

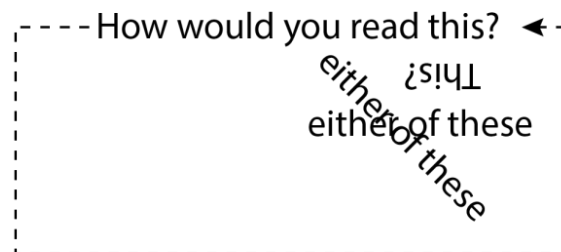
Performance

"I got introduced to poetry via the stage, where there isn't a place to crawl behind the language." –

Patricia Smith

The word *lyric* shares its etymology with *lyre*, because in ancient Greece, poems were sung to the music of the lyre. The singing of poetry has deep roots in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish traditions. Poems in China were traditionally sung or chanted. Griots in West Africa sang poems with musical accompaniment. Poetry is deeply tied to performance, and many of the most popular forms of contemporary poetry exist *primarily* to be read aloud (see: slam poetry/spoken word).

A visual poem might be thought of as sheet music designed specifically for words. In that case, one could interpret space in terms of pacing, or typeface in terms of voice. Color or texture, or other visual elements like shapes, illustrations, or photos might be expressive cues for the reader's body language, facial expressions, or vocal tone, or to indicate staging decisions. How might a poem encourage the co-occurrence of one reader's voice with dance, music, or other readers? What parts of communication are usually lost in words alone? This can be an alluring way to interpret visual poetry, though it has its own set of challenges. For instance, how do you resolve poems with no defined order of text?



Try the strategies outlined in [Reading Order](#). Afterward, look up the poet, or poem, and see if the poet has performed the piece. See if you can find the same poem performed on a different date—is it the same performance? (Douglas Kearney is a great poet for this exercise.)

But all of this is only one model—one of many potential ways to understand or reinterpret a visual poem. Another model is: What if the visual poem itself is a record of a *performance* of a set of feelings or ideas? What if we think of the visual poem as capturing lightning in a bottle, of sketching a butterfly caught in the wind, or as the equivalent of recording a live band? In those cases, a performance is impossible or perhaps besides the point.

Furthermore, what if we consider the visual poem as “unreadable”? Some or all of the piece might literally be impossible to read aloud. In theater, the **closet drama** is an example of a form of “performance” never meant to be performed except in the reader’s head. **Asemic writing** is illegible text that nevertheless evokes some of the qualities of language (See Renee Gladman’s *Prose Architectures*).

Further Examples:

- Yoko Ono – *Grapefruit* (Book)
- John Cage – “Water Walk” (Score for performance)
- Shayla Lawz – *speculation, n.* (Book, with QR Codes)
- Chaun Webster – “forbidDIN” (Poem from *GeNtry!fication: Or the Scene of the Crime*)
- Kenji C. Liu – “Manifest Destiny for Sassy Choir” (Poem from *Monsters I Have Been*)