Kenneth Goldsmith, founder and curator of UbuWeb, argues that for this classic, "haroic;" period of Concrete poetry, "readability was the key: like a logo, a poem should be instantly recognizable" as poets endeavored to render all language into poetic icons, similar to the way that everyone can understand the meaning of a folder icon on the computer screen. For Goldsmith, Concrete poetry presaged the language and formulation of the graphic interfaces of the contemporary Internet and the shift from command line to graphical icon. Margorie Perloff, in "Signs are Taken as Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space," levels a withering critique of the "utopian" Concrete poetry of the 1950s and 60s, declaring that it is a question "whether such poems, charming and witty as they are, especially the first time we read them, can continue to hold our attention." In her introduction to Concrete Poetry: A World View, Solt pre-empts Perloff's charges by declaring that to approach Concrete poetry as traditionally poetical expectations is a fallacy for "the Concrete poet is concerned with marking an object to be perceived rather than read" and "the content of the Concrete poem is non-literacy." It is precisely this non-literary content that makes the "Clean" Concrete poem ideal for a 21st Century audience. In "Signs are Taken as Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space," Perloff expresses concern that "the question remains, however, whether the conflation of Concrete poetical and advertising isn't a kind of signal end for the former;" that such texts as Código, after all, function primarily as recognition symbols: as soon as we see them, we know a particular object [...] is in question because only that particular object has just this (and no other) emblem [...] Indeed, it seems that this call for what Eugen Gomringer has characterized as "reduced language," for "poems ... as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs," runs the risk of producing "poems" that are airport and traffic signs. By placing quotation marks around "poem," Perloff further underlines her doubt that these poems have any right to claim the title of poetry. Perloff seems concerned that Concrete poems would end up not only resembling, or being inspired by, "airport and traffic signs" but being replaced by them. I couldn't disagree more. The poem, under the theories of Gomringer and Solt, is the result of a concentration of sound, letters and material where headlines, slogans, groups of letters and material give rise to forms which could be models for a new poetry just waiting to be taken up and meaningful use. That meaningful use, Goldsmith and Perloff argue, has now arrived. Soft believes that the visual poem is a new product in a world flooded with new products, then it must partake of the nature of the world that created it. To be perfectly fair to Augusto de Casas and Código, the poem was written to operate both as a poetic object and as the logo for the Brazilian poetry magazine Código. That dual purpose doesn't seem problematic to me at all. Goldsmith and Perloff build upon this arguing that the Concrete poems of the 1950s and 60s, as typified by Gomringer and the de Campos brothers, has become relevant again is that their poems closely echo the icons used in contemporary computing—the filefinder icon, the floppy disk save icon—not to mention the cool typography of the Mac platform and icon-driven interface of the iPad.
While graphic design, advertising and contemporary design culture expand to redefine and rewrite how we understand communication, poetry has become ruefully ensconced in the traditional. The McDonald’s golden arches, the Nike swoosh and the Apple logo best represent the aims of writers working in this form of poetic discourse. Beat poet Lew Welch supposedly wrote the North American insect repellent Raid’s ubiquitous advertising slogan “Raid kills bugs dead” as a copywriter at Foote, Cone and Belding in 1966—and thus applied Imagist doctrine to the world of advertising. Conceptual poet Vanessa Place argues that “today we are of an age that understands corporations are people too and poetry is the stuff of placards. Or vice versa.” By proposing poems “as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs,” Eugen Gomringer moves poetry away from readability (despite Goldsmith’s claims) towards poetic icons. Luis Fernando Verissimo, in his novel Borges and the Eternal Orangutans, has Jorge Luis Borges, a character in the novel, state, “No one can possibly recognize their mother tongue when printed in Futura typeface. It lacks maternal warmth, it lacks friendliness.” Both Goldsmith and Perloff discuss Concrete poetry in terms of readability. Goldsmith believes that for Gomringer and the Concrete poets of the 1950s and 60s, “readability was the key” although “like a logo, a poem should be instantly recognizable.” This confutes two differing approaches to Concrete poetry and its place within a poetic discourse. If Concrete poetry (and perhaps by extension all poetry) is to assert ongoing relevance, “readability” cannot continue to be “key.” Today the Noigandres Group’s “thing-word” concept is best understood as the desktop icon, the Facebook “like” button and the corporate logo. If poets are beholden to Eliot’s “changing face of common intercourse” then Concrete poetry’s embrace of the “instantly recognizable” poetic “thing-word in space-time” reflects today’s common textual intercourse. Johanna Drucker, in Figure the Word argues that the Brazilians rejected all forms of “expressionism”—lyrical, personal, emotional—in favour of a poetic form which could function as an object in its own right, betraying nothing about the author, nothing of subjective feelings, or individual identity. Declaring poems as daily objects, to remove aesthetic distance and replace them with a “utilitarian relationship.” In order to contextualize the logo as poem within a poetic discourse, I suggest that Concrete poets working in response to Gomringer and the Noigandres Group situate their work as corporate logos for onerous businesses. Since 2005, I have constructed Clean Concrete poems entirely by hand using outdated technology. Dry-transfer lettering, ubiquitous in graphic design and advertising from the early 1960s to early 1990s, has been relegated to use by artists and hobbyists. At one point a specialized tool with an expensive price tag, Letraset (the commercial name of the largest producer of dry-transfer lettering) was used in graphic design and technical drafting in order to standardize graphic elements, eliminate the individuality of the artist’s hand and speed up the creative process. With the advent of desktop design and publishing, the production and use of dry-transfer lettering dropped significantly. Dry-transfer lettering has the disadvantage of being unforgiving. Once a designer, artist or writer places a letter on a page or canvas, that letter is permanently affixed and can not be moved or replaced. I construct my poems without the aid of plans or sketches; the work builds gesturally in response to shapes and patterns in the letters themselves. I construct the poems one letter at a time, each placed by hand, a physical embodiment of Al-
I JUST WANT TO SAY ONE WORD TO YOU. JUST ONE WORD.
Yes, sir.
ARE YOU LISTENING?
Yes, I am.
PLASTICS.
Exactly how do you mean?

Of the Poundian “new,” they reflect the old, retrieved from a nowhere cultural memory. My concrete poems are fitfully nostalgic for an ethereal, ephemeral moment. In our dreams, the resolution of the landscapes has a liminal moment of what our mind establishes as the backdrop for our oniral antics is only as clear as required. They are the street-signs, the signage, the advertising logos for the shops and corporations which are just beyond reach. They are not islands of meaning-semantic or corporate. Like the de Campos brothers, I believe that Concrete poems should be as easily understood as airport signs, but instead of pointing the reader to the toilet, the directions they impart are spurious if not completely useless. Concrete poems need to be cogni-
zant not of readability but of look-ability. Airport signage is not designed with readabil-
ity as a primary concern. They are de-
signed for instant and momentary recogni-
tion and comprehension as ultimate goals.
Viewers need not read, they only need mo-
mentarily stare: "the most representative
(and perhaps even the most exciting) art
form of our age is the advertising logo.
Why not create a logo advertising modern
poetry, modern art?" Clean Concrete po-
ems refuse linearity in favour of the mo-
mentary. Wayfinding signage is designed
to be easily understood in a moment, it
operates without the need to read. It only
requires consumption. Designed to be
smoothly digested and transparently com-
municative, way-
finding signage and
traffic signs work
extra-linguistically.
Goldsmith refers to
Gomringer's efforts
as a "utopian agen-
da of [...] transna-
tional, panlinguistic
[...] writing that any-
one—regardless of
where they lived or
what their mother
tongue was—could
understand. Think
of it as a graphic
Esperanto, taking
language and ren-
dering it as symbols
and icons." As
Goldsmith notes,
Gomringer's utopi-
an aspirations didn't
pan out, but the
idea of a poetic
form outside of lan-
guage continues to
resonate. Instead of
leaving logos and
slogans to the world
of graphic design,
poets are better
served to craft work
which is responsive
to a new reading
milieu. These po-
eems perform a poet-
ly become another chemically engineered experience, in which we manufacture a complex polymer by stringing together syllables instead of molecules. The words of our lexicon have become so standardized that they now resemble a limited array of connectible parts [...] and the rules of our grammar have become so rationalized that they now resemble a boundless range of recombinant modes [...] We see language marketed as an infantile commodity—a toy suitable for kids of all ages, because its plastic coating makes it safe to own and easy to use.” Canadian sculptor James Carl’s Content 1.0 takes this idea to its extreme, with Content 1.0, Carl creates a new typeface which replaces all alphabetic characters with images of recyclable plastic bottles or home cleaning products. Every letter and number has been replaced by an insignificant, inconsequential, line-drawn image of a disposable container or lid. This incomplete inventory, seduced by the shapes and forms of plastic packaging, reduces language to a series of products—each of which points to an anonymous manufacturer. Carl’s font, while not strictly Concrete poetry, embraces Mary Ellen Solt’s declaration that if the visual poem is a new product in a world flooded with new products, then it must partake of the nature of the world that created it. My letterforms, like Carl’s typeface, render the particles of language into “Content 1.0,” a new content that uncannily resembles the letters we already have, but in logos which promote empty storefronts and boarded-up retailers, their signs scrubbed to the point of illegibility. In these oneiric logos letters combine, like so many pieces of orphaned Lego, to form previously unexpected constructions not at all resembling the images on the packaging. In the age of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, poetry must embrace plasticity in order to remain relevant. Plastic and vinyl perfectly embody the poetic possibilities for language. As Bök argues, the recombinant possibilities of plastic (especially recycled plastic) are the ideal metaphor for poetry. John Dewey, in “Vinyl: material location, placement,” provides a useful history of the creation and refinement of vinyl (Polyvinyl Chloride or PVC) from its creation in 1930 to its commercialization by Waldo Semon of BF Goodrich in 1926. While this history may seem marginal to the history and development of Concrete poetry, it does align with contemporary concerns. The commercialization of plastic in the 1920s and its ubiquity by the 1960s coincides with the rise of Concrete poetry from its Dada beginnings during World War One through the post-World War Two rise of global corporatism. Plastic is not only indicative of rising consumerism but also of the post-consumer need for recycling, reformating, reusing and recasting, all of which are metaphorically foreshadowed in Concrete’s early manifestos. Bök’s declaration of the poetic implications of plastic is supported by Roland Barthes’ ”Plastic,” a brief essay which en- treats for the artistic potential of “ubiquity made visible.” Barthes’ comments on plastic are germane to a discussion of Concrete poetry, especially Concrete poetry made with two dry-transfer lettering. Concrete poetry, like plastic is a “shaped” substance: whatever its final state, it keeps a luminous appearance, something opaque, creamy and surreal, something powerless.” Poetry no longer retains the cultural cachet that it once held. Like plastic, poetry “in the hierarchy of the major poetic substances [...] figures as a disdained material.” Complementing Solt and Gomringer, Barthes argues that plastic (read “poetry”) “belongs to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use”. PVC / vinyl is creat- ed from a combination of hydrocarbon byproducts and
Chlorine. I have lived in Alberta for over 40 years (mostly Calgary, though now in Banff), having moved here as a young child, and it seems only appropriate that I would choose to poetically investigate a medium produced as a product of oil and gas exploitation. Calgary’s economy is driven by the problematic revenue of non-renewable resource exploitation and increasingly by the notorious northern Albertan oil sands. Calgary—with an estimated population of 1.2 million—popularly represents itself through its rural ties, by oil and gas revenue and by right-wing politics. Alberta defines itself not in terms of cultural growth but in terms of economic growth. To be an artist or arts worker in Calgary means to engage with the culture and economics of oil and gas exploitation. Concrete poetry created with dry-transfer lettering—PVC suspended on inert backing paper—actively embraces marketability and the technology of waste; “plastics have been seen, notwithstanding developments in recycling technology, as the one-way conversion of natural resources into mountains of waste.” The Neogrittes Group embraced advertising and graphic design—the logo-ization of language—as necessary and inevitable in order for poetry to prove its relevance to a contemporary audience. Bevis argues both that plastic “adds quality while reducing skill, enriches and cheapens” but “we couldn’t be modern without it.” Concrete poems, like plastic, are “the very spectacle of their end-products;” the spectacle of a logo, operating normally, but promoting an empty product.

The material of poetry, here, “is wholly subsumed in the fact of being used” while ignoring the need to be poetic. Concrete poetry, like plastic, contains a “revolve [. . . ] at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter.”

The circulation of poetry is problematized when confronted with the publishing requirements of the majority of literary magazines and journals. Most literary magazines in Canada request that contributors grant “First North American Serial Rights;” an agreement that all work accepted has not appeared elsewhere in the North American market. This request restricts poems to an ephemeral moment of epiphanic truth. Requiring poems to appear only once (before potential book publication) limits poetry to unique missives from the poet directly to the reader, conveyed within a temporary framework: these poems were written for you, now, I ignore these requests. Much to some editors’ and colleagues’ chagrin, I actively pursue placing my poetry in recurring and overlapping venues. Restricting publication to a single venue limits audience to a lone, ephemeral space—and does not allow for the proliferation of poetry into other discourses. I have published my Concrete poems as 1” buttons, t-shirts, broadsides, chapbooks, through both poetry and illustration submissions and projected on the sides of buildings (most notably on the side of Calgary’s 191-metre tall concrete spire the Calgary Tower), often at the same time. I believe that poetry—and criticism, including this reflection—should be poured from container to container, using the grains of sand to
build new castles. This open refutation of publishing norms asserts that poetry is most effective when it works within another discourse. My poems are designed to be received as logos for empty products. As logos, these poetic emblems are synonymous with, and indistinguishable from, branding and trademarks. Campos’ Código and my emblematic Concrete poems are designed to be as ubiquitous as Nike’s swoosh or Starbucks’s twin-tailed mermaid. The swoosh and the mermaid are meant to saturate, they move without resistance from billboards and products to print ads and television spots without tension. See, for instance, the “Privacy Policy” of Calgary’s filling Station magazine: “filling Station reserves First North American Serial Rights. This means we get to publish the work we have received from contribu-tors first in magazine form, and this also extends to our Digital Edition through Zinio / Magazines Canada, this website, and filling Station’s social media presence.” The other hand, due to their very medium, have restrictions placed upon their appearance.

crete poetry now fully embraces the plasticized space of graphics and glyphs, pixels and projections. With Prose of the Trans-Canada I situate Concrete poetry within a history of books and the avant-garde. Constructed as a response to Blaise Cendrars’ 1913 La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France (“Prose of the Trans-Siberian” and of Little Jehanne of France”), Prose of the Trans-Canada seeks to expand the scale of Concrete poetry past the manuscript (or magazine) page to the larger concerns of the canvas while still working within the discourse. Cendrars’ La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France is a “sad poem painted on sunlight” created in collabora-

With Sonia Delauy-Terk. Each Technicolor copy of Prose of the Trans-Siberian is an accordion-fold, codex-challenging, “book” that is six pages unfurled, measures 16” x 72”. As proposed edition of 150 copies. Prose of the Trans-Siberian’s production was such that every copy and brand would equal the height of the Eiffel Tower, the symbol of Parisian modernity (despite Guy de Maupassant’s dietary habits). Unsurprisingly for a book with such a radical design, there were ultimately only approximately sixty copies of Prose of the Trans-Siberian produced (of which only around thirty survive). Prose of the Trans-Canada playfully responds to Cendrars’ La Prose du Transsibérien in a 16” x 52” Concrete poetry work as a scroll instead of an accordion book. When all 150 copies of the scroll edition are placed end-to-end, the scroll length is the same as the symmetrical modernity, the Calgary Tower. Like Cendrars’ original, while the intended edition of Prose of the Trans-Canada is 150 copies, it has been published print-on-demand and is unlikely to ever reach its intended print-run. Due to the poem’s size, Toronto small-press publisher Bookthug (who took on this project when it was rejected by several other publishers for being impractical; if not impossible, to produce) ultimately printed the 52” scroll on matte polypropylene film, the same plasticized veil used by architects and oil-field refinery designers for blueprints and schematics. Cendrars’ Prose of the Trans-Siberian
notoriously uses 12 different typefaces in its poetic recounting of a troubled journey across the Russian countryside. Highly unusual for the time, Cendrars' typefaces temporarily align his work with Futurism and Dada’s embrace of commercial design, advertising fonts and display faces in an attempt to embody a corporate landscape. Like Cendrars’ efforts to graphically present the material forms of his poetic evocation, Prose of the Trans-Canada embraces a torrent of typefaces, flooding across an unending field of half-formed logos and pseudo-glyphs that blend in to a single panel of undifferentiated language material. Prose of the Trans-Canada was ultimately projected nightly on the side of the Calgary Tower as part of Wordfest 2011, an international literary festival focusing on emergent and established authors. Phallusily erected in the centre of Calgary's downtown core, the Calgary Tower (once known as the Husky Tower, its original name revealing the primary funder of the tower's construction; Husky Oil and Refining Ltd.) has become a symbol of Calgary's reliance on oil and gas and its growth and expansion (the tower was officially fired cauldron on its tip as Canada hosted the 1988 Winter Olympics). Coating the entire plasticized vellum and ultimately projected upon the most recognizable symbol of Albertan dedication to the exploitation of non-renewable resources. Like James Carl's Content 1.0, Prose of the Trans-Canada is a celebration of a plasticized poetic; letters are pelletized, melted, poured and reformed from one undifferentiated lump into another. Prose of the Trans-Canada features no identifying words, only the smallest pieces of language repackaged as a flowing panel of glyphic remnants. The detritus of advertising swept up, flattened and projected on the side of Calgary's most iconic building. Not surprisingly, given poetry’s—and especially Concrete poetry’s—cultural purview, the projection of Prose of the Trans-Canada on the side of the Calgary Tower was met by complete cultural indifference. No one in the popular or cultural media discussed the projection nor the intervention of a poetic object in to commercial space. Despite the Calgary Tower's location at the intersection of two prominent, high-traffic streets (7th Avenue SW and Centre Street S) and prominence in the Calgarian skyline, the poem, ironically, did exactly what Gomringer expected for Concrete in general. By projecting Prose of the Trans-Canada on the side of the Calgary Tower, the poem ceased to operate as poetic. It became the object of its own critique: it became an undistinguished logo. I argued earlier that Concrete poetry's formulation of a non-literary space made it perfectly suited for a 21st Century audience. Perloff's fears that the call for what Eugen Gomringer has characterized as "reduced language" and "a new typography [...] as easily understood as billboards and traffic signs," that of producing "poems" that are not "commercial advertisements" are not to be found here. The poem in the display and projection of Prose of the Trans-Canada they will pass. But that's not surprising. Reading has shifted from something that takes place over time (a concentrated investment occurring privately, i.e.: single readers quietly reading single books) to something that takes place instantaneously (a brief moment occurring publicly, i.e.: the passing glances of logos, headlines and slogans). Moving Prose of the Trans-Canada from a literary space (the exhibition) to a commercial space (the side of a public building) guaranteed it would no longer garner attention literary circles. It simply washed over readers in the same way as any other billboard, logo or corporate slogan.
Comfortable and unnoticed.

ANOTHER PIECE OF REASSURING PLASTIC.
Another Piece of Reassuring Plastic

Derek Beaulieu

No Press

c/o derek beaulieu
107 Tunnel Mountain Drive, Box 1020
Banff, Alberta
Canada T1L 1H5
derek@housepress.ca