

*Uncovering Brossa's Words*

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**Abstract**

Through a self-guided exploration of the streets of Barcelona, I discovered the many visual poems left by the Catalan poet, Joan Brossa. From an extravagant sixteen-metre high letter *A*'s at Horta Velodrome in the outer areas of the city to fauns hidden within the confides of residential buildings, being taken back by nature. Here I explore the importance and meaning behind popular touristic sculptural words in Plaça Nova and how these works by Brossa, along with other artists, helped put Barcelona on the tourist map. This is a journey of discovery, realisation and inspiration through a treasure hunt created many years ago by a man who I will never meet, yet his voice lives on.

**Key words:** Joan Brossa; Barcelona; Visual Poetry

“A headline is the alphabet with the letters in the wrong order”  
Joan Brossa (qtd. in Baines, 2000)

Every time I arrive in a new city, the first thing I do is wander. I try to get lost in my new surroundings, I try and walk until I don't recognise anything and then try and find my way back. It confuses the senses to be somewhere new, somewhere unknown, where your mind is trying to compare your new environment to what you know, trying to compare one street to another, trying to compare the unknown to the familiar. After arriving in Barcelona, I walked and wandered, aimlessly trying to become accustomed to my new surroundings, taking in the new senses and feelings. While I was walking through the small alleys and backstreets of Barcelona, I didn't know that I was about to begin a journey of uncovering Joan Brossa's hidden visual poetry throughout the city.

To understand the streets of Barcelona and the art that lies within them, I had to delve deeper into the history of the city, where I found its darker past. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Barcelona, the population was growing very rapidly and doubled in size. Yet, the residential areas could not expand to keep up with the rapid growth due to the medieval walls that still surrounded the city. This led to overcrowding and left inhabitants living in poor living conditions—an example of this is the estimated average age of a working-class citizen, which was no more than 23 years old (Permanyer, 1992, p. 7). In 1854, the old city walls were pulled down to extend the city boundaries, and with this, the radical Cerdà Plan of expansion began. Created by the Catalan engineer Ildefons Cerdà, the Cerdà Plan was designed to build a new city without past mistakes. The plan involved each block being centred around an enclosed garden and where traffic flow was the focus, something that became a revolutionary idea for city planning (Bausells, 2016). The area of Eixample was consequently formed—with its grid system where the class divisions were spread—and the city began to be a liveable and modern city.

However, the streets were very barren, lacking public, open spaces and green areas. It wasn't until the 1980s when new large urban areas started to appear with an interesting attachment to sculpture. Artists were being brought on board to create works for these spaces turning Barcelona into a sculpture museum. Barcelona born journalist, Lluís Permanyer speaks of these spaces in his book *Barcelona Open-Air Sculpture Gallery*, "people have perceived the character that a sculpture confers on a public square: it individualises it, gives it class, imbues it with personality. A square or a public space with

a sculpture in it acquires an added dimension" (1992, p. 9). This new approach to city planning put Barcelona on the map with artists involved such as Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, and Joan Brossa, who created work for this project. These works still stand mostly in their original form and location and have created an exciting tourist attraction to the city.



*Image 1.* Photograph of "Bàrcino" (1994) by Joan Brossa. Copyright [2019] by Gala Jane Hazell.

In the initial days of being in Barcelona, I came across Plaça Nova, where I witnessed many people getting their photos taken with a set of bronze sculptures. Upon further inspection, these sculptures appeared to resemble letters, which caught my attention due to my fascination with all things related to letters and words. I stood and absorbed the work and read the seven letters that spelled 'Bàrcino' [Image 1]. I wondered what that word represented and made a mental note to look it up later. Carrying on with my day, I didn't put much thought into the sculpture again. The name Joan Brossa started to be brought up in conversation throughout the day as a Catalan poet who I should explore further. I finally gave in and looked him up. To my amazement, the bronze sculpture I had seen earlier appeared as one of his works. Joan Brossa was born in 1919 and called himself a poet who created 'visual poetry.' He transitioned his visual poetry into large public sculptures that now lie around Barcelona and other locations (Baines, 2000). He has been called a pioneer in urban poetry, giving permanence to his poems rich in meaning. Starting his art career in the Surrealist realm, he moved into theatre, poetry, and sculpture, collaborating with artists such as Joan Miró and Antoni Tàpies.

I had to go back again and see the words in a new light. Upon the second inspection, it was no longer a tourist attraction but a piece of history and art. Each letter of “Bàrcino” is a poem in itself, all free-standing sculptures, all made from bronze (except the 'N', which is aluminium), and all are very typical of Brossa and his style (Fundació Joan Brossa and Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006). After carrying out some research, I discovered that the word 'Bàrcino' comes from the original name of the city of Barcelona, Colonia Iulia Augusta Faventia Paterna Barcino (Barcelona Turisme, n.d.). Commissioned by the City Council, Brossa created this site-specific work to be located at the medieval walls for both locals and visitors to explore the area's vibrant history. It is merging both lettering and sculpture, where the location is a large part of the work's identity. As I stood in front of those seven poetic letters surrounded by tourists wielding selfie-sticks, it felt like I was the only one really reading it, knowing what it truly was. This made me question tourism and art and wonder why people are so interested in getting a photo with this work and whether it does indeed have more to do with the placement of the art in this square rather than the object itself.



*Image 2. Photograph of “Visual Transitable en Tres Parts” (detail) (1983-1984) by Joan Brossa. Copyright [2019] by Gala Jane Hazell*

After having these intriguing moments with Brossa's 1994 work "Bàrcino", it became apparent that I needed to seek out more of his works throughout Barcelona. In the gift shop at Fundació Joan Miró, I stumbled upon a book named *Brossa Itineraries* (Fundació Joan Brossa and Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006) that had an extensive list of his works mapped out as walking routes throughout the city. Perfect. The first stop was Horta Velodrome for "Poema Visual Transitable en Tres Parts" (1983-1984), which translates to Transitable Visual Poem in Three Times [Image 2]. I got off at Mundet metro station, and all I knew was that the work was somewhere near the cycling track. So, I did what I always do when I arrive at a new place, I wandered. I found a soccer field where it was Saturday sports day with families cheering their loved ones. I arrived when a marathon was finishing, so I watched as the winners ran through the finish line holding hands as a group. I found the velodrome where the cyclists were going around and around like they were in a hurry to get somewhere. And that's when I saw, through the thick branches of the cypress and olive trees, the enormous sixteen-metre-high sandstone letter A, towering over me. This was the starting point of the visual poem. I sat at the park bench and took in the scene; people were jogging past, not giving it a second glance, couples wandering the gardens, and then there was me. I decided to sketch this significant piece of art and appreciate it a little more.

The book I was holding had a picture of Brossa standing next to the sculpture. I could only assume it was taken when it was recently erected, and I compared it to what I was looking at then. So much time had passed that the trees had grown large enough to engulf the sculpture and the path that Brossa made part of his work. According to a letter he wrote to the architects developing this project, he had envisaged cypress trees concealing the path to the second deconstructed A. He suggested that people would enter through the large sculpture and walk through the poem down a reddish-coloured earth path to embark on a journey through the visual poetry (Fundació Joan Brossa and Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006, p. 68). I did as he suggested: I started at the beginning of the poem, at the 'birth', the initial A that is the gateway to the journey. Brossa imagined that it would be the entryway that all visitors of the velodrome would have to walk through before entering the venue. However, this wasn't the most practical way of entering and people

often avoid the work. While I was walking through, I meandered past the trees and found myself at the gentle grassy slope where I saw stone punctuation marks in the grass [Image 3]. Each separate comma, exclamation mark and question mark were absorbed back into nature by the grass surrounding it. I momentarily thought about the gardeners that must have the difficult job to mow this section of grass, but then I enjoyed this part of the journey which represented “Pauses and Intonations” (Permanyer, 1992, p. 65) throughout life. This led to the final deconstructed A; Brossa explained, “the life of all beings is subject to a decomposing process that ends up in deconstruction” (Fundació Joan Brossa and Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006, p. 68). These words were quite heavy on the heart but made me appreciate how an idea can be formed and translated into a visual poem, giving me inspiration and excitement for my own practice. This work was somehow different from the words that lay in the centre of town: I didn't witness anyone wanting to capture a photo of this work or even acknowledge its existence; maybe it was the location. I wonder whether if this work of art was placed on La Rambla, it would be a different story. Being blown away by this work's beauty and enormity, I continued on my own journey to get to my next instalment by Brossa.



*Image 3.* Photograph of “Visual Transitable en Tres Parts” (detail) (1983-1984) by Joan Brossa. Copyright by [2019] Gala Jane Hazell

Next, using my book of itineraries, I decided to seek out Brossa's work, “*Faune*” (2004) [Image 4]. I set off with the address and a map and did not quite know what to expect.

When I arrived at the address, I started to be on the lookout, knowing I was looking for a patch of grass, according to the photo. However, what I was seeing was very grey and only concrete-made, suddenly I spotted a plaque that read 'Placeta De Joan Brossa' and I knew I must be in the right place. Walking past a hotel down a passageway, I was not quite sure that I was allowed to be there, but then I spotted a children's play structure with a family enjoying a day in the park and I felt more at ease. I sat on a park bench with the hotel bar guests looking on, and realised I was in one of the internal garden spaces created by the Cerdà Plan surrounded by buildings in all directions. After having a quick glance around the garden, I could not see the artwork anywhere, nor the neatly mowed grass that appeared in the book. I was ready to give in and assumed the work had been removed, and then after peering through some overgrown bushes over a metal fence, I found it. The fence did not have a gate, but there was a makeshift path with flattened vegetation up the few metres to the artwork, indicating it was being appreciated by someone. In this garden dedicated to Brossa, emerging from the grass and bushes, there was a 2-metre high monolithic block sculpture based on a silkscreen poem by the artist where a faun is playing music between an *A* and a *Z*. Just like the punctuation marks at the velodrome, the faun was being taken back by nature and it just added further to the poem that Brossa was trying to tell.



*Image 4. Photograph of "Faune" (2004), published as a silkscreen by Joan Brossa in 1988. Copyright [2019] by Gala Jane Hazell.*

Seeking out these works was becoming like a treasure hunt: with little information to go on and with just a photo and an address, I was on a quest around the city to uncover all the Brossa works I could before my time ran out. They were all over the city; I had been walking past some every day and without even realising it. Walking back to the centre of town, I was on the hunt for “*Homage to the Book*” (1994) [Image 5], which I knew was located somewhere on the corner of Gran Via and Passeig de Gràcia. When I arrived at the busy intersection at peak hour, I found a sea of pedestrians crossing in all directions and cars trying to get through the traffic. It is a grand intersection with beautiful buildings on each corner, now home to modern clothing stores like H&M and Zara. It took me a while to locate this piece and moving with the crowds I nearly missed it in the middle section of the road. Seeing a very large red book in the street, I knew that must be it. After inspecting closer, I found the familiar signature of Brossa on the concrete base and, while this piece did not consist of words, it was still fascinating. I stood and took a photo with local commuters watching on as they rushed past and I noticed it had been defaced by some graffiti, giving me a pang of sadness for this work.



*Image 5.* Photograph of “Homage to the Book” (1994) by Joan Brossa. Photo copyright: Gala Jane Hazell.

With the rush of foot traffic, I was swept up and was on to the next hunt walking through the small passageways of the old town, to search for a shop called El Ingenio, the oldest fancy-dress shop in town, to find “*Lletres Gimnastes*” (1997), as seen in [Image 6]. I



recognised the area as I had been walking these streets before and had walked right past this shop, but I never noticed the two shiny red A's on the shop front. But this time, I saw them and recognised Brossa's work immediately; I was becoming a honing device to search out his work. It really was all over the city. By using single A's, it feels like Brossa is just beginning these poems and they will live on forever through the new generations.



*Image 6. Photograph of “Lletres Gimnastes” (detail) (1997)  
by Joan Brossa. Copyright [2019] by Gala Jane Hazell.*

After the journey of searching for these works, it made me question public art and especially public letter art, where the line is between art and a tourist attraction. Brossa's “*Bàrcino*” seems to be both, whereas other works of his tend to lean towards public art that gets little attention. I looked into other letters around Europe that might give me insight into this idea, and I came across the famous red and white letters, “*I Amsterdam*” in The Netherlands' capital. So, I ventured to Amsterdam in the hope of seeing these very famous letters, but I found out that they had been removed not long ago. Since I was disappointed by this, I dove deeper and found the reason behind their removal. The letters, which spanned over 23 metres long, were located outside the Rijksmuseum, which is home to many important historical artworks. According to journalist Natashah Hitti, critics suggest that tourists became more interested in taking photos of these letters outside of the museum than the artworks that are contained within the museum walls (2018, n. p.). It was estimated that around 6000 selfies were taken with the letters daily,

and while Brossa's bronze letters in Plaça Nova might not have reached a high number of selfies, these two works have many similarities. These critics bring up the idea that the letters in Amsterdam are not art and that people should be more interested in the works that are contained within the walls of a museum than that works outside. However, Brossa's work is considered art and lives outside for all to enjoy. Yet both are treated the same by tourists, always wanting their photo with it. So, I began to question what makes something art and what makes tourists so attracted to it. While I have not found the answer to this I endeavour to continue this journey of exploration and analysis of both artistic and touristic letters.

While I was searching out these artworks, it felt like I was journeying through a visual poem Brossa had written just for me, it made me understand poetry more and how it is not limited to words on paper. Looking at the sculptures and the interaction they have with the public has made me question many things about tourism and art and it will be a constant reminder any time I wish to take a selfie in front of a sculpture or a word, to stop and try and see what the artist wanted me to see. This journey has made me more interested in the single letter *A* and has pushed me to incorporate it into my own practice as I am at the beginning of my own visual poetry career [Figure 7]. I have used the technology of a laser cutter to create my very own *A* that I hid by the overgrown world where people walk past without noticing, but it is still there—a poem of its own and will continue to grow.



*Image 7. "A's In Public" (2020) by Gala Jane Hazell. Copyright [2020] by Gala Jane Hazell.*

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**Gala Jane Hazell** is an emerging artist currently studying a Bachelor of Art and Design at Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia. With a keen interest in text, fonts and signwriting this has a large influence on the work she creates. By using an amalgamation of printing practices and modern software and machinery, her work is blurring the lines between traditional and contemporary practices.

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