

The Letterists

The Letterism, founded in 1946 by Gabriel Pomerand (1925–1972) and Isidore Isou (1925–2007), uses letters as “sounds” and then as “images.” Poetry turns into music and writing becomes painting. The letterists extend these changing relationships to film, culture and society.

In 1952 the movement divides because of diverging objectives: living art or the art of living.

Jean-Louis Brau, Guy Debord and Gil Wolman founded the Letterist International to “transcend art”. Marc’O set up the group “Externalists” to encourage the uprising of youth. The Isouists asserted that their only doctrine came from a single creator. Letterists, for a long time, would remain “badly known or known to be bad”.



From poetic letterism to political letterists: 1946-1952

The letter as sound 1946 / 1949

Letterism takes its name from the letter that some young people, of the inter-war generation, wanted to use in ways other than words, which they believed had been killed by propaganda.

The term is launched on January 8, 1946, in Paris, at the movement’s first manifestation, in the Salle des Sociétés Savantes. Gabriel Pomerand, Isidore Isou, Georges Poulot and Guy Marester announced a new poetic revolution: to make a poetry of letters, to realize “an international of direct communication” and to “make poetry out of everything.” Their collective manifesto was published in June of 1946 in the first issue of *La Dictature lettriste*. At the end of 1946, after hearing Pomerand speak, François Dufrêne said: “Poetry is a shout,” and joined the group. During the third manifestation, on April 3, 1947, Pomerand directed *Octuoren K*. On April 24, 1947 Gallimard published *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique* by Isou. On June 20, 1947, at the lecture *Après nous le lettrisme* (After us, letterism), the Dadaists asserted their paternity. On October 17, 1947, the autobiography that Isou had written in Paris was published: *Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie*.

Between 1947 and 1949, while the Dadaists continued to claim precedence, Isou and Pomerand multiplied publications, lectures and scandals: Isou’s books, theoretical ones such as *Une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique*, apologetical ones such as *Agré-*

gation d’un nom et d’un messie and attempted alliances such as *Réflexions sur André Breton*; group lectures on youth uprising, which Isou would develop in *Traité d’économie nucléaire*; lectures by Pomerand on prostitution, pederasty, rain and fine weather, that he published and had him sent to jail, such as his book *Lettres ouvertes à un mythe. Le cri et son archange*, which Isou wanted to appropriate, led Pomerand to break with him. Isou published *Isou ou la Mécanique des femmes*, which brought him legal troubles, like those of Pomerand.

1949 and the beginning of 1950 marked a move to the production of films and paintings. The documentary filmed about Saint Germain des Près, on which Jacques Baratier worked with Pomerand starting in 1947, was finished in 1949. This film interweaves different shots of Saint Germain with films extracts and symbolic scenes: Pomerand destroying a piano, burning a work by Picasso, shattering a stained glass window and shouting a poem. Titled *Paris ton décor fout le camp* (Paris, your decor is flying the coop) by Pomerand, and later *Désordre* (Disorder) by Baratier, was censored by the distributor, which replaced Pomerand’s commentary. In the middle of 1949, letterism moved from the field of poetics to the field of plastic art, with the arrival of Gil Wolman and Brau who produced abstract writings, and with the arrival of Maurice Lemaître, who was very active with the publication of a sole issue of *Front de la Jeunesse* and in the first issue of *Ur*.

The letter as image 1950 / 1952

Through a combination of secret alphabets, drawings and rebus in metagraphy, Pomerand drew *Saint Ghetto des Prêts* [Saint Ghetto of the Loans], his commentary that had been censored. It appeared in 1950. That same year, Isou published *Les Journaux des Dieux* (Diaries of the Gods), an essay in which literature and painting merge, and which is illustrated with a metagraphy. At the end of 1950, Lemaître published the review *Ur* containing his metagraphic collages, theoretical texts by Claude Matricon in collaboration with Brau about the death of aesthetics and in collaboration with Wolman on the death of art, as well as texts by Isou on metagraphy.

In April of 1951 the diffusion of the unfinished film by Isou, *Traité de Bave et d'éternité* (Treaty on Venom and Eternity), attracted Guy Debord. In May of 1951, Pomerand showed his film *La légende cruelle* (The Cruel Legend), which disintegrates paintings by Léonor Fini. After Lemaître's film, at the end of 1951, *Le film est déjà commencé?* (Has the Film Started Yet?), all the letterist films of 1952 exhausted all possibilities offered by images: the single image in Wolman's *L'anticoncept* (The Anticoncept), B/W sequences in Debord's *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade), transparent images in Brau's *La Barque de la vie courante* (The Boat of Current Life) and imaginary images in Dufrêne's *Tambours du jugement premier* (Drums of the First Judgment), a movie devoid of film. They published their scripts and theories in the only number of the review *Ion*.

In 1951, five years after the reading of a manifesto by Jean Caillens on letterist painting, Pomerand transferred the principles of *Saint Ghetto des Prêts* to approximately forty pictographic and metagraphic paintings, and twenty of 1952, such as *Le Prisonnier* (The Prisoner). Some were published in June of 1952. On October 31, 1952 Isou had an exhibit of a series of 36 paintings, *Les Nombres* (The Numbers), which are a rebus representation of traditional form poems. He would also paint the coded text of his *Introduction à la Métagraphologie*, entitled *Amos*, on nine black and white photographs.

Letterism, art or weapon? June-December 1952

Due to diverging objectives, the letterists splintered into different groups.

The Externalists, whose name reflected the situation of youth "out" of the market, positioned themselves between reform and revolution. In June of 1952, the journal *Soulèvement de la jeunesse*, by Yolande du Luart and Marc'O, supporter of the future president of the Council, diffused political and artistic letterist ideas. It shows Pomerand's first paintings of 1951 and the 1952 paintings by Marc'O, du Luart and Poucette, who showed her letterist paintings on December 10, accompanied by a letterist sound system by François Dufrêne. This journal published the first text by Yves Klein. Jacques Spacagna became part of the group. Their externalist trade union had a short life.

The Letterist International, founded in June of 1952 by Berna, Brau, Debord and Wolman, painted on a Parisian wall: *Never work*. On October 20, 1952, to denounce the spectacular promotion of the Chaplin film *Limelight*, they distributed a pamphlet entitled *Finis les pieds plats* (No More Flat Feet). Disavowed by Isou, they responded that "the most urgent exercise of freedom is the destruction of idols" and they distanced themselves from Isou, who did the same to them. The conflict became public in the first issue of their review *Internationale Lettriste*. On December 7, 1952, at the Aubervilliers Conference, Brau wrote their principles: "It is not to be greater than Picasso, but to have a life as exciting as Picasso, so far as Picasso had an exciting life", and "It's in transcending art that the approach still needs to be done." The first Directive of the Situationist International would increase the revolutionary objective.

The Isouists convinced themselves that they would discover the laws of evolution and economic means, if they could go deep enough into their initial ideas. Lemaître wrote "A million arts can be created" (*Ur* no. 2) and "Système de Notasion pour les Létristes," outcome-less. Later Isou would publish his generalizations, extended to immaterial. The group would return to plastic activities starting in 1961, with a second generation, post-war born, focused on the art market. All of them rewrote history, preserving the name "Letterists".

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Links

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Lettrist Film

Film was one of the arts that aroused greater interest among the members of the Lettrist group, and also one of the reasons behind their differences. They strove to proclaim the death of film only to bring it back to life through the transgression of language and the medium itself, focusing on the theoretical debate surrounding it. The subversive quality of these films heralds a rebellious spirit that would spread to subsequent movements such as the Situationist International or the riots of May 1968.



Lettrism emerged in Paris following the meeting between Romanian poet and intellectual Isidore Isou (1925–2007) and Gabriel Pomerand (1926–1972), who were soon joined by a large group of young artists. Like other isms, the origins of the movement were linked to the written word (in this case, the letter) as a form of expression, rendered in plastic terms via print and abstraction, while their sound derivations materialised in phonetic poetry that broke away from writing and became improvised actions. These experiences were tapped into a vast film production, and the artistic experimentation and radicalism of Lettrism were thereby prolonged for several decades.

This hall presents three of the movement's key films. The first, Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (Treatise on Slobber and Eternity, 1951), 1951, was described by the director as a film manifesto and introduced the basic principles of the theory and practice of Lettrist film: *discrepant* montage (based on the divergence of image and sound) and *chiselling* (manipulation of the filmic support via physical aggression, grating or scratching, the use of waste material, etc.). The film was a salutary lesson, a cry against the tyranny of image over sound and the decline of photography. "I wanted to separate the ear from its cinematographic master, the eye," declared Daniel, leading player in the film and the auteur's alter ego. Isou's intention was to destroy the photographic image through words and the study of sound. Daniel recites his initiation speech, a tribute to the rules of Lettrist film over a soundtrack riddled with boos, noise and phonetic rhythms.

Maurice Lemaître (1926), one of the group's most active members and a loyal follower of the intellectual gloss established by Isou, experimented with chiselling away at the

filmic support, a property that he combined with the random element.

Le film est déjà commencé? (Has the Film Already Started?, 1952) is one of the movement's most transcendental films, where the artist moves away from Isou's theoretical density and emphatic tone. It wasn't conceived as a film but almost as a happening, in which the very projection becomes a *syncinéma* (a term coined by the artist to replace the traditional idea of a session), an action that could be defined as an artistic fact or a social act based on the alteration of the screen and the theatre through the creation of movements in time and space, combined with the participation of the audience and other elements foreign to the actual film. The total asynchrony between the sound and the jumble of unconnected images, most of them derived from the scraps and remains found in several film laboratories, together with the performative nature of its *mise-en-scène*, take Isou's discourse, which welcomed contamination from different sources, to the extreme—in this case, to the theatricality defined by Antonin Artaud (1895–1948).

All the Lettrist texts on film that appeared in the review *lon*, only one issue of which would actually see the light, made a call for a new concept of the screen, one that would replace the screen as a flat and inert surface, the reflection of the outdated photographic image. In *Tambours du jugement premier* (Drums of the First Judgement, 1952), François Dufrêne (1930–1982) does away with the image completely and makes a *sound film*, the

first example of imaginary film without either a screen or celluloid. Initially conceived as a set of images presenting abstract compositions and everyday objects, as depicted in the script published in *Ion*, Dufrière ended up forsaking the images in an act of denial of the medium itself and its materiality. The film consists of a series of sung aphorisms and Lettrist poems, a compendium of practically all the phonetic work he had hitherto produced. As a key artist in sound poetry as well as a Lettrist, Dufrière transcended the phonetic experiments of Dada and in this picture explored the volumetric nature of sound and its corporeal conception beyond the voice. He achieves this by resorting to Artaud's theatricality, albeit in a different way to Lemaître, i.e., focusing on the study of cries and the body's phonetic capacity as in his oral document *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (To Be Done with the Judgment of God, 1947). Even in its title, Dufrière seems to want to reveal these echoes of Artaud. *Tambours du jugement premier* was not released as a projection but as an improvisation by four actors positioned in the corners of the theatre. In the recording shown here the spectator is surrounded by quadraphonic sound, thereby creating a physical experience.

Gil Joseph Wolman, Guy-Ernest Debord, Serge Berna and Jean-Louis Brau soon broke away from the rest of the group as a result of theoretical differences, which became public knowledge following the presentation of Charles Chaplin's *Lime-light* at a film club. The dissenters accused Chaplin of emotional blackmail, an accusation Isou immediately challenged, causing the irreversible split. Wolman (1929-1995) and Debord (1931-1994) made two key films, *L'Anticoncept* (The Anticoncept, 1951) and *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade, 1952) respectively. The latter sanctions the moment prior to the break and the close of the first and most significant period in Lettrist film. The aforementioned artists went on to found the so-called Lettrist International, a more radical leftist faction that, in turn, would become the seeds of a much broader and influential movement, the Situationist International.

While Lettrism was one of the last avant-garde isms—trends with which it shared certain similarities, particularly with Dada and Surrealism—it also heralded many of the features of the Neo-avant-garde movements of the second half of the twentieth century, especially expanded film, *décollage* and performance. In spite of the virulent and subversive tone of the films made under the umbrella of Isou's self-proclaimed 'Lettrist dictatorship,' these did not intend to destroy the previous history of film (in fact they defended the talent of filmmakers such as Clair, Buñuel and Einstein), but transcend it and eradicate established patterns.

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