of the poet's wife, printed in a deep red. She was a typist (hence the fingers). From top to bottom you can follow her under different guises and wordplays, as well as her feline aspect, and the name of a second woman. Claus CLÜVER (1981) has given a clear and detailed description of the method.

Here I'd like to open an aside. Many attempts have been made to establish a parallel between colour and sound, on the ground that both are continuums governed by frequencies. The fallacy of this conception can easily be demonstrated (see f.i. Linares, 2008). But the most salient remark is that these theories, in correlating the frequencies of both domains, consider that each colour corresponds to a sound pitch, i.e. to its height, whereas the notion of Tone-Colour, or Klangfarbe, or Timbre, the only musical parameter to be spontaneously associated with colour, has little or nothing to do with pitch... A sound of the same pitch can be produced by a variety of instruments, which nevertheless clearly retain their distinctive "colour" and can easily be identified. The poem by de CAMPOS in no way indulges in such fallacies.

## 2.11 Heinz Gappmayr

The visual poems by the late Heinz GAPP MAYR (Austria) are quite difficult to describe and to comment, not because of their visual complexity but because of their philosophical turn. Several of them are about colour, and a complete exhibition has been devoted to this subject in Innsbruck in 2000 under the general title *Text Farbe Raum*. On this occasion the author published a short essay about his conception of colour in visual poetry. The principal theme of his poetry is time and space, and colour is a later addition to the mainstream of his reflections. He is interested in questions such as the meaning of colour, the relationship between colour and language, and the kind of space created by colour (Fig.17). Finally he questions the nature of the colour that a subject can form in his imagination after being evoked by a word, as compared to the same colour perceived directly. This latter problem had been nicely put in the teaser previously shown (Fig.1) : the name of a colour supersedes the colour itself!

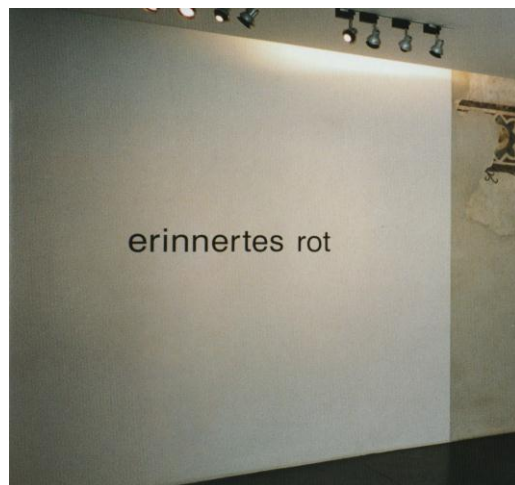


Fig.17

### Conclusions

Many more examples could of course have been shown, but they all would have concurred to demonstrate the interest of colour as a means to increase the efficiency of poetry. The use of colour has procured poets with an additional channel of meaning, simultaneous to the linguistic one and conveyed directly by colour without the help of words. In these instances both channels retain their full capacity. As the same units function simultaneously at both levels, and not as if the two codes were simply juxtaposed, one may call them intersemiotic. Sometimes the colour contrasts play strictly inside the poem, sometimes their meaning plays on an external reference.

However one must not forget that, since the advent of the Concrete Poetry movement, an opening has also been made towards space and movement, so that the complex contemporary works are a combination of several semiotic dimensions : language, form, colour, space and movement.

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