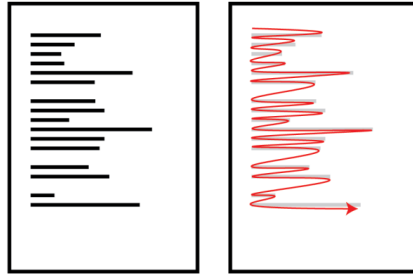


Reading Order

*"I rejected the ordinary and the extraordinary, because / those are rungs / one learns how to climb.
I do not need a ladder to reach / the sky." — "Further Adventures in Monochrome,"
John Yau*

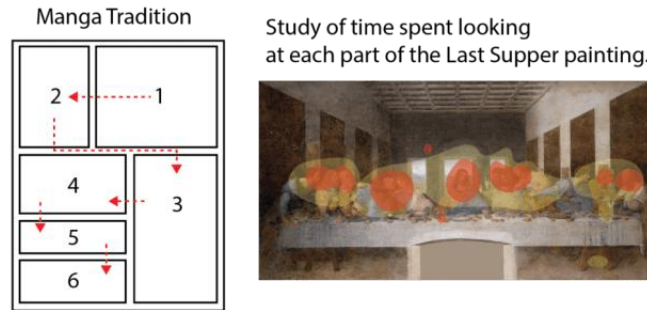
If one question remains evergreen when it comes to visual poetry, it is: "What order am I supposed to read these lines?" It's a good question; in English, a traditional poem (that is, a text-based poem we treat as non-visual) is read left to right, top to bottom. We know to do this every time. The tradition of poetry includes a tradition of lyric comprehension—of literacy.



In a visual poem, other ways of reading open up. There are three broad ways to think about how to read a poem that break from the traditional order of reading lines. First, is it accessing a different tradition of "reading"? Consider: How do you decide to move your eyes in a comic book? In a painting? In a poster? The 回文詩 is a Chinese poem form that can be read both forward and backward. (For more on this form, see Emily Lee Luan's book [回 / Return](#), and her essay ["Notes on Reversing"](#)).

Second, the poet may be inventing a new order of reading. Are there clues for how to read the poem? Are there arrows or numbers? Try reading a line or stanza and arbitrarily moving to another, then try a different order. Does one way of reading

seem to “make sense?” If some ways of reading are perfectly grammatical, and other ways are not, this can be a sign that there *is* a preferred way of reading.



Third, the poet may be open to *many* or *all* reading orders. Or a poem may have no order, or no true order.

Why break from the tradition of left to right, top to bottom? A visual poem might resist chronology because of its interest in feeling, thoughts, and ideas—concepts that don’t necessarily adhere to “order” (these are also the traditional subject matters of lyric poems). Or, a visual poem might be interested in the narrative tradition of poetry but expresses it anew, as in DeeSoul Carson’s [“Good Riddance,”](#) which is inspired by the video game *Hades*. Like the video game, every path out of Hades is a path back in—nobody, not even the prince of the dead, can escape the inevitable.

Reading order can indicate many things—it can represent the mind (stream of consciousness), or a resistance to “tradition” or narrative. If the poem adopts an alternate tradition of reading, it might be in conversation with the associations of that tradition. For instance, visual art is often open to interpretation, and so too might the visual poem that is read like a painting. What is the impact of returning, over and over, to a stanza of a poem not because it repeats, but because you keep *choosing* to look back to it? As always, look at what the text is saying and see if it aligns with something the reading order says or allows for.

For more on reading order, see: [Gestalt Grouping](#).

Further Examples:

- Layli Long Soldier – “Obligations 1,” “Obligations 2” (from *Whereas*)
- Monica Ong – “Diaspora Nova” (from *Planetaria*)
- Tyehimba Jess – *Olio* (or look up any of his contrapuntals; he also has talks on them.)
- Eugenia Leigh – “Oh I Thought You Knew, She Said, Dad Is Alive”
- Eloisa Amezcua – “Bobby v Valorie” (from *Fighting Is Like a Wife*)