

A tour through Brazilian modernist visual poetry

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Abstract: This article discusses aspects of Brazilian visual poetry based on poetic experiments produced within the scope of Brazilian modernism. Brazilian modernism is recognized for its aesthetic aspect of intense experimentation in its early years. Although in the Brazilian context, there were experiments in the articulation between images and poems before the twentieth century, it was in Brazilian modernism that the production of visual poetry expanded. In this essay, the visual artist and poet Vicente do Rego Monteiro is prominently presented through his numerous experiments since the 1940s.

Keywords: Brazilian modernism; Brazilian visual poetry; Vicente do Rego Monteiro (1899–1970).

Resumo: Este artigo discute aspectos da poesia visual brasileira a partir de experimentos poéticos produzidos no âmbito do modernismo brasileiro. O modernismo brasileiro é reconhecido por sua vertente estética de intensa experimentação nos seus primeiros anos. Embora, no contexto brasileiro, tenha havido experimentos de articulação entre imagem e poemas antes do século XX, foi no modernismo brasileiro que se ampliou a produção de poesia visual. Neste ensaio é apresentado, com destaque, o artista visual e poeta Vicente do Rego Monteiro, por meio dos seus inúmeros experimentos realizados desde os anos 1940.

Palavras-chave: modernismo brasileiro; poesia visual brasileira; Vicente do Rego Monteiro (1899–1970).

1. VISUAL POETRY: IN SEARCH OF SOME PERSPECTIVES

It is always a risk for any critic to define and conceptualize categories capable of encompassing such a broad artistic production, marked by a wide variety of styles, codes, and adopted forms, with works produced across an extensive historical period. Conceptualizing visual poetry entails certain risks, as it is a contested territory with no consensus regarding its definition¹, beginning with the very question of what qualifies as visual poetry. After all, among other things, one of the qualities of good poetry may lie in its ability to construct

¹ In some ways, an example of these disputes can be observed in the rupture between the poet Ferreira Gullar and the Concrete Poetry movement, which ultimately culminated in the Neo-Concrete Manifesto at the end of the 1950s. In 1996, during an interview for *Caderno Mais! of Folha de S. Paulo*, Gullar recalled the reasons for this break, emphasizing that what was at stake was a dispute over the role of verbal form in Brazilian poetry at the time: “the divergences were poetic-aesthetic, since at that time I had no political or ideological affiliation or involvement.

images; thus, it could be assumed that a significant portion of our poetry is imagistic, nourished by a world of visualities.

Nevertheless, visual poetry must be read here through a different lens. The reference to visual poetry is situated in a liminal space—sometimes inhabited by the visual artist, sometimes by the literary writer—both envisioning a territory without clearly defined boundaries between the visual arts and literature. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that both the writer and the visual artist cohabit this territory. Beyond the play of images that emerge from the processes of signification in verbal language (the basis of literary practice in its more traditional sense), visual poetry also engages with the plasticity inherent in typographic forms, in the design and spatial arrangement of words and sentences, among other aspects.

A more secure approach to this discussion may lie in pointing to some of the relations established between the written and representational form of the word and what we understand as the visual features of drawing. It is within this intersection that visual poetry and its modes of experimentation are situated. It is in the contours of drawing, combined with the work of the word, that a kind of meaning is produced—where these elements coordinate with each other. They highlight a type of aesthetic experience that assumes the position of a nonboundary, where hierarchical distinctions between drawing and word are not rigidly fixed. To further illuminate this relation, I turn to the researcher Jorge Bacelar, who explains:

Visual poetry, as has been said, may be considered the result of an intersection between poetry and visual experimentation. It may equally be seen as the result of a superimposition between writing and drawing, since all writing originates from drawing (writing may be understood as the drawing of words). It is possible to think simply in images, just as it is possible to think simply in words. Therefore, if writing and drawing are means of mental communication, it is in the mind that poetry and the primal trace will first encounter each other².

Conventionally, visual poetry is closely tied to the typographic world, which opens up another dimension to be explored: that of visual spatialities. Traditional poetry—understood here, broadly speaking, as that which does not fully explore typographic values in their radicality—remains more closely aligned with the sonic universe of the word, through rhythm, musicality, and orality. Unsurprisingly, in the critical vocabulary of this kind of poetry, it is common to speak of poetic diction, of a writer's voice, of the musicality of a poem, and so forth. Visual poetry, in turn, although not abandoning its connection to the sound of words, establishes itself much more directly through visual values. It constitutes an artistic practice linked to a technological domain that brings it closer to the world of the visual arts proper.

Within this horizon, the so-called visual poem emerges in a far more hybrid environment³, subjected to the interrelations between verbal and nonverbal languages and among interconnected semiotic systems. In traditional verbal

And they predated the movement itself, for I never accepted a merely rationalist and technical view of poetry. What triggered the rupture was an article by Haroldo claiming that Concrete Poetry would henceforth be produced according to mathematical formulas. As this was impossible, I considered such a claim to be tainted with charlatanism—and I was right: this mathematical poetry was never actually produced by them. The Neo-Concrete movement was not created by anyone; it arose naturally from the experiments of poets, painters, and sculptors who formed the group. I merely elaborated the theory that was implicit in them. In art, there can be no master plan." Cf. FOLHA DE S.PAULO. A divergência neoconcretista [interview with Ferreira Gullar]. **Caderno Mais!**, 8 Dec. 1996. p. 10. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/1996/12/08/mais!/15.html>. Accessed in: 3 Mar. 2024.

2 BACELAR, Jorge. Poesia Visual. **Arquivo Digital da PO.EX**, 2001. Available at: <https://po-ex.net/taxonomia/transtextualidades/metatextualidades-alografias/jorge-bacelar-poesia-visual/>. Accessed in: 29 Mar. 2024.

3 BERTGES, Livia Ribeiro; PEREIRA, Vinicius Carvalho. Poesia visual: subsídios teórico-metodológicos para uma leitura da serialidade. **Texto Poético**, v. 17, n. 33, p. 177-201, 2021.

poetry, written in the Western alphabetic script, the reading of poems follows a linear mode, given the inherent characteristics of the linguistic sign, where the linearity of the signifier⁴ dictates this kind of hierarchy of vision.

When considering the modes of reading in visual poems, however, referring to the linearity of the signifier explains only part of the phenomenon. The gaze of the reader, the modes of attention and observation required in the act of reading, are no longer hierarchized in the same way as in poems strictly based on linguistic signs. The visual poem is founded upon the superimposed relationship between image and text. Researchers Bertger and Pereira⁵ elaborate on an interesting perspective on this relationship, presenting a characteristic of visual poetry that takes into account its physicality, grounded in gesture and corporeality.

The history of writing—whether from an anthropological, visual, or technical perspective—offers us different aspects of the same problematic relationship between image and text. The plasticity of the written word within the text, with its successive and repetitive movements, reveals a counterpoint through which we can trace, much like visual poetry itself, a genre that oscillates between two physical dimensions: that of gesture, which stands in contrast to vocalization, and that of the physical act that passes through the body, the hands, and the fingertips, drawing with the aid of instruments as a form of sliding desire, of naming a desire. The same hand that provides balance to the human body as it moves away from the ground becomes inscribed on countless surfaces⁶.

Throughout history, numerous examples illustrate this relationship between text and image. It was in the twentieth century, however, that poetry was more systematically theorized (and self-reflected upon) and practiced within this space of visual labor and refinement. Many poetic endeavors of the twentieth century became increasingly self-determined in situating themselves at this boundary. At the same time, criticism sought to more thoroughly theorize the procedures of both visual artists and poets. In the case of Brazilian visual poetry, there was a pronounced commitment to this collective construction, carried out by groups and movements. Brazil produced a heterogeneous and abundant body of visual poetry throughout the twentieth century. At this point, it is worthwhile to take a tour through these experiments—without, of course, claiming to exhaust this vast constellation of visual poems.

2. INITIAL DEVELOPMENTS OF VISUAL POETRY IN BRAZIL

Some poems produced prior to the twentieth century have already been cataloged as forms of Brazilian visual poetry, as they revealed expressions willing to engage in dialogue with a universe of nonverbal language. One may recall, for instance, the poem “*Ao desembargador Belchior da Cunha Brochado por suas altas prendas*” [“To judge Belchior da Cunha Brochado for his high virtues”], attributed to Gregório de Matos in the seventeenth century, or the

4 SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de. **Curso de linguística geral**. Translation, notes, and afterword by Marcos Bagno. São Paulo: Parábola, 2021.

5 BERTGER; PEREIRA, *op. cit.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

acrostic poems of Frei João do Rosário in the eighteenth century. As can be seen in Figure 1, Gregório de Matos's poem—produced within an encomiastic genre common at the time—proposes a type of reading that dismantles the linearity present in traditional poetry. Almost like a game, crafted in the spirit of Baroque ingenuity, it requires the reader to leap back and forth in order to extract meaning from the verses with their respective common word endings.

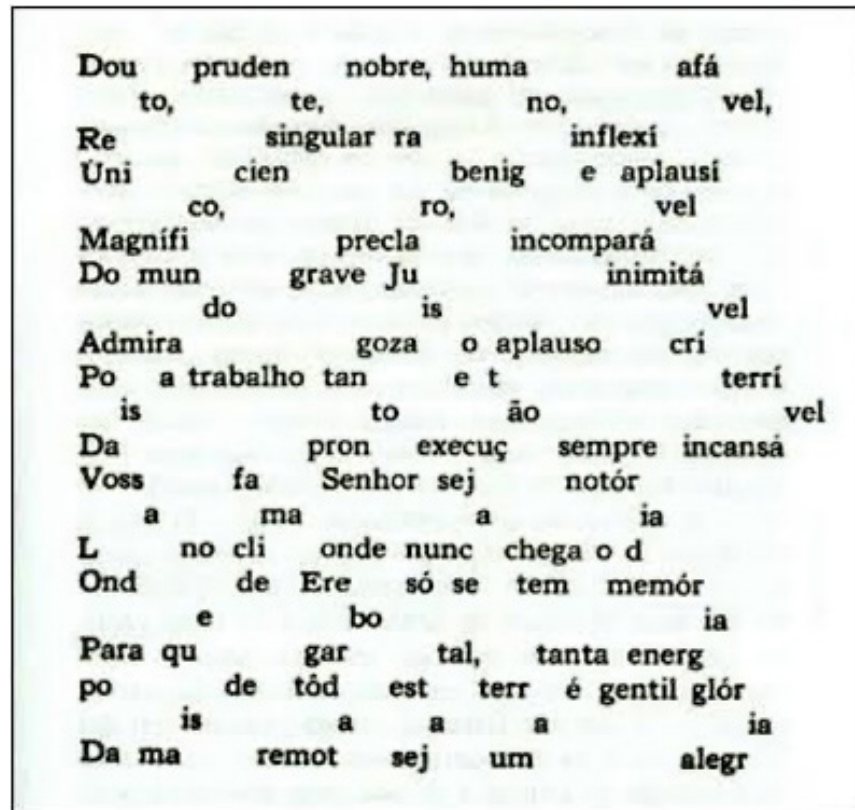


Figure 1: Poem by Gregório de Matos

Source: Bruscky, Montejo Navas and Bruscky (2019, p. 16).

Even in the nineteenth century, the poet Sousândrade, author of the singular work *Guesa Errante* (1876–1877), composed of several cantos, was already producing poetry with strong visual intimacy. The poet employed, for example, a series of typographic resources: double dashes to indicate the entrance of a character's voice; the use of capital letters and italics; the printing of textual segments in smaller typeface as a poetic device; among other strategies. Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos, in what is regarded as the most important study on Sousândrade, highlighted the presence of the visual form of print itself shaping the choices of this nineteenth-century poet's visual poetry: "it is undeniable that, on the typographic level, headlines and compositional resources of the newspapers of the time must have influenced Sousândrade,

exerting such an effect on his spirit (as indeed, and not coincidentally, they did on Mallarmé as well).”⁷

In the early decades of the twentieth century, already within the scope of Brazilian modernist production, it is worth highlighting some of the experiments by Oswald de Andrade and the poet Jorge Fernandes. From the former, his visual poetic experiment with a stamp is particularly notable, resulting in a kind of poem that reappropriates an everyday object to give it new meaning—comparable to the *ready-made* style inaugurated by Marcel Duchamp. Let us look at the stamp-poem in question (Figure 2):

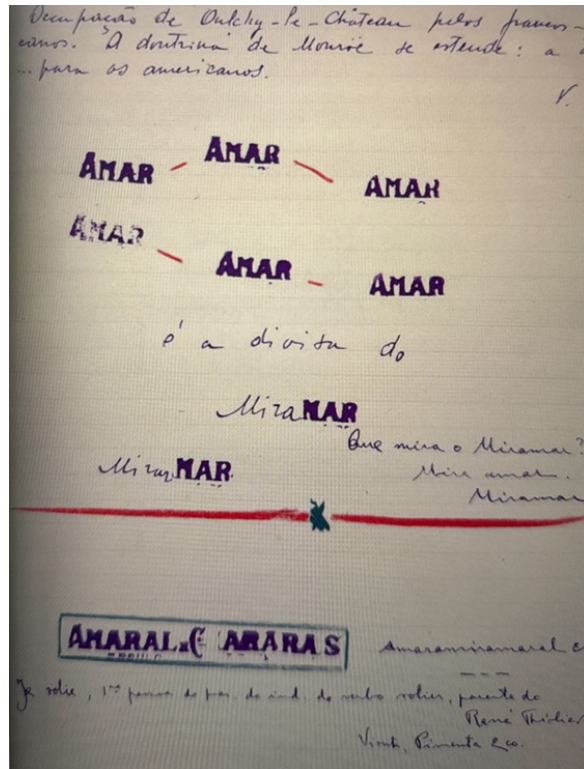


Figure 2: Stamp-poem by Oswald de Andrade

Source: Bruscky, Montejo Navas and Bruscky (2019, p. 16).

In the 1920s, the poet Jorge Fernandes was also among the Brazilian modernist poets who incorporated visual experiments into their poetry. A poet from Rio Grande do Norte, he was one of the first in that state to employ free verse, unbound by traditional rhyme and versification. An example of the incorporation of visual form into his poetry can be found in his poem “Rede” [“Net”], from 1927; in it, the word *rede* takes on the visual form of a net, evoking the caligrammatic forms of Stéphane Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire. This example (Figure 3) comes from his first publication, *Livro de Poemas* (1927)⁸:

7 CAMPOS, Augusto de; CAMPOS, Haroldo de. Sousândrade: o terremoto clandestino. In: CAMPOS, Augusto de; CAMPOS, Haroldo de. *Re Visão de Sousândrade*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002. p. 55.

8 FERNANDES, Jorge. **Livro de poemas**. Natal: Typ. d'a Imprensa, 1927. p. 16. A imagem do poema foi extraída do catálogo de uma exposição dedicada à poesia visual brasileira: BRUSCKY, Paulo; BRUSCKY, Yuri. **História da Poesia Visual Brasileira**. Recife: Museu de Arte Moderna Aloísio Magalhães (MAMAM); Companhia Editora de Pernambuco, 2016. p. 83.

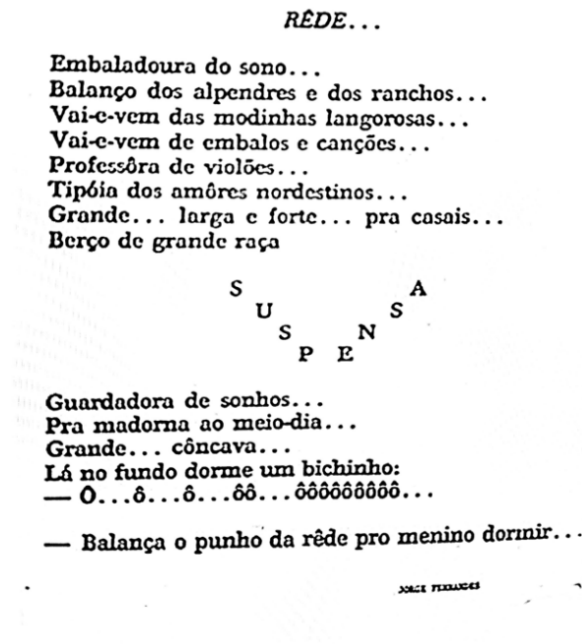


Figure 3: Poem “Rede” by Jorge Fernandes

Source: Bruscky and Bruscky (2016, p. 83).

9 Although Vicente do Rego Monteiro produced visual art of singular importance to the history of Brazilian modernism, his work was much more widely recognized after his death. One of the most plausible hypotheses for this momentary oblivion is linked to his political positions in support of the Estado Novo and his flirtation with integralism in the 1930s. To follow this debate, we recommend the article: DIMITROV, Eduardo. **Vicente do Rego Monteiro**: de ex-poente modernista a integralista esquecido. **Novos Estudos CEBRAP**, n. 103, p. 193-208, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.25091/S0101-3300201500030010>

10 Cf. AJZENBERG, Elza Maria. **Vicente do Rego Monteiro**: um mergulho no passado. Doctorate in Philosophy (Faculty of Philosophy, Letters, and Human Sciences)—Universidade de São Paulo, 1984.

11 MONTEIRO, Vicente do Rego. *Biopsiconogino*. **Renovação**, ano 2, n. 1, jan. 1940, p. 15.

3. VICENTE DO REGO MONTEIRO, AN EXPERIMENTER OF VISUAL POETRY

Among the poets of the first half of the twentieth century, the artist Vicente do Rego Monteiro occupies a prominent place in the roster of contributors to Brazilian visual poetry. From his work and activity, it is possible to affirm that Brazilian visual poetry took a significant leap forward. With Vicente do Rego Monteiro, new paths were opened for movements, groups, and new authorships to emerge within this universe of poetic formulation⁹.

In the early 1930s, after an extensive and successful period in France—where he was even recognized as a poet in the French language¹⁰—the artist from Recife, upon returning to his homeland, began to take part in the vibrant publishing market of Pernambuco’s capital. Rego Monteiro joins Manuel Lubambo as editor of the journal *Fronteiras* from Recife, where he was responsible for all graphic design, including the illustrations published therein. In 1939, he founded his own periodical, the journal *Renovação*. In January 1940, he published in this journal a highly original poem in terms of the way it combined illustrations and verbal language. This poem, entitled “*Biopsiconogino*,”¹¹ can be seen and read below (Figure 4):



Figure 4: Poem by Vicente do Rego Monteiro in journal Renovação

Source: Monteiro (1940).

As can be observed in the reading above, the images do not serve a merely illustrative role. Rather, they integrate uniquely into the poem itself. One might even argue that such images create visual landscapes within the poem, expanding the very act of reading the textual elements and already anticipating other experiments in poetry later undertaken by this author.

In 1941, Vicente do Rego Monteiro published his poetry book *Poemas de bolso* [Pocket Poems]. Within this more immediate context, in which he was directing periodicals, *Poemas de bolso* reached the public. At that time of intense work with journals, the visual artist—though still active as a painter—found in poetry a space for artistic production. Azjenberg highlights a specificity in the poetry of Vicente do Rego Monteiro that deserves emphasis here:

In fact, the poet Vicente begins from his closeness to life; he comes to reaffirm it, despite the war, all the misunderstandings, all the contradictions. In his poetry, he shifts the language of daily life—of street scenes, of coffees, of gatherings with friends—into poetic phrasing. He is not concerned with the ornamentation of phrases, with exterior adornment, but rather with the vibration before life itself. Reminiscent of Northeastern popular poetry in its improvisational and spontaneous qualities, he writes *Poemas de bolso*, which can be devoured in a single breath. Afterwards, they can be savored slowly, word by word, delighting in his marvelous

or curious inventions, much like repeating a brilliant verbal acrobatics, a popular saying, or a witty remark that cleverly frames a scene or event. His work retains a distinctly Northeastern flavor—the pleasure of expressing oneself through words¹².

It is in *Poemas de bolso* that Rego Monteiro accomplished—arguably for the first time—the feat of composing the first Brazilian typographic poem, with the text “*Poema 100% Nacional*.”¹³ Let us examine this poem¹⁴ (Figure 5):

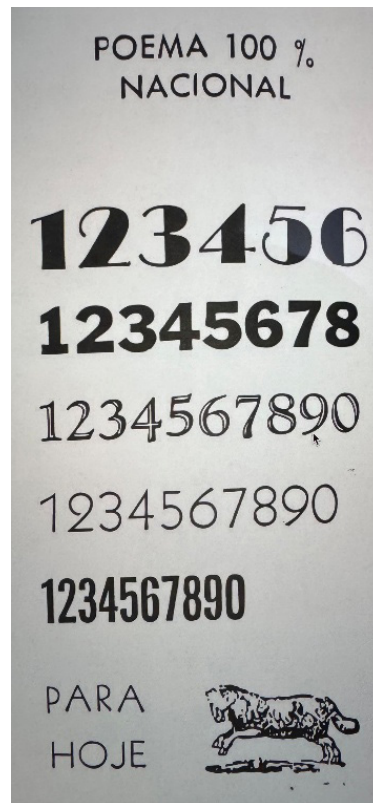


Figure 5: “Poema 100% Nacional,” by Vicente do Rego Monteiro

Source: Bruscky and Bruscky (2016, p. 88).

Without a doubt, in a freer interpretation of this poem, one may say that its mode of expression alludes to the famous and widespread *jogo do bicho* [“animal game”], present throughout the country. The numbers presented in different typefaces evoke the cards used in this game, which paired numbers with corresponding animals, a practice that spread clandestinely in Brazil from the late nineteenth century onward. The expression “PARA HOJE” [“FOR TODAY”] reinforces this reading of the *jogo do bicho*, suggesting the daily draws of the game. Here, a play of affirmation emerges—blending humor and irony—aimed at highlighting a singular aspect of national culture.

In 1946, with the end of the war, Vicente do Rego Monteiro once again left Brazil and returned to live in Paris. The experiments in visual poetry from the earlier period, however, were not exhausted with the change of continent.

12 AJZENBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

13 The statement is found in: BRUSCKY; BRUSCKY, *op. cit.*, p. 16. Cf. BRUSCKY, Paulo; MONTEJO NAVAS, Adolfo; BRUSCKY, Yuri (org.). *História da poesia visual brasileira*: no acervo do Arquivo Paulo Bruscky. São Paulo: Sesc Bom Retiro, 2019. (Catalog of the exhibition held at SESC Bom Retiro [May 30 to September 8, 2019]). p. 64.

There, in the French capital, he established, within the space of a small apartment, a nearly amateur publishing house using the press he had brought from Recife on his journey: it was to be called *La Presse à Bras*. Through this press, he published *Cartomancie* in 1952. Researcher Francisco Oiticica Filho contextualizes the work as follows:

Cartomancie remained an incomplete book from its first edition, as it was published in a format different from what the author had originally intended. Accumulating the roles of writer, illustrator, typesetter, editor, and printer of his own books—as well as those of his numerous poet friends in Paris—Monteiro intended *Cartomancie* to take the form of a deck of cards, which was not possible. Pressed by his many activities and by the technical constraints of standardized printing methods in his artisanal press, Monteiro left to future generations the task of completing his editorial project¹⁵.

As can be observed, *Cartomancie* was conceived as a work to be read and apprehended beyond the conventional format of a book. Even so, due to the technical limitations of that period, its publication through Monteiro's French press assumed a more traditional form, a pocket-sized book (Figure 6), containing 32 poems. It was only in the late 1990s that the project of a new edition was carried out by researcher and visual poet Paulo Bruscky, who, together with two collaborators, managed to bring to the public a deck edition¹⁶ in book format, as originally envisioned by Vicente do Rego Monteiro in the 1950s.



14 Extraído de: BRUSCKY; BRUSCKY, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

15 OITICICA FILHO, Francisco. *Cartomancie* (1952–1999): livro de artista, poesia em jogo. *Revista Leitura*, Maceió, v. 2, n. 34, p. 117–146, 2019. p. 130. <https://doi.org/10.28998/2317-9945.200434.117-146>.

16 Cf. MONTEIRO, Vicente do Rego. *Cartomancie*. Paulo Bruscky, Mário Hélio e Ronildo Maia Leite (org.). Recife: Arquivo Público Estadual de Pernambuco: Edições Bagaço, 1999.

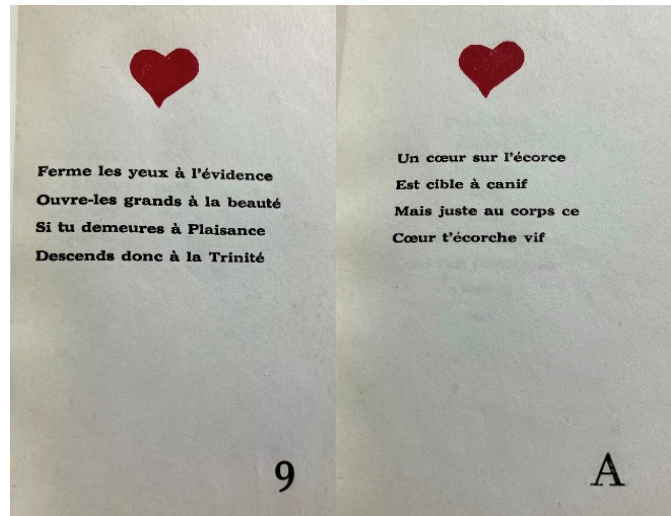
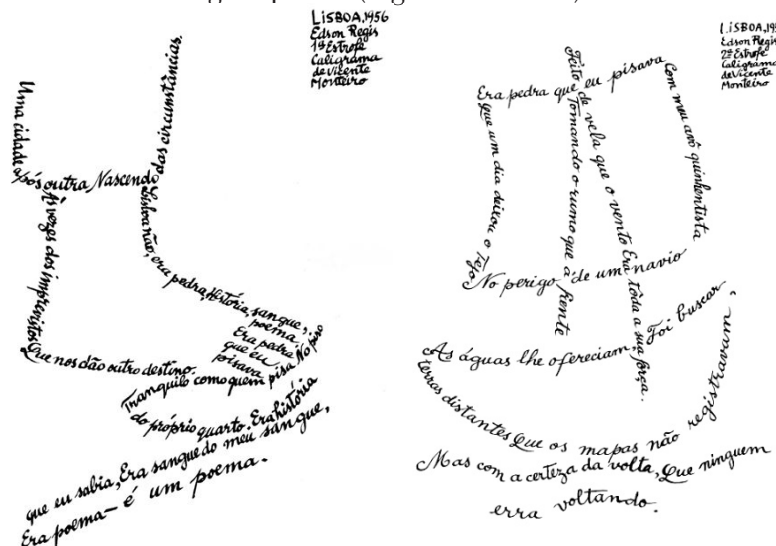


Figure 6: Pages from *Cartomancie* (1952)

Source: book *Cartomancie* (1952), by Vicente do Rego Monteiro.

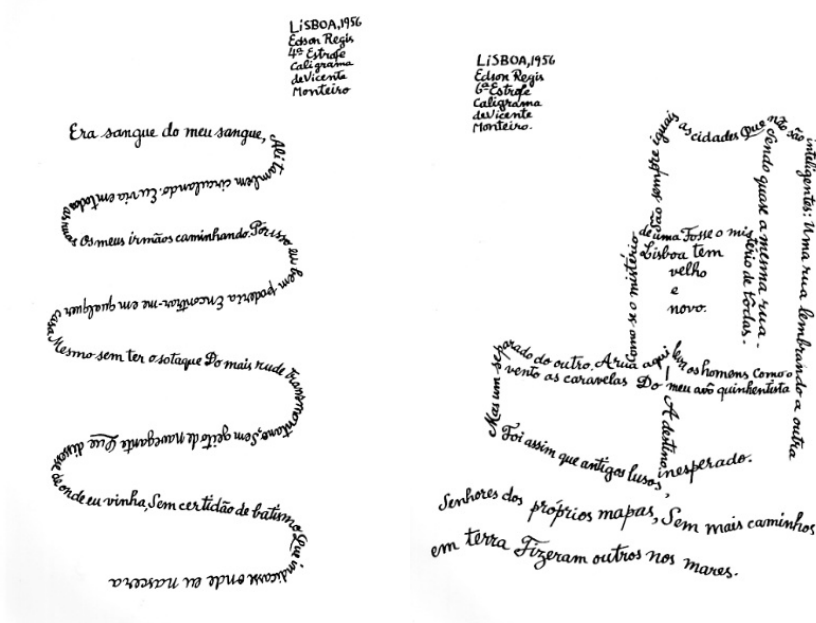
Monteiro also collaborated with poets and writers, either as an illustrator or as a coauthor of poems in the form of calligrams. In 1961, having already returned to Brazil to work as a professor of painting at the School of Fine Arts of the University of Recife, Vicente do Rego Monteiro published a series of calligrams based on Edson Regis's poems about Lisbon. This experiment must also be understood in light of Monteiro's own affinity with the French tradition¹⁷ of calligrams. It is worth presenting some of these calligrams, composed from each stanza of Edson Regis's poem (Figures 7 and 8):



Figures 7 and 8: *Caligramas* by Vicente do Rego Monteiro, based on Edson Regis's poem

Source: Bruscky and Bruscky (2016, p. 91).

17 The extent of Vicente do Rego Monteiro's connection with French poetry can be understood insofar as this author received recognition from the French literary world through important and prestigious awards: the *Mandat des poètes littéraires* prize in 1955 and the *Prix Apollinaire* in 1960 for his entire body of work.



Figures 9 and 10: *Caligramas* by Vicente do Rego Monteiro, based on Edson Regis's poem

Source: Bruscky and Bruscky (2016, p. 91).

As can be observed in these poetic and visual experiments by Vicente do Rego Monteiro, there is no longer a discernible separation between images and letters. Everything intermingles to create a new interrelation between drawing and the expressive potential that the word can harness. Explanatorily, this recalls the way in which Foucault brilliantly unraveled the interplay of figure and text in René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (*La trahison des images*, 1929). This work, in Foucault's interpretation, operates as a "secretly constituted calligram."¹⁸ The calligram, as a complex artistic and literary practice, is finely defined by the French thinker:

In its millennial tradition, the calligram has a threefold role: to compensate for the alphabet; to repeat without recourse to rhetoric; to trap things in the snare of a double writing. It brings as close as possible to one another the text and the figure; it is composed of lines that delimit the form of the object and of those that arrange the succession of letters; it houses statements within the space of the figure, and makes the text say what the drawing represents. On the one hand, it alphabetizes the ideogram, populates it with discontinuous letters, and thus gives voice to the silence of interrupted lines. But inversely, it distributes writing across a space that no longer bears the indifference, openness, and inert whiteness of paper; it compels writing to unfold according to the laws of a simultaneous form. It reduces phoneticism to being, for the gaze of an instant, nothing more than a grayish murmur completing the contours of a figure; but it makes drawing the fine envelope one must pierce to follow, word by word, the emptying of its intestinal text¹⁹.

18 FOUCAULT, Michel. *Isto não é um cachimbo*. Translation: Jorge Coli. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2014, p. 23.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 23-24.

Following the paths traced by Foucault, it is possible to point out that in Monteiro's calligrams, a dual procedure is at work in each composition: letters—an inexhaustible source of rhetorical procedures that generate words—take on the role of outlining the drawing's lines, which, in turn, allow for the figuration of things²⁰. In short, as Foucault observes with regard to this form: “the calligram playfully seeks to erase the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to figure and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.”²¹ Within this horizon of a new mode of poetic reading, of a renewed articulation between words and depicted things, one may perhaps situate the contributions of Brazilian visual poetry, partially inaugurated by modernists such as Vicente do Rego Monteiro.

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²⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

²¹ Ibid., p. 24.

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