

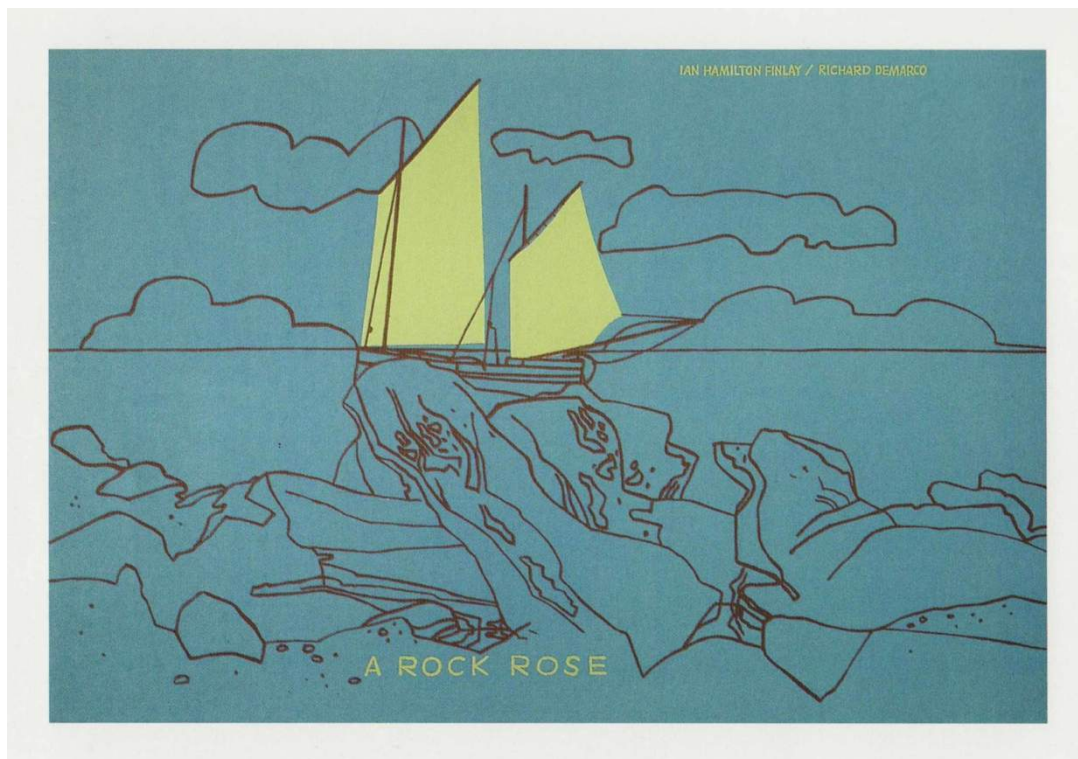
Beauty and Revolution The Poetry and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay

Teachers' Resource

Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006) was a Scottish poet, gardener and artist. Widely regarded as Britain's foremost concrete poet, he began as a master of the art of reinterpreting poetic forms and using language for visual effect.

Born in the Bahamas, Finlay lived and worked for the majority of his life in rural Scotland. He trained for a short period at Glasgow School of Art, but made his reputation first as a poet and writer. In the mid-1960s, he began to develop this love of language through concrete poetry and set up the Wild Hawthorn Press to publish his work. He experimented firstly on the page, then with prints, small sculptures in card and glass, and later with medallions, stones and other materials.

This exhibition explores Finlay's diverse practice and the main themes that captivated the artist from the 1960s to the 1980s: concrete and kinetic poetry, nautical subjects, emblems, and the French Revolution. Many of these subjects are also evoked in features of Finlay's garden in the Pentland hills near Edinburgh, known from the late 1970s as Little Sparta. This renowned garden is represented in the exhibition through photographs and a rarely seen film.



A Rock Rose, 1971 with Richard Demarco

The starting point for *Beauty and Revolution* is 1964, the year of a meeting between Finlay and a group of Cambridge students. Stephen Bann and Mike Weaver went to Edinburgh to meet the artist and included his works in an exhibition that was held at St Catherine's College, Cambridge. Bann continued to exchange letters with Finlay and became a leading scholar on his work. *Beauty and Revolution* is curated by Bann and presents his remarkable collection of Finlay's art and poetry.

Kettle's Yard's founder, Jim Ede, also met and began corresponding with Finlay in 1964. Although Finlay never visited Kettle's Yard, he described his fondness of the house in his letters. In 1995 Finlay exhibited an inscribed pebble there, which was later bought for the collection: using a phrase that reflects upon Ede's fusion of art and found objects, the inscription reads *Kettle's Yard Cambridge England is the Louvre of the Pebble*.



Kettle's Yard Cambridge England is the Louvre of the Pebble. 1995

This resource has information on the following themes:

- Concrete Poetry
- Collaborations
- Boats
- Oppositions
- The French Revolution

Concrete Poetry

Concrete Poetry is where the form and arrangement of the words contributes as much to the poem as their sound and meaning. The form and shape combine with the meaning and sound to create the poem as an object in its own right.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was interested in breaking down ideas around language, examining the relationship between words and the rest of the world.

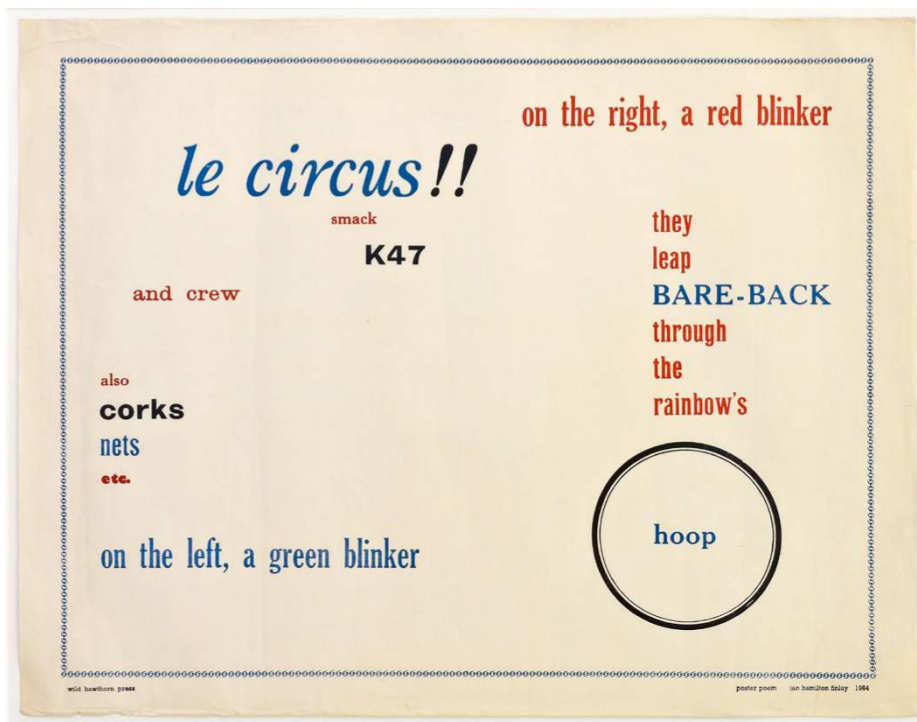
“Just so, ‘concrete’ began for me with the extraordinary (since wholly unexpected) sense that the syntax I had been using, *the movement* of language in me, at a physical level, was no longer there – so it had to be replaced with something else, with a syntax and movement that would be true of the new feeling..”¹



Wave/Rock, 1966

In the work above, the words ‘wave’ and ‘rock’ are repeated and combined to create an effect of the waves breaking on a rocky shore. The density where the words overlap suggests the solidity of the rock compared to the froth of the sea implied by the spread out letters of ‘wave’.

¹ Letter to Pierre Garnier, quoted in Bann, 1977, p 9. Ian Hamilton Finlay - An Imaginary Portrait



Poster Poem (*Le Circus*), 1964

In *Poster Poem (Le Circus)*, the activity of a fishing boat's crew is compared visually to the circus. The red and green blinkers refer to the port and starboard lights on ships, as well as the blinkers worn by horses to keep out distractions. 'Bare-back' suggests a horse and rider, while the hoop they are jumping through is created by a rainbow, conjuring the sun and rain, or sea's spray. While the composition of the words does not build a literal picture in the same way as *Wave/Rock*, the arrangement still suggests the energy and movement of performers in a circus, or a boat's crew at sea.

Activity: Choose a subject that interests you. This could be a type of landscape, an animal, or a type of performance or game.

Write down a list of words that your subject makes you think of. How can you arrange those words to give a better idea of your subject? Should some be bigger than others? Which words should go together? Can you add in different colours? Try a few different arrangements and see which one works the best.

Collaborations

As an artist who wanted to work in many different mediums, Ian Hamilton Finlay relied on working closely with many different people to produce his work. While the ideas behind the pieces are Finlay's, he respected the expertise of the sand blasters, engravers, and printers he worked with.



After Piranesi (1), 1991 with Gary Hincks.

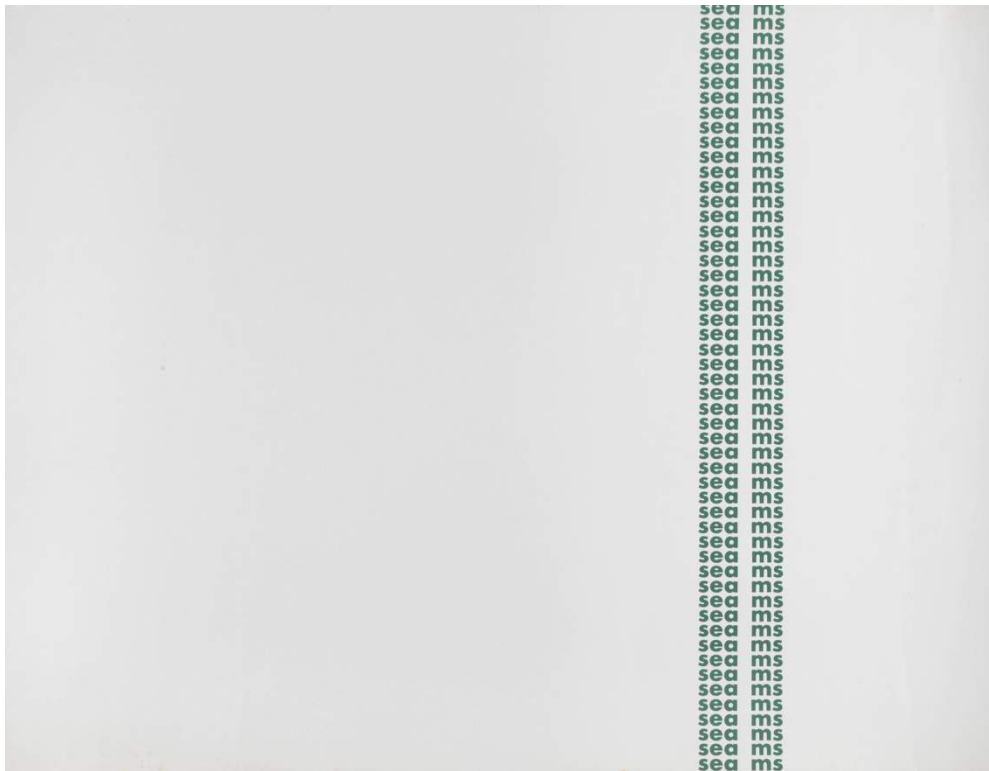
Activity: Take the list of words you put together for your concrete poem. Work with a partner to arrange them into a final piece. How does the process of collaboration change the results to when you worked on your own? Can you come up with more ideas working together, or do you feel that it is more difficult to develop your own piece of work?

Now try working with your partner's list of words.

Boats

Possibly inspired by his time working as a shepherd on the Orkney Islands, boats and the sea is a theme that runs throughout Ian Hamilton Finlay's work. He was fascinated by the relationship between humans and nature, particularly the immense power of the sea.

For Ian Hamilton Finlay, boats represented humans and nature being in harmony, something he was striving to achieve through his own work particularly in his garden, Little Sparta. To emphasise this harmony, many of his works compare activity on the sea to domestic tasks such as sewing.



Seams, 1969

In *Seams* Finlay splits the repeated word in two, creating a seam running down the page. This creates two new words, 'sea' and 'ms'. Ms, a title used for women, suggests the traditionally female role of seamstress, as well as the fact boats are referred to as female. By suggesting the sea, the words can be seen to portray not just stitches running up the page, but also the wake of a boat moving through water.

Oppositions

In much of Ian Hamilton Finlay's work he explores the juxtapositions of apparently opposite ideas. As well as his fascination with humans and the sea, he is interested in the relationships between modern warfare and the classical idea of Arcadia, where the inhabitants lived in harmony with the unspoilt natural environment. His own shaping of his garden at Little Sparta was a constant balancing act of creating individual pieces and a landscape in harmony with their surroundings, while nature is constantly vying to overrun what he has created.

During the Second World War Finlay joined the British Army and served in Germany. Various themes from the war feature in his work. He was interested in the development of modern warfare, often depicting machinery and warships. He was particularly interested in the way these new developments in weaponry affected nature and human relationships with the natural world. This is playfully explored through the inclusion of aircraft carrier shaped birdbaths in Little Sparta, and the print *Are Aircraft Carriers Urban or Rural?*



Are Aircraft Carriers Urban or Rural?, 1976
with John Borg Manduca

The French Revolution

Ian Hamilton Finlay was fascinated by the French Revolution, and the way the high ideals of brotherhood, liberty and equality could produce such terror.



Terror/Virtue, 1984 with Nicholas Sloane



The Revolution is Frozen, 1990 with Gary Hincks

He includes quotations in his work, playing with the meaning through the way that the quotes are displayed. Here he takes a quote from the French Revolutionary leader Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just. An important member of the government of the First French Republic, Saint-Just became most associated with the bloody Reign of Terror. Here the quote is sprawled in red on a guillotine blade, towering over the top of a 'beheaded' stone column.

Activity: Look up quotes from famous speakers such as politicians, protest leaders, philosophers, or writers. Design a picture around the quote. How can you add to or change the meaning of the quote by what you include in the picture?

How to book a group visit

The Learning team at Kettle's Yard aims to respond to the needs of teachers, tutors and those working with people outside formal education. The House and gallery programme of modern and contemporary exhibitions are excellent environments to support people's natural curiosity to explore, engage and learn. Experiencing works of art in such a unique setting provides a fascinating springboard for discussion, creativity and developing knowledge and skills.

We also work with practicing artists to offer workshops that combine creative thinking and discussion with practical activity, taking inspiration from works in the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. Practical workshops provide the opportunity for pupils to explore artist techniques, experimenting with new processes and materials.

When can I bring a School Group in?

HOUSE: we work with schools outside opening hours: all day Mondays and between 9.30– 12pm Tuesday – Friday

GALLERY: we are able to work with groups during opening hours. Groups often visit in the morning, between 9.30am–12pm.

How many pupils can I bring?

The maximum group size is 30 pupils. Our Learning Studio can only accommodate 15 pupils at a time so if you wanted a practical workshop, we could work with one class of 30 (half doing a practical activity while the other half were looking at the house/gallery and then swap).

What does it cost?

It is free of charge for British resident school groups to visit the house or gallery, have an introductory talk, explore the space and/or sketch. Practical workshops prices start from £100 for a 2 hour session.

For summer schools, language students, international exchange programmes etc, we charge £4 per pupil/student and £30 for an introductory talk.

Please contact education@kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk or call 01223 748100 for more information.

Further Reading

The Arts Council. *Ian Hamilton Finlay*. (Exhibition Catalogue 1977, Serpentine Gallery).

Stephen Bann, 'Ian Hamilton Finlay – An Imaginary Portrait' in The Arts Council. *Ian Hamilton Finlay*. (Exhibition Catalogue 1977, Serpentine Gallery).

Stephen Bann, ed. *Midway: Letters from Ian Hamilton Finlay to Stephen Bann 1964–69* (Wilmington Square Books, 2014)

Kettle's Yard, *Beauty and Revolution: The Poetry and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay*. (Exhibition Catalogue 2014, Kettle's Yard).

Emmett Williams, ed. *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Something Else Press inc., 1967)

<http://www.ianhamiltonfinlay.com>

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/16/ian-hamilton-finlay-concrete-poetry>

<http://www.littlesparta.org.uk/>

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ian-hamilton-finlay-1093>

Ian Hamilton Finlay at Kettle's Yard –
<http://www.kettleyard.co.uk/collection/collection-database/?artist=4709&title=&type=>