

THE “ERGODIC” SUITES OF VISUAL POETRY BY JOAN BROSSA

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After the painstaking analysis that has been made in the previous pages of the first avant-gardes in Catalonia, reread from the perspective of reading offered by the ergodic perception of Espen Aarseth, we should follow the trail of the projection in the age of the avant-gardes or late avant-garde in Catalonia. This way we can appreciate to what extent throughout the twentieth century we continue to find various signs of ergodic manifestations in Catalan literature. In this sense, it is inevitable that we should refer to the work of Joan Brossa (1919-1998), who has been considered the antonomasia of avant-garde poet in Catalonia and who, if I allow myself to use the expression, we could consider to be the great ergodic poet of our literature.

Joan Brossa began writing in the 1940s which, it should be remembered, were the post-war years after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). This was a dark period in our history, hard years for culture, especially Catalan culture, as the Fascist victory of General Franco did not only signify the prohibition of the use of the Catalan language, but it also imposed a closing of borders, physical and mental, with the rest of Europe and all of its social and cultural advances. This reclusion also affected the arts, as what dominated in Spain during these years was a completely ossified art that feared all that was new and creative risk and which only had eyes for an outdated and endangered artistic expression.

As Bordons¹ explained, for Joan Brossa the 1940s signified an initial contact with surrealism, first from Catalan poet J. V. Foix (another of the exponents of the fight between tradition and modernity that was part of the avant-garde in Catalonia, as synthesised in his well-known verse “I praise the new and I love the old”, which has been explained in the preceding pages, possibly the most successful example of this combination of the past and the

future), and then by painters Joan Miró and Joan Prats, with whom he explored surrealism more deeply. It was precisely from surrealism that he drew the techniques to express freely the subconscious through what Brossa called hypnagogic images.² In 1947, thanks to his friendship with Arnau Puig, Joan Ponç and other acquaintances, he began the *Algol* adventure, the seed that would later become the *Dau al Set* journal. The publication had a certain demonic and provocative air, both because of the name “Algol” (the name given by Arab astrologists to the devil) and because of one of Brossa’s texts, “La presència forta”, which could be considered as the group’s presentation manifesto: a denunciation of the rigid atmosphere and an incitement to revolt.³

Joan Brossa’s first visual texts were from this period and they form a short series of untitled poems that he generically called “experimental poems”, dated between 1941 and 1947, and in which he explored an entire imaginary world based on the findings of the classical avant-garde, especially surrealism and the hypnagogic image, as we have explained. The poems are the result of his desire for exploration. Similarly, in some poems, as in the poem stuck with pins, in which a square root appears,⁴ we already see a personal way that he would resume in 1959 with the first *Suites de poesia visual*. I believe that these *Suites de poesia visual*, of an extreme material fragility, as we will see later, are one of the most radical examples of ergodic writing of our poet.

It should also be remembered that not all of Brossa’s poetry was formally experimental. As Andrés Sánchez Robayna⁵ accurately explained, the model of J. V. Foix would exercise a significant influence on Brossa’s taking this decision. In effect, the model of the poet from Barcelona’s Sarrià neighbourhood made it quite clear that in Catalan literature there could be no kind of antagonism between the experience of modernity and the will for poetic exploration. Unlike other European literatures – French, for example – in which there was a considerable erosion of fixed literary forms, in Catalan the traditional metric procedures stayed in effect and fertilised lyrical creation. According to Foix’s model, then, Brossa’s poetic work began by exploring particularly the possibilities of the sonnet and of the romance. He did not accept just that, though: without abandoning these models, in the 1950s he worked with the Sapphic ode, which became one of his favourite compositions. By the 1970s this place was taken by the sextine, through which he offered us some excellent compositional examples which, based on an original pattern that was

already in use in mediaeval times, became a perfect formal structure for creating new forms and meanings.

After his initial contact with surrealism, Brossa never gave up his relationship with literary experimentation. This desire for formal and conceptual testing would accompany him throughout his career, together with that other wish to revisit fixed and traditional forms in order to renew them. Even with this, during the 1950s, Brossa's poetry changed perceptibly: he gave up exploration into the subconscious to go on to a poetry that was more closely bound to reality. As Pere Guimferrer⁶ explained, Brossa's principal concern "was to find the core that gave away the Catalan language's forms of existing in a situation of oppression and of genocidal politics, and alongside this, to graft this core onto a possibility of subversion by the word". It was in 1950 that Brossa wrote *Em va fer Joan Brossa*, with completely prosaic poems that took up the minimum of space. They were small flashes of everyday life, full of humour and intentioned political denunciation. The aim was to give more with the least possible. This he did under the influence of João Cabral de Melo, who wrote the prologue to the book, who practised it in his own poetry in Portuguese and who led Joan Brossa to explore the nakedness of everyday dialogue. The synthesisism of these poems contributed to the evolution of Brossa's poetry. The poet was concerned with the representative power of words and began to reflect on this phenomenon, on the blank page, on the materiality of the word, on the graphical nature of the letters. This concern to capture the idea synthetically would lead him to visual poetry.

From the 1960s onwards, especially in the two books on Frègoli, an Italian quick-change artist whom Brossa passionately admired, we find a more genuine visual poetry, as it is the letters in the words that become independent to show us clearly the reality of what the poet wished to communicate. As Glòria Bordons wrote: "These small examples of visual poetry emerge from the logical evolution of the essential exploration carried out with words, but also from an experience that the poet had been developing in his study since 1959: suites of visual poetry, poems that unfurl in time and space, that are composed of simple and fragile materials. From here, the poet will amply develop visual poetry and throw himself fully into experimentation in all fields."

It is widely known that in his book *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, especially in the introduction, Espen Aarseth explains the reasons why he chooses the neoteric concepts of "cybertext" and "ergodic" to refer to a specific way of relating to

texts, especially those that have emerged with the arrival of digital technology. Despite this, Aarseth insists that the concept of cybertext is not limited solely to the study of computer or electronic textuality, as according to him this would be an arbitrary and unhistorical limitation. Aarseth explains, however, that the idea of cybertext means knowing the medium in minute detail as a central part in the literary communication, which also implies a concern for the role of the “reader” and the “receiver”. The Nordic theorist insists that distinguishing ergodic literature from the trivial, taking this to be the literary experience in which the reader has to work actively, should be a reading path that is neither passive nor obvious. In ergodic literature, the reader has to journey through the text, they have to read through an effort that surpasses the act of intellectual understanding, that goes far beyond the simple movement of the eyes or following the page with the fingers.⁷

Out of all of Brossa’s production, I believe that the *Suites de poesia visual* are the ones that most fit in with the concept of ergodic literature proposed by Aarseth. As we commented earlier, these *Suites* were “written” by Brossa at the end of the 1950s under the generic name of *Suites de poesia visual*, which were grouped into simple folders. It is a collection of visual poems (between three and forty) made by Joan Brossa himself in a handicraft style on sheets of writing paper. Reading them, although full of surprises, is sequential and at times separated by parts or “acts”. All the suites can be brought together in two main groups. So, as Pilar Palomar explains, “the first was created over the last two months of 1959 and the beginning of 1960. Two further *Suites*, which appeared in 1962, close the block, up to a total of eighteen. The second group comprises thirteen *suites* conceived between 1967 and 1969”.⁸

Peter Bürger recalls the impression he had on seeing one of these *Suites*, which introduced one of Brossa’s most important exhibitions: “It is not with a title on a page that the first work starts in the catalogue of the great retrospective on Brossa in 1991 at Madrid’s Reina Sofía Art Centre, but with the reproduction of four sheets tied together with black thread.”⁹ Bürger commented on the impact that it had on him in not seeing any name referring to the author on that work. Standing out on the grey of the page, almost in the middle, was a tangle of black thread with two knots going upwards. On the last of the four pages, a bow complements it, with two threads going downwards. This is *Suite de poesia visual núm.1*, from 1959, which Bürger himself says is not easy to talk about, that it is a poem that slips through the fingers, although it is possible to describe it: “[...]”

an indication of pentagram lines with a single note, afterwards, on the next page, a sort of draft of the lines and, underneath, the letter A, then an arm and a hand that points to a path. By turning the page, you can see the path, which leads a square with five dots to another with three dots; on the right of the other page, an A with a large upright. The sixth page shows, as well as other marks on the left-hand side, just an incision with a line that is almost equal in length...”¹⁰

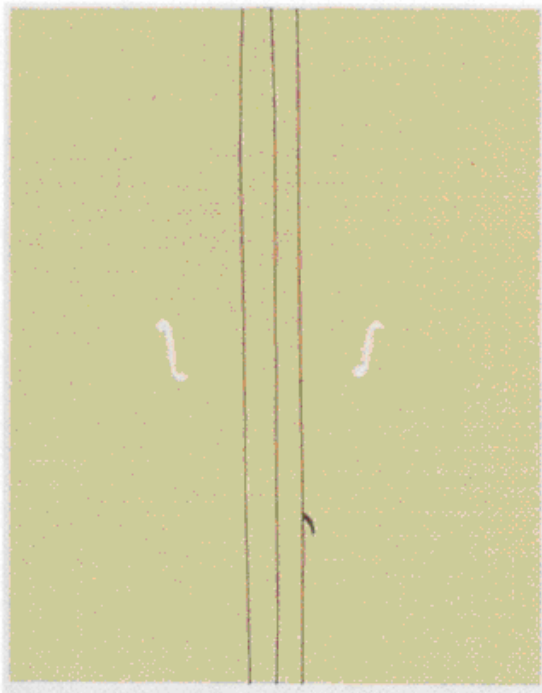


Figure 1. “Portada”, *Suite de poesia visual núm.1*, Joan Brossa (1959).

From this point on, Peter Bürger ceases describing this first *suite* by Brossa, and realises that the pages that include these poems do not want to open, as though trying to hinder the reading process. There is a strange attitude of reading (or of looking at) these poems, as each page materially holds back the reading of it. The fragility, the

precariousness of the materials used, the sensation of being in front of home-made hand crafts, means that the calm, the soothing look, the need to stop reading imposes itself: “here calm is victorious over the observer, who slowly lets their glance slip from one page to another,” wrote Bürger. We find a conception of the book as a poem that is peeled in the visual time of the reading, and the chosen name, *Suites*, is not casual, as a time sequence comparable to action and life, then, as a fourth dimension of the poem. For Brossa, then, the book is also an event of live, direct poetry, which is consumed in its visual reading; a language event bound to experience and, at the same time, to creation. The *Suites*, then, are the first examples of Brossa’s interest in the viscosity of reading.

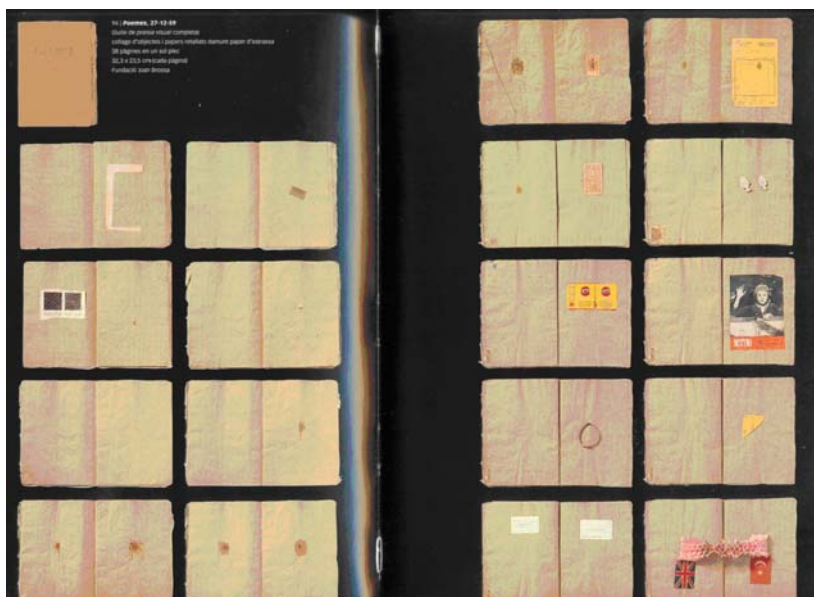


Figure 2. *Poemes* (27-12-1959). Part of a “suite of complete visual poetry” made of objects and cut papers.

The three *Suites de poesia visual* of 1959 are, therefore, poetic folders designed to be read temporally. The leaves are not sewn together in the way a book is, but require sequential reading, as we have seen that Bürger did. It is as though Brossa did not want to make a book, but a poem read at different times. It is dominated by the manipulation, cutting and sewing of some pages – like the sheets

traversed with a thread – the collage of some elements, such as letters, calendars, stamps, stuck pins, threads and slang, fingerprints, secant rules and newspaper cuttings with printed letters, metro tickets, paperclips and objects, such as toothpicks, that have to be read page by page beside an “Ideales” brand cigar wrapper, alluding to two objects for the same place with a different instrumental and poetic function.

The central idea of the construction of the *Suites* was, as Brossa himself explained, to achieve “an integrating language that forced the reader to go into their form of conscience and see beyond their own eyes”.¹¹ Abstraction and reality in an integrating language are the mainstays of the exploration on which the visual form of the *suites* lies, an experimental task that Brossa also tried in other fields.

In the *Suites*, the highly amusing perceptive challenges to the reader/spectator predominate. According to Pilar Palomar, “the meaning lies in its formal structure and in the time deployment filled with tactile and visual traps.”¹² This idea of trap, of interference in the reading with all kinds of home-made materials, such as needles, sandpaper, toothpicks, that Brossa stuck alongside the pages hinders the act of reading, produce the effect of nuisance, of minor impediment to glancing quickly at the page, slow down automation of the simple fact of going from one page to another. Moreover, these pages can be unfurled, unfolded, while we also find poems wrapped up in string and thread, which to be “read” need to be opened, untied. In other *Suites*, for example, what Brossa is working on is the attempt to incorporate movement and conceptualisation into the interior of the poem, elements that will be basic in the more lucid moments of the Barcelona poet’s later visual work. The synthesis of both these ideas can be found in one of the first *suites*, in *11 poemas* (1960), where the sheets open in the form of a spiral in all four directions, emulating a small galaxy. When we finish opening the “galaxy”, the image of Saturn appears as though presiding over the spiral’s centre of gravity, constructed with white pages.¹³ With regard to the conceptualisation, these are poems, as Pilar Palomar explains, “with an intuition that is six years ahead of conceptual art”. Also along these lines, Brossa created poems such as the eighth *suite*, entitled “Poema” (1959), which has just three visual poems; in the first, we see the written word “match”; in the second is the drawing, and in the third, the real match glued to the paper. The three levels of expression with which we capture the reality are placed in relation consecutively: first the word, then the visual representation, and ending with the “thing itself”. With regard to movement, another

suite, La piga de Pierrot (1960), is amusing in Brossa's playing with his exploration of minimal expressions (in this case, it is a black dot: the beauty spot), which he paints in different places on different pages. And when the pages are flicked, we get a "beauty spot" that seems to dance. A rudimentary cinematograph that introduces in this brief *suite* cinematic elements "activated" by the reader.

These first *Suites de poesia visual* by Joan Brossa are a series of texts that cannot be decoded from a traditional point of view, but which need to be placed in a new field (the ergodic perspective?), in a different order of the poetic genre: they transcribe acts and objects, they rediscover the action of the subject in the space of the sheet of paper and they open up the possibility of the poem-object or of the visual poem that would later appear in Brossa's poetry and which would make him a creator known worldwide.

NOTES

1. Bordons (1999a).
2. Salvo (1995).
3. Bordons (1999b).
4. Salvo (1997).
5. Sánchez Robayna (2001) "La poesía sintética de Joan Brossa".
<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/brossa/articles/robayna.html>
6. Gimferrer (2001).
7. Aarseth (2004).
8. Palomar (2001, 120). In this work, we will focus on the first of these blocks.
9. Bürger (2001, 370).
10. *Ibid.*, 370-371.
11. Brossa (1972, 95).
12. Palomar (2001, 121).
13. *Ibid.*, 122.

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