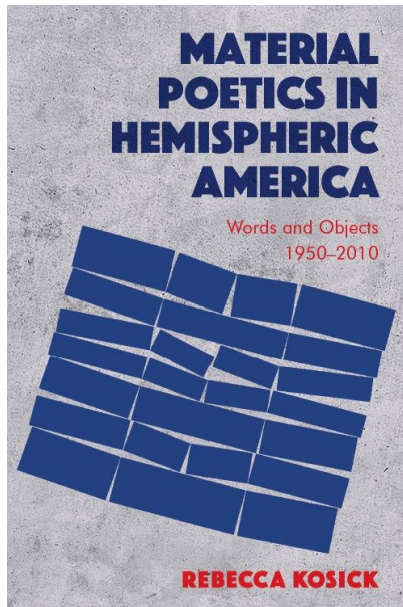


# When matter matters (and how it matters)

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Rebecca Kosick. *Material Poetics in Hemispheric America: Words and Objects 1950-2010*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 240 pages. ISBN: 978-1474474603 (Hardback), 978-1474474627 (Ebook – PDF).

**A**t the beginning of her book, Rebecca Kosick proposes to question “what it means for poetry to be an object even when it isn't an object” (20). She then dedicates the whole book to the discussion of object-subject relations, unpacking the diverse ways in which material poetry materializes itself (pun intended). This leads her to wrap up her arguments in the last sentence of the book by saying that she is “looking forward to more work on the question of what poetic subjectivity looks like when matter matters so much to poetry” (205). I would like to think that this summary of mine, while simplistic and partially incorrect, can pave the way for

a more accurate review of Kosick's book. I believe that it is extremely important to account for matter when it matters, as it is imperative to go a step further, as this book does, and demonstrate how it matters.

The key concepts of the book are those of material poetics and material poetry, both intertwined and used as umbrella terms explored in detail through the analysis of works by Ferreira Gullar, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape (chapter 2), Juan Luis Martínez (chapter 3), Ronald Johnson (chapter 4), and Anne Carson (chapter 5), the very first chapter being dedicated to the output of Brazilian concrete poets. While not overlooking the debt those poets (or better, their material practices) owe to the São Paulo-based group, one of the hallmarks of Kosick's argument is that, contrary to some more or less recent theories, concretist forms are not considered here as the starting point of materiality in literature. Whereas its historical role is a prominent one when it comes to the discussion of experimental literary forms and practices, concrete poetry cannot be considered nor the origin or the end of everything.

On the other hand, while describing the rise in scholarly interest about the material aspects of poetry in the digital realm, Kosick proposes "a longer arc of material poetry" (5), therefore engaging and contributing to a line of study that is critical of linear perspectives of innovation in literature and the arts. In addition, it is worth noting that Kosick leaves a (kind) message for those invested in more traditional literary studies: "Readers of all poetry can benefit from spending more time with the material features of poetry, rather than overlooking them in favour of a focus on meaning or representation" (10).

Arguing for "an elastic understanding of material poetry" (4), Kosick defines material poetics as a framework that acknowledges and explores the "interlocking nature of the verbal and the material for poetry" (7). For Kosick, material poetry is "poetry at its most object-like, poetry that stresses its materiality, and self-theorises as an object" (203). Early in the introduction, Kosick discusses the ways in which the term "material poetry" can be more inclusive than the labels "concrete poetry" and "visual poetry", for instance. Personally, I would have also liked to see the author differentiate the term "experimental poetry" from the latter. Although the term may be historically connected to some movements and groups in particular, in the same sense that "concrete poetry" is, "experimental poetry" still seems to work as a catch-all term for visual and sonic materials, the tactile engagement as well as various other sensory materials, not leaving behind relational and performative takes on material objects of poetry or on poetry as a material object. The difference between "material poetry" and "experimental poetry" may lie in the fact that, while the first may be described as

an object-centered term (having materiality as a focal point), the latter is more connected to the process (the experimental way of construing material objects). In any case, given the many complications occasioned by the vast and diversified history of experimental poetics, I strongly believe it would be interesting to see this taxonomic distinction discussed in *Material Poetics*.

In her book, Kosick proposes five models for material poetics: autonomous, relational, assembled, architectural, and posthuman. Each one of these is at the core of the five case studies or book chapters. The first chapter revolves around concrete poetry as a material exploration of the autonomy of the object, which means, in Kosick's words, that concrete poets explored "the visual, sonic and meaningful components of language as constructive matter for the object that would be the poem" (42). Chapter 2 shows how neoconcrete poetics can be understood as a relational approach to subject-object relations, addressing "the ways poetic language can materially and sensorially engage with its participants" (96). Chapter 3, in turn, analyzes *La nueva novela* by Juan Luís Martínez as a material poetics of relation construed through assemblage, where "the book resists any absolute rootedness and proposes in its place a rhizomatic horizontality where there is no hierarchy between its various 'themes'" (105). Chapter 4 takes at its center an interpretation of Ronald Johnson's book *ARK*, here considered as an architecture of ever-changing relations which "confuses the senses" (137), through the imagination of objects and by working as "an object-in-the-making and also a metaphor for that same object" (166). Lastly, chapter 5 proposes *Nox* as a particularly posthuman material take on how poetry can materialize relations between people and things, considering that Anne Carson "makes lyrical modes of representation into objects" (181) and "turns inscription into a material object" (189).

These five case studies work as movable parts of a solid argument about the openness and fluidity of the very notion of the material object. For example, if we assume that concrete poetry is an object made of language and language is "what defines its form, its limits and its possibilities" (55), neoconcrete poetics challenges this assumption when we realize that some of Oiticica's and Pape's works do not include any words at all, albeit being called poems. On the other hand, regarding Pape's work, Kosick states that "language doesn't just call attention to its own materiality, but takes shape in, and as, nonlinguistic material objects" (93). In this sense, neoconcretism would be more precisely described as a "relational exchange of sensing subject and material object" (63), because, as Kosick points out, "such objects have to be materially realised, and sensorially engaged, in order for the work to exist" (67).

We could say that there are several sub-arguments throughout the book, which appear now and then. To call them sub-arguments may be inaccurate, because regardless of being somehow discrete in their apparitions, to some extent they are also main arguments, or at least we can tell that they serve as points of entanglement within a broader picture. Those topics are: the lyrical, which material poetics seems to challenge directly; and the threefold emergent notions of posthumanism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism, all lines of thought with which Kosick's book critically engages. Regarding this matter, and to see it working in a truly relational way, it is worth reading carefully the brief Coda that serve as the final remarks to the book.

Besides the great attention to details when comparing poetics by several authors with incredibly diverse approaches and materializations of their works, one of the most poignant aspects of *Material Poetics in Hemispheric America* is that it is deliberately oriented to an in-depth material analysis of each of those works, rather than providing a tentative compendium of material poetics in hemispheric America. See, for instance, the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph on page 17 for an interesting statement on how no one would ever demand a global account of all the lyrical poetry, for example.

While the number of works and authors analyzed in the book is not extensive, the deep material interpretations provided by Kosick in her five case studies constitute an outstanding contribution towards a better understanding of the broader field of practice of what we can in all fairness call material poetics. This is a goal that the author was able to achieve via a contrastive in-depth analysis and complex, yet lucid, theoretical problematization. In the end, the fact that each chapter focuses on one particular poet or small group of artists does not mean that other poets and practices are neglected.

Rather than stating that something is missing – as is customary for a critic of a given book, study, anthology or event to do – I would like to note that the transnational landscape drawn here, which includes three languages and contains examples drawn from Brazil, Chile, the United States and Canada, in fact corroborates the premise initially proposed by Kosick that poetry may be “much more materially experimental than it is usually given credit for” (6). Radically stepping outside any kind of hermeneutics would necessarily imply that when approaching a poem every reader would need to be “ready to perceive whatever the poem is and work[...] against the assumption that, first of all, language means to mean” (13). Because, after all, matter matters.