

(from text to texture by james stuart

a review of *Words and Things* + a rather long discussion on contemporary reading practices and the visualisation of poetry, which has an epigraph that goes like this:

It sat me up. This wasn't the Turk's or Thoroblood's 'poems',
big, dangerous, baggy. This was the grain distilled.
This was the sort that might not get men killed.

- Les Murray, *Fredy Neptune*

and another one, which involves me quoting myself, like this:

E-Comm-
unication: I write you to counteract the overall
functional approach which strikes me primarily
as contractual, or:

*Your mission should you choose
to accept it is to read
this in 30 seconds or less
& then respond.*

- James Stuart

-1 credits

From Text to Texture

Words & Design by James Stuart

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But really, you can do what you like though if you truly
wanted to make me happy you could get the printout
wire-bound either using stuff at work or by going to
some binding place. But I think I'm starting to fantasise
now. Sorry. It's just that I've spent many hours laying this
whole thing out. Me go-go delusional.

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1 the rambling introduction

When Patrick Jones took the stand at the Sydney Poetry Seminar in June this year, my interest was piqued, for two principal reasons:

1. He was the only person that day, other than myself, to use the digital projector (and yes, I'm a nerd).
2. His presentation centred on visual poetry, a topic that for some time had held great interest for me (No really, I'm a nerd).

More precisely, Jones was presenting samples from the collection of text-based visual art and concrete poetry, *Words and Things*, of which he is the editor.

Given the relative and ironic invisibility of visual poetry in contemporary Australia, a light went on inside my head.

When the book came up on the *Cordite* review list, I got a hold of it, quickly. This review, in turn, became a launching pad from which to assess the role of the visual in contemporary (and not-so contemporary) poetry as well to consider poetry in terms of contemporary reading practices. But would *Cordite* let me follow through with this line of thought?

Fortunately, Major Colonel David Prater gave me the go ahead and my rocket blasted off from its little launch pad in a conflagration of unanswered questions. As I sat in my little cockpit hurtling towards the breaking point of this whole space travel metaphor, I was able to narrow my journey's purpose down to the following key concerns:

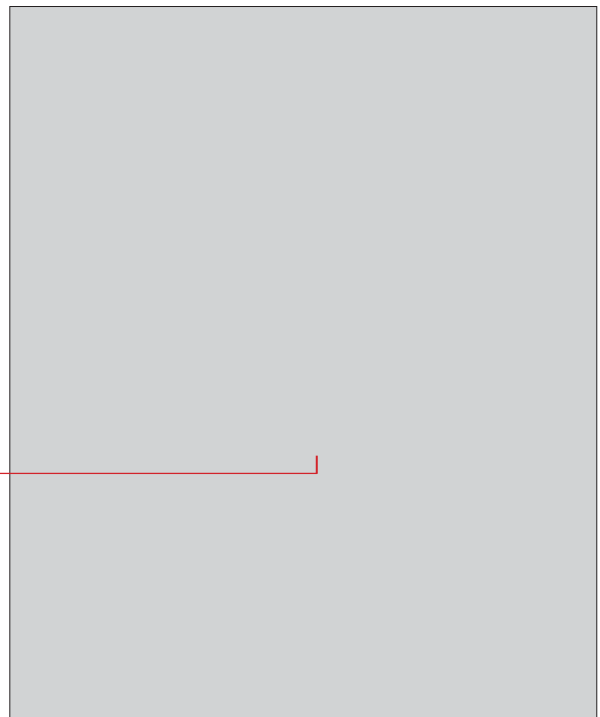
- o What do I think of *Words and Things*? What does it reveal about visual poetry in general?
- o How does one "read" a poem? Does this reading differ from that of other literary texts?
- o With this understanding, can we re-assess how meshing the visual and the textual alters the reading of a poem?¹
- o Finally, what visual poetic practices engage with the ideas developed under the previous point?

If you don't feel like reading the entire article, I can tell you now that it involves the blurring of reading/viewing practices, while also finding ways of drawing attention to the poem as an original work of art.

OK. Hopefully you haven't gone to sleep. Unless of course you need a nap. In which case you should take one. Otherwise, read on.



Words and Things - scan of cover



2 If you're short on time and just want to read the review of *Words and Things*, this section is for you.

I'll start this review with some facts about *Words and Things*:

- a) It is a comely little book, printed with a rough, 230 gsm enviroboard cover.
- b) It has been elegantly and organically designed by Ian Robertson, who followed the lead set by John Cage's Cunningham mesotics in which '[t]ypeface, size and style (roman, italic, bold, etc) [are] determined by chance.'
- c) It is edited by Patrick Jones and published by Reverie Press Publications.
- d) Its matt 150 gsm pages are printed with Eco Resista vegetable oil based inks but do not have any page numbers.
- e) It features works by nine Australian concrete poets and text-based visual artists: Geoffery Baxter, Aleks Danko, Patrick Jones, Peter O'Mara, Alex Selenitsch, Marie Sierra, Jeff Stewart, Richard Tipping & Peter Tyndall.
- f) The ISBN is 0-9580307-2-3.

For those of you who would like a more opinionated review, mine goes like this:

In introducing the book, Jones describes a 1999 trip to Scotland, following which was the 'refocussing' of his library, based on a desire to explore the poem beyond the literary. This in turn led to the realisation that 'there was a whole continent of artists and poets (living and long dead) who have attempted, especially in the past two centuries, to dismantle the art/literature wall enforced by a parallel age of specialisation.' This notion of dismantling that art/literature wall is key to approaching the works enclosed in *Words and Things*, as well as the whole concept of "visual poetry" – a term to which I'll return later.

As for the artists, Baxter and Danko continue a long tradition of wordplay in the concrete poem through more conventional typographic means, while contributions by Sierra and Jones build upon this tradition by reinterpreting the wording (and effect) of traffic and pedestrian route signs. Tipping's *Whispering Fence 2003*, a sequence of engraved picket fences, is also an amalgamation of the physical and textual object, the continuation of a life-long theme in his work. The strong impression of play and irony that links these contributions is balanced out by the perhaps more sober text-based

pieces from O'Mara and Stewart, and the enigmatic, almost textural work of Tyndall and Selenitsch, who is an old hand in Australian concrete poetry.

It would be both difficult and not necessarily useful to discuss all of the enclosed works so I'd like to offer the following highlights package instead:

1. O'Mara's "concrete haikus" (my own term), which combine to "word" a compelling snapshot of contemporary western consumer culture, and those it casts to one side as other;
2. Baxter's often humorous and intelligent interpretation/presentation of found textual objects (such as Livy's "Hannibal Crossing the Alps"); and
3. Sierra's *Twice as Natural* series, which re-contextualises literature and art by placing quotes from the likes of e e Cummings and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on a traffic sign positioned within the public domain. Jones's own series of concrete/absurdist road and pedestrian signs is in the same vein.

Nevertheless, it is not all clear sailing:

1. Danko's *Song(s) of Australia: dead cocky on the kitchen floor (fed-up mix)* displays a bland middle-class lefty wit, that while worth the occasional smile, does not amount to much either visually, poetically or politically.
2. Tyndall's series of scans/photos of old/original edition book covers by, to name two, John Brooks and Jean-Paul Sartre... Though Jones claims that Tyndall is 'a distinctive counterpoint to abstraction' that continues his long-term focus on how 'we read things', I have the distinct impression that a nerdy librarian with a point to make (as well as significant contacts in the art world) could have put together a similar oeuvre. Having said that, the book covers, all captured digitally at high-quality, are engaging according to their own aesthetic. Still, one questions whether their value is archival rather than artistic. Actually, to be perfectly honest, by the end of writing this paragraph, I sort of see the value in this piece as one stares closely into the configuring of meaning inherent in the cover design, but the whole thing's still a bit problematic so I thought I'd leave the previous comments in, regardless.

Patrick Jones
Prohibitions in the Age of Interpretive Signage
2003 OED definition 2003
Site: Noosa Regional Gallery, Tewantin, Queensland
as part of the exhibition *Floating Land*
Photography: the artist



OED Definition 2003 - Patrick Jones as featured in *Words and Things* (courtesy of Reverie Press Publications)

I am greater than television

:: :: :: :: :: :: ::

I am greater than television

:: :: :: :: :: :: ::

I am greater than television



television listens to no one
& no one listens to the sea

Despite my slightly over-the-top and easily pregnable assertions about what are to my mind the lesser works enclosed therein, it became clear to me as I read (looked?) that *Words and Things* had a significant contribution to make to our understanding of contemporary poetics. Foremost among these is the question of what constitutes a concrete poem and, more generally, what constitutes visual poetry.

I daresay, with only a minor historical knowledge of the forms involved, I am in no position to offer any definitive statement on the matter. But perhaps there is something to be gleaned from the rather comprehensive *Poems for the Millennium*, where the concrete poem is defined as:

a reduction of the poem to a sign (often in bold typography, sometimes in colour) that typically eliminated syntax & even words themselves, thus offering up an image open to interpretation (reading) at a single glance.¹

Meanwhile, the late Barrett Reid's² introduction to the exhibition catalogue of *Words on Walls: a survey of contemporary visual poetry*, 'the first of its kind in Australia', suggests that there was a polychromatic visual poetry movement in 1989 Australia. His understanding of the term embraces 'pattern poetry, concrete poetry, and concepts developed by the Lettrist movement which grew out of a ground of calligraphy, and others which grew from a base in typographic design.'³

And yet, as I perused the catalogue all I found were visual poems, which, while for the most part well-wrought, eschewed the literary for the graphic, as per Ruth Cowen's 'eating my heart out', which is quite cute but... well I don't really need to use another adjective to describe it. This is concrete poetry where meaning, intent and origin are most certainly reduced to the status of one-glance-required.

This comment is not to disparage what has been accomplished in "Visual Poetry" up until now (though I really didn't like much of what I saw in that particular catalogue – *Words and Things* displays far more sophistication). No: what I am getting at is that in attempting to dismantle the art/literature divide, it strikes me that much of contemporary visual poetry and text-based art (which, to keep the word count down, I'll henceforth lump into the one term "visual poetry"), actually builds a bridge between the two sites and then goes to live on the visual side of things with little regard for its more traditional poetic brethren who are all living in a state of self-exile in shantytowns at the edges of literature land.

To put it otherwise, without again resorting to piss-poor metaphor, it strikes me that **what is carried across from poetry into visual poetry is not so much the poetic, as I understand it, but its compression to a graphic trope in pre-defined textual spaces.**

Perhaps there are other ways of dismantling the art/literature divide with a view to different effects. Perhaps the emphasis should be upon blurring the divide, not dismantling it.

If this just seems like pedantic and polemic semantics (which it is, sort of), you should download and read the rather detailed PDF of an extended essay that contains and contextualises this review (while also featuring lots of pretty pictures, including some from *Words and Things*). It also expounds upon the incredibly vague statement "the poetic as I understand it". Hopefully, my whole argument will become clearer and any vague urge you have to throttle me will fade away (or, at least, grow justifiably greater). If you're already reading the PDF version, you should scroll/click/flip the printed page to go to section 3... Unless of course you need a nap, in which case you should take one.

¹ Rothenberg, Jerome & Joris, Pierre, *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry* (From Postwar to Millennium, Vol 2), University of California Press, 1998. I forgot to write down which page exactly.

² I use the term "late" here to make it sound like I knew who he was while alive.

³ Reid, Barrett 'The Unknown Art: Visual Poetry in Australia' in *Words on Walls: a survey of contemporary visual poetry*, Barrett Reid (ed), Heide Park & Art Gallery, 1989. p.5

Song(s) of Australia

dead cocky on the kitchen floor (*fed-up mix*)

The musical score is presented in a system of five staves. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

There is a land where, there must be, something, somewhere?

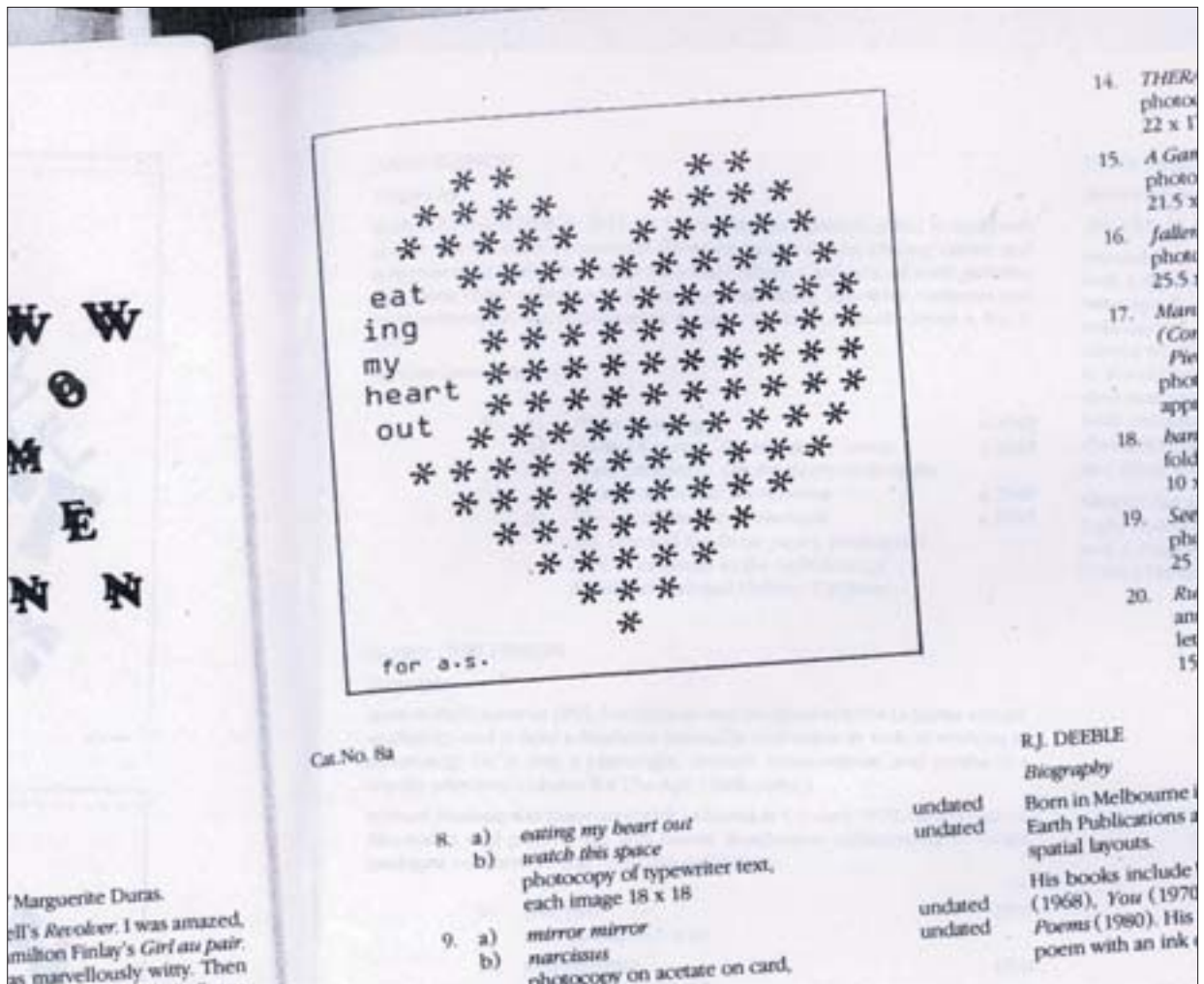
There is a land where, everything is right, but it is not beautiful

There is a land where, nothing can be changed

There is a land where, I hate to think

REFRAIN
Aus - tra - li - a, Aus - tra - li - a, Aus - tra - li - a!

Song(s) of Australia: dead cocky on the kitchen floor (*fed-up mix*) - Aleks Danko
as featured in *Words and Things* (courtesy of Reverie Press Publications)



eating my heart out - Ruth Cowen, photocopied, then scanned from
Words on Walls: a survey of contemporary visual poetry

3 Please time how long it takes you to read this Section 3 & ask yourself 'Am I really reading it?'

Just last night I was showing some poems to a girl who has since ditched me for not cutting the mustard. Ahem. Anyway, the poems I was showing her formed a sequence entitled 'Sequence, with still life' and with which I was quite chuffed, to be honest, having spent many an hour shaping it. As she flipped flippantly through the poems, I found myself increasingly disconcerted. 'No, no,' I felt like saying, as I indignantly prised the laptop from her fidgety fingers, 'you're not **READING** them; you're just watching them go past.'

Thinking about this the next day, I realised the whole scene bore a remarkable similarity to one in the movie *White Men Can't Jump*, starring Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes. For the uninitiated, *White Men* recounts the unlikely friendship/partnership of two hustling basketballers, one black (Snipes) and the other white (Harrelson). At one point they are driving down the street in Snipes's character's classic American convertible. Or maybe it was Harrelson's – I'm not sure and couldn't be bothered sitting through the entire movie again, just to check. Anyway, Jimi Hendrix is on the stereo and Snipes is pontificating in a typically kooky afro-american diatribe about how white men can't "listen" to Jimi; they can only "hear" him.

The confluence of this recollection with the aforementioned poetry-cum-romantic disaster made me realise one thing: these two lovable rascals weren't discussing socio-cultural politics; they were concerned with the concept of reading inasmuch as it pertains to contemporary poetry...

For some reason, I had trouble unpacking this moment of clarity into something that bore any sort of intellectual clout... Eventually, following a friend's recommendation, I read a bit of interdisciplinary (literary) theorist and all-round intellectual busy bee Mieke Bal.

Bal, in a nice looking book with a black cover, posits that concepts 'are not ordinary words, even if words are used to speak (of) them', arguing that an interdisciplinary approach to the humanities is required if these slippery concepts and the words used to present them are to be understood. To emphasise the point, she outlines a hypothetical discussion between a philosopher, a psychoanalytic critic, a narratologist, an architectural historian, and an art historian, asking how each might interpret the word/concept "subject":

With growing bewilderment, the first participant assumes the topic is the rise of individualism; the second sees it as the unconscious; the third, the narrator's voice; the fourth, the human confronted with space; and, the fifth, the subject matter of a painting or, more sophisticatedly, the depicted figure.¹

This variety of interpretations can be pinned back to the fact that each is "reading" the term in his/her own way. In the *White Men Can't Jump* example, Snipes's character was in effect saying that Harrelson's couldn't "read" Jimi Hendrix because he didn't have the right cultural/racial configuration, ie he was neither black nor had he lived a black man's life. In the case of me and my ex, our understanding of how to read a poem differed immensely too.²

Anyway, the point is, and in many ways this is self-evident (but not so much so that I can't reiterate it here), the concept of reading comprises a multitude of reading "sub-concepts." Even if we narrow this argument down to the reading of a "literary" text (whether on screen or page) we are still presented with similar conundrums in which we must ask a) what we are reading (and in what form is it presented) and b) how we are reading it. And this is where the problems faced by poetry emerge.

¹ Bal, Mieke *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: a rough guide*, University of Toronto Press, 2002. p. 5

² And you're probably on the money if you thought I didn't need this many anecdotes to state my case. It's just that I was quite attached to the idea of *White Men Can't Jump* making an appearance in this sort of context.

Because a poetic text is generally understood to be a literary text, it is inevitably equated with a whole tradition of literary texts. For someone to approach poetry in the same way as any other clump of literature (fiction, non-fiction, newspaper, SMS, etc) is nonetheless problematic. And yet, this is precisely what is invited when the poem is presented as a literary object. To read poetry, in fact, is to engage with a specific tradition, one that has evolved reading practices distinct from those of, for example, a novel (narrative) or an academic paper (logical). To understand exactly how a poem is read, though, is an enterprise fraught with danger since to answer this question involves defining what a poem is or is not.

In attempting to do this, I do not want to prefer one school of poetics over another since there is usually good in each. Instead, what I am concerned with is a tradition of poetry that has eschewed the narrative and other literary conventions to become what Simon Patton called, in an article written for *Island*, 'a form of *semantic indirection*' in which 'poets say one thing in order to mean another.' And, yes, you're right: That is a rather broad brush I'm using.

Patton is, himself, paraphrasing a French theorist with the great name of Michel Riffaterre for whom 'poetry occurs as the fruit of rereading, or, even better as the result of two distinct stages of reading. The first involves a decoding of the text's meanings and an apprehension of the obstacles to sense ... It requires a second phase of *retroactive reading* to re-establish the exceptions to literal meaning in some more inclusive ordering'.³

In other words, their understanding of the term "poetry" involves poetry where the concept of reading is tied up with that of re-reading – reading practices where the reward occurs in the act of continuous return. **To them, as to me, the reading of a poem, despite its generally shorter length, is a process that requires reading patterns not based upon those contractual agreements often equated with prose.** A poem asks the reader to form a different temporal and intellectual/emotional "pact" in which there is not necessarily a clear outcome (such as a narrative conclusion).

Admittedly, this whole argument is somewhat totalising: The relativists in the audience will note that it could be readily applied to just about any sort of literary text – it took me a lot of attempts to read Derrida back in my uni days (a lot) but that doesn't make it poetry. Really, a bit more intellectual enhancement (dialectic steroids?) is required for this argument to stand up on its own two feet. But let's just look the other way, shall we – as that lawyer in the Aussie battler movie, *The Castle*, says: 'It's the vibe of the thing.' The primary goal here is to establish, broadly, how the reading of a poem differs temporally and cognitively from the reading of other literary texts, which in turn implies that there is a divide between the literary and the poetic.

Line breaks are one way of signifying this sort of delineation. So is the naming of a poem as "Poem". But, despite these measures, contemporary poetry still remains a literary text, which, for most readers, means employing traditional literary reading practices. This suggests that, somehow, the poem needs to distance itself from the literary, engaging other artistic fields. This is the sort of inter-disciplinary promiscuity that the inter-disciplinarily promiscuous Mieke Bal proposes in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: a rough guide* (of which I read only the bits that were useful to this whole argument, which I guess means that I was operating the sub-concept of "skim reading"). This is also the sort of promiscuity proposed by Patrick Jones when he writes of dismantling the art/literature divide.

So, now it's time (there's that word again) to take a look at the interface of the visual and the literary while also asking whether there are alternative approaches to what Jones et al accomplish. Will this art/literature interface prove to be a sound method in altering the reader's relationship to a poem? Is there room for visual poetry beyond the concrete? If so, should it be pursued? Is anyone out there doing this already? Have I asked too many rhetorical questions in concluding this section?

To answer all of the above: I think so.

³ Patton, Simon 'Re Rereading The Confetti Stone', *Island*, Issue 75, 1998. pp 64-65

4 The rather convoluted section 4 which is entitled 'Read it slow & easy (because it's actually quite hard)'

Every so often you come across something that makes you sit up straight: an idea, a poem, a painting, an Anthony Robbins seminar... In Les Murray's character Fredy Neptune's case (refer to Epigraph) it was a Rilke Poem, 'The Panther', recited to him by Marlene Dietrich.

In my case, a Mary Ann Caws essay entitled 'Taking Textual Time', collected in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*, which I had been reading while on a train to Newcastle, gave rise to a similar situation.

Caws's essay is concerned with the work of Shusaku Arakawa, a Japanese conceptual philosopher-artist, and Madeleine Gins, an American conceptual artist, writer, and thinker. The two have been collaborating since the 1960s, though their work had previously been unknown to me. Specifically, Caws is discussing their image-texts *The Mechanisms of Meaning (MM)* (1963-1973) and the exhibition/installation *Reversible Destiny* (1990) with regard to one key notion:

The question is not about the catching of our attention but its holding; it is about time.¹

This was where I started to get excited. The train wove past the Hawkesbury. Woy Woy came and went. The train pressed into the Central Coast's badlands (Tuggerah, Wyong, Cockle Creek). I read. I nodded a lot. I even said "Ahh!" once or twice.

What interests Caws about Arakawa and Gins is the way in which they disrupt standard reading/viewing (and thus "understanding") patterns. In *MM*, especially, the artists achieve this by blurring the boundaries between the acts of looking and reading.

The series is comprised of minimalist white canvases, stencilled with black words. Sometimes other fonts and colours, as well as hand-written text, come into play too. Shapes, paintings, jottings and objects interact with or, perhaps, counteract these words, with each element pulling against the other – a state of tension, a series of ontological conundrums.

While there are certainly strong connections between the realisation of *MM* and the more progressive examples of visual poetry – the concern with the looking/reading (or art/literature) boundary being a key example – there is also a development from some of the aphoristic tendencies often apparent in the latter, both Patrick Jones and Richard Tipping's text-based sign and sculpture works being good examples of this phenomenon.

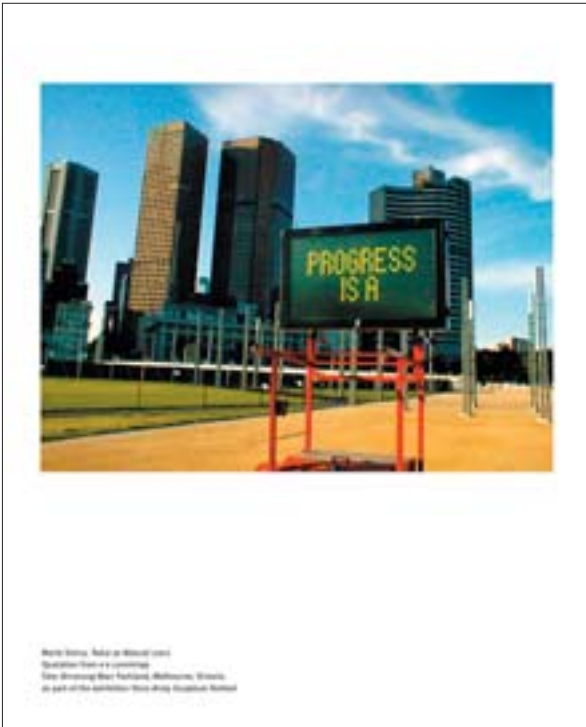
Exactly what this line of thought entailed or required was not entirely clear to me until the next day, as I returned to Newcastle, again, this time by car.

As my friends and I drove in the aftermath of a rather drab and debauched farewell party in Wollombi, we sped past a road sign, identical to that featured in Marie Sierra's contribution to *Words and Things*, announcing this change in traffic conditions or that. It occurred to me then, at the state of 100 km/h, that **what is achieved by the majority of visual poetry is not so much a transformation of perceptive activity as it pertains to reading/looking but, rather, an appropriation of space.**

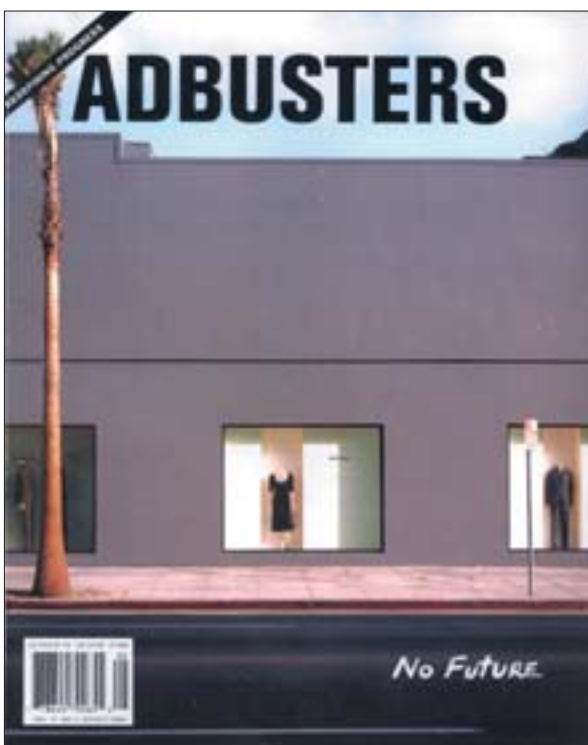
Works by the likes of Sierra, Tipping and Jones form a poetic reclamation of existing textual spaces such as road signs (especially road signs), a process that produces synergies between their work and that of the culture jamming movement, as espoused by the seminal anti-establishment magazine *Adbusters*². Danko's *Song(s) of Australia* is another variation on this theme, as it re-interprets the physical space of a musical score, by "ironising" the text.

¹ Caws, Mary Ann 'Taking Textual Time', in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print* (Loizeaux & Fraistat, eds), The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. p. 146

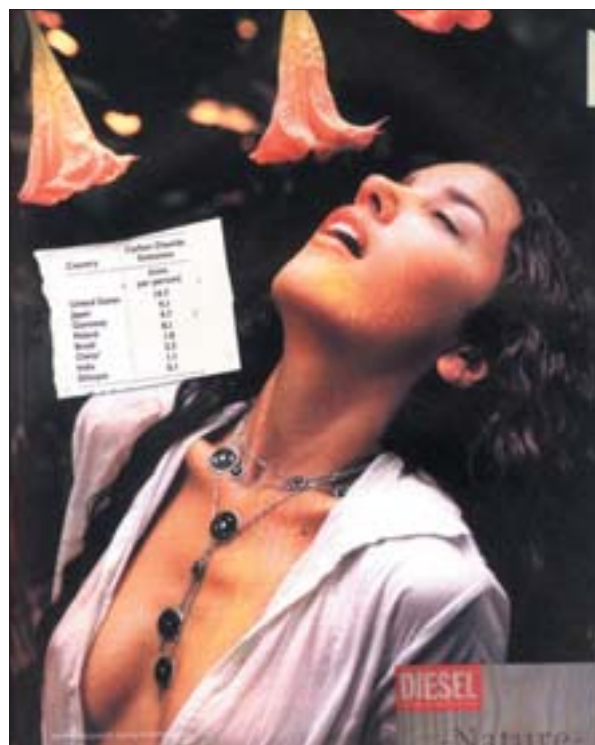
² *Adbusters* is published out of Canada and is well worth a read/look for anyone interested in how fucked up the world is as well as methods for engaging and subverting mainstream media.



Above & Right: *Twice as natural* 2002 - Marie Sierra, as featured in *Words and Things* (courtesy of Reverie Press Publications)



Adbusters 55 vol. 12 No. 5 Sep/Oct 2004



Diesel advertisement with pasted table listing carbon dioxide emissions by country - scanned from *Adbusters* 54 vol. 12 No. 4 Jul/Aug 2004

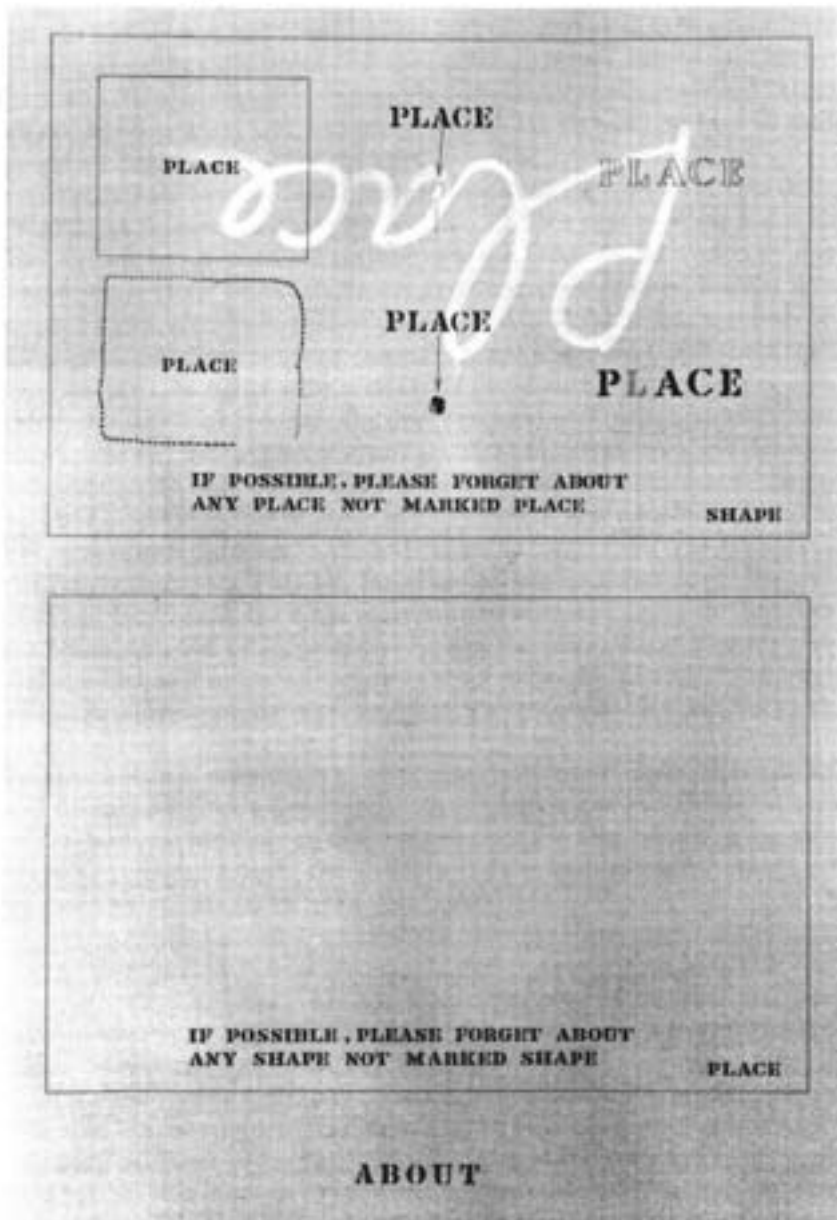
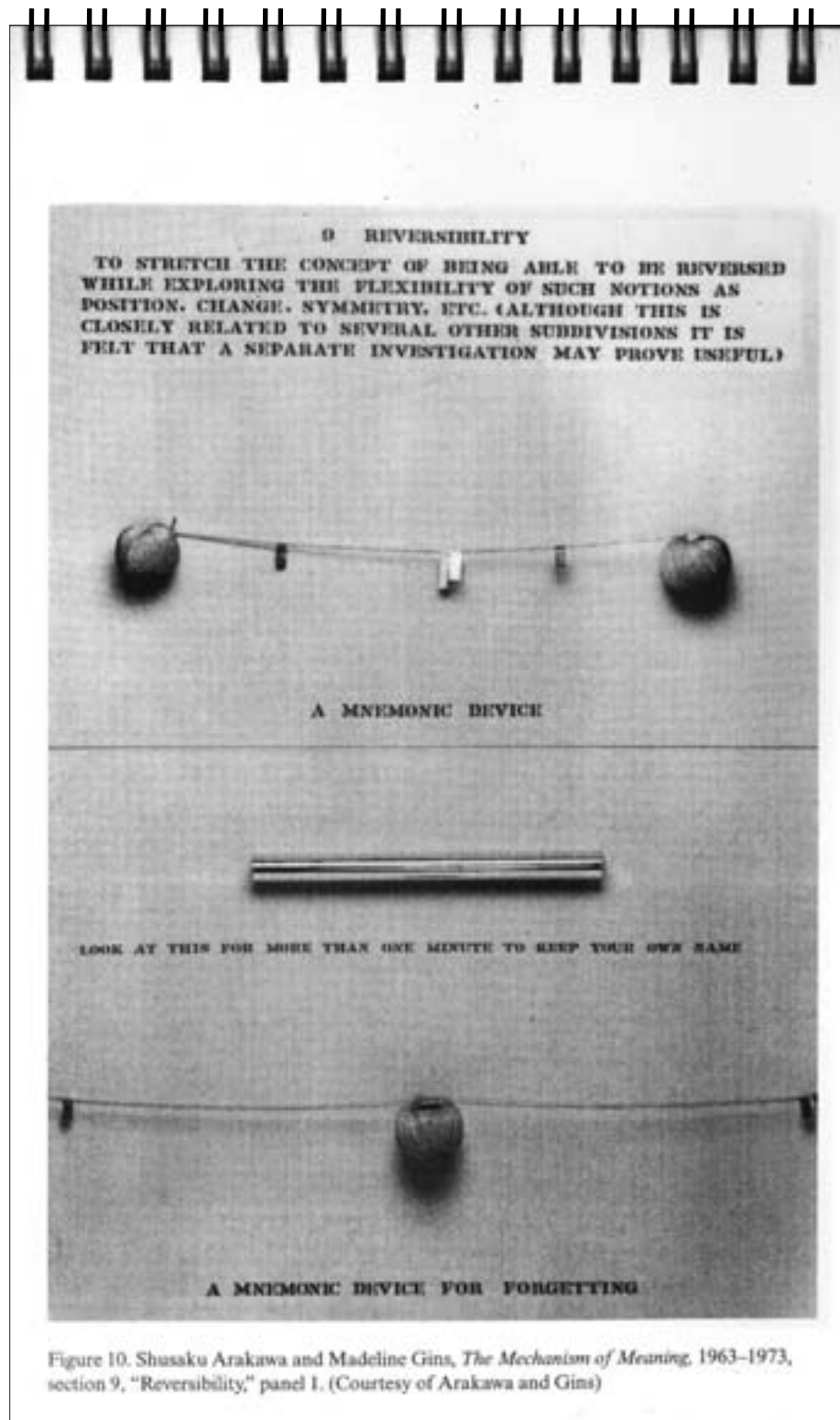


Figure 9. Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning*, 1963–1973, section 15, “Meaning of Intelligence,” panel 3. (Courtesy of Arakawa and Gins)

Artwork photocopied, then scanned from the essay ‘Taking Textual Time’ in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*.



Artwork photocopied, then scanned from the essay 'Taking Textual Time' in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*.

³ Selenitsch, Alex 'Sing Sign' in *Richard Kelly Tipping: Public Works* (Tipping, R), School of Design, Communication and Information Technology, University of Newcastle, 2002.

As if to emphasise the point, Alex Selenitsch, has the following to say about Tipping's public works (my italics):

Every one of his altered signs suggests a new context, an imaginative one in which the original sign is remembered for its banality. By doing this and opening up the imagination rather than restraining it, Tipping shows how one can *transform advertising and bureaucratic space into poetry on its own terms.*³

From this viewpoint – of the majority of visual poetry as space-based work – approaching more purely textual/typographic works by the likes of O'Mara and Cowen is problematic since they still occupy the page and a literary context rather than a public space, or a specific media space. Nevertheless, it strikes me that what they achieve is to reposition text within a visual space while still eliding the temporal connotations inherent in the re-reading of poetry. They seem to conform to the idea of a textual/visual haiku that is consumed in a single glance, which, at the risk of sounding like an apologist again, is not to denigrate this sort of work (except for Cowen's, which sucks). The aim is merely to argue that the poetic tradition in which they operate differs from that in which I have most interest.

Thus, if we are to approach poetry tangled up with the concept of re-reading, the emphasis should be not on the acceleration of the reading/viewing process but, rather, its **s l o w i n g d o w n .**

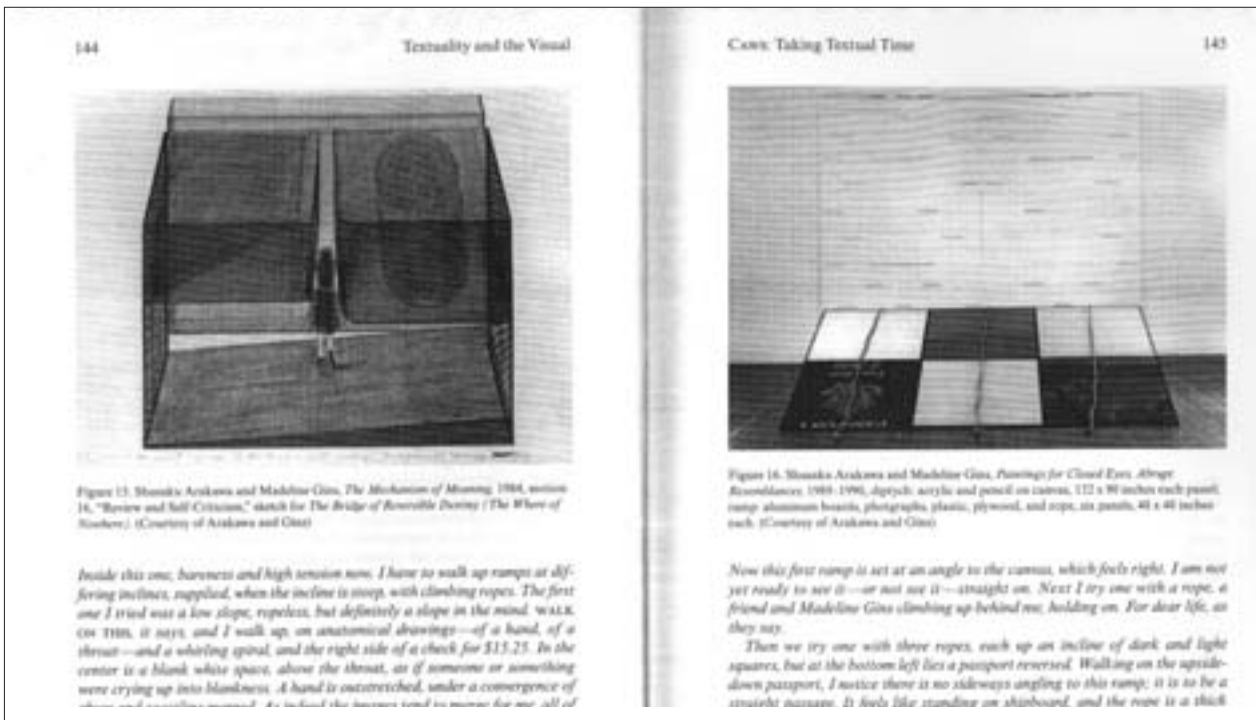
Both Arakawa and Gins confront a similar problem in their own work and resolve it in a number of ways. One is the use of Zen-like aphorisms, often functioning as textually and visually conjoined twins, which, as Caws puts it, invite the impossible so as to arrest the thinking process. As I wrote earlier, this replicates some techniques used in "mainstream" visual poetry. However, on a visual and physical level, the artists also invite the 'texturization of textualization.'⁴

Whereas much of visual poetry is concerned with the reclamation of the text in visual spaces, here the reading/viewing act is confused as text, image and object are brought into a more ambiguous interstitial mode; the reader and viewer are hybridised. Because of this confusion the cognitive processes of the reader/viewer are arrested, decelerated, staggered – if you're uncertain of whether you're caught in the act of reading or looking you need to take a second look, you need to re-read.

Beyond this blurring, there is another lesson to be gleaned from the work of Arakawa and Gins. It is apparent in the painting/installation *Paintings for Closed Eyes, Abrupt Resemblances*. Here the reader/viewer has to climb a ramp, itself part of the installation, with the help of a rope, to behold the actual canvas. A physical dimension is thus built into the work, building upon the aforementioned textualization of text. This physical dimension is a distinct spatial strategy aimed at altering the reader/viewer's relationship to the artwork – it differentiates the artwork from other objects and media by directing the reader/viewer into a specific mode of reading; when you're balancing precariously on a ramp trying to digest the significance of an artwork, you'd be doing well to forget that what you are engaged with is something that requires time and effort. Just like a poem.

⁴ Caws, Mary Ann 'Taking Textual Time', in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*. p. 138 – For what it's worth, I should point out that I actually titled this essay 'From Text to Texture', prior to encountering its usage in Caws's excellent essay. My idea is therefore at least marginally original – though I'm sure there's a whole bunch of other papers out there called 'From Text to Texture' too. It's also interesting that what interests Caws

is the way in which Arakawa and Gins re-educate and arrest the visualisation process by tying it into the act of reading – which is basically the same argument that I'm trying to make, but in reverse. We are 'complex readers,' she writes, but 'we have not learned, most of us, to be complex viewers.' (p. 149) Which is true to a degree when we think of the abstraction involved in much contemporary art. I'm sure she'd approve of what I'm arguing though. Well partly at least. But I diverge.



Artwork photocopied, then scanned from the essay 'Taking Textual Time' in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*.



Scanned cover of *Richard Kelly Tipping: Public Works*



Four multiples 1999-2002 - Richard Kelly Tipping, sample of artwork scanned from *Richard Kelly Tipping: Public Works*

I was going to conclude this section in my own words but one of the great things about the collection in which Caws's essay can be found is that it also includes a response from Charles Bernstein. Never being one to turn down a free lunch, especially from someone far more learned, I'll quote you his exact words on the matter:

While they may be described as architects of the *Reversible Destiny* projects, the point is not to make aesthetic objects to be appreciated but to construct "stations" that will transform perception. Caws details the temporal modelling of Arawaka and Gins's visual and architectural projects, showing how they are configured to warp and reform the space-time continuum. 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.⁵

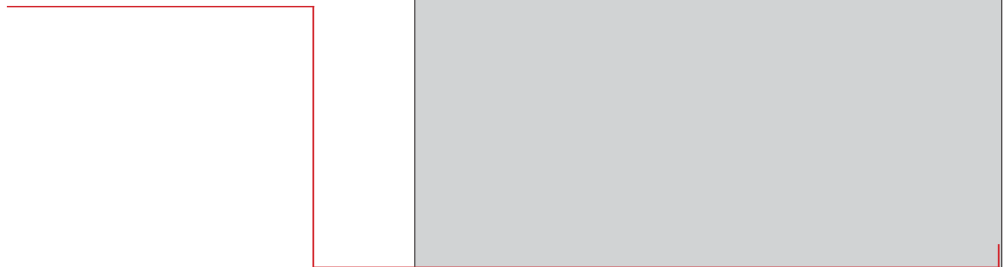
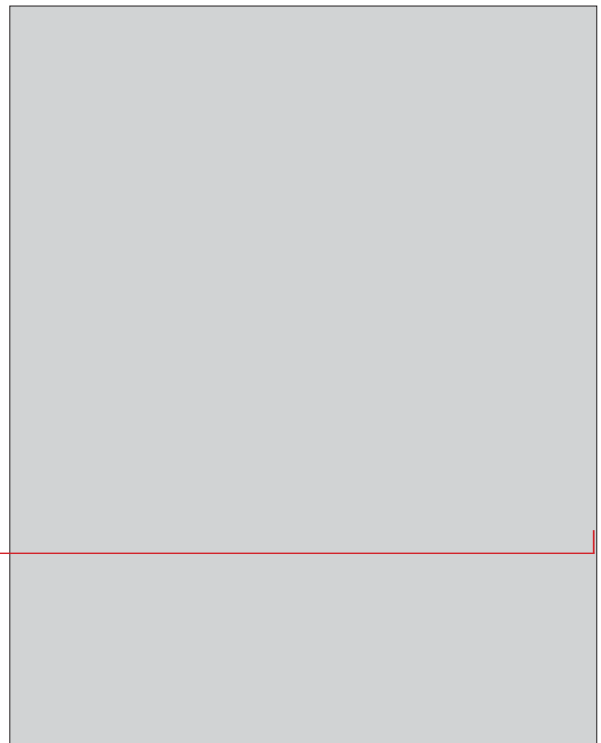
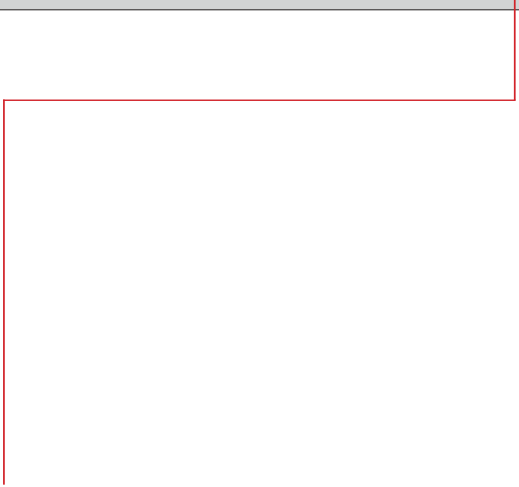
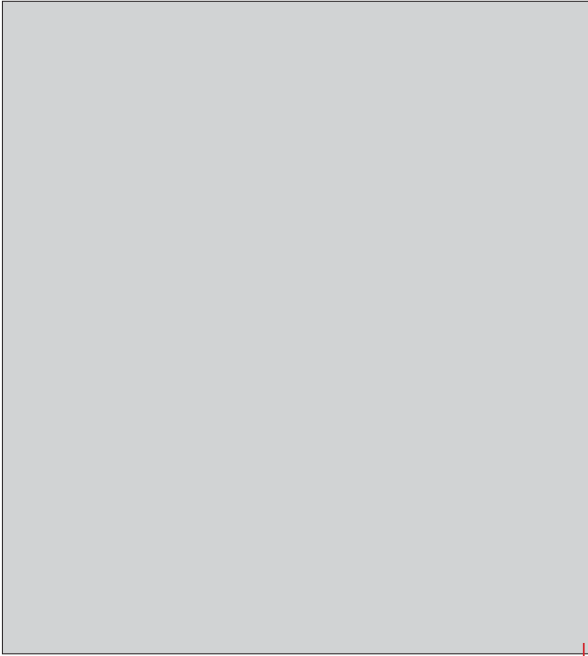
Bernstein, Charles 'Response', in *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print*. p. 183

ibid. p. 180

Precisely. Couldn't have put it better myself, though, if applied to poetry, the wording might go like this:

By presenting the poem as an equally visual/textual, or textural, object, you bring a new set of cognitive functions into play which are evolved from the literary. By considering the physical output you draw attention to the poem as an original work of art, not just another clump of text. You are altering the way in which the poem is read/ consumed, and are drawing attention to its re-reading. You're creating an alternative textual space. You're taking liberties with the poetic form in a way that responds to Bernstein's suggestion that 'Writers become language environment designers – textual architects – who need to foresee how the texts they write will be brought to life in particularized environments.'⁶

So... After all these big claims and the medium-winded justifications behind them, it's time (again) to ask which poets are operating as "language environment designers" today, beyond the concrete, which, to my mind, is ultimately tied up with conceptual.



5 The less-convoluted-than-sections-3+4 Section 5, which is entitled 'A much needed conclusion + Show & Tell'

Before we get to the Show & Tell part of Section 5, I thought I should start by plugging/unblocking a few holes from the previous sections. OK. Here we go:

I'm sure that there's at least one person who read Section 4, saying something like, 'Mate, haven't you read Einstein? Time and space are interrelated. Anything that takes place in time, occupies a space and all space is tied up in time. If you think you can separate the two, you're a dickhead.'

Well, I can't deny that (the whole time and space thing, that is) but my emphasis is upon text occupying space in such a way as to alter the cognitive process of reading, which is bound up in time, and therefore in space too, which is relative to time. Or is time relative to it, slowing down as you speed up in space? Ahem...

Ultimately, all visual poetry accomplishes this in one way or another: By presenting a poem in a visually stylised manner (or aurally for that matter), you are automatically altering a reader's relationship to it. What I am arguing, however, is that there is a paucity (whether real or perceived) of visual poetry engaged with, or drawing upon, that poetry which requires re-reading to be read.

If we wanted to expand the field along the lines of what Bal is proposing, then the key, at a more general level, becomes approaching poetry in an inter-disciplinary manner, whether through visual techniques or otherwise. I'm open to suggestions as to how this can take place but I think that collaboration is the key – a poet isn't necessarily the best graphic artist and the best graphic artist isn't necessarily a poet. We could also argue that poetry needs to distance itself from itself, that is, from the clichés (such as the poet-prophet or the staid café reading) that shape the broader perception of it. But we let's leave that alone for the time being.

Finally, I don't think that discussing form over content is an entirely surface level activity either: All meaning is configured meaning in that all meaning is bound up in the form in which it is presented, whether it be road sign, book page or smoke signal – just like space and time, really. To discuss form is ultimately to discuss content, provided you go through some tokenistic intellectual justification (which I've hopefully done here).

OK. I think there's a few less leaks now. Time to get to the fun bit of this whole enterprise: Show & Tell,¹ a far more indicative than well-researched list of the people involved with this whole poetry thing who are, to my mind, keepin' it real...

¹ As opposed to "Show & Discuss at great, great length" – I think this essay (if you want to call it that) is getting too long already and we'll all be better off when it's over.

a) Fin

This is a French poetry and plastic arts journal, the editor/designer of which I interviewed a couple of years back – Pierre Brullé (see *Cordite* 13, May 2003). *Fin* is among the most beautifully presented and elegant journals I have come across: printed on matt paper (72 pages per issue), in black and white, with a rough untreated cover. I feel privileged to have been able to collect three issues during my recent time in Paris.

Its Director, French poet Jean Daive, describes his mission as being to expose *le fabrique de la pensée* – the fabric of thought (or, perhaps, its texture?). It does so by mingling in-depth literary criticism and interviews with poetry and visual arts. How it differs, though, in its presentation of poetry is that what are presented are not poetic texts as such, but, generally, facsimiles – whether drafts or letters or finished versions. It draws attention, in a visual manner, to the artistic processes that underpin the creation of a poem which, conversely, has the effect of slowing down the reading process while adding further possible levels of interpretation.

Finally, unlike some of the more permissive (undiscriminating?) independent poetry journals that pop up from time to time, it limits its content and maintains a certain punch. It does not overload the reader with poems. It places a strong emphasis on presenting the poem beautifully and selectively. Its editorial policy is about shaping a journal that comes across as a unified work of art, rather than just another anthology of works.³



Fin novembre 2002 - cover artwork by Jan Voss

³ And let's face it – we are living in an age of countless poetry anthologies. Whether this is to poetry's benefit or detriment is explored at greater length in a recent *Contemporary Poetry Review* article entitled 'The Age of Anthologies' by someone whose name isn't included on the printout I have with me. In fact I can't even remember the web address. Oops. Anyway, it's also interesting to note more generally that there is a veritable overload of published literature both online and in print, an overload in which poetry has to compete for a place. I'll shy away from saying that we need to initiate a nation-wide culling process because that would just be ludicrous. Or would it?

JOURNAL D'UN POÈME

Si je tiens une plaque de verre
feuille

bien à plat sur mes paumes

et que j'écarte vivement
les bras

être gisement

la blocaille monte aux yeux ou respire
de la poudre d'os

Cela ne parle plus
C'est là, derrière la
membrane artificielle

pierre pierre pierre appareil à tétaniser

L'intouchable

aveuglement

Poudreuse

et bourdonne jargonne

débris de portes

b) Lisa Jarnot

I must admit to being somewhat unfamiliar with American Poet Lisa Jarnot – I only came across her at a seminar last year in which her work was discussed by Peter Minter. Interestingly, Pete and I also had a bit of a nerdy disagreement at the time about whether poetry was more concerned with time or space, though we didn't get to discuss it any further. Probably for the best.

Anyhoo, I chased up Lisa with his help and she was kind enough to send me a couple of her poems to include in here. Both pieces are from her 1996 book *Some Kind of Mission*, published by Burning Deck Press, which she also sent me a copy of.

In *Some Kind of Mission*, the “traditional” literary prose poems are a grammatically and syntactically absurd/ omissive series of dramatic monologues. Here, fractured narrative, sentence structure and imagery impart disturbing and somewhat violent (occasionally humorous) impressions of a very slippery world-view:

the river of red blue herons. at the porch
light. no visible means of the sunlight.
no visible means of every word is must
like out of. red clay, you have the right to
refuse the meshes of the afternoon. in
the pitch black twilight on a pitch black
tweed indeed couldn't have been. then
when after the black bird sings it is too
there is to the o-rings.

This is certainly difficult – though lyric – experimental poetry in which literary conventions are twisted into strange shapes from which the reader must somehow extract themselves and their own impressions.

Jarnot's visual poems employ similar “literary” techniques and are positioned at semi-regular intervals throughout the book, acting almost like chapter headings. In these, she merges collage and calligraphy in a manner that seems to reference and expand upon the aesthetic developed by the well-known visual poet, Tom Phillips who “sampled” pages from prose texts, editing out words so as to build new textual objects. Jarnot's visual poems are to my mind the most important (and most striking) elements of the book, bringing context to her work as a textual sampler (disintegrator?) while imparting a layered reading/looking experience. They provide insight to her creative processes while also foregrounding as not-purely-literary poetry that appears to me, in many ways, as a profoundly anti-literary (or “a-literary” perhaps) artistic enterprise.

If you're interested in reading a bit more of Lisa's work, here are her biographical details:

Lisa Jarnot was born in Buffalo, New York in 1967. She currently lives in New York City and is completing a biography of the American poet Robert Duncan which will be published by the University of California Press in 2004. Her books include:

The Fall of Orpheus – Buffalo, NY : Shuffaloff Books, 1993

Sea Lyrics – New York : Soho Letter Press, 1996

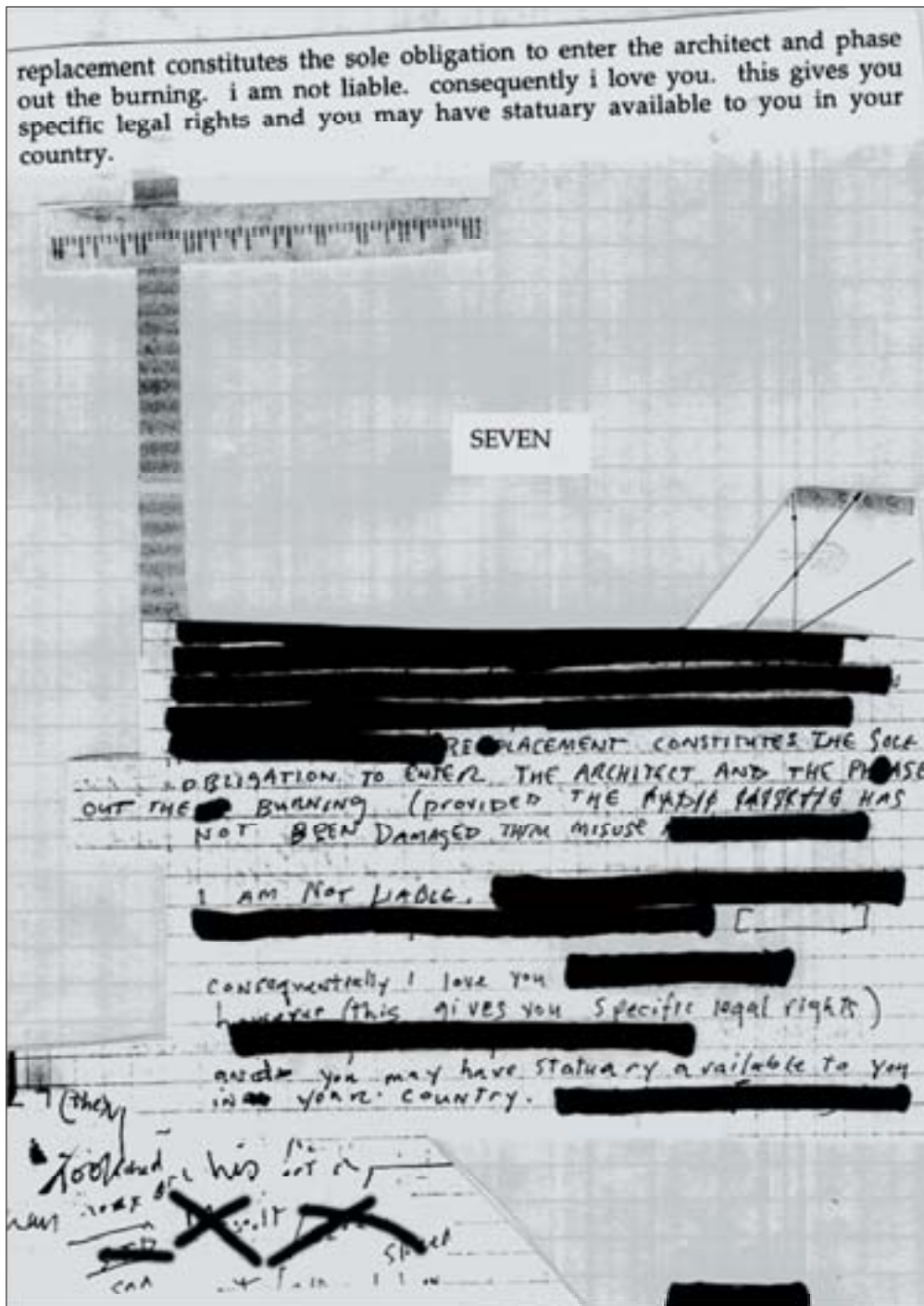
Some Other Kind of Mission – Providence, RI : Burning Deck, October 1996

An Anthology of New American Poets (editor) – Talisman House, February 1998

Heliopolis – rem press, Cambridge, 1998

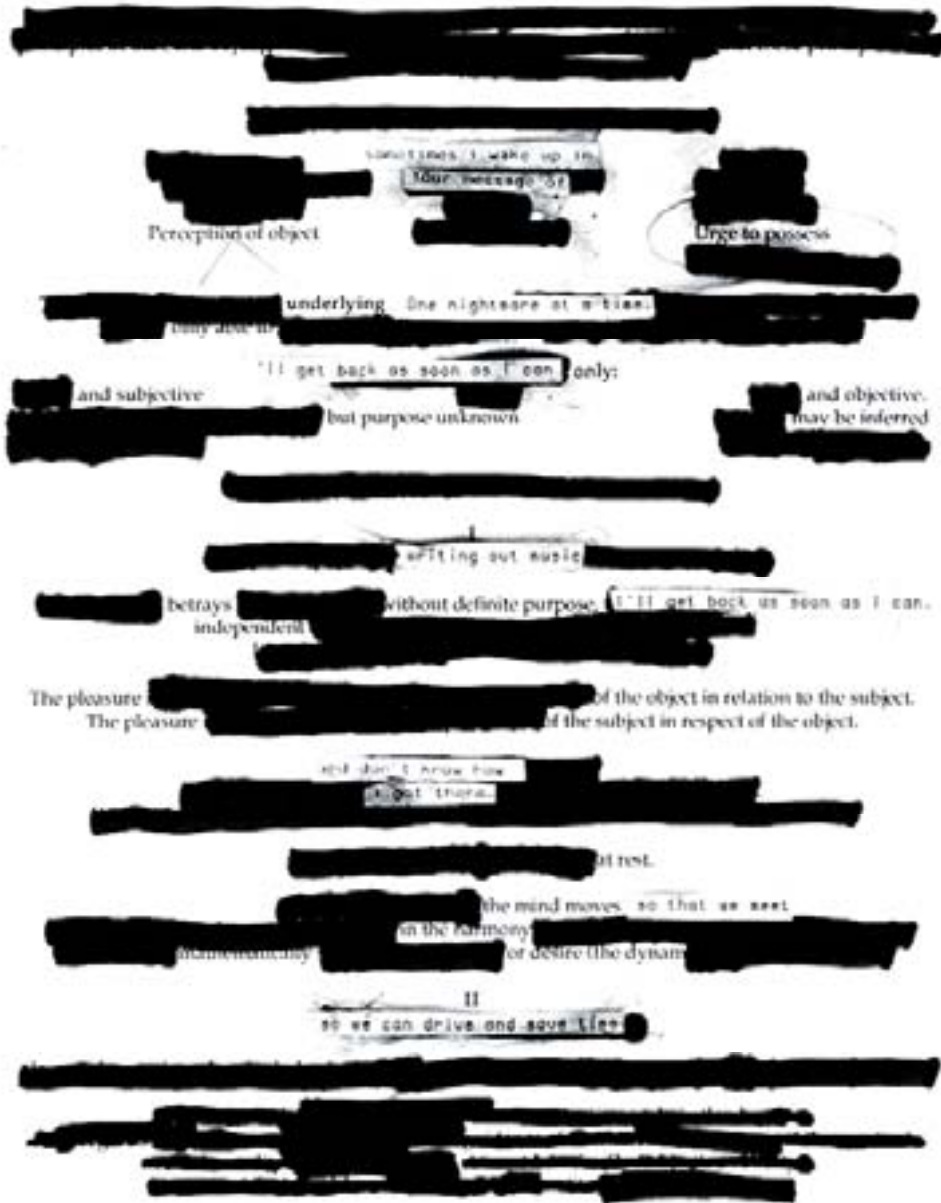
Black Dog Songs – Flood Editions, 2003

Ring of Fire – Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2004



'Seven: Epistle: Prairie Dog' - Lisa Jarnot
from *Some Kind of Mission* (courtesy of the artist)

Figure One: Look forward to playing some more.



PF1=Help

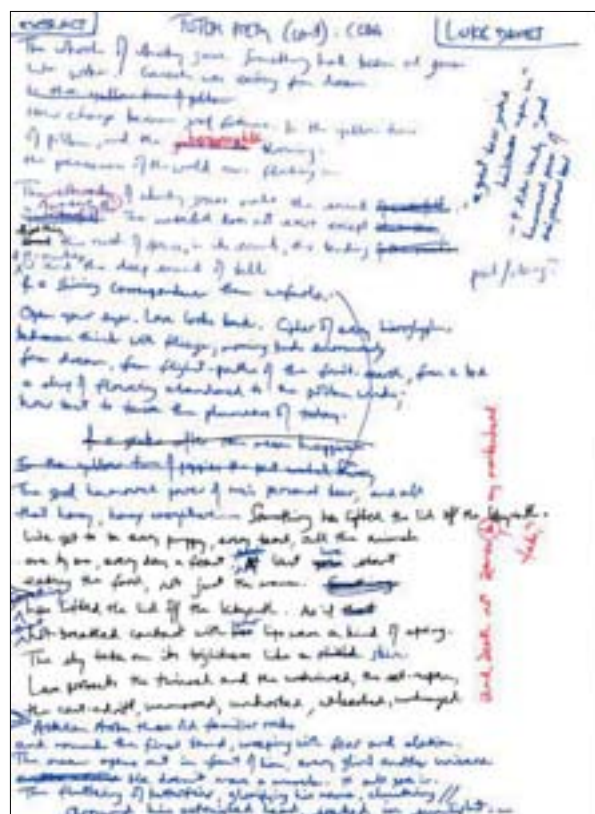
'Figure One: Look forward to playing some more' - Lisa Jarrot from *Some Kind of Mission* (courtesy of the artist)

c) The Red Room Company

Run by the rather happening Johanna Featherstone, the Red Room Company 'aims to create, produce and distribute poetry, by new and emerging Australian writers, to the public, in unusual ways.' In accomplishing this the Red Room repositions poetry in relation to the reader. It has done so through several projects, such as the recent *Toilet Doors* poems and *Fingerprints*.

The former takes poems from six young poets (under 30) and places them on a poster, which is affixed to – you guessed it – a toilet door. Additionally, an illustrator/designer has interpreted the poem, graphically. This approach has the dual effect of repositioning poetry within a different cultural context (ie beyond the literary journal) while also using the visual to alter the effect of the poem, albeit in a fairly poppy sort of way. The fact that I was confronted by a full-page article on the project in the *Sun Herald* one weekend is a testament to the project's broader appeal and how it has succeeded in altering the reader-poem relationship.

Meanwhile, *Fingerprints* was an exhibition of hand-written poems by poets ranging from 10 year-old Annalise Porter to the slightly more established David Malouf. The exhibition was featured at the 2004 Sydney Writer's Festival. Here readers were brought into a gallery-based relationship with the poem where the character of the poet's hand-writing was as essential to the poem's consumption as the poetic text itself. Again, there are several consequences here among which is the re-positioning of the poem as a visual and aesthetic object, not a purely literary one. Of particular interest to me was the draft of Luke Davies's *Totem Poem*, which shows the actual "working through" of the poetic process – similar to what is accomplished by the facsimiles of *Fin*. Furthermore, it strikes me that this representation of the drafting process of a poem transforms the entire piece into an old-skool version of hypertext in which draft notes and whatnot are equated with web-based reading strategies (ie hyperlinks).



Top: 'Who is Alibi Wednesday' - Michael Brennan, illustration by Alice K; Above: from *Totem Poem* - Luke Davies (both images courtesy of the Red Room Company).

d) Vagabond Press

Many Australian poets and poetry readers would be very familiar with Sydney-based Vagabond Press, a small independent publisher of poetry and poetics, which has been in business for a number of years now. Most, yes, but not me – I had to email Jane Gibian to get details on their activities.

In the interest of journalistic integrity, here is her reply, verbatim (with additional footnotes from Liz Allen + me):

JS: This footnote previously read: 'As you can probably tell, Liz never got back to me.' However, in the end she did, just in the nick of time.

— |
Hi James
OK here are some answers. I have cc-ed this to Liz¹ so she can fill in blanks and correct anything necessary.

1) How many years around?
Started in 1999

> 2) Who's currently on the Vagabond "board"?
Michael Brennan - director
Liz Allen - chief assistant director and very important person
Jane Gibian - second chief assistant person and previous co-director
Kay Orchison - artist extraordinaire
Chris Edwards - ?? should we count him liz?²

LA: Chris Edwards isn't really a permanent member of the Vagabond team. He has helped us a lot with design - especially on the latest four Rare Objects, but I don't know if I would go so far as to call him a board member if you are going to be precise. (JS: apologies for confusion caused by using the term "board")

> 3) How many publications in the Rare Objects Series so far?
Just published no.38

> 4) How many in the Stray Dog series?
Liz please answer.³

> 5) Cover artworks are by Kay Orbison? I take it the artworks are
> scanned and then printed before being pasted onto the covers. Or are they "original" artworks?
Not Orbison like Roy Orbison but Orchison. Yes covers are by him. I think they are original artworks - liz would you say that? He scans them but he makes them in the first place too.⁴

LA: Off the top of my head there are 8 titles in the Stray Dog Editions so far. I am not at home so I don't have all the info in front of me, that's just a mental tally. (JS: By my count there are about 11 or so.)

— |
OK must dash, hope this is helpful
love
jane
— |

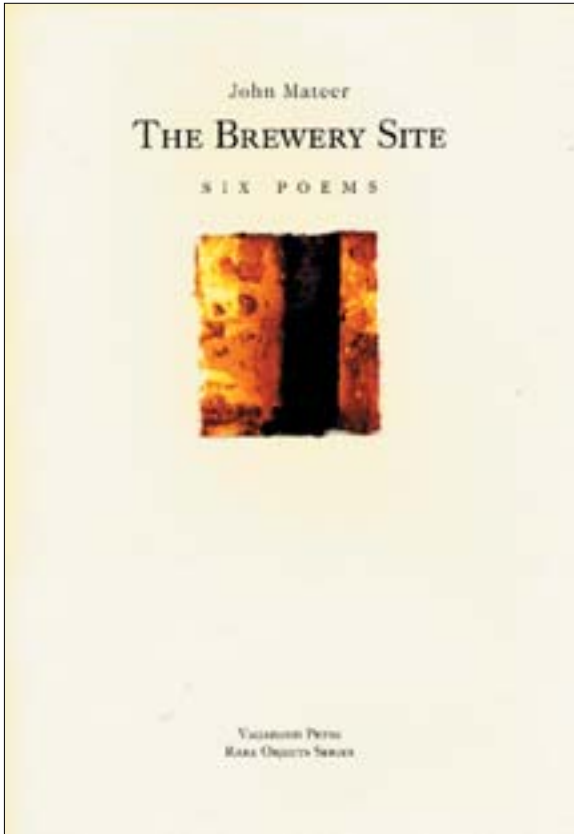
LA: The artworks vary from book to book. Lots of the covers of the Rare Objects are photographs that Kay has taken and then manipulated in Photoshop and then printed on that special thick etching paper, which Jane and I then diligently tear up. But they are not just photographs - some are made by just putting various objects on the scanner and seeing how they turn out. One of the recent Rare Objects, Anagoge of Fire, has an image on the cover which was made by placing a melting ice cube on the scanner. (JS: Apologies, again, for poor question by using the term "original artworks" which is a bit vague, really)

In analysing how Vagabond operates, I found it useful to refer to guerilla combat tactics, in which it is often said that success comes from transforming your enemy's strengths into weaknesses and, in turn, transforming your own weaknesses into strengths. In literary terms, this is more or less what Vagabond have accomplished, though perhaps they may not condone my militaristic metaphors, especially in the current geo-political climate. In fact, I apologise for having used it in the first place. Anyway, Vagabond have managed to adapt to the urban warfare-like conditions of independent poetry publishing by doing short targeted print runs of high quality, well designed publications that become, in effect, collectable objects.

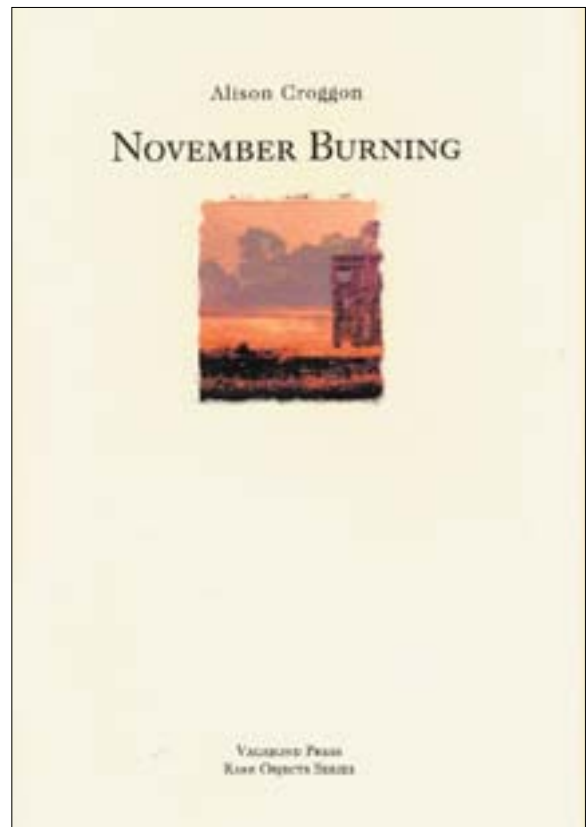
Not surprisingly, the Rare Object Series in particular, the latest release of which features Dorothy Porter, John Mateer and Alison Croggan, falls into this category. While the objects in this series are for all intents and purposes chapbooks/pamphlets, they are also entities that blur the literary and the aesthetic. By paying careful attention to the production standards of their pamphlets (choice of paper, layout & design, etc), the Vagabond team is able to extract maximum value from limited resources at an aesthetic level. Another strategy is to paste original artworks by Kay Orchison (not Orbison) onto the cover of each pamphlet, which has the effect of adding another layer of collectability and visual impact to these 100-copies-per-print-run publications, each of which is lovingly signed by the author.

Finally, this series, by limiting the length of its pamphlets to 10-15 pages, has the effect of escaping the anthology effect in which poem after poem is placed within a larger publication. Instead, the reading experience is altered in temporal terms in the sense that, because the publication is so short, it draws attention to the highly condensed nature of poetry and the problematic process of (re)reading it (while also allowing a poet's work to have the sort of critical/artistic context that only a manuscript can provide).

Having just done a 20km hike to South Head from Bondi and back, I'm too tired to attempt to justify those last statements further and I really need to finish this essay/article/ramble today or my brain will explode. Suffice to say that this alteration of reading practices is amplified by the length of the publication's confluence with its aesthetic impact. Does that last sentence make sense? More or less, which is good enough for me.



The Brewery Site - John Mateer, Rare Object Series, cover scan courtesy of Vagabond Press.



November Burning - Alison Croggon, Rare Object Series, cover scan courtesy of Vagabond Press.



Impermanence.com - Adam Aitken, Rare Object Series, scan of opening spread(s)
with tracing paper insert turned over RH page (top) and LH page (bottom).

e) c-side

No self-respecting piece of literary promulgation would be complete without a bit of self-loving and self-promotion. This being the case, I'd like to briefly draw attention to my own little project, c-side, an inter-disciplinary cross platform production which was launched in 2003.

c-side features three principal elements:

- c-side – an electronic-lounge event in which collaborative written word/still image “slideshow” by poets and photographers are screened in a social space, with a live DJ mixing a soundtrack.
- c-side online – a web-based, inter-disciplinary arts journal presenting good ideas and good art from across the spectrum
- Mix – a new journal format featuring a DJ mix on CD and collaborative works from poets, photographers and visual artists.

Before elaborating further, I should explain that in my day job as Communications Manager for an architecture & planning practice, I am sometimes called upon to proofread design reports for various projects, especially China masterplans. These are quite lengthy and technical documents.

Anyone who has had to do something similar will note that, generally, while such enterprises start out well, the whole thing starts to get a bit more linguistically and intellectually sloppy towards the end as the author(s) begin(s) to run out of steam and time. It is in this great tradition that I have cut-and-pasted some text from another document I had previously prepared for the c-side website regarding c-side's aims and objectives, despite the fact that its diction differs remarkably from the rest of the piece, which has been pretty erratic in those sorts of terms anyway. But I diverge.

OK, here is the blurb:

c-side's aim is that art and critical thought inhabit a wider variety of socio-cultural spaces by occupying a wider variety of virtual and physical spaces. It is thus modular in its approach, as well as dynamic. Its commitment to inter-disciplinary and collaborative activities is integral. In terms of curatorial policy, it privileges neither emerging, developing nor established individuals and is not a populist production. Nevertheless, it welcomes fresh ideas from those who wish to get involved.

Bit of a marketing wank, hey? Oh well. I guess I'm just trying to say that I want to build upon the previously mentioned inter-disciplinary promiscuity espoused by the likes of Mieke Bal.

c-side has thus far held two events, one at the National Young Writers Festival in Newcastle, 2003, and the other at the Live Bait Arts Festival in Bondi, 2004. Poets featured include Jill Jones, Peter Minter, Gareth Jenkins and me. Photographers who participated were Andrew Worsam and Annette Willis. The first issue of *Mix* was also launched at the Young Writers Festival. As for *c-side online*, the launch of the journal is scheduled for January 2005 (with some pretty good content, if I don't say so myself), thanks to a very small amount of Australia Council funding (but not enough to allow us to launch on the original target date of October 2004). It's all going fairly well, I guess, not that anyone is really taking notice mind you. Sigh.

Please visit the interim site @ www.c-side.com.au to find out more. You can even sign up to the mailing list if you're bored.



Gareth Jenkins + DJs Ivan the Tolerable (R) & Guillaume Potard
@ c-side 1.1 - Live Bait Festival, Bondi Pavilion, January 2004.



Above & Right: screen shots from *Containment* - James Stuart,
as featured at c-side 01 & 1.1.

f) Last words

OK. That's it for me. I was going to write a bit more about new media (because I've primarily been discussing print-based strategies) but I think we've all had enough by now. If you're interested in checking some cool stuff, though, please visit SBS's online journal *Cornerfold*, which can be found @ www.cornerfold.com.au. It's well worth a look for a few ideas. I also saw some really interesting work by a Sydney artist called Lu(d)dite recently in a little street mag but was told off by my friends for trying to read while watching a crappy television program on Channel Ten. I didn't follow this up further.

I probably should have written a bit more about the problem with poetry readings and whatnot too but another time perhaps. Thanks for (re)reading.

Cheers, James.