

Lettrism?

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In 1949, Ilia Zdanevich, using his by then adopted contraction of his name, Iliazd, published what is most likely the first anthology of experimental sound and visual poetry, *Poésie des Mots Inconnus*. Remarkable in many respects, the volume contained signature pieces by figures who by mid-century were towering presences in modern art, almost all of whom had been active in the 1910s and 1920s in the first phase of 20th-century avant-garde activity. The list of contributors includes artist so well know their surname suffices: Ball, Picasso, Hausman, Arp, Huidobro, Artaud Braque, Tzara, Chagall, Giacometti, Khlebnikov, and Krutchenyk, among the several dozen featured artists and poets. Printed a set of folded sheets each containing a poem set in a Baton type that anticipates Iliazd's adoption of a lighter, more versatile Gill Sans for the editions of 41 Degrees that would follow in the decades to come, the volume was wrapped in a vellum cover. This nod to antiquity and fine printing had an accordion pleated spine and was imprinted with the image of a harp designed by Georges Ribémont-Desseignes (a perhaps less familiar figure than those referred to in abbreviated form above). The interior wrapper contained the admonition to the reader, "Ne coupez-pas mes pages." The habit of selling bound volumes uncut prompted the habitual French reader to pick up the knife as equipment for the first encounter with any newly acquired book. Iliazd had used the folded sheets as a way of staging the poems and their accompanying images, making each poem work into an event. The reader had to take the stiff printmaking paper in hand, open the quarto sheets, and be surprised in each instance by the novelty of the work on the page. The only consistency was the font and the distribution of the elements into the four quadrants of the folded sheet so that no element violated the fold or was interfered with visually by the crease of the sheet. In every other way – setting of lines, tone of work, character of verse, degree of visual or verbal experimentation, quality of image and nature of its graphic and iconographic content or expression the pages were unique.

Iliazd produced this work as a response to the claims put forth by the then still relative newcomer to the Paris post-war poetic scene, Isidore Isou, that his newly minted brand of experimental poetry, Lettrism, was the first, the only, the most unique, and overwhelmingly the single greatest innovation in the history of literary invention. Isou's character and work are tied in a monomania of proportions unusual even in the poetry world, and his success in the late 1940s and 1950s was a result of his considerable persuasive force as a personality as well as of the compelling tenets of his aesthetic position. The title of one of his first two books, published in 1947 by the prestigious Gallimard, was *The Aggregation of a Name and a Messiah*. Isou, only twenty when he arrived in Paris two years earlier, was an enfant terrible with ambition and determination unhampered by modesty or doubt. Letterism, or Lettrism, (*Lettrisme* in the French spelling) had considerable impact in that brief period, and the works produced by the first generation of acolyte adherents are still fascinating as a unique chapter in visual poetic production. The work they produced was experimental, radical in its claims, and intermedial in its

reach. Theoretical and creative works appeared in rapid succession. Hypergraphic works by Maurice Lemaitre, Isou's comic book, *The Gods' Diaries* (1952), preceded in 1949 by Isou, *the mechanics of women*, a work scandalously detailing his sexual exploits as an expression of *erotology*, the wonderful *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* by Gabriel Pomerand (also 1952) and other imaginative titles. The theoretical reach extended to music, film, performance, installation, as well as visual graphical works for the walls, textiles, and every other imaginable application of their glyphic inventions.

Iliazd's anthology had appeared early in this cycle of public activity, as a historical correction to Isou's claims of novelty and originality. The inventions of the Lettrists had a tradition and history that Iliazd rightly noted was unknown and ignored in the late 1940s. Surrealism's dominance in the Paris scene, other strains of modernism in the British and American communities, changes of mood and circumstance in Germany, Italy, Russia and Eastern Europe had not prompted a great deal of historical reflection or rumination on the early avant-garde at that point. Robert Motherwell's important anthology of Dada work appeared in print in 1951, and was the next major contribution to the process of historical recovery. It had much greater circulation and visibility than Iliazd's anthology, but Iliazd was creating a new work with living members of the avant-garde, while Motherwell anthologized and reprinted works from a historical moment more than three decades past. Iliazd wanted both the historical precedent and the living spirit presented, a different task with a different purpose.

Much more will and can be said about Iliazd's publication, and about the work of the Lettrists. But here is the question to address. The Lettrists were rapidly eclipsed by their more famous cousins, The Situationists. Crossover participation gave the groups a certain shared history – in particular through members of the CoBrA group, another now less celebrated but at the time highly influential post-war artistic formation (comprised of figures from Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, CoBrA was formed in part as a response to the war and with a utopian impulse to find ways of using art and visual languages to avoid any future conflicts of such violence ever again). But Lettrism is not only largely ignored, consigned to footnotes in histories of SI, but is disdained and disregarded. In the US, I suggest, it is hardly attended to at all (a surprise given the appetite of the academic industry for obscure avant-garde activities), while in France, it has a debased status. Explanations for this can be readily supplied in part by attention to the trajectory of Isou's own career, his rants and anti-social behavior, isolation, extremes, as well as by the banalization of Lettrist iconography in the productions of the late 1950s and 1960s. But the early formation is not only fascinating, but the crucible from which sprang a number of unusual books, theoretical and graphical, which continue to reward critical reading. One problem is that of course the works have been largely unavailable, issued in small editions, they disappeared from the art and literary historical landscape, and are only now making their way into facsimile reprint or translation.

My question is this: is Lettrism worth a revisit? I've been fascinated by that late avant-garde, its failures and checks, the end of an idea that met its final end in that most complicated triumph-failure of cultural politics, 1968. Iliazd's beautiful

book is not about Lettrism, but about the early promise and eclipse of an earlier avant-garde, in particular, the loss of knowledge (a breakdown of transmission) about the sound and visual poetics of an earlier generation. But Lettrism itself is called to our attention by its gesture, and without the Lettrist hubris Iliasz would not have been tempted to come back on stage in the theatrical format of the printed book. The claims of Lettrism – to be the historical funnel point of history connecting *everything* that had gone before with *everything* that would come ahead is of course not credible. But the formulation of an aesthetic grounded in a manipulation of graphic code and process now seems as prescient a feature of the late 20th century as any Marxist dream of revolution that was central to SI. The Lettrists had a “political “ agenda as well, if that is an essential criteria for critical attention, but its base was aesthetic manipulation – as in Lemaitre’s 1951 *Has the Film Already Begun?* But perhaps more interesting by far is that Isou modeled his style and look on that of American pop stars, even if he admired his fellow countryman, Tzara. Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces* covered this ground with deft skill, placing Lettrism and early SI in the cultural changes brought by music and media. If we were to convene a seminar to address the specific principles of Lettrism, for the sake of engaging with its tenets and projects, aesthetics and claims, cultural illusions and contextual dreams – what might that yield?