Words at War, Words in Exile, Words Transformed: Visible Language and Legible Image in Migrant Art in Britain

The Manx Schwitters

Kurt Schwitters's 1940 landscape painting *Douglas from the Internment Camp* (cat. 2) was created during his detention as a foreign alien in the United Kingdom, at the Isle of Man's Hutchison Camp. A forlorn, rain-soaked scene, in which the slant of chimney smoke, slate rooftops, and shallow hills beyond somehow combine to suggest the presence of diagonal drizzle, it gives, as Ana-Maria Milčić notes in the previous chapter, 'a fleeting glimpse of life in internment'.

Executed in a post-impressionist style which was hardly revolutionary by the 1940s, it does not hint at the genres and media which made Schwitters famous. These include his rambunctious Dadaist sound poetry and his text-and-image-led collage, from intimate two-dimensional compositions to huge architectural assemblages of junk, his 'Merzbarns'. A glimpse of his achievements in the latter field can be found in the 1927 collage *für Frau Fränkel* (cat. 1), created for the artist Elsa Fraenkel, using fragmented tickets and typography to recall their youthful trips to Paris, far happier excursions than the one which brought Schwitters to Britain.

Dada and the Visible Word

By the time Schwitters made that journey – first to Norway in 1937 to escape Gestapo interrogation as a 'degenerate artist', then to Britain in 1940, after the Nazi invasion of the Scandinavian peninsula – he was already a towering figure in Dada, a movement at the forefront of all subsequent experiments in visible language and legible image.[1] Born in Hanover in 1887, Schwitters started experimenting with Cubist art in 1917, around the same time that he began penning the proto-surrealist poetry included in his 1919 volume *Anna Blume*.[2]

In 1918, Schwitters was denied entry to the Berlin Dada group because some disliked what they perceived as his old-fashioned romantic sensibilities. Unabashed, he effectively forged his own movement in his home city of Hanover under the moniker of 'Merz', a term which, according to his friend Stefan Themerson, he coined by extracting a stray syllable from a newspaper advert reading 'Kommerz und Privat Bank', and which he used to describe his collages.[3]

Dada had been forged not in Berlin but in neutral Switzerland, at the brutal apex of the First World War, part of the wave of experimentation in visual and sonic poetics which had swept across Europe during the early 1910s. Willard Bohn describes the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, author of pictorial 'calligrammes', and the Italian Futurists – such as F.T. Marinetti and Carlo Carrà – as 'the source of all subsequent experiments' at this time.[4] Bohn draws particular attention to Apollinaire's groundbreaking 1912 poem 'Zone', where he 'began to imitate the Cubist

painters who decomposed an object into its parts, seen from different angles', and to Marinetti's concept of 'parole in libertà' ('words in freedom'), by which adventurous typography often expressed the noise and excitement of military combat.[5]

Recalling the early days of the Dada movement, centred on Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire, the artist Hans Richter admitted that, '[l]ike all newborn movements, we were convinced that the world began anew in us; but in fact we had swallowed Futurism – bones, feathers and all'.[6] The first 'Dada' artworks included a raucous 'poème simultané' ('simultaneous poem'), a performance piece in which Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, and Tristan Tzara recited lines of text simultaneously, interspersed with para-linguistic vocal sounds, what Richter would later call: 'a contrapuntal recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, whistle, etc, simultaneously, in such a way that the resulting combinations account for the total effect of the work, elegiac, funny or bizarre'.[7] Like the Futurists, the Dadaists relied on experimental typography to bring wild sound effects to the page. In this way, the concept of visual poetry became a foundational one in Dada, evident in the unusual typographic arrangement of poems such as Hugo Ball's 'Karawane' (1916).

By the time poetry had found its way onto the visual plane, of course, painting had found its way onto the linguistic, notably through the Cubist adventures of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. In works such as Braque's *The Portuguese* (1911), stencilled text had been incorporated to emphasise the flatness of the canvas, while Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912) had combined this effect with the incorporation of found materials into the picture surface. Such activities cleared the path, stylistically, for Schwitters's development of his Merz collages, and the wider incorporation of text into modernist painting, from Paul Klee to Cy Twombly and beyond.

Words at War, Words in Exile, Words Transformed: Some Working Definitions

What does this have to do with the image of Kurt Schwitters looking out over the little Manx city of Douglas from a British internment camp on a drab day in 1940? What does it have to do with the other artists featured in this show who fled to the UK from the expanding Nazi empire: Alfred Lomnitz, Hugo Dachinger, Gustav Metzger, Shmuel Dresner? What about the neo-avant-gardes of visual poetry and text art during the 1950–70s, typified by figures such as Henri Chopin, Astrid Furnival, and Hansjörg Mayer? Or contemporary works of migrant text-art by Osman Yousefzada, Astra Papachristodoulou, and others?

Dada was a movement forged in a moment of life-threatening chaos like the one that would force Schwitters into exile a quarter of a century later. Like the period of mass flight from Nazism of which Schwitters's emigration was part, it precipitated in many artists and writers a profound sense of alienation from language. This found expression in the presentation of language as matter: not as a spotless vessel of meaning or truth, but a visual or material substance from which those qualities had been, to varying degrees, extracted, but which yielded strange new aesthetic potential as a result.

In her 1994 text *The Visible Word*, Johanna Drucker gave a more panoramic assessment of the contexts

which compelled early twentieth-century adventures in visual poetry and experimental typography. In particular, she notes the common belief 'that the transformation of symbolic systems was a politically significant act, and [...] that a new aesthetic form would bring about, construct, envision, a new utopian vision of the world'.[8] This was particularly relevant to the Berlin Dadaist milieu which had rejected Schwitters, for whom the German communist revolution of 1918–19 promised a literal transformation of political reality: one for which, say, John Heartfield and Hannah Höch's visceral, polemical collages might provide the mise-en-scène.

Drawing various strands together, then, the manifestation of language as a visible entity has been, for many modern and contemporary artists, both a response to a moment of profound social and political rupture and also an expression of hope in a new world, one where inherited symbolic systems might be reconstituted or imbued with new possibilities. One or both of these qualities tie together a huge swath of the work in this show, whether responding to the global conflagrations of 1914–18 or 1939–45, the revolutionary energies of the sixties counterculture, or the varied experiences of contemporary migrant artists in Britain.

Indeed, given that the Ben Uri Gallery is a repository for work by migrant artists, we can also posit a third, and crucial, paradigm. This is the effect of being uprooted from one's homeland and native language on one's relationship with the spoken and written word. In many cases, this seems to have precipitated a modernist-adjacent quality of 'ostranenie', a feeling of defamiliarisation from language prompting its use in new ways: be it the old, familiar, maternal language, or the new one foisted on incomers as evidence of a right to remain.[9]

Words Behind Barbed Wire: Internment in the 1940s

The Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man, where Kurt Schwitters was held, consisted of a row of terraced houses. It became known as 'the artist's camp' for its lively creative life. Indeed, in the Manx camps, as Charmian Brinson notes, 'the internees were provided with rather less spartan accommodation' than in the transit camps they had come from.[10]

The same civility could not be ascribed to Liverpool's Huyton Camp, located on an unfinished council estate. Here, 'there was initially no furniture, no soap or toilet paper, no hot water, no proper medical facilities and insufficient food. Straw-filled palliasses functioned as beds. The unfinished houses provided basic accommodation, with twelve or more internees per house'.[11] It was in this relatively punishing situation that the Jewish artists Hugo Dachinger and Alfred Lomnitz found themselves in 1940.

Born in Gmunden, Austria, in 1908, Dachinger studied graphic design in Leipzig before returning to his home country to work, developing a subsidiary practice as a painter before fleeing to England in 1938 after the Anschluss. Lomnitz, born in 1892 in Eschwege, Germany, had trained at the Weimar School of Applied Arts and exhibited with the pioneering Novembergruppe and Free Secession group, but left Germany in 1934 shortly after Hitler's ascent. Both men were steeped in an emotionally intense, Germanic expressionist style not fashionable in Britain in the

1930s–40s, while Dachinger's attempts to set up an advertising business were scuppered by strict anti-migrant laws.

All this became academic, however, when they were rounded up and sent to Huyton (Dachinger was later transferred to Mooragh Camp on the Isle of Man). Here they partook in the intriguing processes of make-do-and-mend by which artists grubbed up materials: '[t]wigs were burnt to create sticks of charcoal; short beard hairs were plucked to use for brushes, and paints were made from brick dust or vegetable juice ground with linseed oil or olive oil from sardine cans'.[12]

Most notably, 'any shortage of drawing paper was easily overcome, with the artists becoming avid re-purposers of old newspapers', which were 'primed with gelatine from boiled-down bones mixed with flour'.[13] Many of Dachinger's portraits on newsprint often foreground sections of adverts, photographs, and cartoons, as well as lines reflecting the economic hardship faced by many wartime refugees, such as 'Domestic Situations Wanted'.[14] *The Times* cover used for *Portrait of a Man: Wilhelm Hollitscher (Huyton Internment Camp Liverpool)* (cat. 4, 1940) is less visually arresting. Nonetheless, it hints at the wartime context of its creation, both with the sitter's military-seeming overcoat and the small headline to the upper right, 'Air Fights in Many Spheres'.

If Dachinger's choice of materials suggests expediency more than aesthetic design, it is notable that Lomnitz's *Women Seated at a Table* (cat. 3, c. 1934) is a pre-internment work. Thus, the addition of a louche, seated female figure, cocktail in hand, to a newspaper front page – from the quintessential London paper *The Evening Standard* – largely indicates a conscious artistic ploy, bringing elements of that background into the thematic space of the composition. In her other hand, for example, the Blaue Reiter-style, expressionist figure holds a Vidor battery, a detail from an advert whose surrounding text is whited out. Her head, meanwhile, is filled with part of an illustration of an eighteenth-century John Palmer stagecoach, from a 'To-day in History' feature.

Both pieces are mischievously responsive to the cultural atmosphere of a new and unfamiliar home. At the same time, the use of newsprint as visual ground is imbued with a sense of isolation or distance from the social and psychological world that the text evokes, and from the native readership for whom it would serve, merely, as functional information or propaganda.

Breaking Words Apart: Neo-Dada, Concrete Poetry, and the 1960s

By the 1960s, the tides of avant-garde activity in Europe had receded and then risen again, with the post-war poverty and thrift of the 1950s making way, in Britain and elsewhere, for the more labile, optimistic atmosphere of the new decade. Economies were exiting recession. Consumer goods and lifestyle perks were becoming more widely available, reflected in a mass rise in TV ownership, flashing visual-linguistic symbols across retinas around the country on a nightly basis. Most crucially, a tangible counterculture was emerging, which provided the backdrop for new formations and experiments at the fringes of the visible and legible.[15]

The activities in question ranged from concrete poetry to pop art, book arts and interventions, Fluxus-informed events and happenings, and performances of non-semantic sound poetry – a descendant of those

early Cabaret Voltaire inventions – and graphic scores in the tradition of John Cage. Often, they were brought together under the label 'neo-dada', which, while vague, correctly identified a sense of affinity with Schwitters's generation and its underlying impetus.

That impetus was to bring systems of visual and linguistic symbols under scrutiny during a period of social turmoil – in this case, the counterculture ferment which peaked with the student-led protests of Summer 1968 – and to use strange new amalgamations of language and image to envision, materialise, or invoke a new world. The French sound and concrete poet Henri Chopin, who moved to England in 1968 in the fallout from the Paris riots – in which he had participated – is a useful figure to mention briefly here. His aesthetics explicitly connected the breakdown of linguistic meaning with an assault on unjust and sclerotic social and political hierarchies.

Astrid Furnival (née Billing), born in Stendal, later part of East Germany, in 1940, and Hansjörg Mayer, born in Singen, in what would become West Germany, in 1943, are amongst a younger generation of German emigrants to Britain than those considered so far. Billing left in 1945 with her grandmother, Mayer in 1966, having already become an accomplished typographer and printer, to take up a teaching post at Bath Academy of Art in Corsham.

Amongst his new colleagues in Corsham was the text-artist John Furnival, who had married Billing in 1960. Mayer and the Furnivals, along with figures such as Kenelm Cox, Charles Verey, John Sharkey, and Dom Sylvester Houédard, a Benedictine monk resident at Prinknash Abbey near Gloucester, subsequently helped to transform the west of England into the nerve centre of the newly emergent British concrete poetry movement.

Concrete poetry was a style of poetry which had emerged in northern Europe – including in Stuttgart, where Mayer studied philosophy – and Latin America in the 1950s. It sought to transpose the visual and sculptural minimalism of concrete art into the linguistic domain, compelled by a belief that the presentation of language as an elementary graphic form, with grammatical structures reduced to a bare minimum, was a means of enhancing its semantic clarity. In this sense, concrete poetry was very far in spirit from the exercises in semantic disintegration and semi-sensical jouissance of the Dadaists and Futurists. Indeed, it was partly forged in contradistinction to such movements, at a time when clarity of communication across national and cultural barriers seemed crucial to post-war reconstruction.

However, by the time concrete poetry arrived in Britain in the early 1960s – first printed in the UK in 1962 by the Edinburgh-based poet and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, in his magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* – it had already taken on many contrasting shades and hues. For the Brazilian concrete poets Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, for example, as for the Czech partnership of Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal, the presentation of language as visual matter was often the gateway to polemical and satirical word-play, a side effect, as it were, of the act of visual defamiliarisation.

Such poems might play on contrasts between national languages in a way which represented a sense of threatened or unravelling national identity, such as Portuguese and English in the Brazilians' work – which

was often excoriating in its attitude to US economic expansion into South America – and German and Czech for Grögerová and Hiršal, reflecting their country's recent liberation from fascist imperium. In John Furnival's architectonic text-construction The *Tower of Babel* (1963), the lower lines of the structure are created from repeated iterations of the phrase 'Peace for the World' in English and Cyrillic, an ironic allusion to the Cold War in which Furnival had played a part as a Russian translator in the UK War Office during the 1950s.

In comparable spirit, Mayer's 1965 poem-print *sau aus usa* (cat. 13), as Milčić notes in this text, incorporates the German words for 'out' ('aus') and 'pig' ('sau') with the acronym 'USA'. The poem is an oblique, biting reference to the Vietnam War, and perhaps also hints at the emergence of American English as the lingua franca of a new, consumer-capitalist world. Poems of similar scabrous intent such as *US-A* (cat. 31, 1969; first published 1967) were created by the Irish concrete poet John Sharkey, who, alongside Gustav Metzger, another German migrant artist in the UK, organised the iconic Destruction in Art Symposium in London in 1966.

For Astrid Furnival, similar forms of bilingual wordplay are combined with time-worn and traditionally feminine craft techniques to suggest subversive re-interpretations of both text-art and domestic artisanship. Her jumper-poems, hand-coloured with plant dyes, are amongst the most beautiful and least studied products of the British concrete poetry movement. Often, they combine visual and linguistic allusions to iconic figures of proto-modernist art and music, such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Erik Satie – the latter a mainstay of the Furnivals' creative universe – with punning poetic content. *The Age of Shrivelry Is Not Yet Over* (cat. 5, 1988) finds scraps of English text buried in French, while also picking apart a phrase from Marshall McLuhan, a key theorist of visual-linguistic communication in the concrete poetry era, to make sardonic references to ageing and female beauty standards.

Words Abroad, Words at Home: The Contemporary Moment

In a situation eerily prefiguring the animus of anti-immigration protests in 2025, many Second World War internees on the Isle of Man were housed in hotels. The link is sufficient to remind us that we are once again living through an era of emboldened anti-migrant rhetoric in Britain. In this sense, it seems important to close by naming and celebrating the contemporary artists featured in this show, many of whom deal with the pressures on selfhood and language brought to bear by the migrant experience. These include the Dominica-born British artist Tam Joseph, Birmingham-born artist of Pakistani-Afghan heritage Osman Yousefzada, Hormazd Narielwalla from India, and, from Greece, Astra Papachristodoulou.

To conclude on a more optimistic note, I want briefly to mention Yousefzada's work (cat. 43, 2021), consisting of a blue, silhouetted human form, of abstract but evidently non-white-western provenance, standing behind a wall of red asemic script (lines and symbols that look like writing but have no semantic meaning). The vertical columns of marks at once suggest neolithic cave graffiti, Mesopotamian cuneiform – the world's most ancient writing system – and the coding languages of the digital age, amongst its newest. If much of the artwork featured

in *Disruptors* is concerned with breakdowns in the symbolic systems governing the modern world, here is a work which transports us to a different emotional space, both older and more immediate, as if proposing some underlying, shared human identity in written and figurative form: an ur-text and an ur-figure. The word, and the world, transformed.

Greg Thomas

1 The Nazis' Degenerate Art (*Entartete Kunst*) exhibition was held in Munich from 19 to 30 November 1937.

2 The best-known poem in the collection, 'An Anna Blume' ('Anna Blossom Has Wheels') is a paean to a phantasmic lover, featuring lines – in Schwitters's English translation – such as 'Blue is the colour of thy yellow hair./ Red is the whirl of thy green wheels'. See Jeffrey Cane Robinson, Jerome Rothenberg, and Pierre Joris, eds., *Poems for the Millennium: Volume One* (California: California University Press, 1995), pp. 328-29 (p. 329).

3 See Stefan Themerson, *Kurt Schwitters in England 1940-1948* (London: Gabberbochus, 1958), p. 20.

4 Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1928* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 9.

5 Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry*, pp. 17-18.

6 Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997 [1965]), p. 33.

7 Richter, *Dada*, p. 30.

8 Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 11.

9 See the elucidation of this concept in: Viktor Shklovsky, 'Iskusstvo kak priem' [1917], in *Poetika: Sborniki po teorii poètičeskogo jazyka* [Poetics: Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language], (Petrograd: 18-aya gosudarstvennaya tipografiya, 1919). Translated by Alexandra Berlina as 'Art, As Device', in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2015), pp. 151-74.

10 Charmian Brinson, 'The Internment of Aliens in Britain during the Second World War', in Ines Newman with Charmian Brinson and Rachel Dickson, *Internment in Britain in 1940: Life and Art Behind the Wire* (London; Chicago IL: Vallentine-Mitchell, 2021), pp. 1-16 (p. 5).

11 Brinson, 'The Internment of Aliens', pp. 5-6.

12 Brinson, 'The Internment of Aliens', pp. 25-26.

13 Brinson, 'The Internment of Aliens', p. 26.

14 Brinson, 'The Internment of Aliens', p. 26.

15 On this and many of the other themes in this section see Greg Thomas, *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).