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WRITING POETRY WITHOUT WORDS: PICTOGRAPHIC POEMS BY REA NIKONOVA AND SERGEJ SIGEJ

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Abstract

Pictographic writing, which has been used for conveying utilitarian messages for millennia is typically considered unsuitable for rendering poetic metaphoric and abstract images. Hence a strong belief that poetry cannot be produced using pictographic signs. This assumption was challenged by the Russian Constructivists, Aleksej Čičerin and Èl' Lisickij in the 1920s. Recently, pictographic poetry has been successfully developed by the leading Russian visual poets, Rea Nikonova and Sergej Sigej, whose literary and artistic works demonstrate a notable congruence with the early Russian avant-garde experiments. This study analyzes selected pictographic poems written by Nikonova and Sigej from the 1970s until the present. Originally appearing in manuscript form, limited editions, and small circulation journals, most of these poems are unknown to scholars and the general public.

The paper explores the strategies and techniques developed by Nikonova and Sigej for rendering notions, ideas and concepts by pictographic signs. It is demonstrated that Nikonova's and Sigej's pictographic poems vary considerably in the degree of their abstraction and potential for multiple interpretations, a feature totally absent from the first utilitarian pictographic texts. Therefore, the semantics of their works is dependent on the reader's interpretation of graphic and contextual clues. As Sigej's and Nikonova's works demonstrate, understanding contemporary pictographic poetry requires the reader's readiness to be engaged in the hermeneutic game, to manipulate various contexts in order to construct meaning, thus transforming the reader into a co-author.

Keywords: *Avant-Garde; Nikonova; Sigej; Pictographic Poems*

The idea of writing poetry using pictographic signs seems to be heterodox and deviating. There is no objection regarding the possibility of the pictographic message to convey a message as it has been done successfully for millennia (Mason 1928: 49), originating from a strictly utilitarian need (Coulmas 1989: 7). However, from the invention of this form of social conduct to the emergence of the first literary production there was a gap of many centuries.[1]

In contrast to writing articulating speech, pictographic script is based on the premise that there is "no connection or at least only a loosely recognized implied one, between the spoken word, the name used in the native vernacular to designate the object, and the picture representing the thing referred to" (Mason 1928: 51). Consequently, the great majority of pictographic signs are "simple pictures of objects found in the surrounding world" (Gelb 1963: 97). Every picture sign "recalls the thing itself to the mind, not the name of the thing, unless involuntarily called up by the reader" (51). Some pictorial elements may correspond to individual sentences, but commonly the visual semantics are limited. Thus, the possibility of rendering metaphorical and abstract images associated with poetry does not seem to be very plausible.

Different systems of writing principles of pictography were not uniform since "each system evolved unique characteristics within distinct graphic and semantic features" (Senner 1989b: 6). The process of pictographic message decoding required a series of mental experiences assisted by codes and conventions, specific for a particular system, inasmuch as codes differed in appearance and connotations from culture to culture. The ability to produce or understand pictographs did not demand any previous training, but codes and conventions associated with pictographic records were to be retained by the common memory of the tribe or group members. Since pictographic messages did not correspond to exact forms of speech, some of them could be interpreted in various ways even by members of the same community. Without *a priori* knowledge of the code or the particular circumstances under which the pictograph was created, the message could be resistant to decoding (Gelb 1963: 11-12). Subsequently, some primitive pictographic systems had been fully developed "to use pictures that stand for exact elements of language, such as a word or part of a word" (76), or characters in the alphabet which function as images for their referents (Brogan 1993: 555). These systems, known as hieroglyphic and ideographic writing, are by no means resistant to creating poetry. In fact, Chinese ideographic writing as presented by Ernest Fenollosa[2] served as the groundwork for Ezra Pound's ideogrammic method in poetry.[3] In contrast to fully developed hieroglyphic and ideographic writing, the pictographic ones were considered to be less suitable for literary purposes due to the inability to maintain a strict connection between pictorial symbols and language.