

Alain Arias-Misson  
*Concretism*  
A Poem



##### Preview #####





C O N

C R E

T / S M

I S I T

C O N

C R E  
T I S M

DISIT  
EROS  
CON  
CE  
TISM

ISIT  
EROS  
OR  
SINGR  
ETISM

IS IT  
EROS  
OR  
COSMIC  
CONCRETISM



EROS  
OR  
COSMIC  
CONCRETISM





CO W

C R E

T IS M

OMENS

C O N

C R E

T IS M

OMEN'S



STIR



CO  
C R E N



C R E N



T I S M



OMEN'S



STIR



EROS



CONCERN



OMENS  
STIR  
EROS  
INME  
CONTO



OMENS  
STIR  
EROS  
INME  
CONTO





C O N



O R E



H / S M



NOETIC

C O N



C R E



T I S M



NOETIC



ROSE



CONCR

ETISM



NOETIC



ROSE



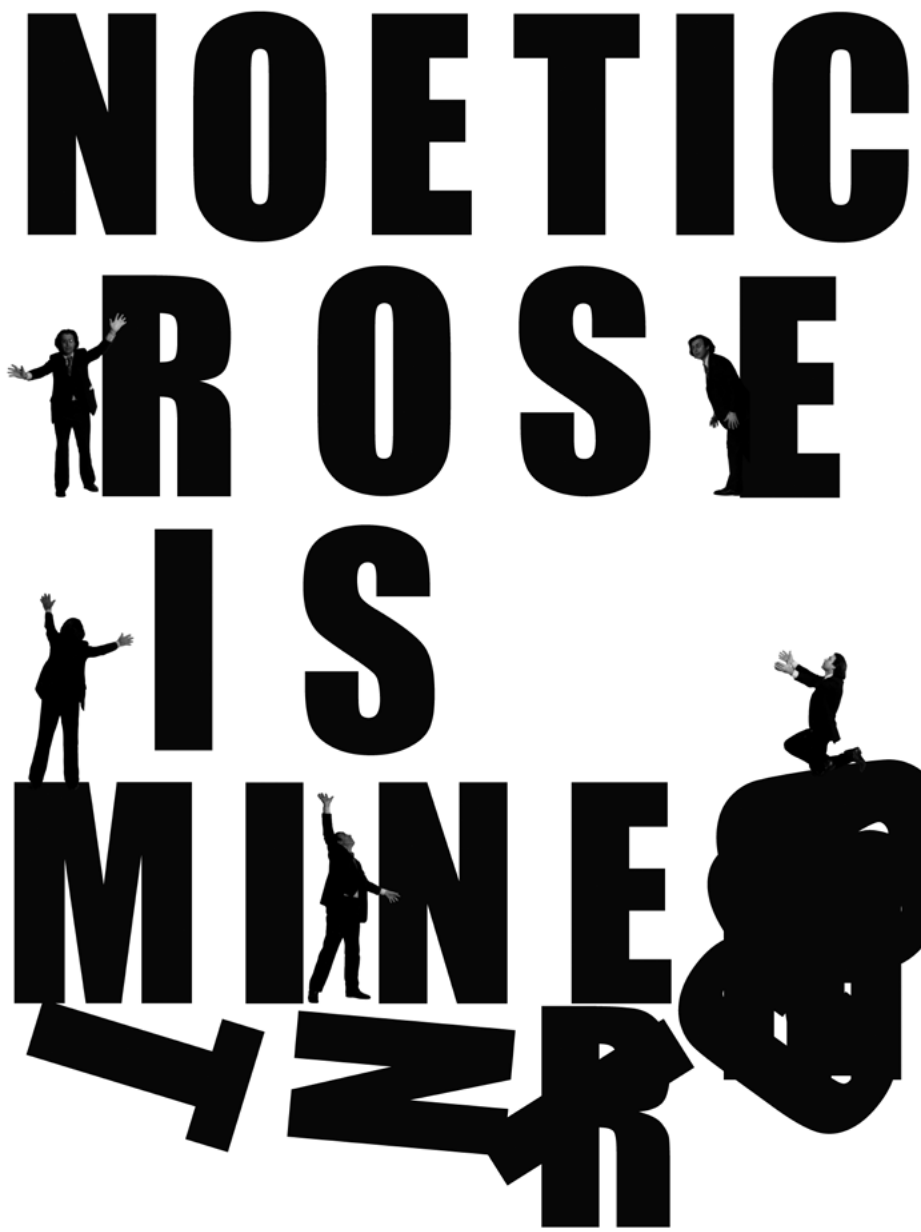
IS



CONCRETE



NOETIC  
ROSE  
IS  
MINER  
YR

A vertical arrangement of large, bold, black letters. The word 'NOETIC' is at the top. Below it is 'ROSE', with a silhouette of a person standing on the 'R' and another on the 'E'. Below 'ROSE' is 'IS', with a silhouette of a person standing on the 'I'. Below 'IS' is 'MINER', with a silhouette of a person standing on the 'I'. At the bottom is 'YR', with a silhouette of a person kneeling on the 'R'. The letters are arranged in a slightly staggered, vertical fashion.

NOETIC  
ROSE  
IS  
MINER  
YR

A distorted and overlapping version of the text from the left page. The letters are slanted, overlapping, and some are cut off, creating a sense of movement and chaos. The words 'NOETIC', 'ROSE', 'IS', 'MINER', and 'YR' are still recognizable but heavily distorted.



Is it eros or cosmic?

Omens stir eros in me

Noetic rose is mine

Metric emits rose scent

Rose in crimson corset

Rites in rose moist cries

Inmost mentor is rose

## A Different Kind of Concrete Poem

Poet, writer, and artist Alain Arias-Misson (born in 1936 in Brussels) is a legendary figure in the history of twentieth-century experimental literature. His works have been presented in the earliest anthologies of concrete and visual poetry, such as Emmett Williams's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* and Jean-François Bory's *Bientôt* (both 1967), as well as in a variety of important journals since the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to composing typewriter, phonetic, visual, and concrete poetry, Arias-Misson was active in establishing and supporting the phenomenon by helping compile the first anthology on the movement in the United States, *Anthology of Concretism*, published by Eugene Wildman in the journal *Chicago Review* in 1967. His works have been shown in many influential exhibitions around the world, including *Mostra di poesia concreta* (Venice Biennale, 1969), *Concrete Poetry / Visual Texts / Sound Texts* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1971), *Buchstäblich wörtlich, wörtlich buchstäblich* (Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1987), *Poésure et Peintrie* (Musées de Marseille, 1998), and *La parola nell'arte* (MART, Rovereto, 2008). In recognition of his achievements, he was awarded the Prix international de littérature Bernard Heidsieck – Centre Pompidou in 2018.

The poem *Concretism*, created in 2023, is the result of Arias-Misson's preoccupation with concrete poetry since the early 1960s. In the course of the book, which consists of seven chapters, each comprising six pages, seven verses are composed in a very literal sense. The

individual panels of the cycle show portraits of the artist originally made in the 1970s for a series of *Photo Poems*. At that time, Arias-Misson was concerned with an expansion of literature beyond its established genres. Against the background of intermedia and expanded arts, his experimentation also transcended the boundaries between traditional artistic disciplines. With regard to *Concretism*, his *Public Poems*, developed since the late 1960s, are particularly noteworthy: in most of them, human-sized white letters were carried through the streets of various cities. At precise locations during a march, different words were formed using letters from the specific titles in an anagrammatic fashion. With this mixture of artistic happening and political demonstration, he created a literary form that enabled him to inscribe texts in the social context of a city.

In *Concretism*, we can follow the poet's alter egos creating verses out of the letters of this very word by moving them over the pages. The poet is at work with great enthusiasm and significant physical effort. Sometimes he appears as a real craftsman who forcefully drags or pushes the signs to the right places, sometimes as a clown kicking letters across the pages like a maniac, and sometimes as a thinker with an exaggerated pathos in his posture (an ironic element, of course).

From a historical perspective, the physical effort (*fatica* in Italian) involved in creating a work of art was one of the arguments used to justify the supremacy

of painting over sculpture in the *paragone delle arti*, the comparison and competition between the arts. It is obvious that working with stone, wood, or metal was much more physically demanding than applying paint to a canvas. Compared to the sculptor, who toils in his studio, the painter, according to Leonardo da Vinci in his *Trattato della Pittura* (ca. 1480-1516), “[. . .] sits in the greatest comfort and finely dressed before his work, and moves a feather-light brush dipped in delicate color, and is adorned with garments according to his taste, as he pleases, and his house is clean and filled with beautiful pictures, and music often sounds there, and various beautiful works are read aloud, which is most pleasant to hear without the accompaniment of hammer blows or other noise.” Even more than painting, writing and poetry were regarded as primarily intellectual activities because there was, it seemed, no treatment of physical material involved. Words, which texts are made of, were widely considered immaterial ideas or concepts. However, this overlooked the fact that one also gets one’s hands dirty in writing: with the ink, which writers of the past often produced themselves using curious recipes, as well as in the “black art of printing,” when texts are reproduced.

The rose, which appears as the central motif in *Concretism*, has been celebrated in thousands of poems. Gertrude Stein’s famous line, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” from her 1913 poem *Sacred Emily*, shows that the rose also stands at the beginning of concrete poetry. Even though “Rose” is still used as a woman’s

name in this poem, Stein later played with variations of this sentence such as “a rose is a rose is a rose” (in, for example, *Operas and Plays*, 1932), which makes the reference to the flower more obvious. The tautological nature of this sentence and the idea that the word would be enough to evoke the sensual qualities of the blossom made this line extremely attractive for concrete poetry. In that sense, Arias-Misson’s poem can also be understood as paying homage to the grandmother of concrete poetry.

*Concretism*’s numerical structure, which is complex and rich in allusions, leads even further into the past. In the number symbolism of the Middle Ages, 3 stands for the Trinity of God (and the soul as well as the spiritual sphere). The number 4 reflects the elements fire, earth, air, and water and thus the totality of the physical world. The number 7, as sum of three and four, is associated with completeness and wholeness: God is said to have created the world in seven days—and thus the creation was complete. In this world, however, man is supposed to work only six days, and on the last day of the week he is supposed to rest and reflect. Seven times six is forty-two: before becoming a pop-cultural myth as the answer to the “Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything” calculated over 7.5 million years by a supercomputer in Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), this figure appeared repeatedly in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books and other works—an author highly admired by Arias-Misson. In the early 1450s Gutenberg printed the Bible as the first book reproduced with movable

type in the Western world structuring the text with a layout consisting of forty-two lines per column, picking up various symbolical references in Christianity. For similar reasons, in Judaism, some Torah scrolls are written with forty-two lines per column, based on, for instance, the forty-two stations of the exodus from Egypt—or the role of this number in the context of the creation myth in Kabbalistic tradition.

Despite such serious historical references, *Concretism* certainly is also a comic poem because readers can follow curious protagonists in eccentric postures who move around letters bigger than themselves. It is a “comic strip” showing the creation of verses. It could be considered a poem within a poem, and in that sense it is a concrete poem as much as it is a poem on or about concrete poetry whose influence continues to this day.

Christoph Benjamin Schulz

## Colophon

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