

Mary Ellen Solt, 86, Poet of Words and Shapes

By MARGALIT FOX

Mary Ellen Solt, an American poet known for helping disseminate the art of concrete poetry, which marries words and typography to produce works in which the verbal and the visual are inextricably intertwined, died on June 21 in Santa Clarita, Calif. She was 86 and had lived in Santa Clarita in recent years.

The cause was a stroke, her family said.

With Willis Barnstone, Ms. Solt edited "Concrete Poetry: A World View" (Indiana University, 1968), considered one of the major anthologies of the form. At her death, she was emeritus professor of comparative literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, where she had taught from 1970 to 1991.

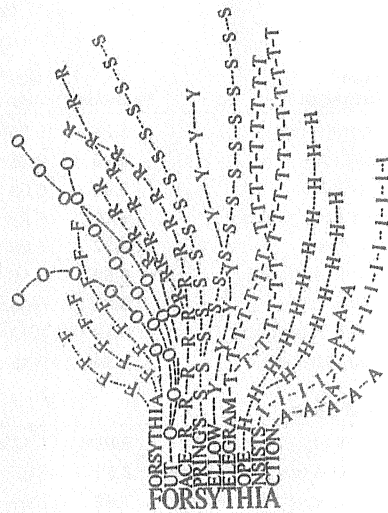
Concrete poetry, which flourished in the United States in the 1960s, had its roots in the work of experimental poets in Europe and Brazil a decade earlier. (Its antecedents go back much farther: among the form's best-known English examples is the mouse's tale from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll, published in 1865. Declaimed by a mouse, the poem is typeset in the form of a long undulating tail.)

A concrete poem exploits the potential of the written word as both a unit of linguistic meaning and a purely visual symbol. Long before the computer made it easy to manipulate text, concrete poets were using words much as a painter uses paint, arranging them to create self-referential forms that underscored a poem's structure or theme.

In a poem
about an urn,
to take a simple example,
the words might be arrayed
in a very deliberate fashion,
so that, on the printed page,
they would form, in the eye
of the beholder, a shape
that called to mind
the precise form
of an urn.



Catherine Solt



Above left, Mary Ellen Solt in about 1980. Above right, her "Forsythia."

Working closely with artisanal typesetters and calligraphers, Ms. Solt created work that was praised by critics for its visual beauty. One of her most widely reproduced poems was "Forsythia," part of her collection "Flowers in Concrete" (Indiana University, 1966). The poem is set with its lines of text springing upward from the bottom of the page, recalling forsythia's branches and blooms.

Mary Ellen Bottom was born on July 8, 1920, in Gilmore City, Iowa; her father was a Methodist minister from Yorkshire, England. Originally trained as a pianist, Mary Ellen was smitten with poetry as a student at Iowa State Teachers College. She earned a bachelor's degree in English literature from the college (now the University of Northern Iowa) in 1941 and a master's in the field from the University of Iowa in 1948.

With her husband, Leo F. Solt, a historian, Ms. Solt moved to Indiana University in 1955. She began writing concrete poetry in the early 1960s.

Besides teaching poetry and comparative literature at the university, she also published critical studies, notably of the poet William Carlos Williams.

After teaching American poetry at the University of Warsaw for a year in the mid-1970s, Ms. Solt spent several years as the director of the Polish Studies Center at Indiana.

Ms. Solt's husband, whom she married in 1946, died in 1994. She is survived by two daughters, Catherine Solt of Manhattan and Susan Solt of Santa Clarita, and a sister, Jean Peterson of Iowa City.

Meant for the eye as well as the ear, Ms. Solt's work was as much at home on the gallery wall as on the printed page. Her poetry was exhibited at the Venice Biennale, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Jewish Museum in New York. In 1974, several of Ms. Solt's flower poems, among them "Forsythia," had their television moment, featured on the CBS cultural program "Camera Three."