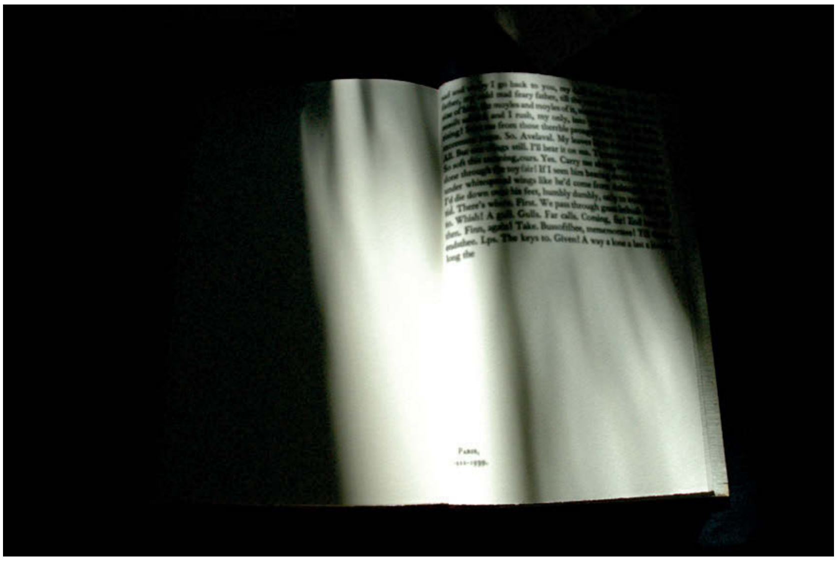
IT BEGINS IN THE BOOK
writing the material poem



JAMES STUART
Thesis submitted for a Masters of Creative Arts
University of Technology, Sydney
September 2009

Certificate of Authorship / Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Foreword

It Begins in the Book: writing the material poem is the title of my thesis, submitted as part of a candidature for a Masters of Creative Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney from March 2006 to September 2009. This period includes a leave of absence for the whole of 2008.

The practice-based components of my candidature are as follows:

The Homeless Gods (2006-2007)
A Flash poem presented as an interactive map interface
www.thehomelessgods.net

The Material Poem (2006-2007)
An anthology of text-based art and intermedia writing
www.nongeneric.net

Conversions (2008)
An exhibition of poetry in translation
www.nongeneric.net/itbeginsinthebook

The exegesis contained in this document forms the research-based component of my candidature. It should be read in concert with the accompanying website: www.nongeneric.net/itbeginsinthebook. This website replicates all written information contained herein and also provides additional images relating to the above practice-based components. Content exclusive to the website has been replicated on a CD, attached to the hard-copy of this thesis.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis has been made possible by the assistance and support of many individuals and organisations. I would particularly like to thank the following individuals: my academic supervisor at UTS, Martin Harrison; my proof-reader and constant companion Jane Gibian; Peter Minter, for his advice in my original admission application; my long-time creative partners, Karen Chen and Guillaume Potard; all of the contributors to *The Material Poem*; my fellow postgraduate students: Nour, Astrid, Kais, Wafa, Katherine, Suyin and Amy; and, finally, my daughter Marilla, whose arrival in the world provided the most real of deadlines.

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Abstract

It Begins in the Book: writing the material poem comprises practice-led research in the form of three creative projects, and a thesis. Its central question is how the theory and practice surrounding the materiality of language can be applied in the context of poetic practice.

The first of the three creative projects is *The Material Poem: an e-anthology of media-specific writing and text-based art*, published in mid-2007. The second, *The Homeless Gods*, is an online poem-world developed using Flash. The third and final work is Conversions, an exhibition of Chinese poetry in translation. I explore the processes underpinning them through dedicated project assessments. All projects are in some way collaborative and all parties are duly acknowledged.

The thesis formulates a model by which these works (and other literary endeavours engaged with the materiality of language) can be critically assessed.

The first proposition is that we must move beyond materiality's purely formal meaning. Accordingly, I have developed a three-pronged model of materiality that centres on the following questions: what enables, and how does, a reader to respond to a literary work (material basis); what socio-cultural forces influence the relationship between writers, readers and the language-object (materialism); and finally, the actual material expression (or materiality) of a language-object. This is the subject of the first chapter.

The subject of the second chapter is how this model might be applied to a specific literary genre, poetry. Drawing on texts by Huisman, Riffaterre and Perloff, I argue that poetry's material basis is driven by its visual interface, its localised semiotic systems and, in the case of certain poetic traditions, ultimately indeterminate meaning. This material basis differs vastly from that of most other literary genres, indicating potential for experimentation with poetry's material form.

The third and final chapter centres on this assessment. Having established that interactivity and interface are emblematic of poetry's material basis, I revisit the conceptual and creative work of artists/architects Arakawa and Gins to develop a model of materiality that echoes their concepts of terrain, landing sites and perception stations. In turn, this provides me with the required critical framework to revisit and reassess my creative projects as complete "language-objects".

00: Turning the First Page

This thesis and the creative projects associated with it were born from a longstanding interest in the materiality of language. My starting point was the tenet that poetry, because of its particular reading practices and semiotic structures, is as much a 'fine art' as a literary art. It follows that it must require a different treatment in the way it is presented to an audience. My aim, simply put, was to challenge the notion that poems should always end up in a book or on the pages of a journal, printed in the same font and heading structure as other texts.

The projects

The three creative projects I developed as part of this Masters responded to this challenge. *The Material Poem: an e-anthology of media-specific writing and text-based art* was the first, published in mid-2007. Initially available as an online and freely downloadable PDF e-book, it brought together the work of 28 Australian artists, writers and poets – all of whom were engaged with the materiality of language. The anthology now also has a life as a print-on-demand edition. While not strictly speaking a creative work, it nonetheless enabled me to develop my typographic skills on the one hand while also canvassing the current creative and critical trends within this field, at least insofar as Australia is concerned.

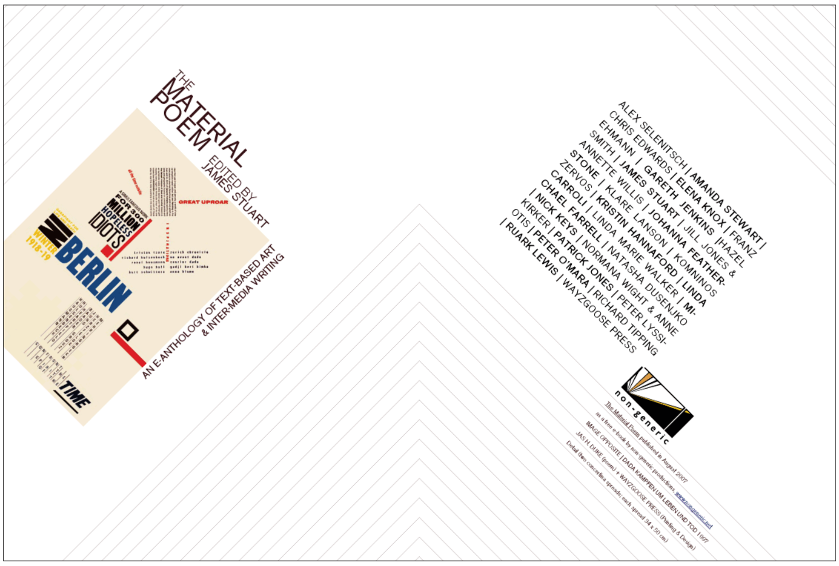

THE MATERIAL POEM
EDITED BY JAMES STUART
AN E-ANTHOLOGY OF TEXT-BASED ART & INTER-MEDIA WRITING
BERLIN
IDIOTS
GREAT UPROAR
TIME
ALEX SELENITSCH | AMANDA STEWART | CHRIS EDWARDS | ELENA KNOX | FRANZ EHMANN | GARETH JENKINS |HAZEL SMITH | JAMES STUART | JILL JONES & ANNETTE WILLIS | JOHANNA FEATHER-STONE | KLARE LANSON | KOMNINOS ZERVOS | KRISTIN HANNAFORD | LINDA CARROLI | LINDA MARIE WALKER | MI-CHAEL FARRELL | NATASHA DUSENJKO | NICK KEYS | NORMANA WIGHT & ANNE KIRKER | PATRICK JONES | PETER LYSSI-OTIS | PETER O'MARA | RICHARD TIPPING | RUARK LEWIS | WAYZGOOSE PRESS
non-generic
The Material Poem published in August 2007
as a free e-book by non-generic productions, www.nongeneric.net
IMAGE OPPOSITE | DADA KAMPFEN UM LEBEN UND TOD 1997
JAS H. DUKE (poem) + WAYZGOOSE PRESS (Printing & Design)
Detail (two concertina spreads; each spread 34 x 50 cm)

IMAGE 1
James Stuart (ed.), *The Material Poem* (2007), launch flyer

The second, and perhaps most challenging work, was *The Homeless Gods*, an online poem-world developed over the course of some 18 months. It was the result of a close collaboration with multimedia artist Karen Chen and sound artist Guillaume Potard. My role was as writer and director. *The Homeless Gods* took the form of a city map interface, inspired by role-play adventure games such as *Baldur's Gate* or *Neverwinter Nights*, and developed as an interactive Flash animation. Users were invited to discover the mythical city of New Eridu, wherein resided the fallen gods of Mesopotamia. Each location was represented by a custom-made, text-based Flash poem; each revealed some aspect or other of life in New Eridu. The extensive research into ancient Mesopotamian history, culture and mythology formed as much a part of the creative substance of the piece, as the poems and animated artworks themselves.

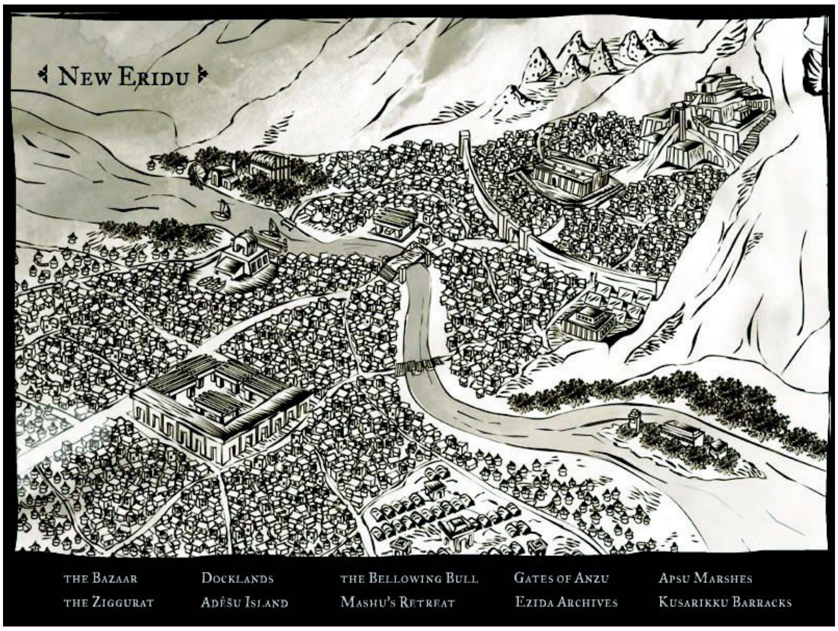


IMAGE 2
James Stuart et al., *The Homeless Gods* (2007), screenshot

The third and final work developed for this Masters was *Conversions*. *Conversions* placed the work of three Chinese poets – two of Yi, one of Miao nationality, all from Sichuan Province – into the English language. It differed from other translation projects in two ways: first, it brought the poems to life, not in a book or journal but as a large, Chinese-scroll style banners, installed within an existing social space (The Bookworm, a bookshop/restaurant in Chengdu); second, the translation teams were all "untrained". Thus, the process of learning the art of translation formed an integral part of the project; process was just as important as the end result. All translators worked collaboratively and, where possible, with the poets themselves. My role in the project was as director, banner designer and principal translator.

Having completed the three projects, and having read much critical work in that time, the final question was how to develop a theoretical exegesis that tied all three components together.

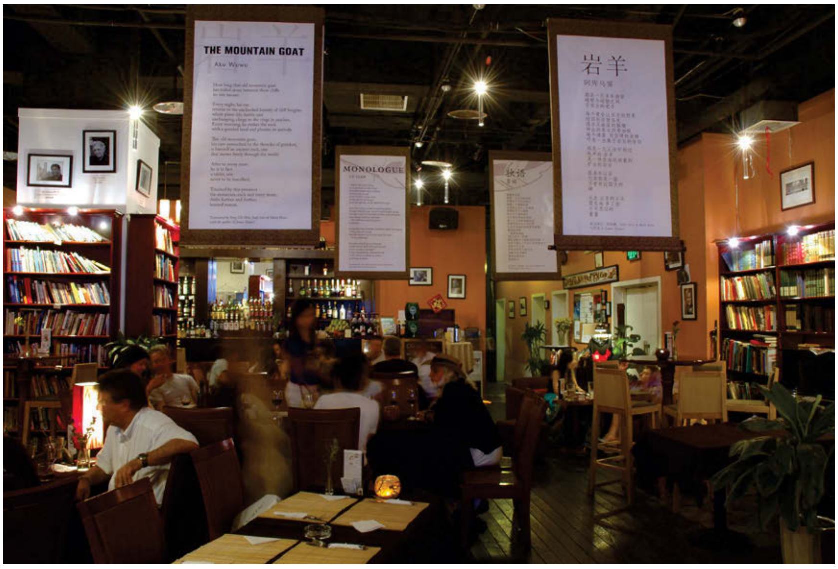


IMAGE 3
James Stuart et al., *Conversions* (2008), Bookworm Chengdu [Photograph: James Stuart]

Developing the language of materiality

At the outset of this Masters, before undertaking even the first of the creative projects, I had been able to expand my understanding of the term materiality beyond the formal sense of the concept. In my early thinking, two other modes of materiality also emerged: first, a literary work's material basis – or the literary devices through which a reader formulates an aesthetic response to it; second, its material context – that is, the social systems through which the work is produced and received as a *language-object*. This three-pronged model of materiality emerged as essential to the thesis: what enables, and how does, a reader to respond to a literary work (material basis); what socio-cultural forces influence the relationship between writers, readers and the language-object (materialism); and finally, the actual material expression (or materiality) of a language-object. This is the subject of my first chapter.

The question then was how this model might be applied to a specific literary genre, poetry. It had become clear that my model of materiality was reader-centric, rather than author-centric, since it is primarily concerned with the processes and conditions that influence how a work is "consumed". Part of the issue with this reader-centric approach are the multiple discursive distinctions surrounding poetry, each tied up with larger literary traditions, that attempt to define what it may or may not be: one person's poem is another's prose.

Thus the second chapter deals with a reasonably simple question: what is the material basis of poetry? This might be rephrased more simply as: what is poetry and how do we read it? Three texts proved especially relevant in this regard. Rosemary Huismann's *The Written Poem: semiotic conventions from old to modern English* offers a simple but well-wrought answer to the first half of this question, drawing the direct association between the visual qualities inherent to lineated text and how we identify a poem. The next step is to ask how we might read such a work. Here, I was drawn to Michel Riffaterre's *The Semiotics of Poetry*, in which he argues that re-reading is essential to engaging with poetry's localised semiotic systems. Finally, I looked at Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* in which she traces the non-representational tradition that emerges from Rimbaud and continues through to the present day in the works of seminal poets such as John Ashbery and John Cage: in essence she outlines the demands that this poetic strand makes of its readers, one in which the onus for meaning-making is put squarely in the reader's own hands. Through this analysis I was able to identify aspects of poetic discourse that might serve as its material basis. In turn, these reinforced my initial idea that poetry, as a genre, seemed especially suitable for experimentation with its material expression.

But the form that such experimentation might take was still far from resolved, despite my having completed all three creative projects. What I needed was a framework that would allow me to assess the relative success of these projects and formulate the lessons that I had learned. In short, I wanted some means of taking this practice-led research and applying it to the development of future creative projects.

The third and final chapter centred on this assessment. What are the fundamental principles that should guide the material expression of a poem and its framing as a language-object? Having divined that interactivity and interface were emblematic of poetry's material basis, I asked whether new media arts was the appropriate material response – interactivity and interface being two terms closely associated with new media technology. I found, however, that such media-based limitations were not required. By revisiting the conceptual and creative work of artists/architects Arakawa and Gins, I was able to develop a model of materiality that echoed their concepts of terrain, landing sites and spatial outcomes. In turn, this gave me the required critical framework to revisit and reassess my creative projects.

By now it had become clear that, had I written this exegesis first, I would no doubt have undertaken each of the projects differently, in some way, shape or form. But it is altogether possible that the direction taken in my critical thinking might not have been possible without the substance of the creative; the creative enquiries into the materiality of language have been of equal importance to the critical. Many of the lessons learnt through resolving these project's initial ideas into defined forms have been applied in formulating this extended essay, even if I avoid making explicit reference to them. Rather than focus my critical writing on this body of work, I have decided to take the model developed in the third and final chapter and apply it retrospectively. These analyses can be found as brief introductions to the critical works themselves.

I hope that this exegesis and the associated creative works together serve as guidelines – of sorts – by which to consolidate and advance my practice in this field of both literary and artistic endeavour.

01: A Survey of Materiality in Literature

Much ink has been spilt over Stéphane Mallarmé’s famous dictum: ‘All earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book.’[1] Because Mallarmé is not the subject of this thesis but, as suggested by the title, its starting point my intention is not to trace a genealogy of such ink-spills. Instead, I want to explore how the fundamental ideas he espoused – namely the idea of pure or essential language and the Book (*le Livre)* as its repository – are transformed by the creative writing and theoretical practices concerned with the materiality of language.

Materiality is a term most often used in relation to a work’s medium, that is the form by which language reaches us. This may be book, billboard or Mallarmé’s pet hate, the newspaper. But I have come to believe that understanding the materiality of language requires us to consider the term in a broader socio-cultural context, leading to a model which also integrates the material basis of literature and the materialist notion of the language-object, two terms which I will explain more satisfactorily through this discussion. The fundamental point is this: language is a construct that can never escape either the system that produces it or that in which it is consumed. Writers and artists who engage with this conundrum through the construction of media-specific language-objects are the ultimate subject of this first chapter. Their mode of writing centres on unified and crafted language-based works that move fluidly across artistic genres and, ultimately, continue the spatial and performative compositions seen in Mallarmé’s *Un coup des dès*, his one and only attempt to realise *le Livre*.

I have always had reservations about Mallarmé’s poetry and criticism: there is an unashamed obscurity in Mallarmé’s poetic and critical writing, stemming perhaps from an elitist belief that wordsmiths are the ultimate distillers of worldly experience. The more *pure* your language becomes – a concept explored below – the closer you are to reaching an equivalence with pure being.[2] It is easy to see how poets and writers have come to romanticise a worldview ‘about art which can explode, diamontinely, in this forever time, in the integrity of the Book’.[3]

Maurice Blanchot later tried to position *le Livre* in this critical context, noting how Mallarmé believed in the transformational power of language, or its 'converting potential', and wanted poetry to rebel against the illusion that language can be substantive.[4] Mallarmé, according to Blanchot, maintained that reality is comprised of correspondences rather than objects. *Le Livre* is entwined with this metaphysics of language: pure being can be inscribed on its pages provided the language used negates the representation of fiction and objects; names or places. This process is one of exacting precision, hence the abolition of chance that Mallarmé famously espoused. Such an enterprise is essentially impossible or at least paradoxical, as Blanchot concedes, echoing Wittgenstein's notion that we can only know the world through language:[5] 'The book's obviousness, its palpable presence, is thus such that we have to say that it exists and is present since without it nothing could ever be present, and yet that it never quite conforms to the conditions of real existence.'[6]

This concession allows Blanchot to reappraise Mallarmé in terms of the political economy and the ability for his ideas to make an impact on the history of ideas: 'A work of art must express the conflict between the "times" and the creative process.'[7] I would like to further develop this idea in discussing the materiality of language rather than its metaphysics.

Three modes of materiality

Like all concepts, materiality has different meanings within different critical disciplines, but at a base level it might be said to relate to the physicality of an object. It follows that any discussion concerning the materiality of language should centre upon the particularities of the medium through which a lanaguage work is expressed – whether sound, print or screen – and how that materiality relates to a writer's various conceptual and formal motivations. However, I am proposing here a model for the materiality of language that depends on three interrelated parts.

The first is overwhelmingly engaged with verbal content and style, the structuring of words to represent objects (real or imagined) and embody ideas. This holds as true for a popular novelist using normative grammar and syntax to deliver a straightforward narrative as for an experimental poet assembling words in a system that steps beyond the bounds of consensual linguistic patterns. While their respective thematic and conceptual frameworks differ vastly, (written) language is the common currency. What differ also are the literary devices at play – craft and style – since these guide our aesthetic response to a work (be it intellectual, emotional or both). In this model of materiality, verbal content and the literary devices employed to structure it form the *material basis* which a reader must internalise in order to formulate an aesthetic response to any given literary text.

A useful essay by Daniel Punday attempts to explore how this literary material basis functions, expanding on the critical thinking of W.K. Wimsatt and Lubomír Dolezel. In Wimsatt's eyes poetry is amphibious, Punday writes, because it 'both refers to and, hence, depends on ideas as its material basis, and yet at the same time directs the reader back toward the words themselves as the prime material of the work.'[8] Fiction, however, 'demands a different type of response from poetry,' he continues, elaborating on Dolzel's approach to the genre's aesthetic ontology, which has 'at least three elements [...] *words*, *objects* [eg. narrative, character and places], and *themes*.'[9] Different readers will focus upon different aspects of literature: some may be interested purely in narrative, as is often the case; others will balance this interest with a concern for the relative complexity of an author's use of language and grammar. Also implied is the notion that a poem cannot be read the same way as prose, a concept to be fleshed out in the second chapter of this thesis.

Parallel to this approach has been a concern with exactly how language, as a material form, can embody meaning, which is essentially immaterial. At its extreme is the deconstructionist attitude of Jacques Derrida, Blanchot and others who posit that language only ever defers meaning. More practically, critics such as Bourdieu and Bakhtin have argued that language is a motivated system entwined with socio-cultural contexts; language depends upon the material conditions that produce it and those that regulate its consumption, a critical position that holds some affinity with Marx's dialectical materialism.[10]

For example, in approaching language through the prism of Bakhtin's dialogic imagination we find that the discourse of a literary work – the language it deploys and meaning it intends – is no longer a heterogenous unit, the pure intention of a speaker. Instead, the socially constructed nature of language requires that a work of literature be seen as a dialogue between its author and its reader – an outsider to the work who is caught in a separate 'verbal-ideological life' and can only engage with it as an object: 'Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself in a living impulse toward the object...'[11] In this word, *object*, we find Bakhtin's relevance to the question at hand: we move towards a communications model of language whereby the production and reception of a work are entwined with its broadcast – to use a technological analogy – a process that necessitates the presence of a both a material object to carry the language (a book, a radio, a computer) and a transmission framework.[12] I want to propose that when we discuss the materialism of language we are in fact thinking of it as a *language-object*. This is a critical position closely related to contemporary semiotic models, such as those espoused by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen with regards to visual communication, and the structuralist approaches of Julie Kristeva and Roland Barthes who maintain the encoding and decoding of language are acts that occur within given (and often distinct) cultural systems. Such models have also closely influenced contemporary translation theory.[13]

The third and final model for the materiality of language is that with which I began this discussion: language's material form or, as I prefer to say, its material expression, a term that captures some of the process-based assumptions inherent to the communications model briefly described above. The issue is not purely a dialectic of visual format and verbal content; instead, we engage the physical, aural and visual texture of a literary work – as technology and imagination unlock further synaesthetic possibilities, we might also add smell and taste to that list. It is with such notions in mind that N. Katherine Hayles argues, 'Materiality of the [literary] artefact can no longer be positioned as a subspeciality within literary studies; it must be central, for without it we have little hope of forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies.'[14]

However, in expanding my conceptual understanding of materiality it has become clear that the material expression of literature and the two other materialities I have outlined must, to some degree, co-exist and interrelate. My argument is that the material basis of a literary work and larger questions regarding how, and in what contexts, language *means* are linked by a work's material expression.

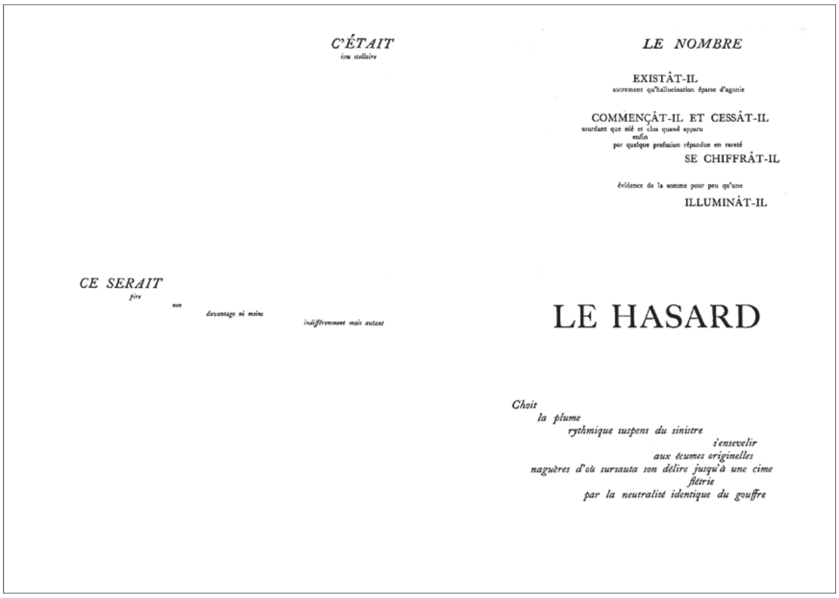
Joseph Grigely, in *Textualterity*, echoes this approach when he presents a detailed account of the problems faced by textual criticism, arguing that the appeal of a textual object 'is precisely its ability to dislocate itself from a condition of fixedness, thereby metonymizing that which it represents … Textual criticism has historically worked in the opposite direction … towards fixedness.'[15] This impetus in textual criticism is based upon several fundamental beliefs, among which is the assumed iterability of language and of texts. However, when material considerations are considered as part of this process, Grigely argues, the situation changes: 'A reprint, one might say, is *motivated*: it does not necessarily exist for the same reasons as that of which it is a reprint.' From this he concludes:

> Instead of viewing literature, or artworks, as finished productions we might instead view them as works of fluxion that experience stasis or duration in a particular edition or a particular exhibition space. Yet, what is particular about a particular edition or a particular exhibition space is ultimately undermined by its instability: it is particular only in our conceptualization of it as such, not by virtue of its implied or physical context. For [Jerome] McGann there are no final or finished works, but only final or finished texts.[16]

While Grigely's emphasis upon the ultimate instability of a literary work (or indeed a work of art) requires a more nuanced account, and indeed critique[17], I agree with its general thrust.

Take the example of a subversive political novel written by a dissident author living under an authoritarian regime. The work is written, published and very quickly banned by the government. Such a work might only be distributed within the country as illicit photocopied manuscripts. But that same novel, smuggled out by a sympathetic foreigner, is concurrently translated and published as a glossy paperback in another country. There is a gulf in the meaning embodied by these two material expressions and by the socio-cultural motivations at play in each instance. Dissident Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) suffered exactly this fate: imprisoned for his writing; his novels banned by three successive regimes while his work was feted in democratic societies. Similarly, Anna Akhmatova, under Stalin's Soviet rule, could not risk committing poems to paper, for the very real fear of execution or incarceration should they be found. Instead, she resorted to reciting poems to a close group of friends who helped her commit them to memory – how different a reality this is to mine as I read her story in the elegantly printed *New York Review of Books*.[18]

Such histories draw into focus the scope for materiality within literary criticism while also situating the relevance of such an approach beyond the technological imperatives that motivate Hayles. They indicate how a literary work's material expression might form a part of the creative process that delivers it – a question that is not simply one of cover design. The oral culture essential to Akhmatova's mode of composition, and the role of the body and the voice in poetic performance, point to the broad range of enquiry that material studies of literature encompasses. But the pressing question in this introductory chapter is how such a substantive view of language can co-exist with the seemingly irreconcilable metaphysics of *le Livre*.



C'ÉTAIT
issu stellaire

CE SERAIT
pire
non
davantage ni moins
indifféremment mais autant

LE NOMBRE

EXISTÂT-IL
autrement qu'hallucination éparse d'agonie

COMMENÇÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL
sourdant que nié et clos quand apparu
enfin
par quelque profusion répandue en rareté
SE CHIFFRÂT-IL

évidence de la somme pour peu qu'une
ILLUMINÂT-IL

LE HASARD

Choit
la plume
rythmique suspens du sinistre
s'ensevelir
aux écumes originelles
naguères d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime
flétrie
par la neutralité identique du gouffre

IMAGE 1
Stephane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dès: jamais la chance n'abolira le hasard,* typical spread

Johanna Drucker, in examining some of the precursors to the so-called Century of Artist's Books that she espoused in the book of same title, takes up a similar question. She responds by exploring how Mallarmé's philosophical position – of *le Livre* as an egoless and timeless entity where language was form and ideas, being – gave rise to the typographical experimentation that was to characterise one of his most enduring works, *Un coup de dès: jamais la chance n'abolira le hasard* (*Dice Thrown Never Will Annul Chance*) [Image 1]. In turn, *Un coup de dès* would influence the expansion of modernist typography in early 20th century Europe.

Realising some of the impossibility of his proposal, Mallarmé began to conceive of the page as space, a white abyss that confronted the writer and which would be filled through spatial composition rather than just literary composition. He positioned the letter as the basic unit for literature and the page as the score of a musical composition, an approach which influenced his understanding of *le Livre*. He wanted to scatter the structure of the *quotidian book* and destroy its reliance upon columns, text blocks and other standard typographical devices: 'Mallarmé was attempting a synthesis between a philosophical vision of the book as an expansive instrument of the spirit and the capacity of its physical forms to embody thought in new visual arrangements.'[19]

Reframing this notion, we might say his idealised material expression for literature – as a spatial composition on the white abyss of the page – was a direct response to his material basis for literature, namely its attempt to embody pure thought.[20] Ironically, the technology and cultural attitudes required to implement this vision were to follow his death: the definitive printed edition of *Un coup de dès* was only published in 1914 (the work was written in 1895 and first published in 1897).[21] To derive such a pragmatic response from Mallarmé's ethereal musings might seem reductive. But my central point is that Mallarmé's work, in conceiving the page as a white abyss for the performance of language as the embodiment of pure thought, challenges some of the fundamental ways in which we conceive the space of literature. A materialist analysis of Mallarmé fleshes out how any thinking about what poetry actually is – or indeed what literature or language are – might lead to a revision of how such language-objects are embodied and consumed. In this media- and discourse-rich age, it also leads us to call into question the notion that 'All earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book.' Hence the title of this thesis: it begins in the book.

The Material Poem: applied materiality

Such a critical framework was at the core of my thinking when I began editing *The Material Poem: an e-anthology of text-based art and inter-media writing*.[22] This 270-odd-page publication collects the work of 28 Australian poets, artists and critics, all of whom are engaged with poetry, and more broadly language, as a material form.

The body of work is inter-disciplinary, inter-media and often collaborative, spanning a wide variety of formal contexts – page, screen, canvas, book, performance and physical space. While intended to showcase the vibrancy of experimental writing in Australia, its secondary function was to demonstrate how writing functions as a practice that is never purely literary – even for the purest of literary figures, of whom Mallarmé is a shining exemplar. Language depends upon material expression, context and basis for its conception, broadcast and consumption. Each work in the anthology is the result of engagement with this set of relationships. I will briefly discuss a few such works now.

Though I am loathe to admit to personal favourites among the contributions I find myself constantly drawn to the work of Wayzgoose Press, a private press comprised of Mike Hudson and Jadwiga Jarvis, partly because of the absolute perfection of craft at play but also because they are deal directly with a literary form close to my heart: poetry. Wayzgoose was established in 1985 and, in the intervening 20-odd years, has produced 20 books, 46 broadsides and numerous ephemeral printings all of which are manually typeset and printed in their Blue Mountains studio/workshop. These limited-edition works also feature original prints, which explore the gamut of hand-printing techniques from etchings through to woodblock prints and linocuts. Collaboration with writers is at the core of their book-works, many of which are centred on the poem and its expression as a material form.

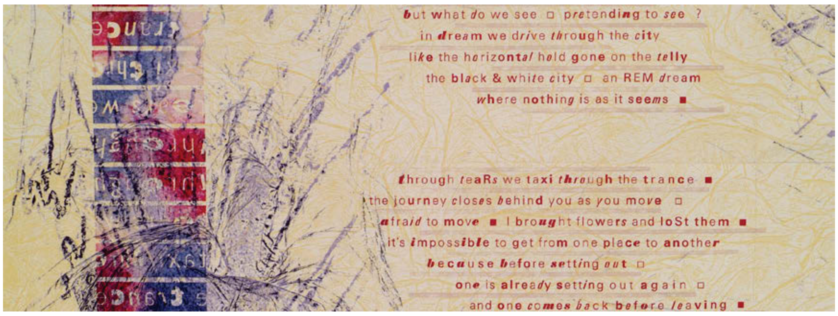

but what do we see □ pretending to see ?
in dream we drive through the city
like the horizontal hold gone on the telly
the black & white city □ an REM dream
where nothing is as it seems ■
through teaRs we taxi through the trance ■
the journey closes behind you as you move □
afraid to move ■ I brought flowers and loSt them ■
it's impossible to get from one place to another
because before setting out □
one is already setting out again □
and one comes back before leaving ■

IMAGE 2
George Alexander and Wayzgoose Press, *Orpheus through the rear-vision mirror* (2002), detail

Hudson and Jarvis's approach to such collaborations – and their fascination with material expression of language – can be gleaned from their introduction to *Orpheus through the rear-vision mirror* [Image 2], a large concertina-fold bookwork featuring a poem by George Alexander, where they respond to Alexander's trope that 'meaning in poetry often seems to float just out of reach, like lost paper sail boats':

> We have rearranged the traditional appearance of the individual words of the poem by mixing in different type styles so as to encourage a slower and more deliberate reading than the average reader is accustomed to with today's universal emphasis on speed. This multifaceted depiction of words as images made of letters provides yet another visual reminder of the "layering" character of poetry.[23]

This approach – also discussed in my introduction to *The Material Poem* – provides a counterpoint to Mallarmé's advocacy of experimental typography. Here Wayzgoose identify the material basis of poetry as its ability to defer or obscure meaning (rather than its ability to embody pure thought) and conclude that this requires an experimental approach to typography, especially in the context of an age suffering from information overload.

Another feature of their works is their sheer scale. Their most recent concertina-fold books, when fully extended, reach eight metres in length. The process of reading them is best described as one, literally, of navigation: you must physically move through the work to engage with it, necessitating a more bodily relationship to the text than would be expected of standard codex-format books. The idea of navigation also connotes the drawn-out time span required to "read" the text. Given the radically different nature of Wayzgoose's book-works, a more comprehensive survey would consider each piece individually, examining the relationship between individual author, text, and Hudson and Jarvis's artistic response. For example, a survey of the radically modern Bauhaus and Dada design and arts movements in early 20th century Europe would be required to fully appraise their interpretation of Jas H. Duke's *Dada: Kampfen um Leben und Tod* [Image 3]. Here, the fundamentally performative nature of Duke's text (who was well known for the unique oral delivery of his poems) has been assimilated into the unmistakeably bold typography of early modernist design, so often used for the posters, broadsheets, manifestos and other publications of the period.

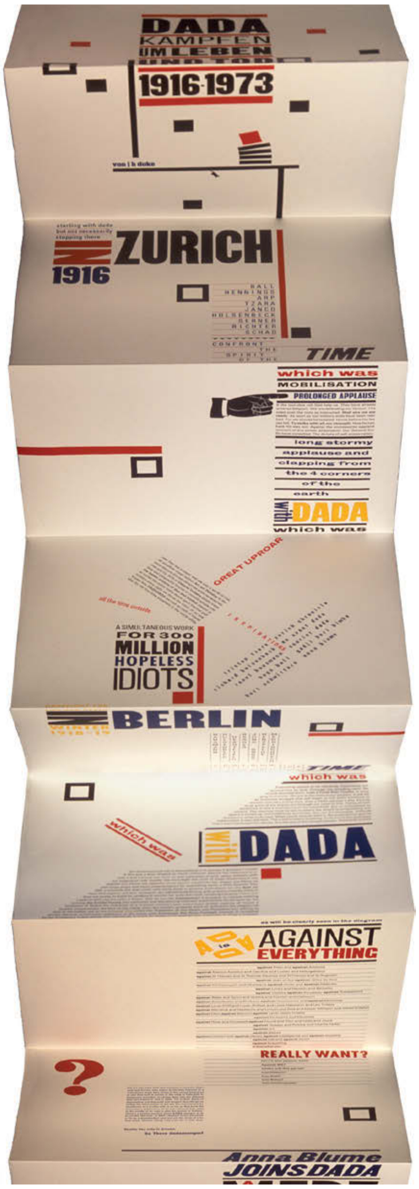

DADA
KAMPFEN
UM LEBEN
1916-1973
ZURICH
1916
TIME
which was
MOBILISATION
PROLONGED APPLAUSE
long stormy applause and clapping from the 4 corners of the earth
DADA
which was
GREAT UPROAR
A SIMULTANEOUS WORK
FOR 300
MILLION
HOPELESS
IDIOTS
BERLIN
which was
DADA
AGAINST
EVERYTHING
REALLY WANT?
?
Anna Blume
JOINS DADA

IMAGE 3
Jas H. Duke and Wayzgoose Press, *Dada: Kampfen Leben Und Tod* (1997), partially unfolded work

While Wayzgoose Press, whose work is collected internationally and can be visited at most major state libraries in Australia, represents the pinnacle of page- and book-based practices, other contributors to *The Material Poem* demonstrate how language can function as both a spatial and performative practice. Franz Ehmann is an Austrian-born and Brisbane-based painter, performance and installation artist whose practices centre very much on both the written word and a cultivated sense of the absurd.

When I think of Ehmann I visualise two things: one is the image of him with a small plank, whereupon is perched a wooden rabbit, extending from his mouth and obscuring his face (from the photographic work *Boy am I scared*, 2003); the other is the white, hand-painted script on a black background that characterises his use of text. In a painting such as the epic 2.7 x 2.4 metre Happiness, I am struck by the energy of Ehmann's script overwhelming the black abyss of the canvas. The almost stream-of-consciousness nature of his meditation on happiness assumes the form of a discontinuous and, dare I say, Mallarméan visual essay whose text performs more than it lies passively, waiting to be read.

But Ehmann's use of text in painting is not in itself original. We might compare it to Angela Brennan's FAITES L'AMOUR PAS LA GUERRE (Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, 2004, Image 4), an exhibition in which the artist painted various literary quotes over colourful abstract backgrounds. The results are bland at best, outright kitsch at worst. Apart from her gaudy use of colour, lazily painted backdrops and the need to plunder textual sources rather than use her own writing (or adapt that of others), perhaps what is fundamentally wrong in Brennan's text-based art is the lack of correlation between material basis of the text and its final material expression in painted form. Indeed, the exhibition notes refer to 'a bower of poetry and allusion' in which words become 'glaze-like or function as structural elements in their semantic content and the shapes and architecture of each letter.'[24] What Brennan has tried to do is make the architecture of the letters, rather than verbal content, function as meaning. In doing so, little heed has been paid to the original text, its material basis and how this might be expressed in a painterly way. She could just as easily have used passages from a Victoria's Secret catalogue, and perhaps have generated more intellectually challenging works in the process.[25]

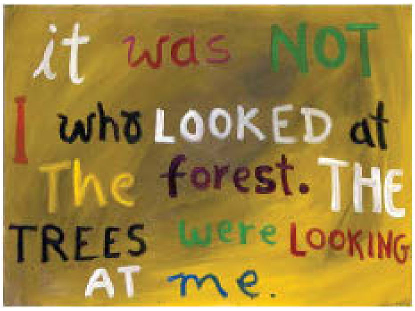


IMAGE 4
Angela Brennan, *It was not I who looked* (2003) from http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au

What differentiates Ehmann from Brennan, on the other hand, is not just the correlation between the energy of his writing and its spatial arrangement on the canvas. Ehmann is also interested in how sculptural or performance-based interventions within the gallery space are deployed as part of the reading experience. His *Speaking the World into Existence*

[Image 5] exhibitions at the Institute of Modern Art (2004 and 2006) were hung with extensive word works punctuated by various sculptures and spatial transformation that forced the viewer to navigate not just the space but the words themselves. In his 2006 exhibition, Ehmann covered one wall with large black paper on which were scripted the last meals of American death row prisoners. In front of these works, on a newspaper-lined floor, he arranged perishable food items and empty bowls. The combination of these two elements creates a simple poignancy, one that attributes the final wishes and their incarnation as physical objects to the palpable absence of the executed.

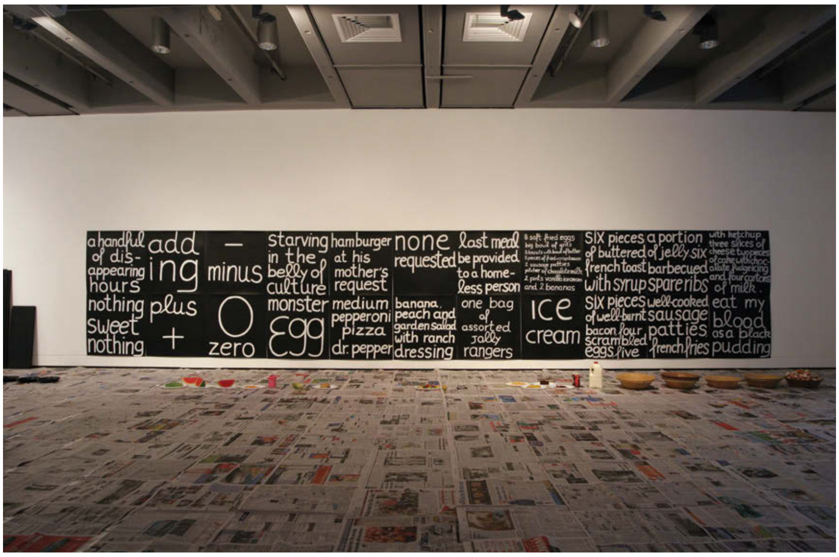

a handful of dis- appearing hours
add ing
– minus
starving in the belly of culture
hamburger at his mother's request
none requested
last meal be provided to a home- less person
8 soft fried eggs big bowl of grits 5 biscuits with bowl of butter 5 pieces of fried-crisp bacon 2 sausage patties pitcher of chocolate milk 2 pints vanilla icecream and 2 bananas
six pieces of buttered french toast with syrup
a portion of jelly six barbecued spare ribs
with ketchup three slices of cheese two pieces of cake with chocolate fudge icing and four cartons of milk.
nothing sweet nothing
plus +
O zero
monster egg
medium pepperoni pizza dr. pepper
banana, peach and garden salad with ranch dressing
one bag of assorted jolly rangers
ice cream
six pieces of well-burnt bacon, four scrambled eggs, five
well-cooked sausage patties french fries
eat my blood as a black pudding

IMAGE 5
Franz Ehmann, *Speaking the world into existence* (2006), exhibition detail

I have discussed elsewhere the importance of Ehmann's word-installations in relation to the interactivity of reading so will leave that aspect of his work to one side in this instance.[26] Ehmann and Wayzgoose Press are only two representatives from the artists surveyed in *The Material Poem*, whether it be collaborative digital work of poet Gareth Jenkins, the word sculpture and performance of Ruark Lewis or the video-poem and text-installations of Elena Knox. Such a discussion would have referred back to my central point about the correlation between the three-different models of materiality that I have outlined in relation to language: material basis – how we form an aesthetic response to the verbal content and style of a literary work; the language-object, stemming from the socio-cultural framework upon which languages depends to "mean"; and, material expression – the final form (physical, aural or virtual) through which language is able to become an object.

Such a model allows us to re-assess Mallarmé as a poet whose revolution consisted not just in thinking about what literature and poetry should be but also how these conceptions of language could be made incarnate, that is, material. Such thinking allows the materiality of writing to move beyond Brennan's text-based art into the evermore-satisfying realm of art-based text. Exactly how we might apply such an undertaking to the genre of poetry is the subject of the next chapter in this thesis.

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1 Mallarmé, S. 'The Book: a spiritual instrument' (trans. Caws, M.A.), *Stephane Mallarmé: Selected Poetry and Prose,* Caws, M. A. ed. (New York: New Directions Books, 1982), p. 80.

2 See for example Blanchot, M. 'Mallarmé's Experience', Cook, J. (ed.) *Poetry in theory: An anthology 1900-2000*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 332: 'In verse, words become "elements" again, and the word *nuit* despite its brilliance, becomes night's intimacy.'

3 Mallarmé, S. 'Action Restricted' (1982), p. 80.

4 Blanchot, M. 'The Book to Come' in Rothenberg, J. and Clay, S. (eds.) *A Book of the Book* (New York: Granary Books, 2000), p. 142.

5 Such a position, for example, relates intuitively to Ludwig Wittgenstein's arguments on the subject of meaning and understanding: 'The process we call the understanding of a sentence or of a description is sometimes a process of translation from one symbolism into another; tracing a picture, copying something, or translating into another mode of representation [...] When someone interprets, or understands, a sign in one sense or another, what he is doing is taking a step in a calculus (like a calculation). What he *does* is roughtly what he does if he gives expression to his interpretation. / "Thought" sometimes means a particular mental process which may accompany the utterance of a sentence and sometimes the sentence itself in the system of language.' Wittengenstein, L. *The Wittgenstein Reader*, Kenny, A. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1994), pp. 62-66.

6 Blanchot, M. (2000), p. 146.

7 ibid. p. 146.

8 Punday, D. 'Toying with the Parser: Aesthetic Materility in Electronic Writing' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 61 No. 2, Spring 2003, p.106.

9 ibid. p.108.

10 See Bakhtin, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Holquist, M (ed.), Emerson, C. and Holquist, M (trans.) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

11 ibid. pp 290-292.

12 See for example the Shannon & Weaver communications model, in Clampitt, P.G. *Communicating for Managerial Efffectiveness* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), p.7, p.12.

13 See Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. *Reading images: the grammar of visual design (*London: Routledge, 2006) and Bassnett-McGuire, S. *Translations Studies* (London: Routledge, 2002 [3rd ed]).

14 Hayles, N. K. *Writing Machines* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 19.

15 Grigely, J. *Textualterity : art, theory, and textual criticism* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p.90.

16 ibid, p.92.

17 Such a critique might follow these lines: 'No, there is no absolute meaning associated with a text, but yes, there are certainly predictable meanings' Huisman, R. *The Written Poem : semiotic conventions from old to modern English* (London: Casell, 1998), p. 7.

18 See Figes, O. 'Anna the Great', *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 53, No. 11, 22 June, 2006.

19 Drucker, J. *The century of artists' books* (New York City: Granary Books, 2004), p. 36.

20 See also Sieburth, R. 'From Mallarmé's *Le Livre*' in *A Book of the Book*, Rothenberg, J. and Clay, S. (eds.) (New York: Granary Books, 2000). Here Sieburth discusses Mallarmé's virtually incomprehensible scattered notes as a 'scene of the mind in play, in action on the *support* of the page.' (p. 133)

21 The emergence of new electronic production technologies have further expanded the possibilities for *Un Coup des dès* with a number of "remixes" or versions appearing, such as Chris Edwards' mistranslation *A Fluke* (see http://jacketmagazine.com/29/fluke01en.shtml).

22 Stuart, J. (ed.) *The Material Poem: an e-anthology of text-based art and inter-media writing* (Sydney: non-generic productions, 2007), downloadable from www.nongeneric.net.

23 Jarvis, J. and Hudson M. 'Foreword', *Orpheus through the rear-vision mirror* (Katoomba: Wayzgoose Press, 2002).

24 Press release, *Angela Brennan – FAITES L'AMOUR PAS LA GUERRE*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery (Sydney: 2004), from http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au, accessed 21/10/2008.

25 Australian artist Imant Tillers's use of text in relation to postcolonial interpretations of the Australian landscape, for example, shows up the underwhelming superficiality at play in Brennan's text-based paintings.

26 See Stuart, J. 'Text-art and interactive reading' in *Artlink*, vol. 27 No.1, 2006.

02: A Few Ways to Skin a Poem

If you live in a contemporary literate culture, it is quite possible you will spend an equivalent amount of time *seeing* language as a visual, printed (or written) medium as you will listening to it as a spoken medium. The case is not hard to make: billboards and banners litter the roadsides proclaiming the value of this product or that. The internet remains (for the time being) very much the realm of textual content; search engines trawl through web domains across the globe based on written-word search terms entered by users. Indeed, written code underpins the very software required for the World Wide Web's existence. In terms of intra-personal communication, text messaging and email are as common as phone calls. On television, credits roll after the show; advertisements are punctuated by written language. In printed media, still literature's principal vessel, the written word remains the foremost means of communication.

But (written) words rely upon both their visual and verbal structures to communicate. Leeuwen and Kress outline such a position thus: 'What is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and semantic structures is, in visual communication, expressed through the choice between, for instance, different uses of colour or different compositional structures.'[1] The process is more complex (as Leeuwen and Kress go on to demonstrate) since other factors must be considered too: quality of paper, layout and printing in the case of a book; positioning and artistic direction in the case of a billboard; place of publication; and so on. The problem becomes one of material expression and, therefore, of material basis (the basis by which we form an aesthetic response to a work) and materialism (the particular socio-cultural contexts in which a work is produced and consumed).

Rarely does literature's critical and creative practice factor in this tension between the verbal and the material. From a creative point of view, such decisions are left to publishers or designers who decide whether a book should use this font and that cover design. At best, a writer may be a stakeholder in the design of their book cover. At worst they are shut out altogether.

Decisions concerning the material expression of literature are often institutional not personal; they rely upon literary convention and not individual material expression for their material form.[2]

It must be said that this is a system that, on the whole, works well: the paperback is perfectly suited to most fiction while beautifully presented coffee-table books can inspire the appropriate sense of prestige and awe in those who consume them; as language-objects, their material basis is matched with their material expression. One instance where this correlation does not seem to take place is poetry – and poetry is the principal subject of this second chapter.

Determining poetry's material basis

In order to support such a statement I want to first explore what the material basis for poetry might be and how it differs from prose's. Michel Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* and Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* will be key texts in this study. I want to establish some of the formal qualities that constitute "poetry", both visually and linguistically. These will inform the third chapter of this thesis, in which I develop a model to inform the production of material poetry.

This task is fraught with a number of definitional balancing acts. The difficulty resides in the fragmentary nature of the poetic field itself, which Charles Bernstein somewhat dryly refers to as 'balkanization'.[3] What Bernstein means, and he is correct I think, is any statement delineating one poetry from another is ultimately the product of a particular interpretive community, to use Stanley Fish's term, with its own idea of what poetry is and is not. Indeed, an e.e. cummings poem and a Shakespearian sonnet bare little formal resemblance: the fomer is comprised of sentence fragments scattered across the page, all in lower-case type; the latter is a strict 14-line unit, comprised of four stanzas, with a strict rhyming pattern. But few would hesitate to recognise both as poetry. Here Australian academic Rosemary Huisman, whose book *The Written Poem: semiotic conventions from old to modern English* becomes directly relevant. In introducing *The Written Poem* Huisman recognises the conundrums raised by discussions of poetry in the abstract: a reader's conception of genre will vary according to the particular socio-cultural contexts, in which they find themselves – their habitus, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, as Huisman does. Instead, she prefers the term "discourse" to "genre" when discussing poetry, recognising how the concept of poetry has changed over time through the various discursive practices that engage with it. Tellingly, she notes how such practices are also related to material context, in an historical sense. The lineation of poetry is a case in point.

Huisman shows that prior to the development and proliferation of printing technology, poetry in the Anglo-Saxon tradition had been a predominantly oral or phonetic practice, with linguistic characteristics such as the repetition of formal structures like rhyme and rhythm. Such characteristics persisted when poetry began to be more systematically inscribed (though not widely distributed in this manner) from the 13th century onwards, with the introduction of alternatives to expensive parchments like vellum. It is only after the introduction of cheaper writing materials that the introduction of lineation occurs, especially from the time of Chaucer (1400 AD) onwards [Image 1].

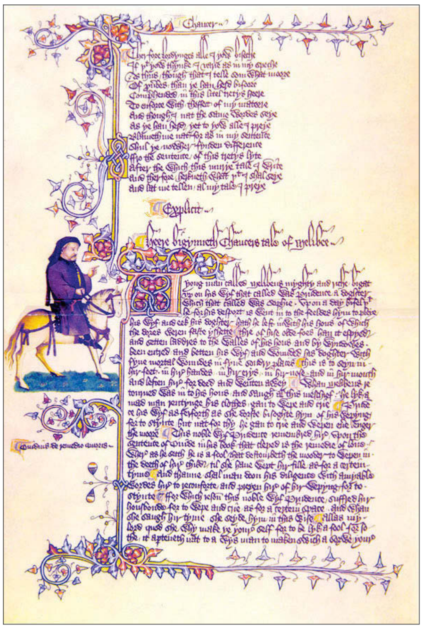


IMAGE 1
Page from the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* (an illuminated manuscript showing both lineation and text blocks with early paragraph markers)

Such a direct correlation between this discursive shift in poetry and its material context – that is the gradual democratisation of paper and book production (as well as literacy) – is startling, though not unexpected. Huisman recounts how these acts of inscription and, subsequently, lineation, introduce graphology into the study of the poem. The graphic element in poetry most often takes the form of left-aligned text with line-breaks, arranged into stanzas of varying length:

> Recognizing the presence (or absence) of lineation has provided the basic classification/differentiation of poetic discourse from that which is not poetic. A text so identified, even at first glance before reading, will then be read, interpreted, as a poem, according to the reading practices for poetry (poetic discourse) then current and internalized by the reader.[4]

What dictates this lineation can be the need to enclose a grammatical clause (a full sentence, for example), a semantic or symbolic phrase (a particular idea or image), and/or sonority (such as iambic pentameter or a rhyme). Specific poetic forms like the sonnet, the haiku or the pantoum – to name but three – apply additional rules to the visual appearance of a poem (and to its aural quality, though I am leaving this aspect of the argument to one side). There are also spatial connotations inherent to the term *stanza*, which derives from the Italian for *room*; a stanza literally contains the lines of a poem in a same way a room holds objects and people.

While my observations are neither incisive nor original in isolation, they do establish that poetry, as a written text, is inherently visual and incorporates within its tradition a stylised spatial relationship to the page. This relationship varies from poem to poem (and from poetic discourse to discourse) but nonetheless functions across most of the cultural reference points by which we can confirm a poem to be a poem. One exception to this rule might be the prose poem. Referring to Paul Hoover's *A Norton Anthology of Post-Modern American Poetry*, Huisman argues that the 'attempt to "redefine the unit of attention" from line to sentence is an attempt to shift attention from the graphic realisation of the poetic substance to the grammatical structure, independent of the material realisation as spoken or written.'[5] Instead of the line, its basic units, like prose, are the sentence and the paragraph. I would contend that there is still an element of visual definition to a prose poem; just as a short story is visually (and materially) delineated from a novel in terms of its length and appearance within a book or journal, so a prose poem, concise and self-contained, is presented differently to other forms of prose – with the possible exception of the emerging field of micro fiction[6].

While much poetry has a certain regularity to its appearance (ie regular stanza and line-length), Marjorie Perloff points out the increasingly wide-spread practice of non-linear poetry in which the deployment of the line (and by extension stanza) is no longer dictated by – and in fact rebels against – the integrity of the semantic or grammatical unit and the referential symbol.[7] Such poetry reflects, in the twentieth century especially, increasingly experimental attitudes with regards to the spatial relationship of poetic text to the page.

Written, visual: poetry on and off the page

The most seminal examples can be found in works such as Mallarme's *Un Coup de Dès*, which obliterates the stanzaic structure of the poem, sowing words and text-fragments in free flow across the white space of the page. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of a looming World War I, the Italian Futurist poets expounded an asymmetrical, highly kinetic and visually onomatopoeic[8] typographical approach that embodied their revolutionary ideology and intense anti-lyricism – an example in which material basis is embodied through material expression, not stripped away.[9] Delving further back into Western literary tradition we discern exponents of visual poetic traditions such as William Blake, William Morris or the Renaissance's emblem poems. William Bohn traces visual poetry back to the *technopaigneia* and *carmina figurata* of the Greeks and Romans respectively – early concrete poems composed 'in the shape of wings, altars, eggs, axes and panpipes.'[10]

If we move across cultures, we find visual and spatial qualities omnipresent in the haiku and zen traditions of Japan, and the classic Chinese poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties. These were inscribed in highly individualised calligraphy, generally on scrolls and often with accompanying ink-paintings; they were prepared for public display rather than private reading while their highly stylised forms (lines of five characters for example in the case of some classic Tang poetry) were inherently visual. In the Islamic world, where pictorial representation of the Qur'an's contents has always been considered blasphemous, experiments with various book forms led to ornate calligraphy, decorative typography and some of the most astounding book-art ever seen.[11] It is also worth briefly noting the tradition of prose which experimented with the conventions of literary structure through alternative material expression: James Joyce, e.e. cummings and Laurence Stern, for example.

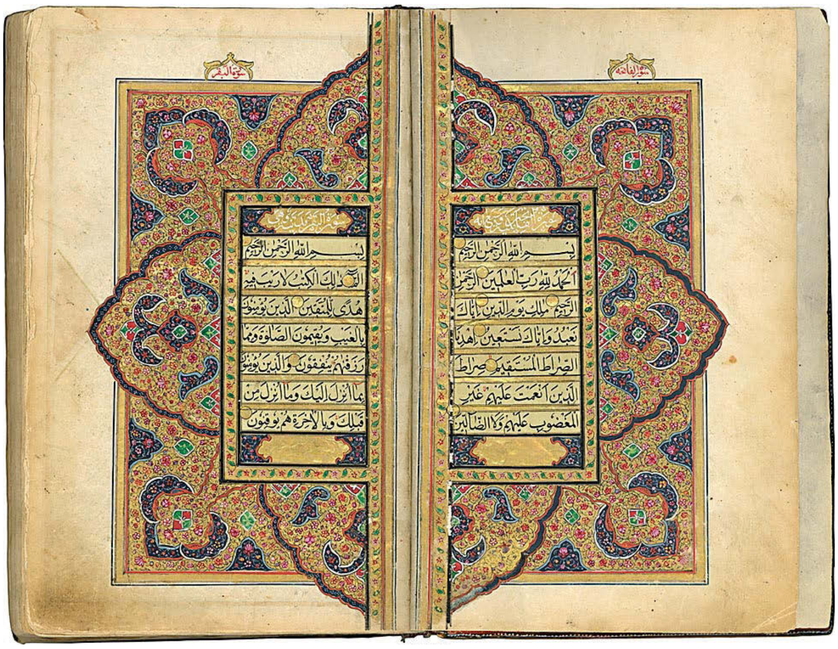


IMAGE 2
Qur'an manuscript in Arabic on polished paper, Kashmir, 18th c., 339 ff., 22x14 cm, single column, (15x9 cm) from The Schøyen Collection http://www.schoyencollection.com/religions.htm

In other words, experiments with the visual aspect of poetry, and literary texts more generally, are not a new phenomenon. Here we return to the text-based art and its associated fields. Johanna Drucker has dedicated herself to such areas of inquiry, as critic, artist and print-maker.[12] In her essay 'The Art of the Written Image' we find a succinct history of text-based art, which delves into the 20th century in particular – from the high modernism of the Dadaists, Futurists, Cubists and Constructivists through to the work of the Concrete Poets, Lettrists, Pop Artists and Conceptual Artists of the 1950s and 60s. Drucker also hints at the artistic possibilities enabled by the late 20th century's technological advances in the field of digital print production, reproduction and distribution.[13]

In her analysis, she lists the various means by which a number of works mediate the verbal content of language and comment upon the relationship of words to a broader linguistic system. For example, she demonstrates how material expression can function as a form of individual expression (such as the handwritten word), confronting the institutional nature of a language-system (as embodied by standardised fonts). Similarly, her interest in the gestural mark in visual writing – 'a trace of the very act of production as dynamic action … a sign which has not yet reached the threshold of meaning'[14] – suggests the fundamental inability of language to properly capture an idea. The gestural act, as it were, traces the demarcation of the legible from the illegible, the cusp at which meaning occurs, at which a sign enters the symbolic order of language. The glyphic sign, meanwhile, is a written language generated by the internal logic of its creator; it exists outside of known alphabets (though perhaps references them) to generate a system of meaning beyond 'the fixed economy of language'.[15]

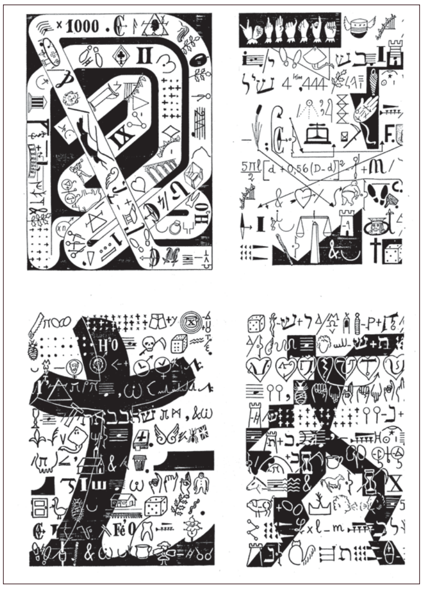


IMAGE 3
Gabriel Pomerand, extrait de 'saint ghetto des prets' (1949): an example of Lettrist composition from *UbuWeb* (http://www.ubu.com/historical/letterists/index.html)

In another essay 'Experimental/Visual/Concrete', Drucker pursues this strand of thought courtesy of a more thorough assessment of the Concrete Poetry and Lettrist movements of the 1950s, along with their subsequent influence on the practice of text-based art. From her analysis, we can infer that the common objective of these two movements was to strip the basic units of language from their association with their larger linguistic system, a system that imbues them with meaning, including symbolic and ideological values. While the Concrete Poets viewed these basic units as words and, sometimes, clauses or phrases, for the Lettrists, as the name suggests, the basic unit was the letter[16]. Simon Morely posits that this movement 'denuded the alphabet itself of its linguistic role, severing the umbilical cord between signifier and signified, and rescuing it as a purely visual form.'[17] A quick survey of a prominent concrete poet such as Ian Hamilton-Finlay reveals how such a statement might easily be adapted to suit concrete poetry as well. Indeed, Finlay's body of text-based work moves, more often than not, to re-appropriate textual fragments (whether words or utterances), removing them from their habitual linguistic framing and positioning them in new formal contexts.[18]

Text-based art, in the twentieth century at least, appears not wholly engaged with the field of literature, per se. Its concern rests with the fields of linguistics and semiotics: how writing as a visual form can play with the tension between the immateriality of a work's verbal content (the ideas it wishes to express) and the capacity of language to signify this verbal content in material form. Implicit in such a concern is the socialisation of language. Like Grigely and philosophers such as Derrida, these practices often draw attention to the fundamental instability of language as a semiotic and cultural system, and the ability of text-based art to deconstruct this instability through extra-verbal means. This is by no means a sin; such concerns are also prominent in literature, especially poetry. But it does not follow that text-based art is *necessarily* a literary medium. Literature depends on linguistic structure and grammatical (dis) ordering as its material basis and not visual punning.

Drucker does acknowledge the diversity of text-based art practices in the 20th century, as well as literary forays into the broader field of material expression (that is, sound poetry, performance poetry, etc), some of which I have previously discussed. For example, she briefly explores the collusion between literature and text-based art in the work of Charles Olson, and the Toronto Concrete Poets bpNichol and Steve McAffery, whose work is informed by poetic discourse 'as a strategy of representation engaged with issues of culture, ideology, and politics'.[19] There are many others whose work draws upon similar theoretical grounding and creative techniques to extend the material basis of their writing through appropriate material expression. But the comments thus far hopefully illustrate how a dominant approach in the field of text-based art could be seen as an attempt to remove language from its linguistic, ideological and symbolic contexts and position them in new visual formal arrangements, as is the case with Angela Brennan's text-based painting reviewed in Chapter 1. That is, we might situate text-based art within the discourse of visual art rather than literature per se.

My enterprise here is not to denigrate text-based art but to understand how, having posited the visual nature of poetry, we can formulate a model for its material expression that differs from those underpinning much text-based art. I have hopefully done so for Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dès*, showing the relationship between his idealised vision of pure language and its spatial arrangement on the page. I want to now explore such ideas more generally, in a way that might guide the material expression of multiple poetic discourses.

I intend to focus on poetic reading practices – how readers relate to the material basis of a poem. In turn, this understanding will help ascertain the material basis by which we might relate to poetry as a genre. Huisman refers to these practices several times without denoting what they might actually be. For instance, to help define the prose poem she draws upon Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of institutionalised authority and habitus, respectively: how a renowned poetry editor or publisher's decision to publish the prose-poem in a collection of poems or a literary journal will grant the poetic discourse the status of *poem*. But such distinctions are very much discursive, slotting only into the materialist aspect of literary production, rather than responding to its material basis. I want to add to this methodology the work of French theorist Michel Riffaterre and his *Semiotics of Poetry*.

Ungrammatical: the semiotics of poetry

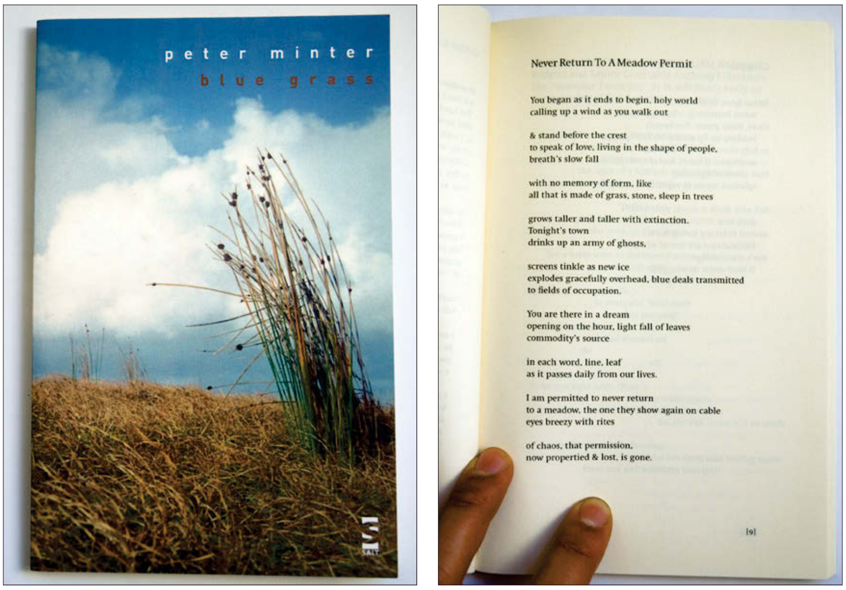
At its core, Riffaterre's enterprise is simple: to determine how the 'structure of meaning'[20] in a poem differs from that of prose – a task that can be approximated to determining a poem's material basis and the means by which a reader can formulate an aesthetic response to it. Riffaterre argues that poetry, unlike prose, acts principally as a form of indirection which 'threatens the literary representation of reality or mimesis' entwined with prose's structure of meaning. He distinguishes the outcomes of indirection and of mimesis as *significance* and meaning, respectively.[21] In order to reach the *significance* of a poem, a term that implies the presence of a distorted or ambiguous signifier-signified relationship, Riffaterre argues two reading phases are required: heuristic and hermeneutic.

In the heuristic phase the reader approaches the text (a poem) as a literary artefact but one in which the standard literary devices are subverted. While prose relies primarily upon mimesis for its structure of meaning, poetry subverts it. Where prose relies upon linear procession (whether narrative or logical, though not necessarily chronological) as a literary device, poetry displays no necessary adherence to it. Riffaterre best captures this concept when he compares 'the habit of checking language against reality' in prose with a concern with 'what language *does to* reality' in poetry.[22] Through the first heuristic phase, we grasp the poem as literary artefact but one that cannot, as a general rule, be read *literally*; by eschewing the standard mimesis of literary representation, the poem substitutes this structure for its own: a localised semiotic order and, in certain poetic discourses, a particular linguistic system.

This semiotic subversion can occur through a variety of formal, symbolic and semantic devices. Take for example the following extract from Peter Minter's poem 'Never return to a meadow permit':

> Tonight's town
> drinks up an army of ghosts,
>
> screens tinkle as new ice
> explodes gracefully overhead, blue deals transmitted
> to fields of occupation.
>
> You are there in a dream
> opening on the hour, the light fall of leaves
> commodity's source
>
> in each word, line, leaf
> as it passes daily from our lives.[23]

In reading this poem it is important to reiterate that the heuristic phase necessarily involves the identification of a poem as *poem* – a process that can be guided by poetry's particular visual qualities and/or the reader's knowledge of poetics.


peter minter
blue grass

Never Return To A Meadow Permit

You began as it ends to begin, holy world
calling up a wind as you walk out

& stand before the crest
to speak of love, living in the shape of people,
breath's slow fall

with no memory of form, like
all that is made of grass, stone, sleep in trees

grows taller and taller with extinction.
Tonight's town
drinks up an army of ghosts,

screens tinkle as new ice
explodes gracefully overhead, blue deals transmitted
to fields of occupation.

You are there in a dream
opening on the hour, light fall of leaves
commodity's source

in each word, line, leaf
as it passes daily from our lives.

I am permitted to never return
to a meadow, the one they show again on cable
eyes breezy with rites

of chaos, that permission,
now propertied & lost, is gone.

[9]

IMAGE 4
Peter Minter, *blue grass* (Salt Publishing, 2006), cover and 'Never Return To A Meadow Permit' [Photographs: James Stuart]

Applying Huismann's interpretational model, I can initially identify 'Never return to a meadow permit' as poem (even before I have seen it on the page) because it is by Peter Minter, whom I know to be an Australian poet with an experimental approach to the lyric poem. When I actually encounter the piece (contained in a standard codex), I confirm it as poetry due to its uneven-length lines containing phrases and clauses; fragments rather than full sentences; utterances rather than ideas. On my first read, the relationship of these phrases and clauses becomes accordingly ambiguous: is the subject of 'opening on the hour', 'you' or 'a dream'? Does 'blue deals transmitted' refer to 'screens' or to 'new ice'? But behind this visual and syntactic ambiguity lies a deeper uncertainty: the symbolic order of the poem which acts to destabilise rather than affirm structural orders of meaning. For instance, the poem inverts the habitual association of ghosts "haunting" a town. Instead the town imbibes the army of ghosts, sucking them into its folds.

The text's meaning eludes us because there is no present meaning, only *significance*, entwined with the particulars of this poem's symbolic system. To broach this *significance* requires a second phase of hermeneutic or retroactive reading, a re-reading, as it were. It is in this phase that I begin to grasp the wholeness of the poem as a particular semiotic and semantic order, separate from standard literary representation; I begin to accept and understand the poem's internal logic (or alternatively I lose interest and walk away). But to grasp this internal logic I must somehow establish an order by which it can be deciphered.[24]

Here we come to Riffaterre's hypogram – an invariant word or semantic structure that determines the structure of the poem – but one that is not directly presented and which usually exists outside the text.[25] The goal of hermeneutic reading is to determine this hypogram. Doing so allows the reader to overcome a poem's ungrammaticalities (that is, the challenges to mimesis apprehended during heuristic reading) by integrating them into the hypogram's matrix:

> The [poetic] text is in effect a variation or modulation of one structure – thematic, symbolic or whatever – and this sustained relation to one structure constitutes the significance … This is why, whereas units of meaning may be words or phrases or sentences, *the unit of significance is the text*. To discover the significance at last, the reader must surmount the mimesis hurdle: in fact this hurdle is essential to the reader's change of mind.[26]

Citing Gautier's cliché-ridden *In Deserto*, Riffaterre demonstrates how the poet's descriptions of the barren Spanish desert landscapes never refer to the landscape per se but always to a voice crying in the wilderness for love (*vox clamans in deserto*). The poem represents the poet's state of being, his own spiritual wasteland. This image forms the poem's hypogram, expressed through the matrix of poetic language; the point of origin to which the poem inevitably leads back. Thus *significance* describes the process by which the reader is able to reach this semiotic nucleus: '*Significance* is … the reader's praxis of the transformation … – the experience of a circuitous sequence, a way of speaking that keeps revolving around a key word or matrix reduced to a marker.'[27]

A similar approach could be applied to Minter's poem – perhaps the hypogram might be revealed if we were to read Robert Duncan's 'Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow' from which the poem derives its title. But I will leave this analysis to one side since my purpose is not to "decipher" Minter's work. Instead, I want to emphasise two aspects of Riffaterre's thought: first is the notion that poetic and prose reading practices differ because of the two-phased process required by the semiotics of poetry; second is the reader-centred interpretational model and the notion of *overcoming* a poem that he establishes through the metaphor of surmounting 'the mimesis hurdle' or 'pushing the meaning over to a text not present.'[28] In these two ideas, Riffaterre establishes a material basis for poetry premised upon the disruption of mimesis (ungrammaticality) and the intense involvement of the reader required to push through this, towards significance and interpretation. While it does function as a credible reader-response to the oft-stated claim that contemporary poetry is "too difficult", such an approach does not, of course, cover the balkanized field of poetry as a whole. Any generalities regarding the "genre" of prose are subject to the same discursive issues.

Similarly, I find Riffaterre's insistence upon a fixed nucleus that allows a reader to decipher a poem to be somewhat reductive – he himself makes the direct analogy between getting a joke and getting a poem; both have a hypogram that once deciphered might unravel the overall poetic matrix into a state of fixedness (albeit one that can be read and re-read due to the constant challenge of the poem's ungrammaticalities).

Part of the problem here emerges when analysing a text through the other models of materiality that I have proposed whereby the text is fluid, embodied in particular editions and a variety of interpretational contexts, all of which may lead to individual hypograms. This approach also fails to allow for the oft-disputed domain of cultural studies when poems are interpreted from within a particular philosophical, theological or cultural framework. A brief foray into contemporary translation theory unearths such a position. Drawing on the structuralist work of Barthes and Kristeva, Susan Bassnett infers that 'The reader *translates* or *decodes* the text according to a different set of systems and the idea of the one 'correct' reading is dissolved.'[29] Such interpretational systems are invariably entwined with the various materialities that I have previously outlined.

The other difficulty is when a poem has no discernible hypogram: what does significance lead to then? Such a point of departure might shift the focus of the text away from Riffaterre's professed interest in texts that 'the reader rationalizes as a symbol of the writer's intention.'[30] This takes us neatly to Marjorie Perloff and her text *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* in which the notion of authorial intention in poetry is turned on its head. Instead the focus shifts to reader interpretation.

Meaning is in the mind of the beholder

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Perloff traces a lineage from French rebel-poet-cum-arms dealer Arthur Rimbaud to the experimental work of John Cage, passing through Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett and John Ashbery. What these poets share in common is a shift from the objective-correlative world of the symbolists (which draw upon a fixed hypogram) to a concern with creating surface-level and semiotically fragmented language-objects. In this sense, Perloff sees the 20th century diverging into two major poetic traditions.

This shift could be broadly summated as moving from certain, prescribed or at least intended meetings (for example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a symbolist narrative for the post-Christian moral vacuum) to poems where meaning is inferred but never fully realised within the text: it is indeterminate, to use Perloff's title. Another feature of this evolution is the move from metaphor to metonymy, that is from reading poetic texts by associating its images with specific ideas (i.e., through objective correlation) to one in which the images and other literary devices are themselves the ideas – 'No ideas but in things!' as Williams famously wrote – even if it is unclear what those ideas might actually be. It is possible, thus, to contrast the flat plane of metonymy to the associative depth of metaphor. It is also a move from structured modes to unstructured and non-referential modes of representation, such as was seen in the visual arts with the Cubists, especially, but also the Dadaists, Russian Constructivists or Suprematists.[31]

While her correlations between these indeterminate poetics and the visual strategies employed by the Cubists and other visual artists are intriguing, Perloff's most useful dialectic (at least for my purposes) is to establish a tradition through the detailed analysis of each poet's work and the literary devices they use to achieve indeterminacy. To some degree this is a repetitive task which could be summarised as: "In Work 1, Poet 2 writes A, B, C, D – but what is the relationship between A, B, C and D? There is no apparent link. At face value, it doesn't make sense. As readers we can never reliably determine the meaning of the text. But the poet seems have taken this approach because of reason X by using literary device Y." And so on. This perfunctory summary does not do justice to the thoroughness and diversity of Perloff's analysis; to her credit she also compares these "indeterminate" works with others by the same poets which might be broadly slotted into objective-correlative poetics.

In approaching Ezra Pound's Cantos she looks first at his earlier works, especially *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, showing how in these he still works within the dominant romantic tradition in which 'rather facile contrasts between an idealized past and a vulgarized present continue throughout the poem as Pound produces symbol after symbol "with an ascribed or intended meaning." [or hypogram to use Riffaterre's model]' She continues: ' One feels that Pound begins with an idea, not with an image, and then sets about to find an objective correlative for that idea … Moreover, despite its allusiveness and ellipses, the poem moves sequentially and logically from *a* to *b*; it is not a collage of "super-pository" images or a "VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing."'[32]

The discarding of the objective-correlative mode and the rise of a dynamic Vorticist aesthetic both come to the fore in Pound's later work, by which point he had distanced himself from the high modernism of his old friend T.S. Eliot. In approaching the *Malatesta Cantos*, Perloff deconstructs these poems' strange amalgamation of imagery (drawn from both historical and autobiographical sources), diction (for example business and colloquial English), translation/mistranslation and languages (Italian, Latin, English). Speaking of 'Canto LXXIV' with its confluence of references to Pound's contemporaries (for example a classics lecturer, Snow) and various historical figures (such as Pope Pius II), and its audacious rhythmic and verbal play, Perloff concludes that:

> Pound's individual word units and images are … insistently illusionistic. Unlike, say, Gertrude Stein or, for that matter, Rimbaud, he does not call into relationship the relationship of signifier to signified … But these illusionistic, literal images are consistently "interfering" with one another, so as to remind us that the world of the poem is not, after all, the real world.[33]

She compares this aesthetic to that of documentary collage in which image after image are spliced together, a series of 'cinematic dissolves' that 'force us to readjust our habits of reading' and participate in the construction of the poem's meaning. No longer can readers take for guiding principles the models of authorial intention/emotion (or ethos) that dominate traditions such as the symbolists.

The notion that such poetries challenge our rote reading habits (that is, interpretational habits) is perhaps key among the common features of all the poets analysed. This is perhaps best summarised by Perloff herself in her discussion of Gertrude Stein, whose 'fluidity of reference creates what John Ashbery … has called "An all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars." The poet wants us to be able to fill in the gaps in whatever way suits us.'[34]

Through this emphasis, Perloff's poetics of indeterminacy move beyond Riffaterre's semiotics. She emphasises how poetry must be re-read for its meaning to be perceived but underlines that such perception is ultimately fluid. Such fluidity is reinforced when we think of poems as language-objects, produced and consumed within distinct socio-cultural contexts. Her contribution to this argument therefore is that we can discount Riffaterre's hypogram as part of our interpretational practices for poetry, that is, as part of its material basis. Such thinking remains easily contextualised, nonetheless, as an evolution of the semiotics of poetry, not a rupture; like Riffaterre, she contends that determining the structure of meaning in a poem is a result of our own participation, that is interaction, with the semiotic structure of the text – a structure we might call, more broadly, its grammatical structure. This latter classification stems from poetry's ungrammaticality, or challenge to the system of mimesis, as proposed by Riffaterre; my emphasis upon this nomenclature will become clearer in the third and final chapter. Here, the core question will be how can the material expression of a poem can be matched to its very particular material basis, as established through my study of Huisman, Riffaterre and Perloff.

1 Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. *Reading images : the grammar of visual design (*London: Routledge, 2006), p.2. See also Huismann, R. 'Reading with the Eye', *Five Bells*, Vol. 16, Nos 2 and 3, Autumn/Winter, 2009. Here Huismann discusses design practices (and "visual grammer") as central to poetic reading practices.

2 Jan-Dirk Müller argues this position in his essay 'The Body of the Book: The Media Transition from Manuscript to Print' in Gumbrecht, H. U. and Pfeiffer, K. L. (eds.) *Materialities of Communication* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994). Here, he documents the evolution from written to printed English from the time of Gutenberg onwards. He concludes: 'But longevity is guaranteed no longer by the written "monument" itself but rather by the numerous institutions that select the constantly growing reservoirs of writings and allow them to become effective.' (pp. 43-44)

3 'how to evaluate the fact that in the last twenty years a number of self-subsistent poetry communities have emerged that have different readers and different writers and different publishers and different reading series, even, increasingly, separate hierarchies and new canons with their own awards, prizes, heroines.' His response is as follows: 'What I take more seriously are pluralist ideas supporting an idealized multiculturalism: the image of poets from different communities reading each other's works and working to keep aware of developments in every part of the poetic spectrum.' Bernstein, C. 'State of the Art', *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p4.

4 Huisman, R. *The Written Poem : semiotic conventions from old to modern English* (London: Casell, 1998), p. 17.

5 ibid. p. 23.

6 Micro fiction is a genre in which pieces are limited to very short lengths, such as 150 characters or 50 words, often to fit particular portable media formats such as the mobile phone.

7 Perloff, M. 'After Free Verse: The new non-linear poetries', published on the author's homepage http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/free.html.

8 As in the layout of the typography should embody the idea the writer is trying to express.

9 Herbert Spencer's *Pioneers of Modern Typography* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1983, c1982) is an especially concise and lucid account of the profound impact the Futurists and their contemporaries had on contemporary typography and, subsequently, much visual writing practice: 'The fundamental difference between traditional, centred and modern typography is that one is passive and the other is active, though not necessarily aggressive. Asymmetry and contrast provide the basis of modern

typography.' (p. 59) However, Futurist Poetry manifested itself in equally stylised and dynamic performances, demonstrating a profound influence on the practice of not just visual but *material* poetry. The same can be said of the Dada poets who experimented with both performance and sound poetry.

10 Bohn, W. *Modern Visual Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), p. 15.

11 See my review of *The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection* at the Art Gallery of NSW, 2007: Stuart, J 'Remediate? Sure (but don't forget the book)' in *Jacket 34*, October 2007 (http://jacketmagazine.com/34/stuart-mirakove.shtml).

12 One item worth consulting that I will not refer to in this thesis is her excellent *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* in which she traces a comprehensive history of the written word, focusing on the evolution of the roman alphabet from its earliest days.

13 The role of technology in all major artistic movements or endeavours that featured text as their core cannot be emphasised enough. The modernists were the beneficiaries of radical photo-gravure typesetting technique and advances in the field of printing, while film had a definite influence upon the Lettrists. Also, we must not ignore how experimentation in prints date back to the Renaissance and the invention of the Gutenberg press.

14 Drucker, J. 'The Art of the Written Image', *Figuring the word : essays on books, writing and visual poetics* (New York, NY: Granary Books, 1998), p.65.

15 ibid. p. 69.

16 Steve McAffery and Jed Rasula in *Imagining Language* refer to this basic unit as the clinamen – the point where one word or one meaning can swerve to become another. This is traditionally understood to be the letter but, as Giordano Bruno argued, can also be the typographical marks that compose a letter: 'Bruno effectively reduces the minimal vector of the clinamen from a swerve in primary articulation (ie a deviation and difference among letters) to a gestural declination of the pre-lettristic mark.' Rasula, J. & McAffery, S. (eds.) in *Imagining Language: an anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1998), p. 533.

17 Morely, S. *Writing on the wall : word and image in modern art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 101.

18 For example, his major work Little Sparta, a garden in which text-fragments are removed from their original contexts and integrated with sculptures placed in the landscaped environment. See Abrioux, Y. *Ian Hamilton-Finlay: a visual primer* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992, 2nd ed). However, Finlay's body of work is extensive and cannot be entirely pigeon-holed in this way.

19 Drucker, J. 'Experimental/Visual/Concrete', *Figuring the word: essays on books, writing and visual poetics* (New York, NY: Granary Books, 1998), p. 131.

20 Riffaterre, M. *Semiotics of poetry* (London: Methuen, 1978), p.4.

21 ibid. p. 6.

22 ibid. p.7 (my italics).

23 Minter, P. 'Never return to a meadow permit' in *blue grass* (London: Salt Publishing, 2006), p.9.

24 I feel it important to note here that the point at which this sense of wholeness occurs can also be the basic units of the poem, the line and the stanza, since I often find myself flipping between individual units to better grasp their relationship or to appreciate a particularly well wrought or destabilising image – a microcosm within the larger ecosystem of the poem, perhaps.

25 See also Prud'homme, J. and Guilbert, N.'Text Derivation', *Signo,* Rimouski (Quebec: 2006), http://www.signosemio.com.

26 Riffaterre, M. (1978), p.6.

27 ibid. p.12.

28 ibid. p.12.

29 Bassnett, S. *Translations Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1991 (2nd ed)) p.76.

30 Riffaterre, M. (1978), p.46.

31 See for example Stankos, N (ed.) *Concepts of modern art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981 [revised edn.]).

32 Perloff, M. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, Ill.: North Western University Press; London: Turnaround, 1999), p. 167 [the internal quotations are from Pound himself].

33 ibid. p. 199.

34 ibid. p. 107.

03: Poetry, Interaction, Interface

The question about how we read poetry can be rephrased in terms of its material basis: how and why do we respond to a poetic text? In what way are we drawn to, or pushed away by, the literary devices in any given piece? The answer advanced in the previous chapter could be summated by the following two propositions: that poetry is inherently visual on the one hand – as a result of its particular (and historical) spatial relationship to the page – and that active participation of the reader is required in the meaning-making process.[1] The central proposition of the first chapter might be simply put thus: when we read a poem, we are necessarily perceiving it as a localised material expression (such as a book), caught within particular socio-cultural frameworks. In this sense all poems are *language-objects* and not just *language*. The unanswered question then is: What model(s) of materiality can be applied to relate a poem's material expression to its material basis? How can these two elements – each essential to the reading experience of a poem – be sculpted into a cohesive language-object? In this final chapter, I intend to outline such a model, drawing heavily on the architectural framework advanced by conceptual artists/architects Arakawa and Gins.

But first a necessary detour: how does new media technology fit into this discussion? Apart from a few allusions, most of my thesis to this point has focused on literature's print culture, still conceived as the literary space par excellence. This could be considered an oversight, especially given the rapid changes within the publishing world, generated by e-reader technology and digital archiving initiatives such as the Gutenberg Project or GoogleBooks.[2] Furthemore, when we speak of the visuality (or indeed sonority in the case of a spoken poem) we are in fact discussing its interface: the media which allows us to perceive it. When we speak of the active participation of the reader we might also be suggesting that the reader must *interact* with the poem and not just *read* it. Interface and interactivity are both terms heavily associated with the field of new media arts. At first glance, it appears that a poem's materiality might be best explored through the field of new media writing – and my intention now is to test this idea, moving through the work of a number of new media critics. Of particular relevance will be Espen Aarseth's historical understanding of cybertexts, which foreground interface as part of the user experience.

Before moving further, I want to make a lexical clarification. It is possible to think of electronic literature and new media writing as interchangeable terms. For the purpose of this discussion, electronic literature refers to literary works produced for consumption by personal computer users and which are specific to that medium.[3] On the other hand, I have taken new media to be broader in its scope, encompassing all electronic media and art, including hybrid compositions. Finally, except where it is used by others, I will prefer the term "user" to "reader" or "viewer" since "user" is not perceptually specific. It also accepted within new media criticism.

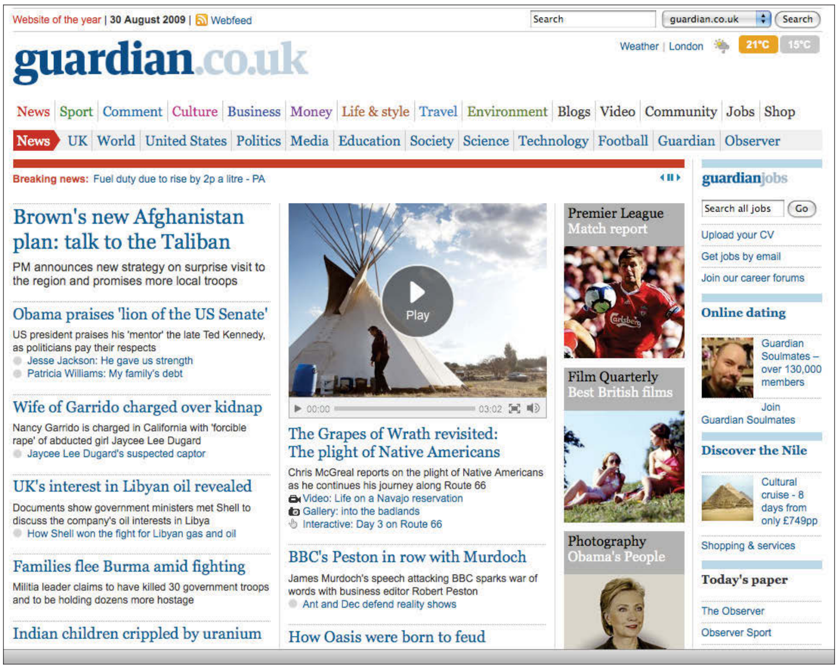
Old media: interacting with the new

As Joseph Tabbi notes in a recent review, the constant stream of upgrades to new media production and consumption technology has 'placed the literary imagination in a situation of continual nostalgia' caused by the fast-pace of technological change. Under this system, just as a work is accepted into the popular consciousness 'the next set of upgrades [arrives], the network has rearranged its protocols, and the next set of works appears, rendering previous works, if not inoperable, then classics before their time.'[4]

This implies the need for a more fundamental stance on electronic literature: Tabbi is frustrated by the tendency in electronic literature studies to define past media by its otherness and new media by its revolution – what Espen Aarseth refers to as 'imperialist' stances designed to carve out one critical territory at the expense of another.[5] Tabbi is instead interested in the continuation of the textual as it has crossed from one medium to another and, as is often the case, back again, or into another medium altogether.

One of the traditional conditions for new media art, apart from the requirement that it be computer-generated, is that of interactivity. According to Darren Tofts, interactivity 'is the refinement of a very specific kind of engagement with art that positioned the participant or visitor as an integral part of the creative process.'[6] The other conditions for new media art, he contends, are immersion and interface, both of which function to draw the user into a given piece as actor and/or participant. For my purposes, two questions follow from this definition: first, are these three conditions specific to new media writing; and, second, do these terms of reference suffice for a discussion of new media writing?

Bolter and Grusin offer a more developed overview of new media, arguing that its two fundamental qualities are hypermediacy and remediation. Hypermediacy derives from a term coined by Ted Nelson in 1965.[7] It denotes how new media space is explicitly assembled from "old" media spaces (eg. film, text, sound, etc). Bolter and Grusin contrast this stratagem to the camera obscura technique in renaissance painting, which sought to dissimulate the painting frame and position the viewer within the picture. 'In all its various forms, the logic of hypermediacy expresses the tension between regarding a visual space as mediated and as a "real" space that lies beyond mediation.' In the logic of hypermediacy, 'the artist (or multimedia programmer or web designer) strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement.'[8] The plethora of media embedded within any major newspaper website (an oxymoron!) demonstrate this aspect of new media: here, video players sit along side photo galleries, flash advertisements and text-based news pieces [Image 1]. The user experience is one of conscious interaction with the media interface.


Website of the year | 30 August 2009 | Webfeed
Search
guardian.co.uk
Search
guardian.co.uk
Weather | London
21°C
15°C
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Brown's new Afghanistan plan: talk to the Taliban

PM announces new strategy on surprise visit to the region and promises more local troops

Obama praises 'lion of the US Senate'

US president praises his 'mentor' the late Ted Kennedy, as politicians pay their respects
- Jesse Jackson: He gave us strength
- Patricia Williams: My family's debt

Wife of Garrido charged over kidnap

Nancy Garrido is charged in California with 'forcible rape' of abducted girl Jaycee Lee Dugard
- Jaycee Lee Dugard's suspected captor

UK's interest in Libyan oil revealed

Documents show government ministers met Shell to discuss the company's oil interests in Libya
- How Shell won the fight for Libyan gas and oil

Families flee Burma amid fighting

Militia leader claims to have killed 30 government troops and to be holding dozens more hostage

Indian children crippled by uranium

The Grapes of Wrath revisited: The plight of Native Americans

Chris McGreal reports on the plight of Native Americans as he continues his journey along Route 66
- Video: Life on a Navajo reservation
- Gallery: into the badlands
- Interactive: Day 3 on Route 66

BBC's Peston in row with Murdoch

James Murdoch's speech attacking BBC sparks war of words with business editor Robert Peston
- Ant and Dec defend reality shows

How Oasis were born to feud

Guardian Soulmates – over 130,000 members

Cultural cruise - 8 days from only £749pp

IMAGE 1
guardian.co.uk, screenshot (30 August 2009): a typical news site, assembling a variety of text-, video-, sound- and image-based media

New media as a process of remediation flows from hypermediacy: the integration of "old media" within a new media interface is by definition a process of re-presentation. Remediation is not unique to new media technology, as it has been in train since the first days of written communication, when textual and image-based media could be combined and re-combined. Technological interfaces aside, what is different are the speed and ease with which such recombination is now possible.[9] Remediation implies that new media is essentially a hybrid form, dependent both upon extant media but also the human subject who engages with it. It exists, not because it is a new and pure form, per se, but because its users invest it with very real meanings, associations or relationships.

Summarising Bolter and Grusin's argument, I want to propose that new media, at one level, can be conceptualised as a tangle of "old" media. This supports Tabbi's case that new media is not a rupture with old media (such as the book). Another facet of this argument is that new media's relationship to its component parts permits the radical acceleration of elements immanent for decades, if not centuries before. We also see that the idea of interface is not unique to new media but that new media technologies, instead, foreground the interface as part of the new media experience.

Honing in on new media writing, Espen Aarseth supports these arguments in his excellent and still relevant typology of what he terms cybertexts, 'the mechanical organisation of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange' and ergodic texts, which 'require nontrivial effort' and extranoematic movement for the reader to traverse them. Aarseth draws up a matrix of cybertexts dating as far back as the classic Chinese text, *I Ching* (易经 or *Book of Changes*) but also including recent electronic "texts" such as adventure games and hypertext novels. He assesses the various texts according to typology variants, concluding that:

> The paper-electronic dichotomy is not supported by our findings. It is revealing and refreshing to observe how flexible and dynamic a book printed on paper can be, and this gives us an important clue to the mergence of digital text forms: new media do not appear in opposition to the old but as emulators of features and functions that are already invented. It is the development of codex and print forms not their lack of flexibility that makes digital texts possible.[10]

IMAGE 2
Devimahatmya, Praise of the Great Goddess, Manuscript in Sanskrit on palm-leaf, Bihar or Nepal, 11th c., 32 ff., 5x31 cm, 2 columns, (3x27 cm) from The Schøyen Collection (http://www.schoyencollection.com/religionsLiving4.html#23.15): an example of an early 'cybertext' requiring extranoematic movement as part of the reading process.

What Aarseth, Bolter, Grishin and others are arguing is that those qualities of interaction and interface, which we have come to think of as the hallmarks of new media, have been present in both art and literature for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It is therefore insufficient to describe new media art – whether computer game, website or electronic literature – according only to their particular interface and interactive qualities. Whether immersion is unique to new media or not is a question that I am leaving to one side in this instance since it is not of direct relevance to my argument.

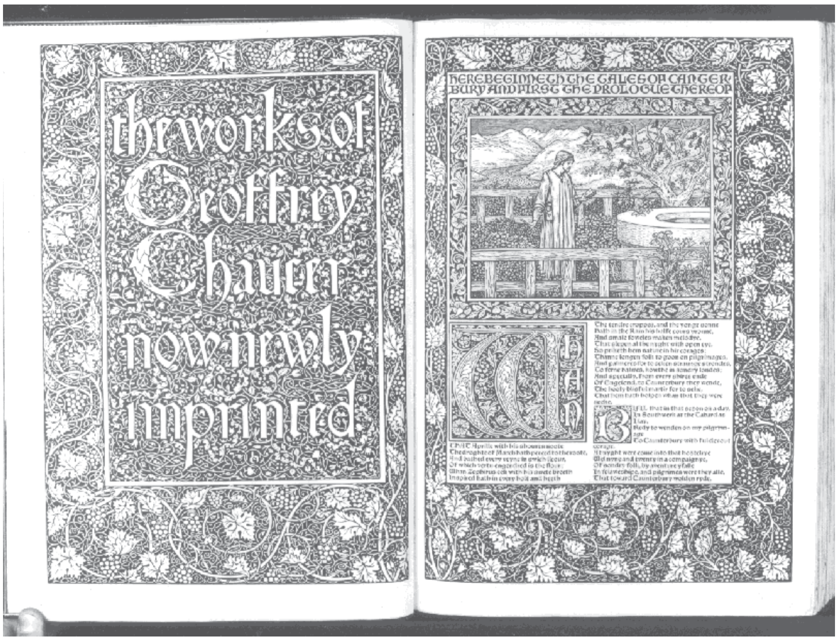
My point is that the (r)evolution of new media is not its delivery of new ways of interacting or interfacing with any given textual object (with text being used in here its widest possible sense to include items such as websites, computer games and Flash poems), extraordinary as these may be. To my mind, new media's relevance to this thesis is the manner in which it has explicitly foregrounded interactivity and interface as essential compositional elements.

In the literary context, we find this argument advanced by N. Katherine Hayles: 'With significant exceptions, print literature was widely regarded as not having a body, only a speaking mind' – a legacy of the 18th century copyright debate, which saw literature as a purely intellectual rather than embodied construction.[11] Jerome McGann, on the other hand, argues that this gap was caused by the shift from written to printed English in which the gap between the writer and the literary object (and between the literary object and the reader) was widened. Hayles expands this argument when she posits in *Writing Machines*: 'Elecronic text had its own specifications, and a deep understanding of them would bring into view by contrast the specifications of print for what it is: a medium and not a transparent interface.'[12]

While the user has always been a figure, no matter how abstract, in the construction of literary objects, only recently has this immanence come to the fore. McGann notes its 19th century re-emergence in the work of Kelmscott Press's intricately designed books. In describing William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* with its ornate borders, its use of all-capital letters and its mediaeval type face [see Image 3], McGann writes:

> In a culture that largely imagines print as a vehicle for linguistic meaning the effect is to foreground textuality as such, turning words from means to ends-in-themselves. The text here is hard to read, is too thick with its own materiality. It resists any processing that would simply treat it as a set of referential signs pointing beyond themselves to a semantic content. This text declares its radical self-identity. This kind of textual scene short-circuits referential reading procedures. Through the apparent temporality of language we plunge into a different order of things.[13]

With a few substitutions, McGann's analysis could easily apply to contemporary new media writing where the user interaction with a Flash poem, for example, could be seen as "short-circuiting" traditional reading practices.


the works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted

HERE BEGINNETH THE TALES OF CANTERBURY AND FIRST THE PROLOGUE THEREOF

IMAGE 3
The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1896): an example of Morris's work 'thick with its own materiality'

Here my engagement with critics such as Hayles and Aarseth draws to a close. Their interest lies primarily in the typology of new media writing and electronic literature. Their goal is establish a critical framework for discussing this field's materiality[14]. From this point I want to explore the implications of hypermediacy and the notion of the cybertext for the material poem. In doing so I am supporting the idea that a key contribution made by electronic literature has been to bring to the fore an interaction between user and text prevalent throughout literary history, albeit one that has lapsed into the background of the reading experience.

Landing sites: the user in relation to the poem

If this interaction between user and text has been immanent in cybertexts (to borrow Aarseth's term) since the advent of written texts, it makes sense to delve into non-electronic literature and traditional artistic media for other precedents. This will enable me to put forward a model of materiality suitable to poetic discourse (insofar as I have defined it through this thesis).

I have previously explored the relationship between Michel Riffaterre's two-phased reading of poetry and the work of conceptual artists Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins, specifically their image-text works *The Mechanisms of Meaning (1963-1973)* [MM].[15] This discussion also touched upon their architectural installations too (broadly categorised under the rubric *Sites of Reversible Destiny*). Drawing heavily on an analysis by Mary-Ann Caws (2002), I argued that Gins and Arakawa's work in MM foregrounded temporality: their textual and sculptural strategies acted to disrupt the time of standard reading patterns. Their work could thus be construed as a template for constructing material expressions for poetic texts, which according to Riffaterre demand alternative reading strategies, that is, re-reading. I concluded with Charles Bernstein's response to Arakawa and Gins' work: 'Language is embedded into these works not as something to be read, as on a page or even a screen, but as something to interact with in an unfolding/enfolding web. The constructed "landing sites" of Reversible Destiny challenge rote perceptual patterns and activate underutilized cognitive paths.'[16] I now wish to build on this framework and its focus on the two-phased reading process that Riffaterre propounded.

In the same way that I have used this thesis to expand my understanding of Riffaterre to comprise the fuller semiotic context in which he works, my intention now is to engage with Arakawa and Gins' architectural body of work, specifically those associated with *Architecture: Sites of Reversible Destiny*. I want to understand the sorts of interactivity and interface that they propose through their architectural interventions, and how these might be applicable to a model of poetic materiality.

Underpinning Arakawa and Gins' [A+G] proposal is a spatio-temporal definition of destiny as the natural movement of a body through the everyday, or what they term 'ubiquitous sites.' It is a motion that one day will lead to death But this everyday destiny is commonplace and irreversible only so long as movements of the body are natural. To challenge destiny, it follows we must denaturalise the natural. This has become central to the artists' oeuvre. Their strategy is to break ubiquitous sites into a matrix of landing sites defined by their contact with the body of the human subject. Each of these landing sites has the potential to challenge normative movement (and therefore normative perception) by forcing the body to acknowledge itself and the world which it defines.

Though A+G establish a detailed taxonomy of landing sites (perceptual, imaging and architectural), I will simply refer to them more broadly as perception sites since 'the world and the body (and mind) moving through it are very much entwined.'[17] George Lakoff, discussing the limit of the human brain's plasticity, likens this process to that of reconfiguring people's image-schemas: 'Cognitive linguists have discovered that people understand the relationships between things in space in terms of elementary schematic mental images, or "image-schemas."'[18] Returning to Riffaterre's semiotics, it becomes possible to think of both image-schemas and landing sites with regards to the relationship of signified to signifier: a grammatical structure of landing sites (prose) will lead to mimesis or a ubiquitous site; an ungrammatical structure (poesis) will lead to the disruption of mimesis, or a site of reversible destiny.

Merging these two lexicons, we might posit that an ungrammatical structure of landing sites lies at the core of *Architecture: Sites of Reversible Destiny*. In this body of work, A+G gradually transform recognisable locations into quasi-labyrinthine Sites of Reversible Destiny. This process occurs through a systematic re-mapping of each location's landing sites, eventually leading to a situation where the 'body is redirected; the paths to the old landing sites are blocked.'[19] Importantly, this re-mapping always retains some grammatical structure in common with its former self: their process is analytical, not wildly fabulist. We can observe these qualities in any one of their built works. In this instance, I will focus on the Reversible Destiny Lofts in Mitaka, Japan.

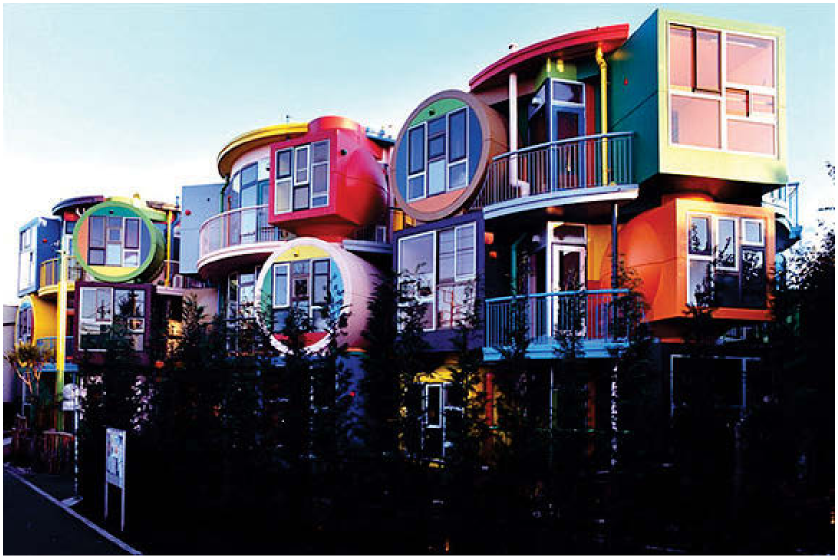


IMAGE 4
Arakawa and Gins, *Reversible Destiny Lofts,* Mitaka, Japan [Photograph: Masatako Nakano]

The Lofts, located in suburban Japan, are brightly coloured (and inhabited) apartment stacks. Room modules emanating at various angles from a circular, central living area define each level of the building. Internally, uneven floor surfaces and modulating lighting conditions are all landing sites which contribute to a complexity of living environment not found in residential architecture. This is apartment living, but not as we have come to think of it.

In discussing the Lofts, Jondi Keane examines the relationship between A+G's procedural architecture and ecological psychology, the relationship of an organism to its environment. The distinction he makes between functional and procedural architecture harks back to A+G's initial distinction between ubiquitous sites and those of reversible destiny. 'The procedural approach applies to perception and action, to perceiving the world and constructing experiments for living. Procedures enable persons to think environmentally when engaging with and organizing their surroundings (conceptually and perceptually).'[20]

By applying this procedural architectural approach to a living environment, Keane argues, the artists make its inhabitants acutely aware of their own perception, of their own senses as a means to enabling the act of living. The goal is not one of a defined outcome (a destiny) but to force the body into questioning its position in relation to the environment that supports it. Again, the similarities to Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry are startling: how do we force a reader to question the semiotic structure of a poetic text, to recognise that this semiotic structure does not lead to grammatical outcomes?

Arthur Danto, reviewing A+G's 1990 exhibition *Building Sensoriums 1973-1990: - for determining how not to die* at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, offers another perspective on this position. He likens their *The Process in Question/ Bridge of Reversible Destiny* [Image 5] to Marcel Duchamps' *Etant donnés*. The Bridge is in fact an architectural model of a bridge designed as a sequence of some 24 "perception stations" each composed of landing sites so complex the artists cheekily suppose it might take 40 days to cross the bridge, should it ever be built. In physical form, the Bridge is a starkly-angled structure, divided into distinct segments, each of which comprise a circuitous maze of geometric structures: cubes, spheres, meshed vertical planes, zig-zagging ramps, and so on. A theoretical user must somehow navigate their way through this sequence of spaces. Both the Bridge and *Etant donnés* demonstrate, he argues, 'the way art springs into being only through the collaborative intervention of the viewer.'[21] Their work is explicitly about drawing the user into a matrix of landing sites, not so much to answer a question but to guide the viewer/user into transcending given perceptual patterns and thus in reversing their own destiny.

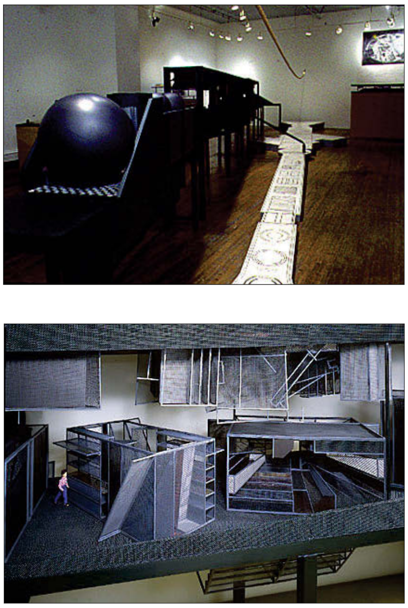


IMAGE 5
Arakawa and Gins, *The Process in Question/Bridge of Reversible Destiny*, 1973-89, wood, mesh, plastic 42 feet x 13 feet 10 inches x 5 feet 10 ¼ inches overall, from Ronald Feldman Gallery (http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/exhsolo/exhgin90.html)

The relevance of A+G's body of work is not simply altering the time span it takes to move through a ubiquitous site. They are also keenly focused on how to unbalance the body sufficiently that its perceptual patterns are fundamentally altered. How we might apply this approach in a poetic context is the final subject of this chapter.

With regards to an architecture of Reversible Destiny, A+G's methodology for a site such as the Bridge can be partly divined in the neat aphorism or "saying" – one of many that punctuate their work: 'Number and complexity of perceptual landing site configurations are directly proportional to intricacy of path or terrain.'[22] In their terminology, terrain is functionally differentiated from floors or flat planes: it destabilises or hinders the body's movement; the more complex the terrain, the more complex the structure of landing sites.

A model for the material poem

As I have argued, the set of relationships at play in the materiality of language can proceed from a similar basis. When deconstructing any given language-object, we might think of terrain as its material basis (which includes its semiotic structure, its grammar). The idea is that this terrain should influence the architecture of its material expression: the more complex the terrain, the more complex the landing sites for the body/mind of the user negotiating the space of the text. However, references to the familiar must be maintained to encourage the user to finish the journey.[23]

Extending this metaphor to the poetic discourse at the heart of this discussion, we can describe the terrain as a localised semiotic system that subverts mimesis, sometimes to the point of having no discernible fixed meaning. Its primary interface is visual and, therefore, spatial: I am thinking here of Rosemary Huisman's argument that poetry is closely defined by its spatial relationship to the page. Embracing A+G's philosophy of reversible destiny we need to create a poetic material expression (architecture) that disrupts movement towards a fixed destination, in this case a fixed meaning. On the other hand, its material treatment must drift away from the visual and spatial properties of prose, which is most often bound by the justified and mono-font text blocks in a codex.

We might thus construct an architectural tool kit for constructing the poetic language-object with a number of primary propositions. Having established the terrain (material basis), we can then consider the opportunities for reflecting this through a textual architecture. The idea that this architecture exists within a particular socio-cultural context, in a particular edition, is reflected in the idea of the language-object, which derives from a Marxist notion of materialism.

This matrix [see following page] is illustrative rather than encyclopaedic – for example the secondary terrain of performance is referenced only in terms of the lyric tradition (and the associated poetry of the self).[24] Accordingly, I want to position this matrix as a template rather than a fixed set of rules: a stratagem for rethinking how we position the materiality of poetry and, perhaps, literature more broadly.

The strategies outlined above are among those that I have determined through the creative component of this thesis. Accordingly, I have applied this critical framework to develop an evaluation for the creative projects I have worked on as part of this Masters – with the understanding that this is practice-led research rather then research-led practice [see www.nongeneric.net/itbeginsinthebook/?cat=6]. There is no doubt that at least one of the projects would have benefited from this model of materiality, if applied at the outset.

Material Basis	Material Expression	Language-object (materialism)
Terrain (primary)	**Landing site opportunities**	**Outcomes**
• Poetry as visual and spatial	• Engage the visual aspect of language • Disrupt the page structure • Differentiate the space of the screen from that of the page • Experiment with typography to create distinctive visual space for poems • Recontextualise language-object outside of standard codex spaces	• Challenge print-culture (read literary culture) norms • New media objects distinct from print objects • Poetry as extra-literary, hybrid object
• Localised semiotic system • Lack of discernible (or at least immediately discernible) meaning	• Force the body into concentrated reading positions • Create unique language-objects • Create non-standardised navigation systems • Position language-object outside of standard literary spaces • Make it a task to the turn the pages (but make the user want to know more) • Disrupt rote reading motions • Re-construct the relationship of the codex to the body	• Challenge print-culture (read literary culture) norms • Re-reading as integral to the poetic experience • User interaction with textual interface • Language-object as non-ubiquitous site
Terrain (second.)	**Landing site opportunities**	**Outcomes**
• Separation from the lyric tradition	• If performing, separate the reader from the audience and discourage the dramatic reading mode • Non-referential sound-scapes to destabilise context	• Draw attention from the "lyrical" I to an indeterminate self • Highlight the language, not the poet

TABLE 1
Matrix for establishing poem's materiality

The key points to retain in relation to the poetic discourse in question – as outlined by my assessment of Perloff, Riffaterre and others – are this:

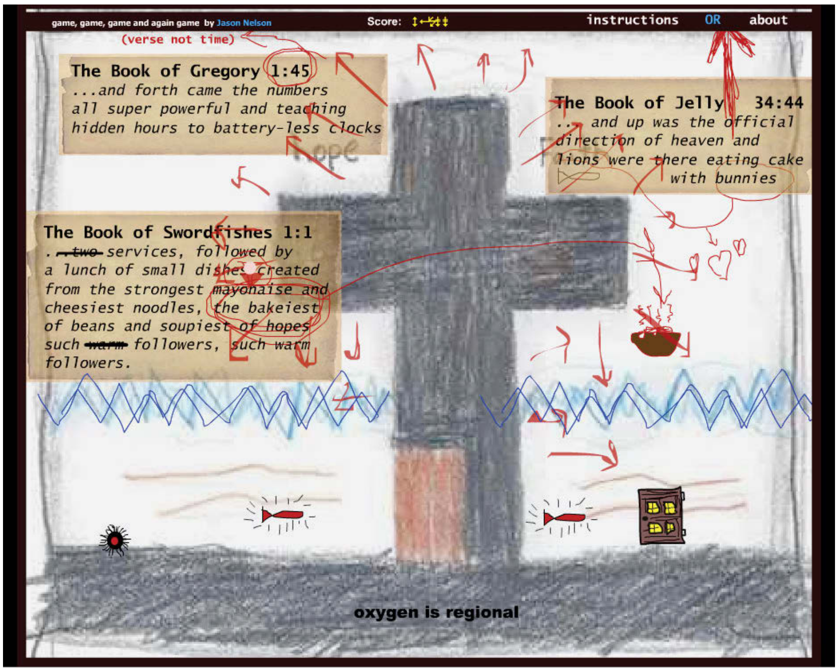
– If we are to approach this poetry as a literary object with its own visual and spatial qualities, then we need to experiment with ways for the interface of poetry to be delineated from that of prose (and how this interface can be made immediate or explicit, as per the principles of hypermediacy).

– If this poetry operates on the basis of a localised semiotic system then the reader should be made to interact with the text in a way that disrupts the movement towards a final and authoritative meaning.

We can relate this to A+G's architecture for sites of reversible destiny by comparing such acts with an effort to unbalance the body/mind of the user as s/he crosses the poetic terrain. We can also surmise that the referential poetries of authors such as Clive James, Andrew Motion and Peter Porter can be left as they are, printed in the *Australian Book Review* and other established literary-culture publications.

I have argued that interface and interactivity are not quintessentially the domain of new media arts. Instead, new media arts has acted to foreground them as essential components of the user experience of a language-object. We can therefore include new media arts in the chain of potential material expressions of a poem, but we do not have to limit ourselves to this particular set of technological practices.

I nonetheless want to conclude this chapter by applying this model of materiality to works by an electronic literature practitioner, Jason Nelson. A lecturer in cyberstudies and digital writing at Griffith University, Nelson has established himself as in the field of electronic poetry through his intricately programmed Flash-based poems. At a general level, his work is distinguished from much Flash poetry by their highly inventive and generally non-linear interactivity, their lo-fi graphics and rough-hewn soundscapes, and, the frenetic overlay of poetic textual fragments, usually gleaned through interaction with the work.[25]



The Book of Gregory 1:45
...and forth came the numbers
all super powerful and teaching
hidden hours to battery-less clocks

The Book of Jelly 34:44
... and up was the official
direction of heaven and
lions were there eating cake
with bunnies

The Book of Swordfishes 1:1
. ~~, two~~ services, followed by
a lunch of small dishes created
from the strongest mayonaise and
cheesiest noodles, the bakeiest
of beans and soupiest of hopes
such ~~warm~~ followers, such warm
followers.

IMAGE 6
Jason Nelson, *Game, Game, Game and Again Game (Game),* screenshot

These qualities are all on display in his piece *Game, Game, Game and Again Game* (*Game) (*www.secrettechnology.com/gamegame/gamegame.html) a platform-style poetry game in which the user controls a round squiggle (literally), moving it through a series of hand-drawn arenas. The theme, he writes, 'hovers around our many failed/error filled/compelling belief systems', while also repelling the 'tyranny (cringe) of clean design and cold smoothness of much of the web/net-art.'[26] Like most platform games, the goal is to navigate a character (the squiggle) through a variety of belief systems (each represented as one of 13 levels in the game – not including the "victory chapter at the conclusion"), a process that involves moving through various hotspots, most of which trigger a textual fragment on-screen such as 'Step 2 of 5 … you will never reach anything. Built into your walk are glass doors, broken only by those wanting them open, handles or knee pads and ~~black~~ pugs.' Small "home-movies" containing nostalgic domestic scenes are also embedded in certain levels.

The piece is undoubtedly an achievement in lo-fi aesthetics and intricate software coding (though it appears that Nelson by and large repurposes existing code, which is not a problem in itself).[27] However, whether it works as a language-object is another. To determine this factor, our starting point is to establish the material basis of the work. Given the obtuseness of the language and the seemingly disconnected nature of utterances throughout the piece, we can associate the poem with a localised semiotic system and a lack of fixed meanings (indeed the premise of the piece is to challenge certain belief systems). But this material basis is closely intertwined with the field of ludology, since the interface is ostensibly that of a computer game. It therefore makes sense to consider *Game* within the expectations of the platform game genre as well. These two characteristics are thus the qualities from which we should derive the piece's material expression.

The material matrix of this work [see Table 2, following page], based on these principles, thus unfolds as follows, along with elements of the material expression that in, my opinion, have not been accounted for. My assessment of *Game* as a language-object is explained below.

Having "completed" the poem-game to find a bonus "story of life", a tongue-in-cheek treatment of the subject, at its conclusion, I was able to discern Nelson's poetic intent more clearly. One interpretation is to view the work as drawing a correlation between the absurdness of trying to complete a game with the impossibility of completing a life. According to Nelson, both are constructs that belief systems have trained us to accept. The language-object is ostensibly successful in that regard: it lacks common game features such as rewards or puzzles. However, the very lack of these meant I couldn't find a compelling reason to "complete" the work, other than to analyse it. Nor was I able to revisit certain poetic elements (as I might be able to in a book or even a saved version of a computer game) without dragging myself through the interface again.

In some sense, the interface itself, even without the poetry, was absurd enough to achieve such an objective – for example memory memes inserted into the game, in the form of grainy Super 8 home movies, are

Material Basis	Material Expression	Language-object (materialism)
Terrain (primary)	**Landing site opportunities**	**Outcomes**
• Interactive platform game	• Substitute rewards (eg treasures) with revelation of poetic texts • Retain some familiar game elements (eg villains) • User-controlled "hero" to unlock poem • Subvert soundtrack and sound effects • Special (victory) platform • Hand-drawn graphics • Absent landing sites: finite lives, scores, narrative drive, genuine rewards, puzzles, consideration of user-experience.	• Poem as game, game as poem • Interface clear but outcome opaque • No defined outcome • Neither quite poem nor game
• Localised semiotic system • Lack of discernible meaning/ outcome	• Symbolic rather than narrative progression through poem • Embedded home movie clips seemingly unrelated to text • Variety of typographical treatments for textual fragments • Various poetic dictions • Playful diction • Absent landing sites: ability to revisit texts without extended navigation, clear poetic strategy to join textual fragments together	• Re-reading not facilitated • High level of user interactivity • Variable poetic time
• Separation from the lyric tradition	• If performing, separate the reader from the audience and discourage the dramatic reading mode • Non-referential sound-scapes to destabilise context	• Draw attention from the "lyrical" I to an indeterminate self • Highlight the language, not the poet

TABLE 2
Materiality matrix for *Game, Game, Game and*

entirely decontextualised. They are a kitsch intrusion, appearing almost for the sake of it.

Part of the problem is that in trying to subvert both the poetic and platform game genres, Nelson moves further and further away from each. While there is no doubt this is a well thought-out work, *Game* appears lost in its own self-referentiality to the point where not caring about the outcome of the work means that it has achieved its artistic objectives. A final message on the penultimate level, expressing amazement that users have actually finished the piece, only reinforces this view. *Game* appears ultimately to centre on its user-hostile interface rather than poetic substance, which is regrettable given the substantive imagination driving the work. As Talan Memmott concludes in assessing another of Nelson's new media poems, ‘Perhaps then, they are works to be operated rather than read (in the strict sense).’[28] Impenetrable as his philosophy on the works is, hidden behind a thick layer of humour and irony, perhaps this is precisely the outcome that Nelson seeks.

Returning to the materialist model I have sought to establish through this paper, we can note two things that might make such a work more complete (or at least more satisfying from a user perspective). First, A+G’s point that the familiar must, in some form, remain. Second, a parting note from British poet and critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson, who charts terrain not at all dissimilar to Riffaterre’s.

Writing back in the 1970s, Forrest-Thomson argues that our experience of the (non-verbal) world is both limited and created by language, since our understanding of it is necessarily verbal. Her emphasis is that while both ‘ordinary language’ and ‘poetic language’ articulate the world, they are necessarily different in how they function.

Poetry’s role within this paradigm – and by extension art’s – is to articulate and mediate (that is, transform) the non-verbal world by subverting ordinary language. In her terms, it must simultaneously achieve continuity and discontinuity with ordinary language. Poetry must ‘control the meanings and feelings generated by the words it uses’ and ‘control experience by verbal relationships that channel it in a structural attitude.’[29] Forrest-Thomson argues that poetry acts to both establish a continuity with non-verbal concepts but also to limit ‘the kind of external material which is assimilated and subjected to new organisation and articulation,’[30] and thus distanced from ordinary language.

In this continuity-discontinuity model, we can discern one of the fundamental challenges at the heart of the material poem. How do we reference the tradition we are trying to subvert, yet create a language-object that sits in the borderlands of those very cultural norms. Has Nelson achieved this balance? I don’t think so. But that does not deny his work is an exciting leap into the potentialities of electronic poetry and, by extension, the material poem.

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1 The caveats to this proposition are many and best explored by revisiting the previous chapters. One argument that might come to mind immediately is that poems are also audible objects, delivered by a speaker, for example at a poetry reading. One response to this argument might be that the spatial arrangement of a poem on the page also relates closely to its rhythm as a performance.

2 A good overview of some of the tensions in this debate can be found in a recent article: Williamson, G. 'Is that a canon in your pocket?', *The Australian Literary Review*, July 1, 2009. Other tangents in this debate include issues about readability and usability in screen-based practices. See for example Nielsen, J 'How Little Do Users Read?' http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html or Morkes, J and Nielsen, J 'Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web' http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html.

3 A useful and concise taxonomy is Adalaide Morris's in her introduction to *New Media Poetics* where she describes six primary typologies (in a poetic context at least): literal art, poem-games, programmable/procedural computer-poems, real-time reiterative programmable poems, participating networked/programmable poems and codework poems. See also the somewhat more comprehensive overview by N. Katherine Hayles: 'Electronic Literature: What is it?' http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html (Electronic Literature Organization, 2007).

4 Tabbi, J. 'Locating the Literary in New Media', *Electronic Book Review* http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/criticalecologies/interpretive, accessed 15 March 2009.

5 Aarseth, E. J. *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1997)

6 Tofts, D. *Interzone: Media Arts in Australia* (Fishermans Bend: Craftsman House, 2005), p. 13.

7 ibid. p. 12.

8 Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R. *Remediation: understanding new media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1999), pp 41-42.

9 For example Kenneth Goldsmith's 'The Bride Stripped Bare' (Morris, A. and Swiss, T. (eds.) *New Media Poetics: contexts, technotexts and theories* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006). Here Goldsmith explores the power that new media technologies have to decontextualise and recontextualise texts such as a stock-standard celebrity interview taken from one website to another and subjected to various formatting changes. As I argued in the first chapter, literary texts (and other media) have always been in a state of edition-based flux (Grigely, 1996). What new media technology enables, perhaps, is for this flux to be elevated to hyperflux: dissemination and re-contextualisation becomes accelerated, enabled and promoted by new media remediation technologies.

10 Aarseth, E. J. (1997), p.10.

11 Hayles, N.K. 'Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis', *Poetics Today*, Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2004, p.73.

12 Hayles, N. K. *Writing Machines* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p.43.

13 McGann, J. *Black riders : the visible language of modernism* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, c1993), p.74.

14 See especially Hayles (2002), where she discusses the computer itself as integral to the materiality of electronic literature.

15 Stuart, J. 'From text to texture', *Cordite 20: Submerged*, 2004 (http://www.cordite.org.au/archives/000677.html)

16 ibid. quoting Bernstein, C. 'Response', in Loizeaux, E.B. & Fraistat, N. (eds.) *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print* (Madison, Wis: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

17 Arakawa, S. and Gins, M. *Arakawa and Madeleine Gins architecture: sites of reversible destiny: architectural experiments after Auschwitz – Hiroshima* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), p.19.

18 Lakoff, G. 'Testing the Limits of Brain Plasticity: Or, Why Is There a Wall Down the Middle of the Tub?' in Arakawa and Gins, M. *Reversible Destiny* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), p. 118.

19 ibid. p. 118.

20 Keane, J. 'Constructing the Conditions of and Environments for Interdisciplinary Research on Perception and Action,' *Ecological Psychology*, Issue 20: p.343–360, 2008, p. 354.

21 Danto, Arthur C. 'Gins and Arakawa: Building Sensoriums', *Nation*, Vol. 251 Issue 12, 1990, p.430. The Ronald Feldman Gallery's website has details of the exhibition: http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/exhsolo/exhgin90.html.

22 Arakawa, S. and Gins, M. *Arakawa and Madeleine Gins architecture: sites of reversible destiny: architectural experiments after Auschwitz – Hiroshima* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), p.65.

23 Arakawa and Gins (2002) make this point with regards to their landing sites too. The point is to create an 'identity crisis' (p. 87) by which 'the familiar passes through itself' (p.73), not to divorce the language-object from its material basis.

24 See Bernstein, C. 'The art of immemorability' Rothenberg, J. & Clay, S. (eds.) *A Book of the Book* (New York: Granary Books, 2000) or Perloff (1999).

25 Compare for example the manic and mysterious *hymns of the drowning swimmer* (www.secrettechnology.com/hymns/navigate.html) or *Pandemic Rooms* (www.secrettechnology.

com/pandemicrooms) to the generally clean-cut poet-designer collaborations exhibited at *Born Magazine* (www.bornmagazine.org).

26 Nelson, J. 'Introduction' *Game, Game, Game and Again Game* (*Game)* (www.secrettechnology.com/gamegame/gamegame.html). This rebellion against established belief systems bares similarity to Arakawa and Gins' efforts to reformat human destiny through architecture. See Lakoff (1997) or Arakawa and Gins (1996; 1997).

27 See for example, Leishmann, D. 'Leishman on Two of Nelson's Works', *The Iowa Review Web*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2007. http://research-intermedia.art.uiowa.edu/tirw/vol9n1/artists_each_others_work.php, accessed 16 May 2009.

28 Memmott, T. 'Clutteralist Aesthetics and the Poetics of Whimsy: The Work of Jason Nelson', *The Iowa Review Web*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2007. http://research-intermedia.art.uiowa.edu/tirw/vol9n1. Accessed 16 May 2009.

29 Forrest-Thomson, V. 'Continuity in Language', Cook, J.(ed.), *Poetry in theory: an anthology, 1900-2000* (Malden, MA : Blackwell Pub., 2004), p. 458.

30 ibid. p.459.

04: Closing the Codex, Opening Ideas

In one sense, this conclusion is superfluous; the individual self-assessments of the three creative projects delivered as part of this project – *The Homeless Gods*, *The Material Poem* and *Conversions* – are possibly better suited to that purpose. But in writing this thesis, I found a distinct thread, one not entirely clear to me at the outset. This thread runs as follows.

In the first chapter, I argued that materiality is always implicated in the production and consumption of literature, not only because language is invariably shared as a language-object but also because of the socio-cultural conditions that affect its consumption. We might also use the term "interpretation" as a less mercantile piece of terminology. However, within the field of literary studies there has been a divergence between these two components of materiality (namely materialism and material expression) and a literary work's material basis. The material basis of a literary work refers to the literary devices to which we respond intellectually and emotionally as readers. In my research, especially from the editorial work undertaken for my anthology *The Material Poem*, the best works of text-art and experimental writing account for this relationship. Such works are both media-specific and also media-appropriate: there is a conscious link between the driving artistic force of the language and the medium through which it is expressed.

In Chapter 2 my task was to examine this understanding of materiality as it pertained to poetry. The first question became: what is the material basis of poetry? Poetry is a disparate genre subject to many discursive claims and counterclaims. In this regard, my first claim is based on Rosemary Huisman's: that poetry is an inherently visual form of literature, not only since the written word is, by definition, visual but because of the practice of lineation that has been prevalent in Western literature since the 14th century. When we consider other literate cultures such as those using the comparatively ornate Arabic and Chinese scripts, the visual tradition extends even further. The transition from the epic function of poetry to the shorter and more visually and spatially contained lyric function could be taken as a further emphasis of this tendency, while reinforcing the divide between the function of poetic and prosaic language.[1]

This difference, contends Michel Riffaterre, is one between mimetic language (prose) and semiotically subversive language (poetry) in which the reader is no longer able to accept poetic language as an expression of literalness. Instead, they must engage with the text meta-semiotically: a process that requires a two-staged reading process in which the reader first approaches the poetic text heuristically (to apprehend its structure as a poem) and hermeneutically (to interpret its localised semiotic system). The goal is to perceive a poem's meaning (or significance) by finding the hypogram (an idea or phrase) that unlocks the localised semiotic system, or *ungrammaticality*, of the poem. While this mode of reading is not unique to poetry, it nonetheless suggests that poetry's material basis is predicated on non-conventional reading patterns. When we take into account the surface-deep metonymy of Marjorie Perloff's poetics of indeterminacy, we move away from the idea of fixed meanings (or fixed semiotic systems and fixed hypograms to continue Riffaterre's terminology). Within many contemporary poetic discourses, it falls squarely on the reader to make their own interpretation of any given poetic text.

If Chapter 2 consisted in determining the material basis of poetry – or at least certain poetic discourses – then the question at the heart of Chapter 3 was to how to resolve this basis as a material expression. At first glance, building upon the idea that reader *interaction* and literary *interface* lie at poetry's heart, I wanted to understand whether new media art might be the apposite form for poetry in the 21st century – interface and interaction being two concepts at the heart of much new media theory. It became clear quite quickly that new media's operations in terms of interaction and interface can be seen as an extension of traditional media (including literary media). This argument stems from my reading of Espen Aarseth, Jerome McGann, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, in particular. What new media technology has accomplished, in the context of electronic literature at least, is to (re)foreground interactivity and interface as essential to art's communication processes.

This conclusion also allowed me to move from a media-specific approach to a more fundamental framework, one indebted to the *procedural architecture* of Arakawa and Madeleine Gins. At the heart of their thinking lie Sites of Reversible Destiny: spaces in which the inherent potential for art and architecture to challenge the body's rote movements (or destiny) through spatial trajectories is realised. This challenge comes through their design of landing sites: perceptual points at which it is possible to change the way the body both comes into contact with and defines terrains it moves through. Put otherwise, landing sites are those points at which an architect can force a subject's body to question accepted motions, and, by extension, accepted meanings. The parallels to Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry, in particular, are tangible, giving rise to my final proposition: a model for the material expression of poetry. If we accept my central contentions regarding poetry's material basis as a visually based ungrammatical structure, then we can use Arakawa and Gins' procedural architecture to propose a model for poetry's materiality. In this model, a poem's interface is positioned as a series of landing sites that force the reader to interact with it in such a way that they are able to forego (and indeed embrace) the accepted semiosis of mimetic forms of literature (prose). In turn they are able to embrace poetry's ungrammaticality. There are subtleties to this position, of course, but that is its essence and the basis from which a critical assessment of *material poems* might proceed.

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1 See Bernstein, C. 'The art of Immemorability' in *A Book of the Book*, Rothenberg, J & Clay, S (eds.) (New York: Granary Books, 2000). Here Bernstein charts the shift from oral poetry to printed poetry, which enabled the stabilisation of a text and the subsequent rise of the epic poetry function. However, this epic function (poetry as the infrastructure of memory) was to be superseded by the novel and other prose functions in the 18th century, a period concurrent with the rise of poetry's lyric function, a more individual mode of expression. In the lyric mode, poetry 'does not create language that is commitable to memory but rather a memory of the analphabetic that is committed to language.' (p.516)

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Project 01: The Material Poem

The Material Poem is an e-anthology featuring the work of some 28 Australian poets, artists and critics, all of whom are engaged with poetry and, more broadly, language as a material form. I edited, designed and published (through non-generic productions) the anthology. It originally appeared as a free-to-download e-book in 2007. In 2009, I designed and published a print-on-demand edition. The back-cover note for the anthology reads as follows:

> This body of work is inter-disciplinary, inter-media and often collaborative, spanning a wide variety of formal contexts – page, screen, canvas, space, book, performance and more. The Material Poem showcases the vibrancy of experimental writing in Australia, demonstrating how writing functions as a practice that is never purely literary.

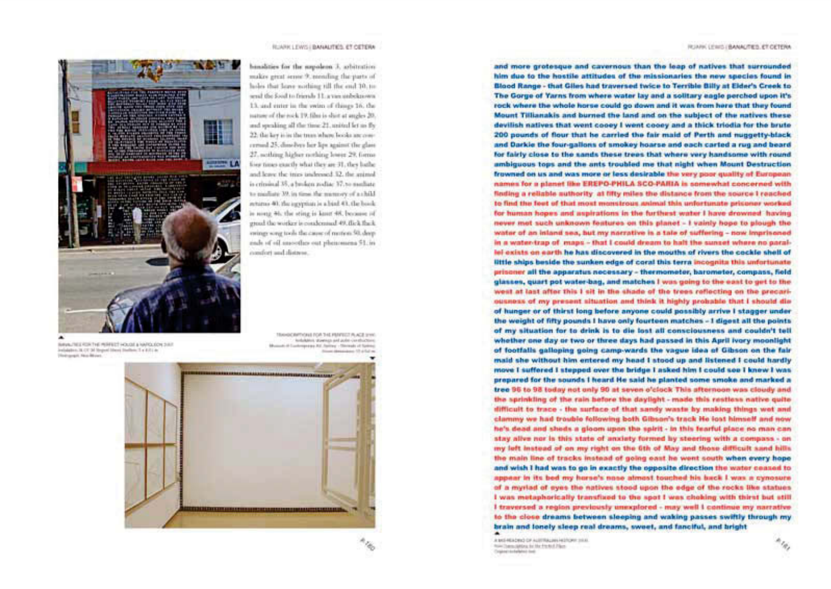
The full list of contributors is listed on the non-generic productions website (www.nongeneric.net).

IMAGE 1
James Stuart (ed.), *The Material Poem* (2007), typical spread

About

I have discussed much of my rationale in commissioning, editing and designing the anthology elsewhere, notably the anthology's extended introductory essay 'The Art of Writing'. Any remarks here should be read in conjunction with those writings. In this instance, I want to contextualise *The Material Poem* in terms of the overall body of work generated as part of this Masters of Creative Arts.

The Material Poem was the first project completed as part of my practice-based research. This was no accident: one motivating factor was my desire to meaningfully engage with those writers and artists in Australia whom I might consider (if not now, then one day) as peers.



RUARK LEWIS | BANALITIES, ET CETERA

and more grotesque and cavernous than the leap of natives that surrounded him due to the hostile attitudes of the missionaries the new species found in Blood Range - that Giles had traversed twice to Terrible Billy at Elder's Creek to The Gorge of Yarns from where water lay and a solitary eagle perched upon it's rock where the whole horse could go down and it was from here that they found Mount Tillianakis and burned the land and on the subject of the natives these devilish natives that went cooey I went cooey and a thick triodia for the brute 200 pounds of flour that he carried the fair maid of Perth and nuggetty-black and Darkie the four-gallons of smokey hoarse and each carted a rug and beard for fairly close to the sands these trees that where very handsome with round ambiguous tops and the ants troubled me that night when Mount Destruction frowned on us and was more or less desirable the very poor quality of European names for a planet like EREPO-PHILA SCO-PARIA is somewhat concerned with finding a reliable authority at fifty miles the distance from the source I reached to find the feet of that most monstrous animal this unfortunate prisoner worked for human hopes and aspirations in the furthest water I have drowned having never met such unknown features on this planet - I vainly hope to plough the water of an inland sea, but my narrative is a tale of suffering - now imprisoned in a water-trap of maps - that I could dream to halt the sunset where no parallel exists on earth he has discovered in the mouths of rivers the cockle shell of little ships beside the sunken edge of coral this terra incognita this unfortunate prisoner all the apparatus necessary - thermometer, barometer, compass, field glasses, quart pot water-bag, and matches I was going to the east to get to the west at last after this I sit in the shade of the trees reflecting on the precariousness of my present situation and think it highly probable that I should die of hunger or of thirst long before anyone could possibly arrive I stagger under the weight of fifty pounds I have only fourteen matches - I digest all the points of my situation for to drink is to die lost all consciousness and couldn't tell whether one day or two or three days had passed in this April ivory moonlight of footfalls galloping going camp-wards the vague idea of Gibson on the fair maid she without him entered my head I stood up and listened I could hardly move I suffered I stepped over the bridge I asked him I could see I knew I was prepared for the sounds I heard He said he planted some smoke and marked a tree 96 to 98 today not only 90 at seven o'clock This afternoon was cloudy and the sprinkling of the rain before the daylight - made this restless native quite difficult to trace - the surface of that sandy waste by making things wet and clammy we had trouble following both Gibson's track He lost himself and now he's dead and sheds a gloom upon the spirit - in this fearful place no man can stay alive nor is this state of anxiety formed by steering with a compass - on my left instead of on my right on the 6th of May and those difficult sand hills the main line of tracks instead of going east he went south when every hope and wish I had was to go in exactly the opposite direction the water ceased to appear in its bed my horse's nose almost touched his back I was a cynosure of a myriad of eyes the natives stood upon the edge of the rocks like statues I was metaphorically transfixed to the spot I was choking with thirst but still I traversed a region previously unexplored - may well I continue my narrative to the close dreams between sleeping and waking passes swiftly through my brain and lonely sleep real dreams, sweet, and fanciful, and bright

IMAGE 2
James Stuart (ed.), *The Material Poem* (2007), typical spread

The other principal motivation was to celebrate these peers' work by creating a reference tool for others concerned with the materiality of language and/or experimental writing. A critical reaction to the anthology's achievements in this regard can be found in Jacket Magazine (http://jacketmagazine.com/34/lorange-stuart.shtml).

Finally, *The Material Poem* was also an opportunity to develop my skills as a graphic designer and typographer. An essential reference was Robert Bringhurst's *The Elements of Typographic Style* (Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 2003, 3rd ed – revised) as well as Herbert Spencer' *Pioneers of Modern Typography* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1983, c1982).

Although ostensibly a practice-based component of this Masters of Creative Arts, my only "creative" input was as the publication's designer. The rest sits more comfortably in the domain of critical studies and traditional research. As such, I have chosen not to submit this work to an analysis driven by my model of materiality [see Chapter 3].

My only comment in terms of materiality would be that *The Material Poem*, despite being conceived as an e-book, remains embedded in a print

IMAGE 3
James Stuart (ed.), *The Material Poem* (2007), typical spread

aesthetic: it is designed to be read in hard-copy format. The internet has principally been used as a means of distributing a print anthology for free (though the inclusion of multimedia work lends complexity to this equation). The only remaining incarnation left for the anthology to assume is as an html-based “website” rather than a PDF document.

NOTE

For more images refer to the *It Begins in the Book* website at www.nongeneric.net/itbeginsinthebook. The anthology itself can be downloaded from www.nongeneric.net.

Project 02: The Homeless Gods

The Homeless Gods (www.thehomelessgods.net) is an interactive, 3D city map of a mythological city, New Eridu. This interface draws its inspiration from adventure games such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*.

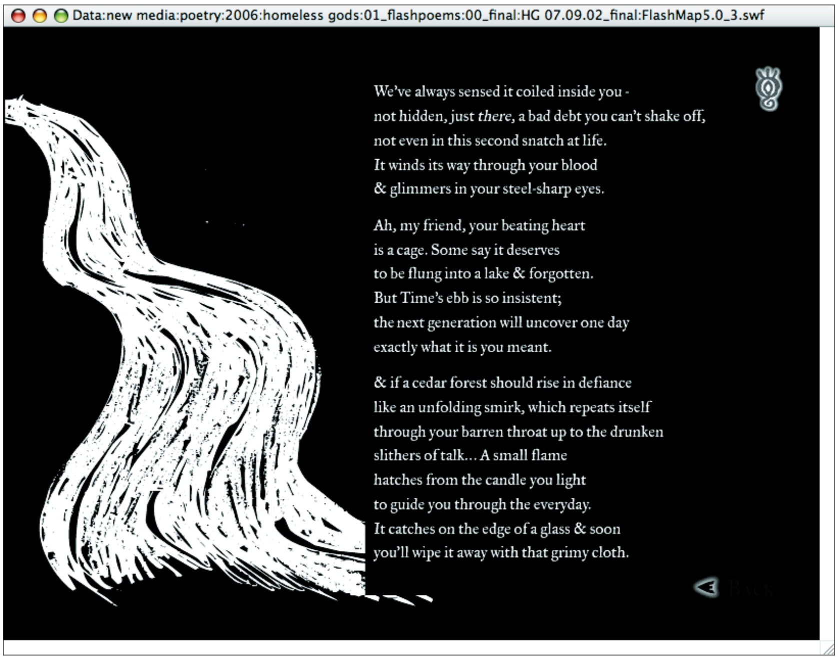
Users are invited to "visit" this city by clicking on one of ten locations. Each location is features an individual Flash poem, an animated black and white scene which users can interact with to read either textual fragments or complete poems.

This project was assisted by the Australian Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

The work is very much collaborative at its heart, though the original concept is entirely my own.

Credits

- James Stuart – Director, Producer & Writer
- Karen Chen – Artist & Animator
- Guillaume Potard – Sound Designer


Data:new media:poetry:2006:homeless gods:01_flashpoems:00_final:HG 07.09.02_final:FlashMap5.0_3.swf
Back

We've always sensed it coiled inside you -
not hidden, just *there*, a bad debt you can't shake off,
not even in this second snatch at life.
It winds its way through your blood
& glimmers in your steel-sharp eyes.

Ah, my friend, your beating heart
is a cage. Some say it deserves
to be flung into a lake & forgotten.
But Time's ebb is so insistent;
the next generation will uncover one day
exactly what it is you meant.

& if a cedar forest should rise in defiance
like an unfolding smirk, which repeats itself
through your barren throat up to the drunken
slithers of talk... A small flame
hatches from the candle you light
to guide you through the everyday.
It catches on the edge of a glass & soon
you'll wipe it away with that grimy cloth.

IMAGE 1
James Stuart et al.
The Homeless Gods,
'The Bellowing Bull',
screenshot

About

Mythology

The mythological structure of underpinning this work is simple: when a civilisation falls, so too do its gods. They become mortal and are forced to eek out an existence as mortals at the edge of memory. New Eridu is one such site, where the fallen gods of Mesopotamia reside. I chose to draw upon ancient Mesopotamian mythology as the central focus for this piece for a number of reasons:

- Humankind's first civilisation
- Emergence of the world's first written language – cuneiform
- Stunning epic literature and mythology
- Issues of cultural loss related to present day looting and destruction of archaeological sites and artefacts in Iraq, following the 2003 invasion

Visual language

I briefed Karen Chen to develop artwork based on German expressionist art, especially woodblock prints. I chose to use this visual language because it was bold, evocative and gritty. It also corresponds to a particularly bleak, but poetic, post-World-War-I Germany world-view, one that suited my vision of society at the fringes of existence. At a more pragmatic level, I felt this was also an art form that could be easily replicated in a vector-based environment such as Flash [Image 2].

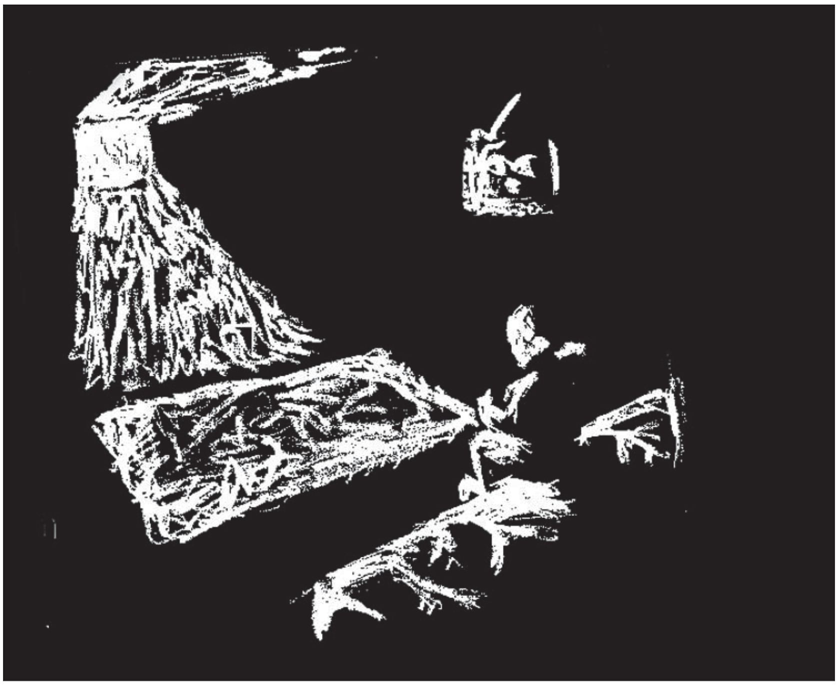


IMAGE 2
Karen Chen, early sketch for 'Mashu's Refuge'

Research

Every aspect of this project is based upon extensive, cross-disciplinary research. Research into Mesopotamian mythology, literature, culture and history were essential to the work's development. I wanted to create a poem-world that embraced this rich literary and cultural legacy in an authentic and informed way. This research is summarised in the project's bibliography (http://thehomelessgods.net/sources.html).

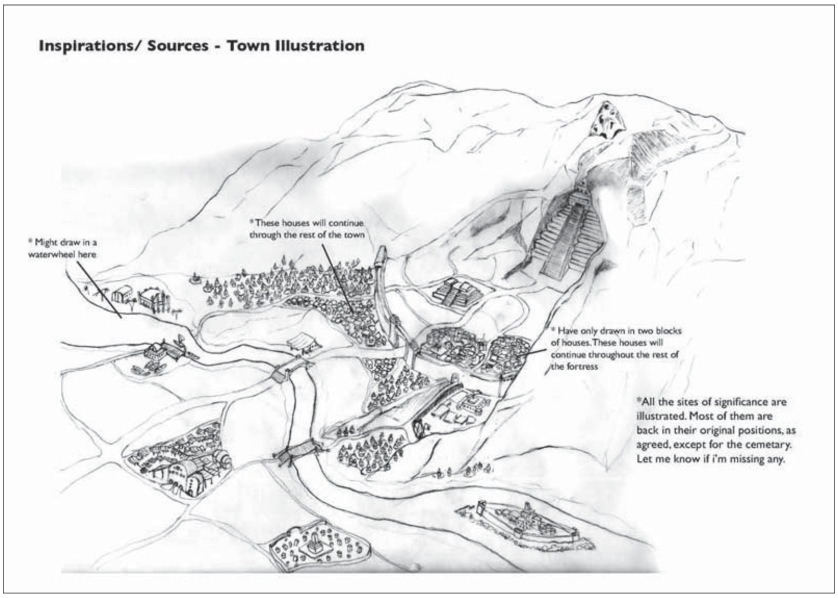
The other key research area was architectural, informing the urban design of New Eridu. A key publication in this regard was Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964), which centred on cross-cultural examples of "organic" architecture that had evolved in response to specific environmental conditions.

This research drew the focus of the project away from its roots in fantasy fiction.

Process

Map interface

After research had been completed, Chen and I spent some months developing the map [Image 3]. This was an iterative process built up from an initial city plan and ending with the final animated Flash map.



* Might draw in a waterwheel here

*These houses will continue through the rest of the town

* Have only drawn in two blocks of houses. These houses will continue throughout the rest of the fortress

*All the sites of significance are illustrated. Most of them are back in their original positions, as agreed, except for the cemetary. Let me know if i'm missing any.

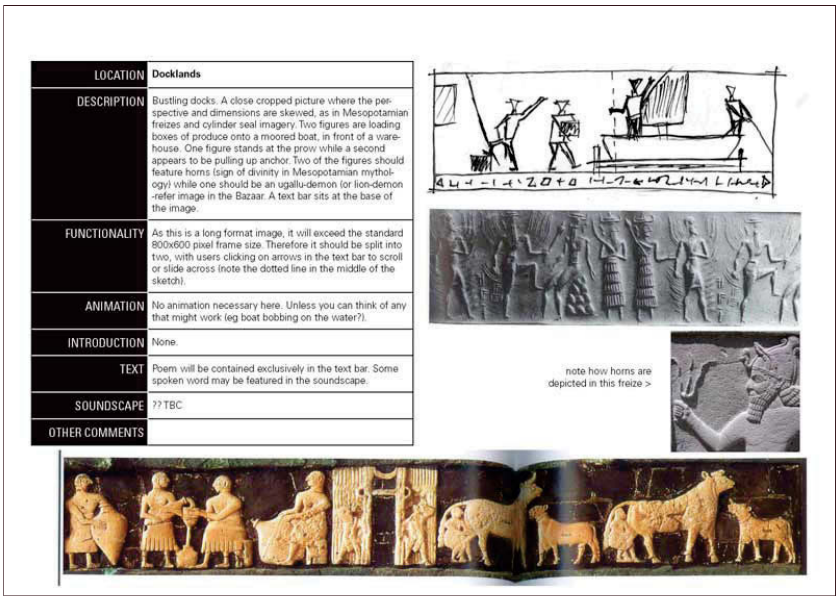
IMAGE 3
Karen Chen, concept sketch for New Eridu map interface

Flash poem development

I began all Flash poems with a storyboard [Image 4] that outlined both the scene as well as the desired interactivity, textual content and animation. This was refined in collaboration with Chen. First an artwork was developed. The actual writing of the poems formed the final stage.

Soundscape development

The soundscapes were the final component of this project, created over the course of several "hands-on" sessions with Guillaume Potard. I would explain the poems, including the desired mood, and he would gradually build up sound layers.



LOCATION	**Docklands**
DESCRIPTION	Bustling docks. A close cropped picture where the perspective and dimensions are skewed, as in Mesopotamian friezes and cylinder seal imagery. Two figures are loading boxes of produce onto a moored boat, in front of a warehouse. One figure stands at the prow while a second appears to be pulling up anchor. Two of the figures should feature horns (sign of divinity in Mesopotamian mythology) while one should be an ugallu-demon (or lion-demon -refer image in the Bazaar. A text bar sits at the base of the image.
FUNCTIONALITY	As this is a long format image, it will exceed the standard 800x600 pixel frame size. Therefore it should be split into two, with users clicking on arrows in the text bar to scroll or slide across (note the dotted line in the middle of the sketch).
ANIMATION	No animation necessary here. Unless you can think of any that might work (eg boat bobbing on the water?).
INTRODUCTION	None.
TEXT	Poem will be contained exclusively in the text bar. Some spoken word may be featured in the soundscape.
SOUNDSCAPE	?? TBC
OTHER COMMENTS	

note how horns are depicted in this frieze >

IMAGE 4
James Stuart, storyboard for 'Docklands'

Project self-assessment

Despite the many achievements of the project – and the exhaustive research underpinning it – I have always felt this work has not reached its full potential.

Table 1 [following page] determines where these shortfalls may have occurred, while also emphasising the project's strengths.

The material basis of this work had two clear currents: first, the desire to subvert the poetry genre through its blending with the adventure game and fantasy fiction genres; second, a close affinity to a strong grounding in historical research and an engagement with issues surrounding the effacement of civilisations throughout history.

In relation to the poem-game crossover there are number of clear opportunities that were not pursued and which have resulted in the final artwork being caught "in between" genres, rather than comfortably inhabiting both. These relate to some of the key aspects of adventure game gameplay (eg puzzles or quests) that immerse a user in the world as well as a reliance upon poetry that could easily be replicated in a codex format. As a result, while there is a cohesive artistic style and self-contained virtual world, the desired user experience has not quite been achieved, at least in *The Homeless Gods*' current online environment.

An immediate reaction might be to examine ways to integrate missing "gaming" elements into the work. However, another option appears when we consider the inter-disciplinary nature of the piece.

At the outset of the project I did not envisage spending anywhere near as much time conducting research into ancient Mesopotamia and architectural design as I did. Nor had I realised how detailed a process developing an "authentic" world would be. I had hoped to create a piece that was far more engaged with a fantasy fiction world, akin to that of *The American Gods* by Neil Gaiman.

Material Basis	Material Expression	Language-object (materialism)
Terrain (primary)	**Landing site opportunities**	**Outcomes**
• Subvert poetry through adventure game genre crossover	Realised • Poetry "book" as 3D, navigable map interface • Poems hold the key to visiting each location • Self-contained "virtual world" with its own mythological structure and urban design Absent landing sites • Goal, rewards • Narrative drive • Puzzles • Web 2.0 interactivity (user-developed content)	Actual • Gradual unfolding of the city as poem • Detailed, immersive world • Cohesive visual style and soundscaping help convey meaning Desired • Incentive for users to return/revisit • Depth to interface and "game play" • Textual interface that is more media-specific
• Research into Mesopotamian culture, mythology and history • Poetry, artwork and soundscapes engaged with issues of cultural loss	Realised • Appropriation of source text literary devices • Actual cultural artefacts used within artwork • Artwork, urban design and poetry underpinned by direct references to source material Absent landing sites: • Cross-references to other sources • Transparency regarding research and project development processes	Actual • Poetic reinterpretations of ancient Mesopotamian texts • References to and reworking of cultural artefacts through poems, artworks and ancillary texts on website and within Flash animation Desired • Inter-disciplinary context • In-depth background on research and development processes

TABLE 1
The Homeless Gods, materiality matrix

While the poetry and artwork all conspire to deliver the desired authenticity, the project became very much inter-disciplinary at its core. It is as much rooted in the field of ancient history and literature as it was in that of contemporary poetry. Failure to explicitly explore and acknowledge this crossover lessens its impact.

Through this self-assessment I am able to conclude that the issue with *The Homeless Gods* is not so much the work itself (though of this is always a subjective point of view) but the context in which it is embedded. Based on the material basis driving the project (and which was different to that which I initially envisaged) it is not the material expression that is called into question but its context as a language-object.

My conclusions for the piece’s next evolution are thus:

1. To more clearly integrate the creative substance of the project with its associated research fields, possibly through association with a museum collection or ancient history journals
2. To explore opportunities for large, screen-based installation as part of a gallery/museum exhibition, drawing on the immersive and interactive qualities of the work while eschewing its shortcomings as a “game”

◆

NOTE

For more images refer to the *It Begins in the Book* website at www.nongeneric.net/itbeginsinthebook.

Visit the Homeless Gods at www.thehomelessgods.net

Project 03: Conversions

Conversions is a translation project featuring the work of three Chinese poets – two of Yi, one of Miao nationality, all from Sichuan Province. Unusually, their translated poems have been brought to life, not in a book or journal, but as large banners mounted on traditional Chinese scrolls, alongside their Chinese originals. These scrolls were installed in the vibrant social space of the Bookworm Chengdu, a western café, restaurant, bar and lending library – making this an exhibition of poetry in translation.

Rather than translate the poems alone, I worked with and mentored two teams of translators, all of whom were "untrained." Teaching people the art of the translation became an incredibly important part of the process. All translators worked collaboratively, both together and with the poets themselves.

This project was completed while I was an Asialink resident in Chengdu, China, from March to July 2008.

Credits

- Director, designer and principal translator: James Stuart
- Poets: He Xiaozhu, Lu Juan and Aku Wuwu
- Translators: Mark Hiew, Judy Seto, Bill Stranberg, Yang Zhi Han and Zhang Rui
- Editorial advisors: Aku Wuwu, Chen Xintong and Wang Yiyan
- Interpreter and project assistant: Yang Zhi Han
- With thanks to: Peter Goff, Tang Yi Chun, Angel Fan & Bill Stranberg at Chengdu Bookworm

This was an Asialink Project supported by Arts NSW and the Australia Council for the Arts, with additional asistance from the Bookworm. The project's first installation was at the Bookworm, Chengdu, China – June-July 2008. It is presently installed at the Bookworm's Suzhou branch.

About

Background

The seeds for the project were planted shortly after I arrived in Chengdu in March. My arrival was well timed: right in the middle of the Bookworm's International Literary Festival.

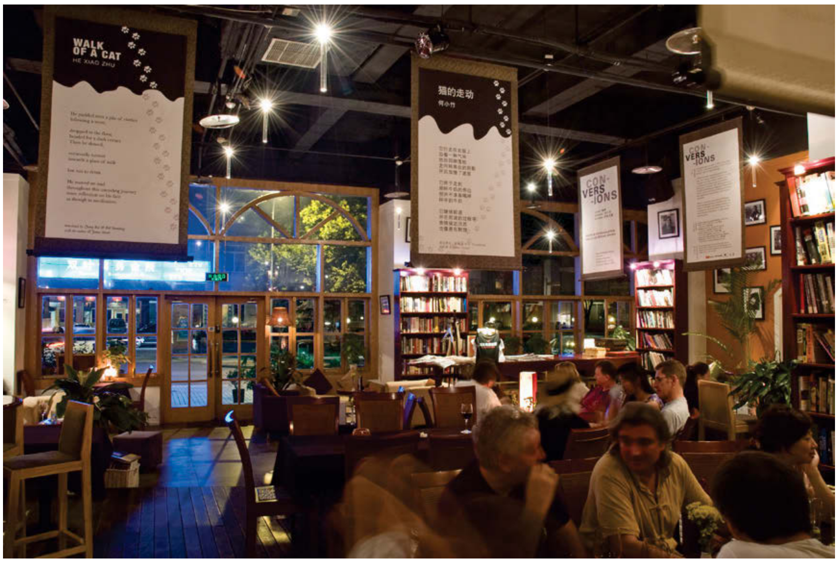


IMAGE 1
James Stuart et al.
Conversions (2008),
Bookworm Chengdu
[Photograph:
James Stuart]

The Festival had drawn writers from all corners of the globe, though mainly the English-speaking world. One of the guests was Chinese-born Australia-based poet and translator Yu Ouyang. Over lunch one day, Yu got up to answer a phone call. It was from a poet-friend of his, based in Chengdu, who was busy organising a national poetry festival. Unbeknownst to most foreigners at the Literary Festival, poets from all across China were flying in for a gathering of their own. I was immediately struck by this divide between local and international culture.

Thus the first goal of this project, which would later take the title *Conversions*, was to find a way of internalising the local within the international-concession-like space of the Bookworm. It seemed obvious that the most immediate way to do so was through a translation project, one that would bring Sichuan poets into the English language. One barrier was my relative inexperience as a translator, and my relatively poor Chinese language skills. These issues are resolved through the particular translation methodology applied to *Conversions*.

Even then, the question remained: how can translated poems actually transform a social space like the Bookworm? This question informed the decision to produce the poems as large banners and install them in the Bookworm rather than, for example, only organise a reading.[1] This approach also highlighted the inherently visual nature of written language as well as the long-standing tradition of poetry as both a visual and literary work of art, especially in the calligraphic traditions of countries such as China and Japan.

Through this approach I also wanted to place poetry into new formal contexts: where diners might expect to see a photo hanging or perhaps just empty space is now occupied by language, by poetry. Readers were invited to engage with the poems not just as objects to be contained in books but works of art with myriad incarnations. People who may have never opened a book of poetry in their life suddenly had access to the genre, simply by opening the door to the Bookworm.

The results of this conceptual work hung in the Chengdu Bookworm for some four weeks in July 2008. There were 12 scrolls in total: 6 poems – 2 by each of the poets, with both an original and translated version featured. The three poets featured were Aku Wuwu (or Luo Qingchun) and Lu Juan – both Yi nationality poets, and He Xiao Zhu, who is of Miao nationality.

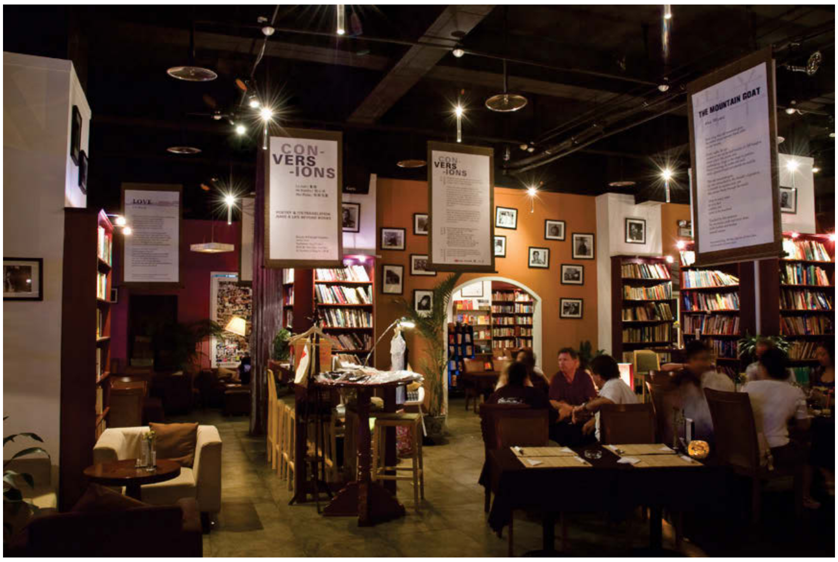


IMAGE 2
James Stuart et al.
Conversions (2008),
Bookworm Chengdu
[Photograph:
James Stuart]

Process

Translation

Apart from its installation as a bilingual exhibition the most distinctive feature of *Conversions* was its particular application of a collaborative or consensus translation model. In this approach, the translators work closely with the source language author in order to better capture the nuances of meaning that are inevitably compromised or, rather, transformed in all translation, especially literary translation. There is often more than one translator involved under such a model as well as an interpreter.

I established early on in my translation research that this was the right path to follow for the project methodology. I decided to pair up one native Chinese speaker with at least one native English speaker, with both having some prior interest in literature. This recognised that true bilinguals - such as Ouyang Yu, able to write poems in both English and Chinese – are not common currency. It was also to have the desired effect of expanding the cultural engagement made possible through traditional language education programs. By choosing to focus on what the Chinese term *nationality* poets (*minzu* or ethnic minority) rather than Han poets, I was able to open another avenue for cultural engagement.

At a project translation workshop with the translators, we explored the notion that direct equivalence between a source language (SL) and target language (TL) text is not possible, making redundant the "lost in translation" cliché. In accepting this, Susan Bassnett posits, 'it becomes possible to approach the question of *loss* and *gain* in the translation process.'[2] I wanted to emphasise that a TL text must be a living, breathing entity: a poem able to be read not as cultural artefact but as a dynamic contribution to the TL's literary culture. Such a notion has a prominent antecedent in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay 'The Task of the Translator' wherein he describes translation as the act of releasing an idea, trapped in a foreign language, into a separate linguistic system.[3]

IMAGE 3
James Stuart et al.
Conversions (2008),
Bookworm Chengdu;
from L to R: Aku Wuwu,
Lu Juan, He Xiaozhu and
James Stuart
[Photograph:
Bill Stranberg]

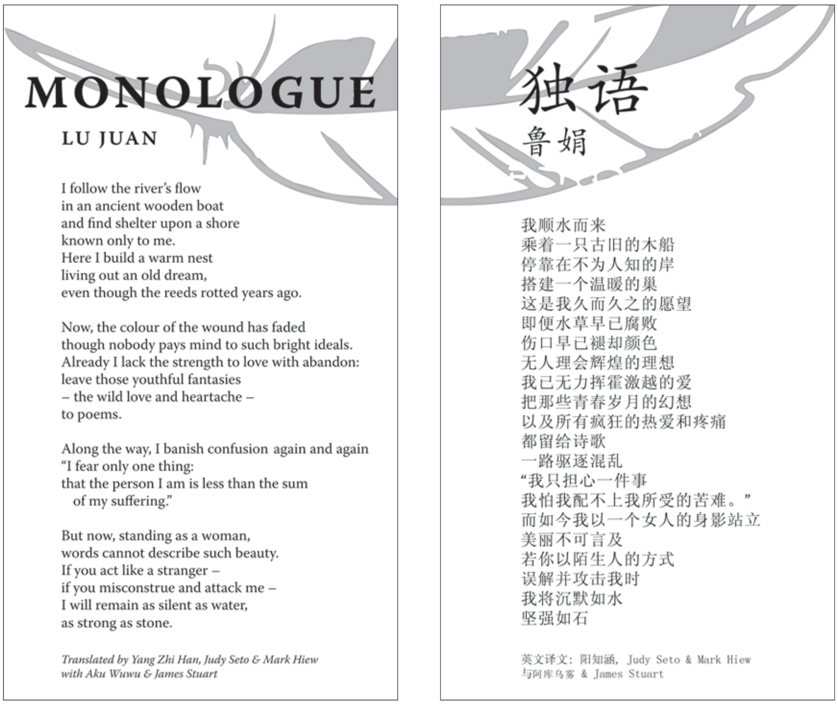
My own involvement in the project – as a poet – became clearer: I was to assist translators to integrate their texts with the vast pantheon of poetic conventions and discourses at play in the English language – to help their initial translations become poems.

Design and exhibition development

With translations complete, the design and installation of the banners was the next phase of the project.

The actual size of the banners was determined, in part, by the constraints of the physical space of the Bookworm, requiring them to be somewhat shorter and wider than initially planned.

I designed the banners to work as pairs, with the translation sitting on the left-hand side and the original on the right. A common motif and typography united each pair. This motif and typography was adapted for both of each poet's work [Images 4 and 5].



MONOLOGUE

LU JUAN

I follow the river's flow
in an ancient wooden boat
and find shelter upon a shore
known only to me.
Here I build a warm nest
living out an old dream,
even though the reeds rotted years ago.

Now, the colour of the wound has faded
though nobody pays mind to such bright ideals.
Already I lack the strength to love with abandon:
leave those youthful fantasies
– the wild love and heartache –
to poems.

Along the way, I banish confusion again and again
"I fear only one thing:
that the person I am is less than the sum
  of my suffering."

But now, standing as a woman,
words cannot describe such beauty.
If you act like a stranger –
if you misconstrue and attack me –
I will remain as silent as water,
as strong as stone.

Translated by Yang Zhi Han, Judy Seto & Mark Hiew
with Aku Wuwu & James Stuart

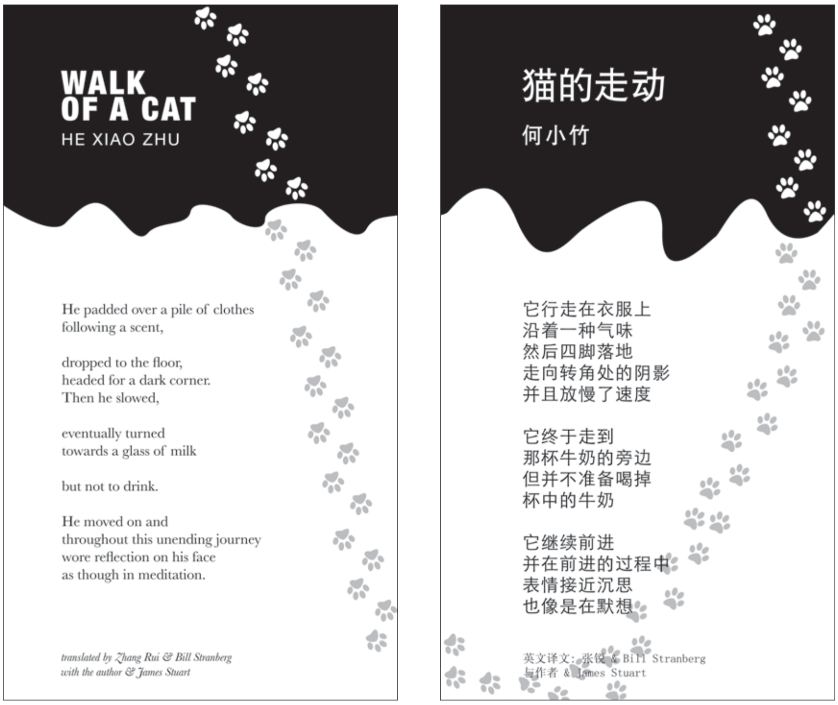
独语

鲁娟

我顺水而来
乘着一只古旧的木船
停靠在不为人知的岸
搭建一个温暖的巢
这是我久而久之的愿望
即便水草早已腐败
伤口早已褪却颜色
无人理会辉煌的理想
我已无力挥霍激越的爱
把那些青春岁月的幻想
以及所有疯狂的热爱和疼痛
都留给诗歌
一路驱逐混乱
"我只担心一件事
我怕我配不上我所受的苦难。"
而如今我以一个女人的身影站立
美丽不可言及
若你以陌生人的方式
误解并攻击我时
我将沉默如水
坚强如石

英文译文：阳知涵，Judy Seto & Mark Hiew
与阿库乌雾 & James Stuart

IMAGE 4
James Stuart et al.
Conversions (2008), 'Love'
by Lu Juan, unmounted
banner



WALK
OF A CAT
HE XIAO ZHU

He padded over a pile of clothes
following a scent,

dropped to the floor,
headed for a dark corner.
Then he slowed,

eventually turned
towards a glass of milk

but not to drink.

He moved on and
throughout this unending journey
wore reflection on his face
as though in meditation.

translated by Zhang Rui & Bill Stranberg
with the author & James Stuart

猫的走动

何小竹

它行走在衣服上
沿着一种气味
然后四脚落地
走向转角处的阴影
并且放慢了速度

它终于走到
那杯牛奶的旁边
但并不准备喝掉
杯中的牛奶

它继续前进
并在前进的过程中
表情接近沉思
也像是在默想

英文译文：张锐 & Bill Stranberg
与作者 & James Stuart

IMAGE 5
James Stuart et al.
Conversions (2008), 'Walk
of a Cat' by He Xiaozhu,
unmounted banner

The 12 banners also needed to be clearly recognisable as a single series. I achieved this by commissioning a Chinese print maker (with the help of a local intermediary) to mount the banners in the manner of traditional Chinese scrolls – also a clear reference to local culture. The banners were digitally printed onto a synthetic fabric and then mounted.

The exhibition installation was in part a response to the opportunities and constraints posed by the Bookworm as a physical space. I wanted to ensure that all banners were grouped as an SL-TL text pair. I also wanted them integrated with the normal social functions of the space, while remaining prominent "artworks" that invited visitors to engage with them. Finally, the poem's arrangement was to reflect the spatial qualities of a book: their arrangement had to form a physical journey.

Project self-assessment

This project, despite the difficulties posed by its cross-cultural and cross-linguistic nature, felt *right*. The model below [Table 1] attempts to explore why.

Material Basis	Material Expression	Language-object (materialism)
Terrain (primary)	**Landing site opportunities**	**Outcomes**
• Reference local poetic culture • Poetry as visual and physical object	• Transform English-language space of Bookworm • Use translation process to strengthen cultural exchange • Use local techniques and materials as part of print production • Installation of poems as physical journey • Create strong visual design for poems	• Transform physical and social characteristics of Bookworm space • Local poetry and culture integral to experience of Bookworm for exhibition duration • Real relationships established between poets and translators • Event launch with majority Chinese audience
Terrain (second.)	**Landing site opportunities**	**Outcomes**
• Deconstruct the idea of "correct" translations	Realised • Application of collaborative translation model • Translation workshop • Launch event where translators and poets read the SL and TL texts Absent landing sites: • Explicit documentation of translation process and theory (eg through a publication associated with the exhibition)	Actual • Translation as process as well as product • Translations that also function as poems in English-language literary context Desired • Peer review of translations

TABLE 1
Conversions, materiality matrix

I feel confident that *Conversions* successfully engaged with the primary material basis of this project: to use the visual nature of poetry to bring local culture into contact with the international space of the Bookworm. The graphic design and print production both had clear references to traditional Chinese scrolls. The physical arrangement of the banners within the venue was able to "layer" the experience of the poems, similar to that which might be produced within a book. The exhibition design also enabled the poetry to become a social experience, rather than a purely private one.

The secondary material basis for the project was the translation process itself: the collaborative, exchange-based model became almost as important as the exhibition itself. While the translators and poets all engaged positively with the process and theory underpinning it, capturing this process as a language-object was difficult. The launch event met some of the requirements of the material expression. Perhaps the only way to strengthen this component of the project was to have developed more formal methods for documenting the translation process itself. A journal article or publication associated with *Conversions* seem like the only possible material expressions for this process and its prominence as part of the project. These may yet eventuate.

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1 The event was launched with a reading by poets and translators as well as a performance featuring Yi nationality singers Amununu.

2 Bassnett, Susan, *Translation Studies*, (Routledge: London, 1988, reprinted 2002) p. 36.

3 Benjamin, Walter 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations* (Arrendt, H. ed. trans.) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968)

NOTE

For more images and all banners refer to the *It Begins in the Book* website at www.nongeneric.net/itbeginsinthebook.