Spring 2025 Steve McQueen Siena Walker & Bromwich Concrete Poets Joséphine Bowes

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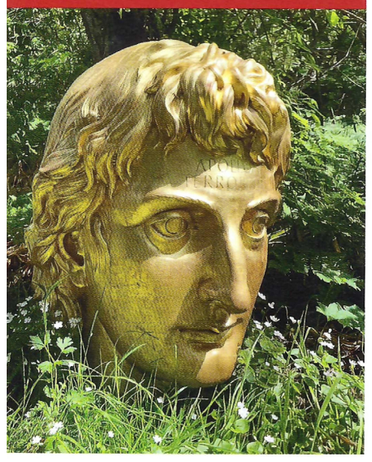
The postwar Concrete poets and artists highlighted the visual potential of language. In the centenary year of one of their most celebrated artists, Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Greg Thomas* tells the story

Landscape and letters

Left: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future – Saint Just*, 1983; below: *Apollon Terroriste*, 1987, both works installed at Little Sparta, Edinburgh



In the Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh, a farmstead nestles in a tree-filled fold. To those who know the place well, it is still sometimes called Stonypath. To the outside world, it is the garden and work of art Little Sparta. The poet and artist who made it his home and transformed it from the mid-1960s, Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), gave it the name Little Sparta during the late 1970s, to distinguish his spiritual stronghold from Edinburgh, home of the Scottish art establishment and often called the Athens of the North. It was also in reference to the ancient city states of Athens and Sparta being in perpetual rivalry.

At Little Sparta, one of the subjects of a centenary exhibition of Finlay's work at the National Galleries of Scotland, a particular model of order prevails. The garden is filled with poems. They are inscribed on stone columns, altars, bridges and way-markers; notched into wooden gateposts and stiles; inset into the gilded lintels of windows and doorways. These poems represent the incorporation of visual and sculptural form into literature: properly put, the stone, wood and bark are not the backdrop to the poetry but part of the poetry itself. The same goes for the trees, plants and landscape. It is all folded into the epic verse of Little Sparta.

However, as the name would suggest, this poet's garden stands not only for the ordering of the visual and the linguistic, but for a neoclassical conception of art, society and spirituality, stressing virtue, reverence for the gods and a fierce resistance to modernity. Perhaps the most famous of the three-dimensional poems at Little Sparta consists of 11 vast slabs of Purbeck stone, inscribed with a phrase attributed to the French Revolutionary zealot Saint-Just: 'The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future'. From the disorder of the contemporary world, the work implies, a future order might yet emerge, echoing classical antiquity.

The exhibition will trace a course through Finlay's work, including sculptures, prints and installation. But to truly understand his creative origins, we must also understand Concrete Poetry, the movement to which he attached himself during the 1960s, and from which the extraordinary domain of Little Sparta blossomed like a flower from a seed.

Concrete Poetry was a movement in modern poetry and art emerging in the years following the Second World War. It stressed the visual arrangement of language as an integral element of meaning. This idea had millennia-old roots in writing systems. Our own Roman alphabet evolved from a set of pictographic symbols, which referred to things by visual approximation rather than standing in for a sound. In the centuries between pre-history and present, countless literary movements and traditions, from Ancient Greek technopaegnia to medieval pattern poetry to Arabic calligraphy, have emphasised written language's innate visual potential.

Concrete Poetry had a set of more immediate precursors, too, in the anarchic poetry scores and performances of the Futurist and Dada movements in the early decades of the 20th century. Poets such as Hugo Ball and FT Marinetti used the unusual visual placement and appearance of words and letters, as well as nonsense words and onomatopoeic noise, to generate a sense of flux, energy and chaos responsive to the anxieties of the machine age and the horrors of the First World War. In this they were following the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose 1897 poem *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'abolira le Hasard* ('A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance'), is often taken as the first visual poem of Modernism.

In the 1950s, as the Western world rebuilt itself following the Second World War, a new visual poetry emerged. Its hubs were in Northern Europe and South America, its founding figures the Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer, based in Ulm, West Germany, and the Noigandres poetry collective in São Paulo, Brazil, consisting of brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari. It's no coincidence that Latin America and Northern Europe were then centres of so-called Concrete Art, a style of abstract, geometric painting and sculpture that sought the minimum possible number of meaningful elements (lines, shapes, colours) to generate interest and emotion in the viewer.

Concrete Poetry, in one sense, simply transferred this idea to language. If a Concrete painting could be made with a handful of shapes and colours, a Concrete poem could be made with just one or two words or semantic fragments. But the borrowing from Concrete Art was more direct too, in that Concrete poets created works that appeared on the page as a visual arrangement: a square, spiral, column or grid, for example. The forms chosen, like

COURTESY LITTLE SPARTA TRUST. PHOTO: ROBIN GILLANDERS. PHOTO: GEORGE GILLILAND. © THE ESTATE OF IAN HAMILTON FINLAY

Right: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Wave Rock*, 1966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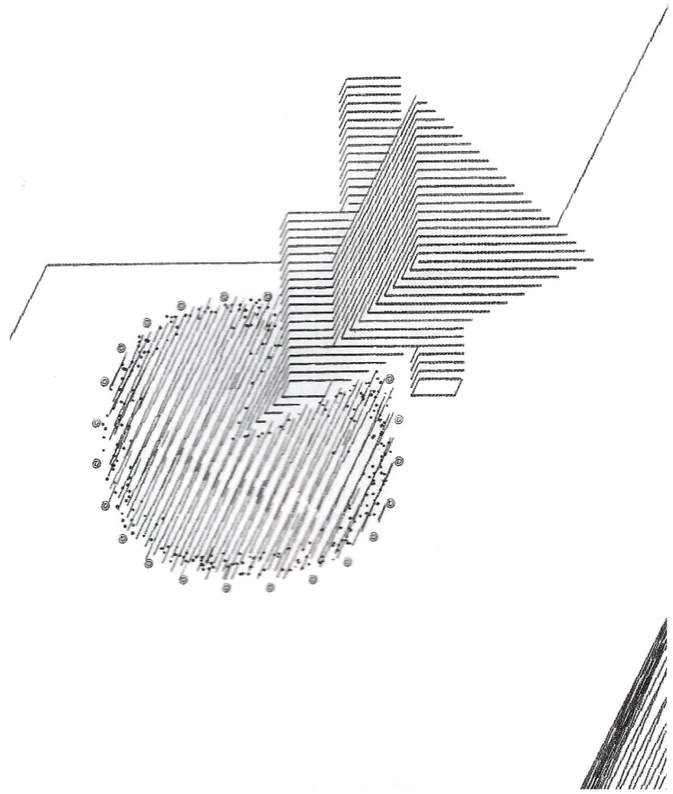
In the 1950s and 1960s, the Concrete Poetry movement spread across the world, with distinctive schools emerging from Sweden to Japan





Above: Dom Sylvester Houédard, *Untitled*, c1967 (detail); right: Liliane Lijn, *Get Rid of Government Time*, 1962

enfold a notion of moral and spiritual purity, filled with the values of the Greco-Roman world. The minimalist language games of Concrete Poetry, still evident in the early works installed in the garden, were replaced by sundials, columns and other evocative forms inscribed with classicist maxims and epithets. When Finlay converted a ruined cow byre into a Temple of Apollo, its façade bearing the dedication 'To Apollo/His Music/His Missiles/His Muses', his invocation of the Greek god of reason and harmony was at once whimsical and deadly serious.

Finlay also became concerned by the ways in which subsequent, bloody phases of Western history, from the French Revolutionary Terror to the Third Reich, could be seen as having reawakened classical values, giving credence to Walter Benjamin's famous phrase 'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. Thus, threaded throughout the garden, in amongst the beauty and gentle humour, a persistent note of menace is struck, as in a work that replaces column finials with giant hand grenades.

Over the decades of Little Sparta's construction, Finlay's reputation grew beyond the garden walls, as works similar to those found at Stonypath were commissioned for galleries and sculpture parks around the world. The artist, however, confined by his agoraphobia for four decades, became a kind of internal political exile, such was his enmity to the modern secular state, which resulted in a series of ongoing 'battles', semi-staged confrontations with public bureaucracies documented through polemical publications and 'happenings'. Finlay's utterly unique aesthetics and ideology also saw his work gradually unmoored from the founding principles of Concrete Poetry. But Little Sparta stands in part as testament to the inspirational possibilities of the style, in its entwining of word, image, sculpture and landscape.

● 'Ian Hamilton Finlay', 8 March to 26 May, National Galleries of Scotland, Modern Two, Edinburgh. nationalgalleries.org, 50% off paid exhibitions with National Art Pass. For more on Little Sparta visit littlesparta.org.uk

Greg Thomas is a Glasgow-based writer and author of 'Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland' (Liverpool University Press).

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