

PAULA CLAIRE, VISUAL POET EXTRAORDINAIRE

*This interview was held in Oxford, England with Paula Claire, a visual poet and owner of the International Concrete Poetry Archive, 1961-1991, which she has documented in a volume which celebrates 30 years of her performing and collecting. This volume is available from her, entitled **Declarations: Poems 1961-1991**, c/o 11 Dale Close, St. Ebbe's, Oxford OX1 1TU, England. I have been corresponding with Paula Claire, or reading about her for years, but this past September was indeed the time to finally meet her, and she acquiesced to my request to be interviewed for the readers of *Umbrella*.*

How did you get interested in Concrete and Visual Poetry?

I read English at London University, and I was very interested in the sound of words. And in our college, there was a very strong language emphasis, so we had to study the Old English texts and Old English texts and Old Norse texts, and the things like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. And I found in that four beat alliterative verse terrific power, and the only modern equivalent I could find was Gerard Manley Hopkins, and so my roots are really very traditional, because I have gone in the sound quality of words, I have gone back to that great tradition of four-beat, not five-beat, lines and alliteration which gives a terrific energy to words. I suppose my interest as a poet started from those texts and Hopkins and then in 1964, I went to Greece for four years, and I was off the beaten track, so to speak. I began writing in 1961, continued it when I was in Greece, and I was rather glad I was isolated, because I think I developed my own style without other influences. When I came back from Greece in 1968, and I went to Zwemmer's Book Shop and found the Something Else Press Concrete Poetry Anthology (ed. by Emmett Williams), I felt that I had already established for myself what I call my "mobile style", a non-linear style--clusters of words, complex images which I could improvise with, but I think my inspiration came from those ancient texts. And Hopkins's very core of his inspiration was the ancient Welsh poetry, which also had the alliterative quality. So I feel pleased that I didn't suddenly come across the concrete poetry of the 1960s in that anthology and get wiped out by that. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to develop a style, then having seen that anthology and seen British names in it, such as Bob Cobbing, I then met Bob Cobbing in 1969. We went to a conference at York University on contemporary poetry, and he then

slotted me into a lot of international exponents. I worked on and off with him, performing his texts and my texts ever since.

Who else did you meet besides Bob Cobbing?

The other person with whom I have worked quite closely is Bill Griffiths, and he also has a great interest in the ancient texts and the sound values that come from those. Then Bob formed our group, Concrete Canticle, which originally had a chap called Michael Charles, but Bill Griffiths joined us quite soon afterwards and we three have experimented with each other's texts. I find that a great discipline, because some of Bob's work I don't necessarily like, but I admire. It's like an actress playing parts, characters, which she maybe finds very formidable, but it stretches you. Bob is far more Dada than I am.

How do you balance each other? He gives you Dada, what do you give him?

I suppose that I take like a duck to water with improvisation. To me it is quite natural. I do not have a good mind for memorizing. I cannot memorize a poem very well, but if someone gives me something to improvise, I don't know why but I can improvise. And Bob really has given me a very frightening but marvelous training. He doesn't believe in rehearsals. He did slightly to begin with, but as the years have gone by, he will actually give me the experimental texts we are going to work on when we are on stage. I don't even see it two minutes beforehand. But I have to work, and he creates the instant response. I think you are tapping into really primal energies when you're challenged that way. And I have Bob to thank for that.

What encounters have you had in the performances with other sound poets?

We have strong links with the Canadian poets. The first time we went to Canada, I was invited

by bp nichol, and that is a huge gap for us that he died in 1988, because he was a marvelous performer and a very generous human being. He loved sound poetry and he would encourage anybody. A lot of the major events in Canada were inspired by him, because he was so thrilled that we were all together and working together. There was no sense of "Oh, I want to be centerstage". He wanted everybody to develop, so we have from 1978 onwards a strong connection with the Canadian sound poets, and I have worked with barry nichol and another extraordinary character, Bill Bissett, who is another extraordinary performance artist as well as a painter, collage maker.

Do you exchange texts? Is there a mail aspect to this?

Yes, absolutely, this is how my archive has gradually cohered. Since I started going internationally. My first event was with Bob at the Stedelijk Museum in 1970 in the Question Mark concrete poetry exhibition. Since then, because my name was in the catalog, that's how Mirella Bentivoglio found me. And that is how I got to know a whole international set of people. Sometimes we meet at festivals, sometimes we know each other (just as we have) just through the mail. What I love about this particular scene is that we all believe in poetry as currency and we produce our little publications not really for the public--I think it is something to barter with. If someone sends you a book that you love, you want to give them something in exchange. My archive isn't particularly big, but it is, I feel, important, because it is unique, because I am a working poet and it's all been gathered together by this swapping. We believe in the currency of each other's work, and that is how all the books have come together. I have bought very little indeed, but it has all been by fair exchange. I am in touch with people all over the world--in Australia, in South America, in Japan, Europe, the States, Canada--it's a full time job just doing that, and I am very hit and miss. Some people may think I am a marvelous correspondent, because something comes in, and I will immediately answer them, send something off. Another time, when there is something particularly going on here, some problems or whatever, then I do not respond to people for ages, and then I feel dreadful.

Tell me if you have felt the difference between the 1970s and 1980s? Am I wrong in feeling the decade difference, or is it less or more time to cite differences?

I think the 1970s and 1980s were both productive, peaking around the mid-1980s, and since then, unfortunately, because of a loss of grants for visiting lecturers and performers, my international activities have gradually ebbed away, but that is the same for a lot of people in the field. Because of the lack of finances, we are not getting around as much as we used to.

Are you more recognized in the academic world, because they are the people who fund events like this, or the alternative art world, or what?

I suppose the alternative art world. To a certain extent, the universities. For instance, I call myself a poet, but I am never sponsored by English departments. It is either the visual arts departments, because they are interested in what I am doing with language and how it appears on the page and poem objects or poems in the environment, or the music departments because I improvise with musicians; I am very interested in electronics and live electronics, and I sing. I don't recognize the difference between speaking and singing. To me, singing is just like when you walk and then you dance. Where is that point when walking becomes dancing? Where is that point when you are speaking and then singing? So I like to flow backwards and forwards from the speaking and the singing. So it is the music departments that are more interested. But the literature departments know because they feel that experimental poets are tampering with the language, and if they tamper with it, they are spoiling it, they are making it degenerate. For me, language demands, requires, deserves an intense focus. Concrete poetry is the most intense focus you can put on language, because you are saying that less is more. I often think that language suffers from inflation, like money. Sometimes the more words we use, the less we say. And I think that the concrete poetry movement is making us realize that a few words say so much, that we ought to understand that each word and each part of each word interacts, how it has evolved and how it affects us.

Being an English concrete poet, and the language is English, is it universalized? Is the meaning of language is a stop gap for

understanding?

I think the universal is important. I am ashamed to say that so many people whose mother tongue is not English understand English, and it makes us speaking English very lazy. The only other language I know is Greek, which I learned while living there for four years, and a bit of French and a bit of Italian, but I do not know more foreign languages fluently. People come to English, because there are so many millions of people speaking English.

Suppose an Italian concrete poet comes to England, and they don't know English. How is their performance received?

I think it is the sound of the language that is important. I think what is beautiful about sound poetry is why it is strong in the 20th century. We are conscious of being part of the entire globe. Sounds in themselves have their own wonderful values, and it is wonderful to listen to another language and experience so much. In fact, it is more often very helpful not understanding the semantics, because sometimes semantics get in the way. We are so busy concentrating on the meaning, that the profound effects of language are lost on us. And that is what sound poetry has to offer us--that it is a kind of esperanto.

Do audiotapes go into your archives here? Do you capture performance on audiotape, videotape, film?

Obviously, I would love it to be videotape and film as well, but I have done very little with that. I did a bit with Texas Tech in their Music Department. Real Art Ways did a video of my performance for their archive (Hartford, Connecticut), but mostly my work is on tape. I would very much welcome the chance to have it in both dimensions. My archive contains quite a number of tapes, visuals, and books. I don't like to separate the two--the visual shapes on whatever a book is, and that interpretation in some kind of performance, some kind of sound enhanced with musical instruments possibly and with movement.

Are there other collectors besides artists who exchange this material?

Well, yes, there are these mythical collectors. I am not really in on that scene in Britain, but Mirella tells me that there is in Italy a considerable market. She sells her work to collectors, but it needs a lot more education for

people to get to know about it. It ought to evolve from colleges disseminating this kind of work. We are so often ghettoized, and this I object to. If I can get through to people, whoever they are-- I often draw concrete poems on the train, which I take a lot--people will be a bit nose, even in England, and the times I have given lectures and performances in trains on the way to London is lovely. People just get out of that particular barrier, and if you tell them you are writing a concrete poem, what a turn-on. If they are intrigued, well, it is called visual or concrete poetry--they are intrigued first. Many people get an enormous joy out of language, but it is intimidating if it is presented to them as an eclectic occupation. And of course children teach us that it shouldn't be eclectic. I do a lot of work with children--six to seven years old. We did a portion of my Space Poem, and they spread the letters of the word "space" all over their pages, and all over their walls, and they were just natural sound and visual poets, even at that age. I was a little nervous to start that young. Usually I teach eight year olds upwards, but this class of six and seven-year olds were a perfect joy. They showed that we should play with language, as dolphins play in the sea. Without set ideas that we develop as we get older. Kids love to wriggle around on the page, they love to respond to language signals and the joy of sounds.

You know that the Fluxus movement is celebrating its 30th anniversary, and I just wonder how you and your colleagues relate to the Fluxus artists?

The only person I know quite well in that movement is Dick Higgins, and he has always appeared in our concrete poetry events. We met in Canada several times and of course, in New York in 1980, and I feel there are a lot of links between us. I hate this idea of movements. I don't like pigeon-holding people in movements. These are all creative people, who have goodwill, who are not so keen in categorizing what they do. It's useful to understand things, but I do not like categorizing.

Is there a frustration in the way art movements take over, and there is less opportunity to perform concrete and sound poetry when other art forms dominate?

I don't think things have changed a great deal. In England, the scene is centered on Bob

Cobbing in London. It is small groups of great enthusiasts that keep the thing going. That is no different from the Dada artists in the first decades of this century. It is the enthusiasm of these small groups of people that is inspiring. It is the quality of enthusiasm, when you have these particular gatherings. Bob has pretty regular gatherings in London, at the Victoria Pub in Wallington Crescent--upstairs. The things that have happened in that room have been terrific! 20-30 people come drifting in. He has the whole afternoon there, and people come in and out--there is the usual hardcore of regulars. London is such a meetingplace for international visitors that you never know whom you will meet or who is influenced by these things. Anna Hatherly happily met Bob in the 1970s and was inspired by him and set out on her own course. And there have been a lot of people from Australia, the States, and it's this particular quality of experience, specialist and gorgeous experience on these occasions. If you have not experienced them, you might go to the other side of the world, but this will stay with you, because it has been so "peculiar".

Is it time to have another international gathering somewhere?

Absolutely, it would wonderful to all get together again. Of course, bp nichol used to be such a great generator of this kind of experience. But since he died, there hasn't been a major meeting in Canada. But it would be wonderful if we could.

Are you all connected via some means like a mailing list, just in case a large international meeting would be called?

Yes, we all network, in a very irregular way. You might not hear from somebody for one to two years, and suddenly they erupt again. The art world likes to say, "Oh, concrete poetry was that movement in the 60s", and of course it's all going on still. It doesn't stop, it is a continuous web. Art critics are out to make their own reputations, they like to be kingmakers, and they like to say "this is finished", and if I say it's finished, and therefore it is. And yet, all the creative people still continue with all the work. That is why I think the Sackner Archive (Miami Beach, FL) is doing such marvelous work. Marvin and Ruth collected a phenomenal amount of material, right from early in this century with the Futurists and Surrealists and everybody since. It is incredible how they

have searched out all the people who are still working. That archive, which the Sackners have said they will secure it intact for the future, will show exactly what is going on. It cannot be ignored, it is huge. The art critics will look very silly indeed, when someone will write a definitive book on the material in that archive.

What about Mary Solt's Anthology and Emmett Williams' anthology that you discovered in the 60s, published by Something Else Press? Could we use a new anthology now, not on paper, but using some other means?

I think a composite video to get people to know about this group. Of course, that would be quite an undertaking and you have to have an establishment that is willing to get everybody together to fund it.

I think it would be wonderful if a contemporary museum would undertake it by having a festival, getting everyone together, and guaranteeing documentation. How about a German museum?

There are a lot of German exponents, but I am not so knowledgeable about the Germans. Jeremy Adler, who is a reader in London University, has been a visual and performance poet since the 1970s. He's the person to ask about the German scene.

There is so much to know about the various national scenes. I have a pretty good handle on the Italian group, because of my contacts. There is quite a lot going on in France.

Yes, about two years ago there was a big event in Marseilles, in which Julien Blaine had a great part?

Yes, I met him in 1979. He had an exhibition in Paris, and we all had to send postcards, and I did one with the gargoyles from Oxford greeting the gargoyles of Notre Dame in a medieval fighting match hurling insults at one another.

The Centre Pompidou in connection with their Electronic Music Studio has held some sound poetry events from time to time there. Bernard Heidsieck had a lot to do with that.

Are there Japanese poets involved with your group?

I know of Japanese visual poets--Shoji Yoshizawa--who did a very interesting visual poetry magazine for about 12 years, which he has now disbanded--of Japanese visual poets,

and at the back he would have a little resume of what is going on internationally. In Japanese, one could see in Japanese calligraphy: "Karl Kempton". The Japanese are very sensitive to the wonderful visual qualities of language. Through their calligraphic traditions, they will look at language with the same intentions as we would only give to painting; we are not so used to looking at language for the sheer beauty of the form that is natural in the Japanese culture. That is why the Japanese have produced very fine visual poetry.

I love to think that when I work at night that I can be quite sure that there are quite a few people that I know beavering away.

If there would be an ideal situation for your archive, could you indicate what you would love it to serve for you and your colleagues?

These archives become a great burden and responsibility as they increase in volume and as we get older. Suddenly, I'm not going to be here permanently, I am not a fixture, and so I will divest myself gradually of things. Bob did have a very remarkable collection of stuff when I first met him in the 1970s. He has gradually dispersed a considerable amount of it. I would like my own archive to be accessible to people. I just cannot cope with people coming to study here. They usually want access to the material for several days or weeks, and I cannot just give that time to people. Some kind of an institution might one day take it. I would like it to be a living archive, and have a whole group of people to use the material and to create themselves. An archive should not be something enclosed, but it should be in the public domain and very active and an inspiration to people.

You taught with your archive. I wonder how your young students reacted to using the materials, evolved under your guidance? Did they love it, did they find it strange?

At Oxford Polytechnic, I have been working for the past two years with Michael Corris in the Introduction to Graphics Module, and I used to take the second part of the Module where I would bring a lot of archive books along, we would browse and we would discuss, and then the students would have their own project in which they would create either a poem object or an overlay poem involving an overlay of Xerox on acetate, and we were really delighted with the response we had. Somehow, there is something

in people that loves to play with words and to free words from their linear straightjacket that printing has put on them. Printing was a wonderful thing that freed knowledge from the jurisdiction of the Church and disseminated information. When we look at a very strict text (left to right on a grid), it does things with our mind. The value of the experiments of visual poetry in this century is that it frees language from the left to right, top to bottom grid (the straightjacket, which controls our ideas) and the computer today makes children do very sophisticated things that were not possible at all before the technological revolution--so when you have the words flowing and dancing on a surface, then it actually liberates the thinking processes. That is why it is very important that it gets people making things in this visual poetry style, and the students really made for us an unending source of creativity.

Robin Crozier at University of Sunderland, an exceptional visual poet who is tremendously fertile and keeps connections with people all over the world with his work, probably teaches a certain amount in England.

Do you find that the mail artists sometimes change their style of communications because they have been invaded by some unusual concrete poetry or visual poetry that changes their form of communication?

Well, I feel on the periphery of mail art. I do get invitations to participate, but if I am working on my own projects, it is very difficult because there is always a deadline. Often I am too involved in what I am doing, and then when I remember, the deadline has gone. I feel you have to have more time.

Well, in the mail art world, those visual poets who participate usually create works of art that have resonance. Since they are appealing to a verbal theme, their visual poem usually stands out as an outstanding contribution--oftentimes magical. In the 1980s, there was really an Italian wave of visual poets who sent mail art around the world.

Well, in my archive, the largest number of work from any country is from Italy. There is a very large number of visual poets in Italy, who also perform as well. The sound poets as well. Some people really draw the line between the two, but it is a very lively tradition, probably because

there is such an expertise in the small printers in small towns in Italy. The beautiful quality of work that you find in these limited edition small books that are sent to me is not uncommon. You can get beautiful work done by your local printer in Italy. There is facility and tradition of the printed book.

So you say there is a fine line between visual poets and sound poets?

Yes, there are some poets who do object to the idea that their work can be performed. We think that there is a lack of purity in their visual poetry. If you try to perform it, you are in some way interfering with it or spoiling it.

Well, do you feel that performing poets must be live or can an audiotape suffice?

Sometimes when I hear recordings of improvised work, there is a mystery throwing something into the ether, there is a wonderful spontaneity, but it does have ragged edges, whereas when you are at the actual performance, if there is a real dynamic in the room, you're so thrilled by the immediacy of it that you're not looking for the faults. You're only experiencing that extraordinary thrill of the improviser. For me, improvising is my form of surfing. You ride that wave, but you're going to fall off. It's going to knock you about, but you're going to fall off at the end. But you don't care about falling off, because you have that supreme thrill of riding the wave, of people enjoying your doing it, and then falling off and making a mess of it--it's all part of the experience. Maybe if it is done on tape, you're too aware of failures, but when you're actually experiencing it, you don't care. Falling off is part of the experience.

There is something about a live performance of sound poets that is electric.

Yes, I would agree about that. The utterance is such a marvelous and logical thing. Just the human voice--but what an extraordinary thing the human voice is. When it is flowing, when it is expressing and my work is not only improvised, but also participational and I think that the interchange that you have in such a situation is wonderfully joyous and therapeutic. And it is essentially quite simple, not costing a great deal, with no complicated setups. It relates to when people used to sing and change and speak to one another in a tribal situation, and perhaps when it was getting dark and a fire was there,

and you need this feeling of the tribe, of all being together, and the voice actually establishes who you are and your place in the universe.

You are aware of the other groups called "performance poets" that are not necessarily sound poets, nor are they visual poets, but they perform their own poems as a troupe, and sometimes together, and that is their form of expression.

I know groups of performance poets, mostly from the Caribbean, where you have a great oral sense and rhythmic quality of language. This is the scene that I know for the most part. In Canada, bp nichol and his colleagues formed the Four Horsemen and you have a younger group called Owen Sound, and they have done a lot of pioneering work in the idea that voices are a quartet. I always love working with other people, and I always welcome that. There is something beautiful about not only speaking, but it is the listening that is so important. When I am guiding students in their own work, the mistake they usually make that spoils things that they are so busy trying to project their own voices that they don't really listen to the others. You have to listen as hard as actually performed, because the listening makes the group performance a true coherence and a true interchange. That is the whole fascination of working with groups. You have got to really pay a great deal of attention. If you're just performing yourself, that dimension is gone. For me, group work is very fulfilling indeed. It's difficult to keep groups together. People go their separate ways.

Then there are solo performers, who really only do it alone. Right?

Oh, yes, like Bernard Heidsieck, who works with his own voice, using his own tapes, and that is very fascinating. It just shows the many ways of working. It's a pity that we cannot get together on a regular basis and develop a whole school of sound poetry. We do suffer from being separate. If we knew that we're going to have an annual festival at some university, sponsored and relied upon developing a whole tradition of work, whereas we as yet have not had such an opportunity.

Well, perhaps if you have a Europe as a union now, perhaps you could have a roving festival, never to be in the same country more than

once until it completes the cycle, and then start again with the annual get-together.

It would be a reliable working situation and interchange, colloquia, performances. People even in Europe, however, don't phone each other. So how can we talk about an annual event? We need a paperback anthology for students today, but there is nothing right now. Bob and I approached Penguin, but the typesetting seemed to be too much of a challenge.

I always wanted to set up a T-shirt business if someone could back me. Cards, posters, T-shirts--alot of visual poems would go down very beautifully without in any way cheapening them or spoiling them. I think they would be very popular indeed.

Do you all exchange work with each other in Latin America?

Avellino de Rojas has sent me work since the 1980s. And the students find his work very, very powerful. It has this intense sense of injustice and care for the downtrodden. These concerns are expressed in such condensed imagery, they are very powerful with the students. There is one that he did (all on postcards), the Apartheid Sonnet, which is just 14 lines of barbed wire--each line barbed wire.

Have you ever received visual poetry in a language you just don't understand?

There is a gentleman in India called Joshi, and his visual poetry is in 14 different Indian languages. He is into computers, and he is trying to create a synthesis of languages just for the purpose of advertising easily, but that is his actual commercial work. His great interest is the different language forms, and he works in fourteen of them. It is very fascinating to receive work from him.

What is the percentage of women and men visual poets?

Maybe 25 to 33% women on a continuous basis. Mirella has been doing exhibitions of visual poetry since 1971. When I was invited to participate in 1978 to the Venice Biennale of 88 international women exponents, I was a bit worried about what kind of work I would see. Yet I was very impressed, and the standard was magnificent. The imagination and the execution was impressive. She has continued to collect

examples of women's visual poetry.

Have you noticed the evolution of visual poetry from Xerography to computer?

I have some examples, and I wish I had more. The computer provides very interesting possibilities. To use technology well, it is very difficult for an individual to keep up with the developments. If you happen to be associated with a college that has all the latest technology and is constantly upgrading it, maintaining it, then you can work in it in confidence. For individual users, often they buy their own equipment which quickly becomes obsolete, and they must spend more money to update. To exploit that equipment fully, you must take courses, because the training manuals are atrocious. The people who design and make computers cannot imagine what it is like not to understand it--so they are in the worst position to write manuals. They forget to tell you very elementary things--and especially in the wrong sequence.

Computer graphics is the biggest hope for visual poetry, because with these systems, you can do extraordinary things with language and quite easily, get a printout. This is more and more accessible to people--including children in schools. It is far less than an arcane thing to do--explore fonts, mix fonts, reverse them, invert them, and fill them with patterns--and it seems to me that if people have access to this kind of equipment and start playing with exploring language, they're very close to visual poetry. Maybe the computer is going to be quite a help, for a revival through the use of computer.

How about Greek visual poets?

There are many Greek visual poets, who have come to London, taken Bob's workshops, and then gone back to Greece.

And then we talked about the Sackners and the Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry in Miami Beach, Florida. I cited the fact that with the passion of collecting and with their uncanny ability to be at the right place at the right time, they have accumulated more than 60,000 items which firmly place them as the largest privately held archive of visual and concrete poetry, including all media, books, broadsides, prints, objects, etc. I cited the fact that they should be named National

Treasures by the U.S. Government for marking an unsung chapter of cultural history with the accumulation, collecting, cataloging, interpreting, curating and exhibiting.

And what do you think of the Sackners' collection?

I feel that because of the Sackners, this whole field can never be ignored. That collection is at their house, they own it, but inevitably, it will become part of a public institution, and a lot more people will know about it and it will give all the visual poets more prominence, because it cannot possibly be ignored.

