Subvertising: Word Works

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Abstract
The nine word works included in this issue of Kunapipi are examples of my explorations in what is sometimes called 'visual poetry' to indicate that the way the poem is embodied is essential to its meaning. It is, after all, being looked at on the page, not listened to per se, and this provides an opportunity for the poet to ask the eye to dance, leaving the ear at the wall. My own written poetry, in contrast, is lyrical, diverse in style as well as aim, and meant to be heard, at least on the readers' inner ear if not spoken out loud. In the case of these to-be-voiced poems, line arrangement is an indication of the rhythms of oral delivery and has meaning as a kind of enforced hesitation. If you say: 'the form restricts and forms so you fit my body when we love like never any other' in the same bland monotonal run-on you might use to read someone a sentence from a technical manual, you have missed much of the poem. The linebreaks encourage rehearing with a slower point of view. I've included 'The Poem Considered as a Lover' because it's a poem about poetry, as well as an 'illustrated poem' which (and this may confuse you) is different from a purely 'visual poem' because it can live without the picture.
The nine word works included in this issue of *Kunapipi* are examples of my explorations in what is sometimes called 'visual poetry' to indicate that the way the poem is embodied is essential to its meaning. It is, after all, being looked at on the page, not listened to per se, and this provides an opportunity for the poet to ask the eye to dance, leaving the ear at the wall. My own written poetry, in contrast, is lyrical, diverse in style as well as aim, and meant to be heard, at least on the readers' inner ear if not spoken out loud. In the case of these to-be-voiced poems, line arrangement is an indication of the rhythms of oral delivery and has meaning as a kind of enforced hesitation. If you say: 'the form restricts and forms so you fit my body when we love like never any other' in the same bland monotonal run-on you might use to read someone a sentence from a technical manual, you have missed much of the poem. The linebreaks encourage re-hearing with a slower point of view. I’ve included ‘The Poem Considered as a Lover’ because it’s a poem about poetry, as well as an ‘illustrated poem’ which (and this may confuse you) is different from a purely ‘visual poem’ because it can live without the picture. The conjunction does open up further formal and sensual dimensions though, I hope. As I went further into the practice of poetry, I became more and more interested in the visual dimensions of letters and typefaces taken as sculptural materials which could be shaped and spaced into the poem’s essential and integral elements. A recent example is ‘Heart the Earth (Hear the Art)’, where a mantra-like sequence of ‘readings’ is opened up by the circle of four hearts, and their hearths, and so on. I have also been aware of the incessant demands of public language. By that I mean graphic language which has a bold physical presence, and which wants us to pay attention. Road-signs giving instructions or warnings; huge company logos jutting out at approaching motorists announcing fuel or fast food; and soap packet designs jostling for buyers on supermarket shelves are examples of this ‘talking’ whose publication methods and mass audience can only make poets envious. ‘Form One Planet’, for example, which is one of the Road-signed series, is a result of this interest. If letters can have sculptural dimension, then why can’t the sheet of paper become the side of a building? And doesn’t the Southern Cross as a key icon of Australian identity also invite recontextualisation as a means to fresh questions about overlapping cultures in the curve of spacetime? Thus, ‘Southern Crossing’, first enacted...
with powerful lights on the Pylon of the Sydney Harbour Bridge facing the Opera House in 1982, and here shown with the ‘cross’ tilted away from the religiocentricity of its naming, imitating the constellation’s nightly turning, placed on a prominent skyscraper in Melbourne in 1993. If the enactment of the sign work is largescale and temporary (such as the above) it is also true that the effective realisation of the object/idea is ultimately the page or photographic sheet, inhabiting the energy field which is created by imposing a frame and edge. Thus, we live in a published world. In 1977 I had bought my first camera (a black-bodied Olympus OM1) and begun photographing signs in the languagescape which were accidentally ironic, ambiguous, paradoxical, or simply bizarre. Many of these were collected in Signs of Australia, published by Penguin Australia in 1982, which quickly outsold my previous poetry books by a factor of ten. The representation of the actual and the actual representation of the invented started to get mixed up. It was more fun that way. The photograph I call ‘Literary Television’ is just as it used to be on one of my bookshelves at Bondi Beach in 1982. I find the joke particularly poignant because I then spent the best part of the next four years making documentary film portraits of writers for television, with varying success. These included studies of Roland Robinson, Les Murray, Peter Porter, Randolph Stow, Sumner Locke Elliott, David Malouf and Jack Lindsay. In 1988 Australia had its Bicentenary of European settlement, which was of course controversial and useful in these post-colonial and more indigenous days. ‘The Australian Touch’ was my contribution, published as a postcard at the time. Like ‘Southern Crossing’, it plays with the signification of shape (the precise abstractions of mapping which have become the country’s quintessential logo, an idea of coasts) and of hand-making and marking, of belonging to. In 1989 I took up a lectureship in the Department of Communication and Media Arts at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, and moved with my family to Wangi Wangi (pronounced ‘wondji’) on Lake Macquarie, about two hours by train north of Sydney. That same year I began Thorny Devil Press, which publishes limited edition foliobooks of my word works, as well as multiples in 2D and 3D. An example of a multiple is ‘Caution: There Is No Avant-garde’, which was released in 1993 as a yellow and black warning sign on ‘corflute’ plastic sheeting, 295 x 225mm in size, unnumbered and unsigned. It has appeared as the cover of Australian Art Monthly, and as a screenprint in The Sydney Morning Volume IV. Now it’s a postcard published by Kunapipi. I like the same work appearing and reappearing in different media, materials and dimensions. Next it might become a refrigerator magnet, or a stamp, or an edition of standard specification signs using reflective tape on aluminium. The main problem might be lack of audience? Hello? We’ll be right back after this short break. ‘Thorny Devil Press, P.O. Box 123, Wangi Wangi, NSW 2267. Write for our catalogue.’ OK, welcome back to the show. A last note about Subvertising. This is in bold type because it’s
very heavy. It's the name I use for word works like 'New World Power' and 'Sunlight Soap Opera', which are interventions, or manipulations, in the name of art. Subvert, I sing. Not to 'ad' to, but to subtract from the omnipresent texts of advertising culture, where everything (including controversial ideas) is a product available now in fresh, delicious, bite-sized chunks guaranteed to last a lifetime, or your money back. Meanwhile, the mediated world is breaking up into new flows. A mobile-phone starts ringing in the cinema. A fax prints out in the livingroom. That home video is about to make international prime time TV news. SCRIPT: Roll final song. 'So what can a poet do, but to sing in a rock-roll band.' Superimpose closing titles over shots of the silly bastard boarding another plane, waving his Hi-8 Handycam, smiling as if the doors of perception had just opened.
Southern Crossing Melbourne, 1993
THE AUSTRALIAN TOUCH
CAUTION

THERE IS NO AVANT-GARDE
ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN LEFT BEHIND
Roadworks, 1992
NET WEIGHT
WHEN PACKED
1.25 kg

Sunlight

SOAP OPERA

Gives reality a softness
you can feel
THE POEM CONSIDERED AS A LOVER

the form restricts and forms, so you fit my body when we love like never any other