



Left: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future – Saint Just*, 1983; below: *Apollon Terroriste*, 1987, both works installed at Little Sparta, Edinburgh

The postwar Concrete poets and artists highlighted the visual potential of language. In the centenary year of one of their most celebrated artists, Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Greg Thomas* tells the story

# Landscape and letters



In the Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh, a farmstead nestles in a tree-filled fold. To those who know the place well, it is still sometimes called Stonypath. To the outside world, it is the garden and work of art Little Sparta. The poet and artist who made it his home and transformed it from the mid-1960s, Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), gave it the name Little Sparta during the late 1970s, to distinguish his spiritual stronghold from Edinburgh, home of the Scottish art establishment and often called the Athens of the North. It was also in reference to the ancient city states of Athens and Sparta being in perpetual rivalry.

At Little Sparta, one of the subjects of a centenary exhibition of Finlay's work at the National Galleries of Scotland, a particular model of order prevails. The garden is filled with poems. They are inscribed on stone columns, altars, bridges and way-markers; notched into wooden gateposts and stiles; inset into the gilded lintels of windows and doorways. These poems represent the incorporation of visual and sculptural form into literature: properly put, the stone, wood and bark are not the backdrop to the poetry but part of the poetry itself. The same goes for the trees, plants and landscape. It is all folded into the epic verse of Little Sparta.

However, as the name would suggest, this poet's garden stands not only for the ordering of the visual and the linguistic, but for a neoclassical conception of art, society and spirituality, stressing virtue, reverence for the gods and a fierce resistance to modernity. Perhaps the most famous of the three-dimensional poems at Little Sparta consists of 11 vast slabs of Purbeck stone, inscribed with a phrase attributed to the French Revolutionary zealot Saint-Just: 'The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future'. From the disorder of the contemporary world, the work implies, a future order might yet emerge, echoing classical antiquity.

The exhibition will trace a course through Finlay's work, including sculptures, prints and installation. But to truly understand his creative origins, we must also understand Concrete Poetry, the movement to which he attached himself during the 1960s, and from which the extraordinary domain of Little Sparta blossomed like a flower from a seed.

Concrete Poetry was a movement in modern poetry and art emerging in the years following the Second World War. It stressed

the visual arrangement of language as an integral element of meaning. This idea had millennia-old roots in writing systems. Our own Roman alphabet evolved from a set of pictographic symbols, which referred to things by visual approximation rather than standing in for a sound. In the centuries between pre-history and present, countless literary movements and traditions, from Ancient Greek technopaegnia to medieval pattern poetry to Arabic calligraphy, have emphasised written language's innate visual potential.

Concrete Poetry had a set of more immediate precursors, too, in the anarchic poetry scores and performances of the Futurist and Dada movements in the early decades of the 20th century. Poets such as Hugo Ball and FT Marinetti used the unusual visual placement and appearance of words and letters, as well as nonsense words and onomatopoeic noise, to generate a sense of flux, energy and chaos responsive to the anxieties of the machine age and the horrors of the First World War. In this they were following the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose 1897 poem *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'abolira le Hasard* ('A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance'), is often taken as the first visual poem of Modernism.

In the 1950s, as the Western world rebuilt itself following the Second World War, a new visual poetry emerged. Its hubs were in Northern Europe and South America, its founding figures the Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer, based in Ulm, West Germany, and the Noigandres poetry collective in São Paulo, Brazil, consisting of brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari. It's no coincidence that Latin America and Northern Europe were then centres of so-called Concrete Art, a style of abstract, geometric painting and sculpture that sought the minimum possible number of meaningful elements (lines, shapes, colours) to generate interest and emotion in the viewer.

Concrete Poetry, in one sense, simply transferred this idea to language. If a Concrete painting could be made with a handful of shapes and colours, a Concrete poem could be made with just one or two words or semantic fragments. But the borrowing from Concrete Art was more direct too, in that Concrete poets created works that appeared on the page as a visual arrangement: a square, spiral, column or grid, for example. The forms chosen, like

Right: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Wave Rock*, 1966







those of Concrete Art, did not attempt to recreate an object or idea but were purely abstract. So too, the Concrete poets were influenced by the global renaissance of Modernist architecture in the postwar decades. They sought to bring something of the immutable and unambiguous quality of architecture to their linguistic art, creating poems that were concretely there. As all this might suggest, whereas Dada and Futurism had been all about expressionism, emotion and excess, Concrete Poetry was about minimalism, order, clarity and calm. Gomringer's poem *Silencio* gives a good example of the atmospherics of early Concrete Poetry. The word *silencio* (silence, in Spanish) is repeated 14 times (emulating the lines of the sonnet) in a rectangle framing a central blank space. The poem evokes the idea of silence while the visual 'silence' at its core appears to infuse the language with its quality of stillness. The fact that the poem can be read across multiple languages is key to the aims of Concrete Poetry. The movement sought to create poems simple enough to be understood across cultural and linguistic divides. In this sense, it stood for an attempt to conceive of a common humanity, after the gross inhumanity of the War. If Gomringer's work stood for meditative simplicity, his Brazilian peers worked in a more linguistically complex, playful and politicised way. They saw the Americanisation

Above: Ian Hamilton Finlay with *Hand Grenade Finals*, 1991; right: 'Big E' (at Midway), 1976-77; above, right: Mary Ellen Solt, *Forsythia*, 1966

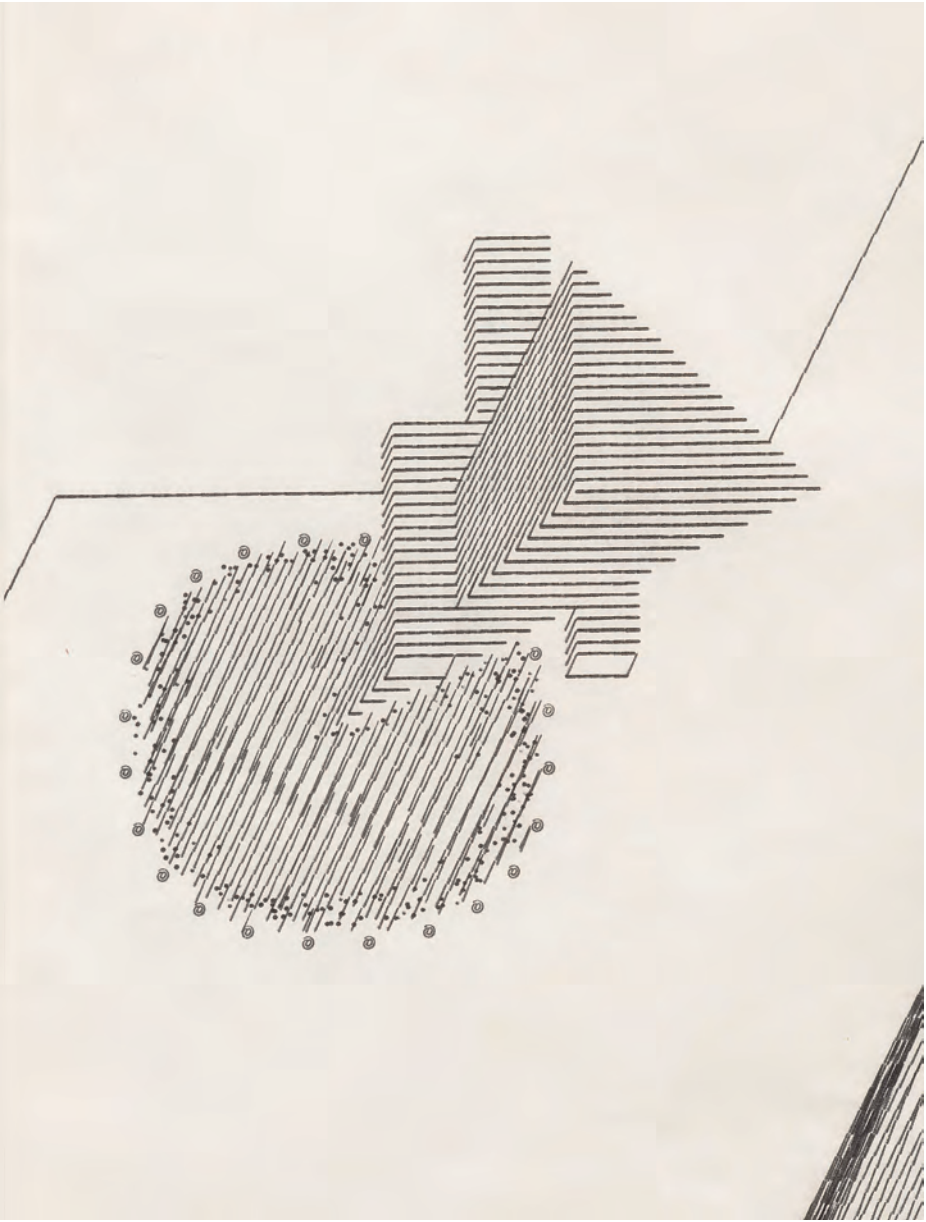


of international culture through the effects of the new postwar economic order and much of their work is shot through with a quality of postcolonial dissent. In Pignatari's *Beba Coca Cola (Drink Coca Cola)*, the title words mutate over several lines to produce variations like 'cola' ('glue'), 'coca' ('cocaine'), 'babe' ('drool'), and, finally, 'cloaca' ('waste', 'rubbish dump' or 'cesspool'). The white-and-red Coca-Cola colour scheme used in some versions of the poem shows that Concrete poets were aware of similarities between their graphic-linguistic style and the mushrooming advertising culture of the postwar world and could use these similarities to satirise the consumerist zeitgeist. Over the 1950s and 1960s, the Concrete Poetry movement spread around the world, with distinctive schools emerging in Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Japan, France, North America and elsewhere. Some of the most interesting artists and writers connected with the style included Mary Ellen Solt, a North American poet who created poems in the shapes of flowers, and the Japanese poet and painter Seiichi Niikunu, whose work took advantage of the innate visual qualities of the Kanji ideograms he used. The style also reached Britain, with 1962-63 being a key period. It was during those years that the Glaswegian poet Edwin Morgan, the Gloucestershire-based typewriter artist and monk Dom Sylvester Houédard [the subject of an exhibition at London's Estorick Collection to 11 May], and Finlay, then living in a flat in Edinburgh, became familiar with the international scene. The Concrete Poetry movement in Britain was highly varied. Morgan produced lively, linguistically inventive poems that retained strong links to more conventional poetic forms. Houédard created stunning, architectonic constructions on his typewriter dubbed 'typestracts'. The artist John Furnival made freehand text murals in the shapes of towers and ziggurats, while Liliane Lijn created spinning mechanical columns and cones of text. Performance poets such as Bob Cobbing and Paula Claire used abstract visual poem-scores as the cue to Dadaist, improvisatory vocal performance. Meanwhile Finlay, the most fêted and creative of them all, experimented with new material formats for the Concrete poem. It began with what Finlay called 'standing poems', mini-paper sculptures for display on domestic surfaces. Then there were poems

created as posters, or in wall-mounted cork lettering. There were poems in sand-blasted glass such as *Wave Rock* (1966), whose visual appearance changed depending on the quality of light refracted through the poem's etched rear surface. There were freestanding wooden sculpture-poems, as in the 'Boat Names and Numbers' series of 1967-68. And finally, there were large-scale, three-dimensional poems placed in relationships with the encompassing landscape. These later forms were made possible by Finlay's relocation in 1966 to Stonypath, then a semi-derelict collection of farm buildings with expansive accompanying grounds. Finlay began to populate his new domain with three-dimensional poems, applying the inventiveness of his earlier experiments in visual and sculptural poetry using a grand natural canvas. As the horizons of the garden were filled with works of art and enclosing greenery, creating what Finlay called a series of 'interiors', distinct aesthetic spaces, his creative and ideological horizons began to shift, too. Troubled by nervous illness and agoraphobia throughout his life, Finlay was much drawn to the idea of order inherent in early Concrete Poetry: of a poem whose meaning could be fixed and unshakable, like a rock withstanding the lashings of the tide, a 'model of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt', as he put it in a 1963 letter to the poet Pierre Garnier. After settling at Little Sparta, however, he began to think of this idea less in the neutral, formalistic terms of midcentury Modernism. Instead, aesthetic order came to



## In the 1950s and 1960s, the Concrete Poetry movement spread across the world, with distinctive schools emerging from Sweden to Japan



Above: Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Untitled*, c1967 (detail); right: Liliane Lijn, *Get Rid of Government Time*, 1962



enfold a notion of moral and spiritual purity, filled with the values of the Greco-Roman world. The minimalist language games of Concrete Poetry, still evident in the early works installed in the garden, were replaced by sundials, columns and other evocative forms inscribed with classicist maxims and epithets. When Finlay converted a ruined cow byre into a Temple of Apollo, its façade bearing the dedication 'To Apollo/His Music/His Missiles/His Muses', his invocation of the Greek god of reason and harmony was at once whimsical and deadly serious. Finlay also became concerned by the ways in which subsequent, bloody phases of Western history, from the French Revolutionary Terror to the Third Reich, could be seen as having reawakened classical values, giving credence to Walter Benjamin's famous phrase 'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. Thus, threaded throughout the garden, in amongst the beauty and gentle humour, a persistent note of menace is struck, as in a work that replaces column finials with giant hand grenades. Over the decades of Little Sparta's construction, Finlay's reputation grew beyond the garden walls, as works similar to those found at Stonypath were commissioned for galleries and sculpture parks around the world. The artist, however, confined by his agoraphobia for four decades, became a kind of internal political exile, such was his enmity to the modern secular state, which resulted in a series of ongoing 'battles', semi-staged confrontations with public bureaucracies documented through polemical publications and 'happenings'. Finlay's utterly unique aesthetics and ideology also saw his work gradually unmoored from the founding principles of Concrete Poetry. But Little Sparta stands in part as testament to the inspirational possibilities of the style, in its entwining of word, image, sculpture and landscape.

● 'Ian Hamilton Finlay', 8 March to 26 May, National Galleries of Scotland, Modern Two, Edinburgh. [nationalgalleries.org](http://nationalgalleries.org), 50% off paid exhibitions with National Art Pass. For more on Little Sparta visit [littlesparta.org.uk](http://littlesparta.org.uk)

Greg Thomas is a Glasgow-based writer and author of 'Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland' (Liverpool University Press).