

The Vispo Bible: One Woman Recreates the Bible as Visual Poetry

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Thanks to Robert Stacey and Claire Farley for inviting me, and thanks to the Ontario Arts Council for funding part of the Vispo Bible this year. To see all of the pieces from the Vispo Bible that I've created so far, from Genesis to Revelation, click [here](#).

1/WHAT: a life's work to translate every chapter, every book, every verse of the Bible into visual poetry. 39 books of the Old Testament; 27 of the New.

I increasingly see the project as a defiant feminist repurposing of the Bible in response to misogyny and homophobia.

2/BACKGROUND

I began to play around with visual poetry around 2005 after finding, most likely through rob mclennan, various visual poets on sites and listserves such as Spidertangle and American writer Dan Waber's site, Logalia.com.

What attracted me to visual poetry and still does is that it is playful and unfreezes text from linearity. Meanwhile I was also starting to take an interest in movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, abstract expressionism, Kurt Schwitters collages, the surrealist paintings of Leonora Carrington, and Joseph Cornell's boxes. My newly discovered interest in art was part of a general self-awakening in my thirties, to the visual, the physical and the sensual, a personal renaissance. I wanted to play. It felt to me as if the art world had always been more playful, more experimental, more exploratory than the literary world I was currently involved in. Brion Gysin said writers were 50 years behind painters and how long ago was that?

I have **grapheme synaesthesia** where numbers, people's first names, names of the month and week, and pain have colours. It is satisfying to me to be able to assign the proper colours to these words. I began to work with individual letters of the alphabet and with words. I used a program called MS Paint and enjoyed assigning colours and turning the letters around, contorting them, focussing on them. That program ceased a number of years ago. Some visual poets such as Satu Kaikkonen used the free Paint.Net program but I started to play around with PhotoShop as a text manipulator.

3/INFLUENCES

I was exposed somehow to the work of Canadian visual poets, such as Judith Copithorne, who began to work with colour in the early aughts, and Gary Barwin who works in many different media and includes colour in much of his visual poetry. I was also fascinated by the sculptural properties of the Letraset work of derek beaulieu and Kelly Mark, particularly their shapes.

I have been an amateur potter, making charmingly uneven hand built pottery since the 90s and the physicality of that process is satisfying. Visual poetry felt like a way to achieve a similar feeling of satisfaction and still work within the realm of text. I have been inspired by the association of craft to text as created by Gatineau artist, Michele Provost, American poet Maria Damon and Canadian poets, Helen Hajnoczky and Jessica Bebenek, through their use of knitting, weaving and embroidery of text, emphasizing the tactile possibilities of text, the traditional labour of women, and friendships between women as part of these practices.

See Desiring visual texts: A collage and embroidery dialogue with MARIA DAMON and RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS in Jacket 2: <http://jacket2.org/article/desiring-visual-texts>

Mary Ellen Solt's concrete flowers also appealed. It felt freeing to see that typically feminine associated tropes, flowers, could be respected as objects of visual poetry without the usual derision. Over the years, I've learned of

international visual poets, such as Márton Koppány of Hungary, Hiromi Suzuki of Japan, Satu Kaikkonen of Finland, who work with colour and sometimes even without text at all.

Satu is also a visual poet who does work in series, something that has always been part of my own poetic practice, the long poem or series. I began to apply the concept of a visual poetry series to my own work. A few years ago I took whole phrases or quotes or song titles and turned them into visual poetry. This felt like a turning point to me because I had been focussing mostly on individual letters and combining them in various ways. I took the first section of my poetry book Kiki and recreated it as visual poems in Kiki in Wonderland. It was great fun and cathartic to play with whole blocks of my own published text and I discovered that the text spoke to me in different ways when I did so.

“Dick Higgins suggests that both concrete poetry and pattern poetry tell ‘the story of an ongoing human wish to combine the visual and literary impulses to tie together the experience of these areas into an aesthetic whole...To those who attempt this synthesis something of the picture of the whole seems crucially important. Calling attention to itself and aware of its own motion—the record of the grapheme in motion becomes a sort of proprioceptive trace/gesture, a constructive practice and the extension of the body.” Robert Mitterthal, Ecology of Vispo-A Blindfold Test, in the Last Vispo.

4/WHEN: Began in June, 2015; have completed Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Esther in OT; Jude, Mark, Romans, and Revelation in NT

5/WHY:

It had to be practical:

I needed a vast source of text available online that didn't have copyright issues. Bible Gateway.com is a searchable online Bible in more than 200 versions and 70 languages that you can freely read, research, and reference anywhere.

Why the Bible?

Art has a history of engagement with the Bible, even stained glass windows in a church tell the stories visually. In junior high Italian my teacher read to us from Dante's Divine Comedy and then in a pre 1700 English Lit course here at U of O with the late John Spencer Hill, I fell in love with Milton's Paradise Lost and was particularly fascinated with depictions of heaven and hell.

Here's a more contemporary example of engagement with the Bible:

Emma Kay did an inventory of all the inanimate objects in the Bible in their order of appearance; 2,728 objects – precedent for engaging with the Bible. <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/16/kay.php>

I was fascinated by the Bible as a child.

I was raised as a heretic but somehow the Bible managed to get into my life. when I could barely read at about 4 years old, the vicar at the United Church across the street gave me an illustrated Bible. I loved the beautiful paintings and made up my own stories to go along with them.

A Celebration

In 2009 I nearly died from an out-of-the-blue health crisis. I developed pneumonia and full body sepsis. I had to have my colon removed. I was intubated and placed in the ICU of the Ottawa General Hospital. the expectation was that I would die. but I didn't. in my state of ICU psychosis I had delusions, most of them horrifying and painful. One of these could have been the angel of death. these angels and ghosts are with me still. and I am grateful to be alive.

It Allows Me To Play

In his introduction to the Last Vispo, Nico Vassilakis says, “Our aim here is to foster the young fidgeter of letter construction, either abstract or traditional, and to inform them that Vispo is a viable poetic form.”

Being part of a discipline that makes people question whether it is a viable form appeals to me. Playing around with the Bible feels taboo, like I’m getting away with something considered sacrosanct and prescriptive, and yet the sacred and the divine to me equals play, having access to the full range of the imagination.

I am interested in the materiality of text, both as something that has social and cultural impact and as a physical manifestation of such, its pliable nature. I’d love to see this work published as an actual Bible with a leather cover and gold lettering, onionskin.

“The material of alphabet is letters/images—the material of a letter/image is line & curve & angle & shape, etc. –an expression of both intuition and mathematics.” Nico Vassilakis.

The word is a graphic unit, but a block of text is also a graphic unit: the amount of space it takes up on the page, words between spaces, layout and design, negotiation of blank space and text, length of words, sentences, paragraphs.

I think of the poems in the Vispo Bible as sculpture, such as Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay’s carving words into stone, his garden Little Sparta. from the site:

“At every turn along Little Sparta's paths or in its glades, language - here plaintively, there aggressively - ambushes the visitor. Plaques, benches, headstones, obelisks, planters, bridges and tree-column bases all carry words or other signage; and this language, in relation to the objects upon which it is inscribed and the landscape within which it is sited, functions metaphorically to conjure up an ideal and radical space, a space of the mind beyond sight or touch..” http://www.ianhamiltonfinlay.com/ian_hamilton_finlay.html

I think such works change the perception of what a poem is or may be.

“Genre isn’t the issue here, except that poetry risks becoming a mere genre when readers and writers expectations are too specific. [...] Poetry readers should not be enticed to recognize The Poetic so easily. When they can or do, poetry becomes one of many fine luxury goods—organic red wine or unsweetened apricot jam. Poetry loses its criticality, loses its social pertinence, loses its power.” Donato Mancini

It engages the Duende:

It’s exciting to use modern technology on a very old text. I hear the ghosts of the writers of the Bible, and Saint Joan and the archangel Michael, as I copy and paste the Bible into Photoshop and screw around with the text in ways they could never have even imagined. My poetic practice is driven by Lorca’s concept of the Duende:

“The dark and quivering duende that I am talking about is a descendant of the merry daemon of Socrates, all marble and salt, who angrily scratched his master on the day he drank hemlock; a descendant also of Descartes’ melancholy daemon, small as a green almond, who, tired of lines and circles, went out along the canals to hear the drunken sailors sing.”¹ Federico Garcia Lorca, “Theory and Function of the Duende,” in *Poetics of the New American Poetry*, (Grove Press, 1973) p. 92.

6/HOW:

to some extent the process of creating the Vispo Bible is an industrial process that repeats several tasks numerous times.

at its base level it involves the following steps with some variations:

1. copy block of text from BibleGateway.com into Photoshop.
2. adjust font size to fit entire text into an 8.5 x 11 inch or 11 x 8.5 inch page.

3. convert text to smart object and to raster in order to preserve the original text and perform nondestructive editing on it.
4. Edit the text and morph it using Free Transform or Transform
5. Duplicate to create a new block
6. group together to make one image.
7. sometimes I play around with styles, adding thickness and colour to the text.
sometimes I divide the text blocks up into verse and do separate operations and each verse, then put them together.
8. perform steps 4 -7 over again until satisfied

For Genesis I admit I didn't read any of the text, but worked with my knowledge of the basic stories, such as creation, Adam and Eve, all the begetting, etc and went from there. I was just starting out so I was fascinated by the process and the resulting images, which appeared by chance, rather than on purpose. I was inspired by the connection between math and nature, such as Fibonacci numbers, and symmetry.

Some have said that some of these pieces evoke sacred geometry, in particular the mandala, which appears in many cultures. The mandala is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism that represents the universe, and is also prevalent in Indigenous cultures (medicine wheel, dream catchers, dance shields), Paganism (the Celtic cross) Christianity (the rosary, the angel's halo) and Judaism (Garden of Eden, Fountain of Life, the Tabernacle of Moses, the Temple of Solomon...).

A Psychological Study of the Mandala in Early Jewish Holy Literature, author unknown

<http://www.psychological-observations.com/two-approaches-to-understanding-psychology/via-reflection-on-the-world/universals/archetype-symbol-myth/60-a-psychological-study-of-the-mandala-in-early-jewish-holy-literature#introduction>

Mandalas in Different Cultures by Katia Dinan

<https://prezi.com/ydbatnk629oc/mandalas-in-different-cultures/?webgl=0>

For Exodus I started to read; When I was creating the pieces, I bore in mind the 10 commandments which were said to have been written with the finger of god, carved into stone, then broken by Moses.

I'm not a Bible scholar by any means. I read the text for mention of colours, numbers, content within text. I considered popular culture and knowledge of biblical themes and figures, but whatever images or shapes people read into the work is mostly serendipitous. I'm not trying to turn the work into specific symbols or shapes, but somehow there are locusts, moths and spiders, a rose of sharon, scrolls, soot, swarms of living creatures, angel wings, a crown of thorns, vines, fearsome teeth, the blood of the lamb and the holy ghost.

I also repeat and layer the text, often according to a repeated number in the original text, such as the number 7 in Revelation. Revelation is full colour because of all the colours and textures mentioned in the text. I am concerned with colour, shape, scale, texture, and composition.

I'm interested in both minimalism and plenitude, which is different from a lot of poets and poetic practices, even visual poetics. When I layer and layer and layer and layer, I find satisfaction in filling up the page. I am influenced by the art concept "horror vacui" which means, fear of empty space and results in meticulously filling up the page.

An example of a Biblical art work that illustrates horror vacui is the Book of Kells from the 8th/9th centuries. It is a complex, intricate and ornate illuminated manuscript Gospel book in Latin, containing the four Gospels of the New Testament.

7/POETIC PRACTICE

The Vispo Bible is part of my general poetic practice of chance operations from the Dadaists and Jackson MacLow's Light poems, cutting up, reshuffling, remixing existing sources: words, phrases, lyrics, titles, objects, geographical and psychological landscapes to unlock fixed propaganda and repurpose it. For William S. Burroughs, "word and

image locks" control the mind, that is, "lock" us into conventional patterns of perceiving, thinking, and speaking that determine our interactions with environment and society. The cutup is a way of exposing word and image controls and thus freeing oneself from them, an alteration of consciousness that occurs in both the writer and the reader of the text." William S. Burrough's Cut Up Technique in Language is a virus.

<http://www.languageisavirus.com/creative-writing-techniques/william-s-burroughs-cut-ups.php>

See also Bryon Gysin's Minutes to Go, a cut up of newspapers and Kathy Acker's cut up and remix of the Scarlet Letter in Blood and Guts in High School

In his essay, Concrete and "What Looks Like Poetry" from the Last Vispo, derek beaulieu states "the Concrete poetry that I endorse – and which stylistically is of most influence on my own work—is a poetic without direct one-to-one signification. It is rhizomatic in composition, pointing both to and away from multiple shifting of clouds and meanings of construction, where writing has nothing to do with signifying...it has to do with surveying and mapping (Deleuze and Gattari)."

The Vispo Bible explores the tension between the tracing of tradition and the rhizomatic approach to exploration and text as map with multiple entry possibilities.

9/CONCLUSION

I will continue to work on the Vispo Bible when I get the urge and share it in whatever ways come to me. I'd love to collaborate with visual artists, musicians, animators, film makers and what have you. I have no idea how the work will change as I continue to work on it. I'm not even sure I'll always use digital tech to create the pieces or whether I'll decide to work on altered books, abstract comics, asemic writing, collage or a variety of vispo-related methods. There are lots of possibilities. My poetics is about whimsy, connection and exploration. The Vispo Bible satisfies all three of these goals for me. Thanks for the opportunity to share my thoughts about this project and about visual poetry in general.

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Amanda Earl is a Canadian writer, editor, publisher and visual poet living in Ottawa. She is the managing editor of *Bywords.ca* and the fallen angel of *AngelHousePress*. Her visual poetry has been exhibited in Canada, Brazil and Russia, and published in *the last vispo: anthology: visual poetry 1998-2008* (Fantagraphics, 2012), *Esther, The Vispo Bible*, (Puddles of Sky Press, 2017), *Leviticus XII* (Penteract Press, 2017), *Revelation 20 from The Vispo Bible*, (No Press, 2017) *Of the Body*, (Puddles of Sky Press, 2012), *Bone Sapling*, a collaboration with Gary Barwin, (AngelHousePress, 2014), *a field guide to fanciful bugs*, (avantacular press, 2010), *Montparnasse: this is visual poetry*, (chapbook publisher, 2010) and in the magazines, *untethered* (2017) and *dreamland* (2016). Amanda's visual poetry also appears in online journals, *Brave New Word*, *Ustanga*, *h&*, *Our Teeth otoliths*, *tip of the knife*, *fboom*, *the new post literate*, *Logalia.com*, *DrunkenBoat*, and *the Bleed*. Gary Barwin gave a lovely write up of Amanda's visual poetry on *Jacket2*, "What kind of [sic] sense is that?: Amanda Earl & the synaesthesia of reading" (June, 2013). For more vispo, please visit EleanorIncognito.blogspot.ca. For more on Amanda, please visit <http://amandaearl.com> or connect with Amanda on Twitter @KikiFolle.