Cybertext: A Topology of Reading

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"Cybertext" was first used by Espen Aarseth as a critical term to denote dynamic forms of literature in his seminal book *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* To Aarseth (1997) the cybertext "is not a 'new,' 'revolutionary' form of text" (18) exclusive to the digital or computing realm. Nor is it a radical departure from "old-fashioned textuality," (18) that is, the codex book – often seen as having little to do with technology defined in a restricted sense. The notion of the cybertext was indeed proposed in response to the print-digital divide that continues to govern how we think about contemporary literary practice. In the popular imagination, the neologism "cyberliterature" evokes the idea of electronically-enabled literary works produced and received via computing platforms; printed literature, accordingly, is not normally considered as belonging to the "cyber" domain. Aarseth's re-definition is therefore fundamental in unlocking the medial and generic constraints imposed on the prefix-signifier *cyber*. In the advent of Aarseth's theory, the term cybertext does not refer to a particular text genre; instead, it describes "a broad textual media category," (5) "a *perspective* on all forms of textuality." (18; original emphasis) It challenges the traditional assumptions of literary criticism by encompassing a wide range of textual formations, some of which are not conventionally regarded as literature proper. The cybertext is therefore a heuristic category that cuts across media and genres "with no obvious unity of aesthetics, thematics, literary history, or even material technology." (5)

The defining characteristic of the cybertext rests not with its medium of representation – it can be instantiated in print, digital, or mixed-media formats – but within the dynamics of its design and reception. To use Aarseth's term, the cybertext is *ergodic*. This is a technical term from physics, in turn derived from a Greek word meaning "work" or "path." When a text is described as ergodic, it means that *nontrivial* work is required on the part of the reader in making sense of the text, where "nontrivial" describes reading efforts beyond "eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages." (Aarseth 1997: 2) This often entails readers' navigational choices that could trigger a chain of events, such as a narrative path or sequence of actions. In the case of poetry, for instance, we could have readers providing some kind of textual input or performing a mouse-over to activate text morphing or motion (Monfort 2001). In other words, cybertext readers participate by "effectua[ting] a semiotic sequence," which is basically a "selective movement" and therefore "a work of physical construction." (Aarseth 1997: 1) As readers undertake "physical actions rather than conscious reflection," their "bodily cognition" comes to play a central role in the reading act (Hayles 2004, n.p.). Such readerly performance or intervention thus substantially differs from that expounded in reader-response theories (e.g., Iser 1978; Fish 1980); in the latter case, reader participation is primarily hermeneutic-interpretive rather than perceptual-somatic.

Aarseth's scheme makes it possible for us to theorize on textual artifacts as disparate as the Chinese *I-Ching* (Book of Changes), printed hyperfiction (novels with hyperlinks leading to branching paths of reading), story-generating programs, and literary adventure games. In each of these texts, literary "meaning" (which for the present purpose is a substantive sense of authorial

intention that can be more or less captured) is not always already present; it is the *effect* of the interaction, not merely intellectual but often physical-sensorial, between the reader, the verbal and non-verbal signs, and the material medium that embodies the text: "The cybertext reader *is* a player, a gambler; the cybertext *is* a game-world or world-game; it *is* possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery." (Aarseth 1997: 4; original emphasis) Here, the text-machine is a central figure that underscores the material processes of literary production; the text (print or non-print) is a machine insofar as it employs technologies (digital or non-digital) to advance its narrative or verse *in response to* the "nontrivial" work committed by its readers. This is evident as much in print as in electronic literature. Accordingly, then, certain experimental forms of composition, such as shape poetry or onomatopoeic poetry, are not considered cybertextual, despite the fact that they do evoke cognitive-perceptual participation. That is because whatever visual or aural signification is intended by the author is always already inscribed within the text, and then faithfully decoded by the reader. The reader needs to participate with his/her senses no doubt, but does not ultimately influence the material configuration of the text s/he reads. Hence, a necessary condition of cybertextuality is this: the reader must be invited or compelled to make choices as regards how the text is to be engaged; such choices will lead to certain nontrivial work (which could be physical or cognitive, or both), which can affect the material outcome (either substantive or presentational) of the textual product eventually received by this reader.

In a related vein, and more to the point of this article, Brian Kim Stefans defines cyberpoetry in terms of two writing modalities. The first is in accord with more conventional ideas about electronic literature; that is, multimodal textual practices that exploit digital platforms such as "the internet, or graphics programs such as Illustrator or Photoshop, or animation/audio/interactive programs, such as Flash – in their creation and presentation." The second, and perhaps more radical, category, covers the non-digital realm, specifically "recombinant poetics that can be done *without* the computer, such as William S. Burroughs's 'cut-up' fictions, concrete poetry, and various Oulipo practices that address the language as replaceable physical matter rather than 'necessary expression'." These latter texts are seen as belonging to the "cyber" realm by virtue of their being "informed by new ways of thinking brought about by the way digital technology has impacted our world," (Stefans 2007: 121, cited in Hoover 2013: li) even though they are non-digital in terms of their medial platform and mode of inscription.

Stefans's conception of cyberpoetry is clearly different than that of Aarseth's. As mentioned earlier, concrete poetry does not automatically qualify as cybertexts, and so is the case for William Burroughs's experimental fiction. Nevertheless, Stefans's explication points us to the materiality of writing in both digital and print modalities. The prefix *cyber* implies a different epistemology in the reception of poetry than linear reading and hermeneutic interpretation; it entails a multimodal, embodied engagement with poetry as textual artifact. It is on this specific point that Stefans's cyberpoetry is aligned with Aarseth's cybertext, which not only requires sensory participation but also the potential for the reader to (physically) intercept the text's unraveling. Of particular interest to me is Stefans's second category, and how it may be extrapolated toward the notion of cybertext. What kinds of nontrivial work may be entailed in processing experimental poetry that "address[es] the language as replaceable physical matter rather than 'necessary expression'?" What is the implication of this *reading labor* for the articulation of an ergodic-embodied poetics of writing?

The *Zebra* Books
In 2010 the Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü published a set of twin books, one entitled *This Zebra* (*Zhe zhi banma*) and the other *That Zebra* (*Na zhi banma*), each under the bifurcated name Li Ge-di/Hsia Yü. The oblique slash that separates the two names serves at the same time to conjoin them: they refer

to one and the same person, each performing in a different capacity as manifested in the two volumes, in what can be seen as a schizophrenic textual performance. Both of these names are in fact the *noms de plume* of the author (whose real name, Huang Qing-qi, is relatively unknown) who has in the course of her career adopted a number of other pseudonyms such as Zhong Li-zhi, Tong Da-long, and Li Fei. Li Ge-di embodies the author's persona as a popular song lyricist in Taiwan since 1984, and *This Zebra* is basically a comprehensive collection of her 166 lyrical verses. The majority of these are commercial texts written for Chinese pop singers and circulated by mainstream music companies for mass consumption. The same lyricist is also a renowned poet writing under the name Hsia Yü, with several collections under her belt, including *Memorandum (Beiwanglu)*, *Ventriloquy (Fuyushu)*, *Rub Ineffable (Moca wuyi mingzhuang)*, *Salsa*, *Pink Noise (Fenhongse zaoyin)*, and *Poems, Sixty of Them (Shi liushi shou)*.

It seems curious at first that the identity of a writer should be at once split and linked in what is essentially a single publication. What is the relationship between the two books in question, and how does this dovetail into the dialectic between the two personae of the poet? Textually speaking *That Zebra* is apparently identical to *This Zebra*; as we shall see later, this formulation is not quite accurate; but for now let us make the basic point that the two books contain the same 166 texts. The bifurcation of names in Li Ge-di/Hsia Yü indicates generic transgression and continuity: the 166 pieces are here constructed as both popular lyrics and contemporary poetry. This is not the first time Hsia Yü has attempted to problematize the boundary between lyrics and poetry – a boundary that is virtually nonexistent in her creative realm. Examples of this can be found in many of Hsia's lyrics, especially in her experimental CD project *Mix-up Band (Yu hun yuedui)*, in which some of her poems from *Salsa* are recited. The Zebra books, by virtue of their ambivalent generic status, conflate the popular lyric as commodified text and the poem as paradigm of serious literature. This act of trivializing literature into pop-art and conversely affording pop-art the façade of literature is very much in line with Hsia's cult status in Taiwan and with her nonchalant, at times vulgarized, treatment of mundane themes in her writing.

At the same time, however, the two books are separate entities – each has a unique ISBN number. Visually this is apparent in the different color schemes adopted: while both books adopt a striped design – hence the zebra motif in the titles – *This Zebra* is relatively monotonous, featuring a black-grey-white concept (Fig. 1), whereas *That Zebra* is a dazzling, technicolored product (Fig. 2). Typographical play is common to both books, though this is realized in different ways: *This Zebra* frequently manipulates the layout of the texts, which may be left-justified, right-justified, centered, or stretched out to saturate the space of an entire page; *That Zebra*, on the other hand, varies the font sizes and colors, and works through the stripe patterning more consistently with its use of colored bars that cut across each page horizontally.
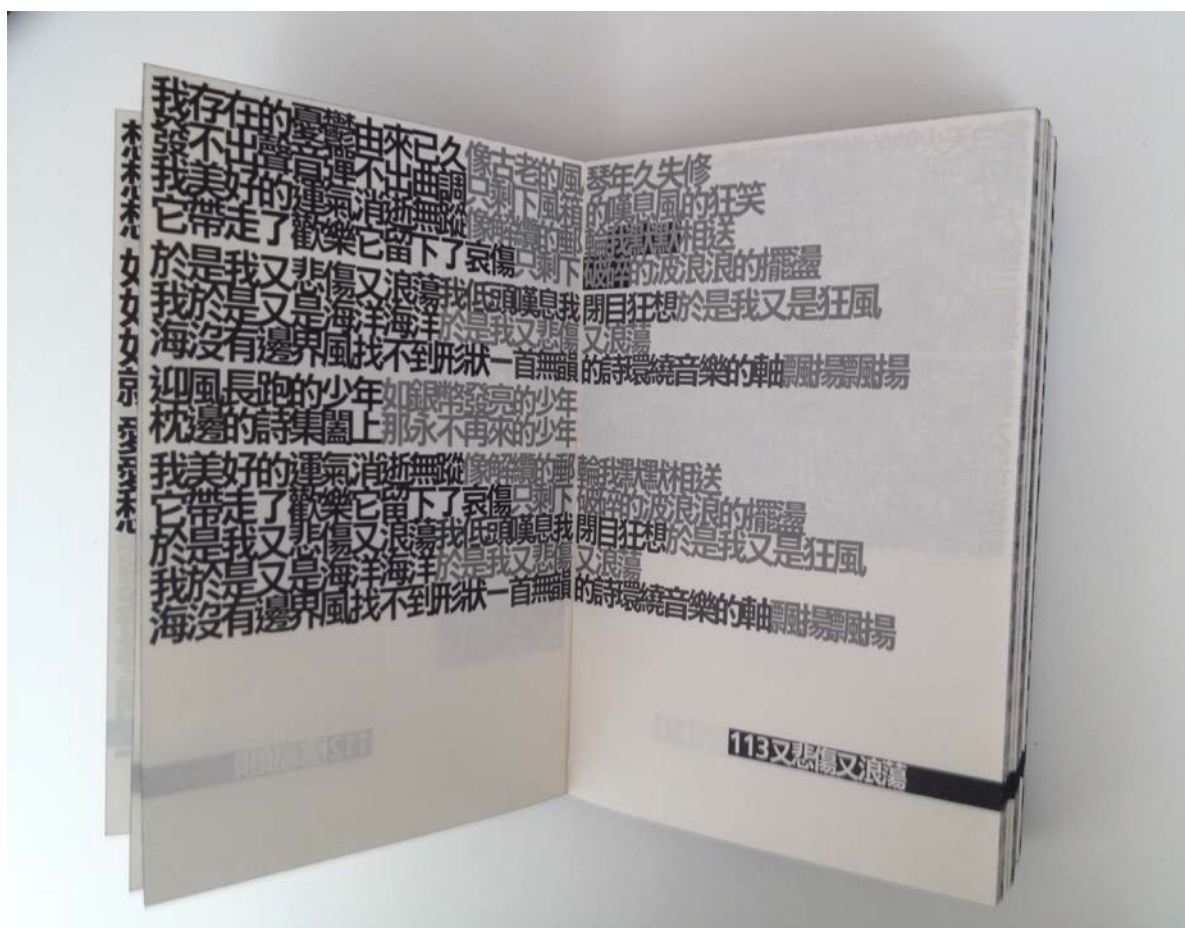
Fig. 1: Layout of a poem in *This Zebra*. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 2: Cut-up pages in *That Zebra*. Photograph by the author.

But the most important difference between the two lies in their visceral design. Unlike *This Zebra*, which is read in linear fashion, *That Zebra* is an altered book with each page, and therefore each lyric/poem, cut into two halves (top-bottom or left-right). The effect of this is that the reader is invited to splice (permutate and combine) textual segments at will, hence inducing a ludic element of embodied play in the reading process. Reading becomes embodied because the reader, who is now also a player, literally handles the book object with his or her hands in a way that gives rise to a tactile-kinetic interface with the poem-texts.

The distinguishing trait of *That Zebra*, therefore, lies in the non-intactness of its individual pages, which leads to the fragmentation, dispersal, and recombination of their texts. The reader may start by first reading any given poem in its original form, and then combine the top segment of this poem with the bottom segment of another poem chosen at random. The reading could either be vertical or diagonal across the page cuts, depending on the placement of the two segments; for example, if we take two facing pages and cross-read their words, the reading line will be diagonal. In some cases, a poem is broken up laterally in the lower half of the book, so that it is possible to read the first (top) part of one poem in conjunction with the second (right) segment of another poem.

This game-like procedure can be repeated any number of times and in infinitely shifting permutations. It can produce an enormous number of composite texts derived from the same pool

of words. Mathematically the 166 lyrics/poems in *That Zebra*, which, as we have mentioned, are the same texts in *This Zebra*, can generate more than 20,000 combinations, all of which are potential texts. They are "potential" because they are only latent possibilities of textual formation; whether a particular textual formation, say, the composite of the upper segment of Poem 10 and the lower segment of Poem 56, *comes into being* – by way of being written down or cognitively registered by the reader – depends entirely on the reader's volition and action. This is an instance of generative art; what we are facing in *That Zebra*, then, is not merely an innocuous book but a *text-machine*, one that can generate a vast number of poems through its craft technology based on a limited number of elemental texts – the raw materials in Hsia's writing project. The labor of the textual production comes from the reader, who executes the process by physically manipulating the book artifact.

When we claim *That Zebra* affords a different material experience of reading, we are assuming *This Zebra* as its point of reference. This seems fair enough, since the two books share the same putative "content" in terms of discrete signifiers, viz. the summation of Chinese characters actually used. Indeed, the high experimentalism of *That Zebra* makes full sense only in juxtaposition with *This Zebra*. Multimodal as it is in terms of its visual setup, *This Zebra* is relatively conventional in that it provides for a linear reading experience not unlike most poetry collections. The same 166 texts, however, proliferate into an exponentially larger number of texts once they enter into the material frame of *That Zebra*. The deixis of *This/That* therefore point to the textual continuity and transformation across two books, two genres, and two modes of poetry reading. Starting out as song lyrics masquerading as poems (or vice versa) in *This Zebra*, the 166 texts morph into experimental poetry in *That Zebra*, entailing a different modality of and also psychology of reading. Here the reader is compelled to take on a proactive disposition vis-à-vis the cut-up pages. S/he does not have the option to sit back and *read* the poems; s/he must instead *act*, and in so doing s/he turns into a nontrivial reader.

Rub Ineffable

But the reader does not always enjoy such a high degree of intervention, even in cut-up writing. Back in 1995 Hsia Yü published *Rub Ineffable* by reworking "found" textual material, specifically words and phrases used in Hsia's 1991 poetry collection *Ventriloquy*. An exercise in poetry recycling (Lee 2015), *Rub Ineffable* emasculates the author through *not* writing, where writing is conventionally associated with such notions as intuitive genius and creative expression. In *Rub Ineffable*, writing is realized, and in the process also undercut (quite literally), through the manual craft of cutting text segments from one book, reshuffling them, and pasting them into another. Hsia deliberately renders the traces of cut and paste visible in the form of watershed marks surrounding each dislocated text segment, as if to indelibly imprint upon them the shadow of their past incarnation in *Ventriloquy*. The poet's intention, according to her preface, is Derridean: to create a palimpsest (Hsia 1997, n.p.), where the specter of a text's history resurfaces, overlaps with, and continually intercepts its present instantiation.

In declaring its recycled nature, the book offers an aestheticized response to *authorial authority*, and to the entire belief in originality in creative writing. But the poet is not completely absent here; she is merely a repressed creative force lingering behind the recycling procedure, which constitutes the technological mechanism of the book. Although it is this mechanism that produces the poems in *Rub Ineffable*, it is nonetheless the author who triggers it: it is ultimately Hsia Yü who decides how the cut-up words should come together in a different pattern to form a new poem, even though a degree of randomness is conceivably granted in the process. At one point in her preface, the poet points to recalcitrant words that refuse to come together easily, "drifting away to form their own poems." (Hsia 1997, n.p.) But who decides in the first place whether these words should come together or drift away, or indeed if they are recalcitrant or compliant? The book's technology does

not allow the words to collocate themselves randomly, as if they had a consciousness of their own; instead, the poet performs the collocations, and this is an important qualification amidst our celebration of *Rub Ineffable*'s apparent challenge to authorship and originality. It is true that the poet's freedom is curtailed by the range of vocabulary she could employ (she does not use any word that has not already appeared in her earlier book) – and this self-imposed limitation is the radical part of the project. However, the concatenation of cut-up segments and their rearrangement into new discursive products are, in the final analysis, filtered through the poet's consciousness. Hsia Yü's ruminations on her creative process testify to her interventions in creating meaning – here defined as an impressionistic and fleeting sense of the poetic – within the apparent randomness of her linguistic game. The poet tells us, for example, that she has to ponder whether a word should be reused in a different figure of speech, or whether to place a linking word between two segments for cohesion (Hsia 1997, n.p.).

The citational poetics of *Rub Ineffable* thus tacitly privileges the author, inasmuch as the grafting work is done by Hsia Yü alone. The reader can, of course, take on the impossible task of tracing each cut-up segment to its previous life in *Ventriloquy*, hence experiencing for him- or herself Derrida's (1967/1974: 47) idea of the "retentive" aspect of a signifier, where a signifier recalls within itself the phantom of its past life. Apart from the fact that such a task would be logistically daunting, it is not very productive either, since the poet's consciousness at the time of the pastiche is irrecoverable. Nor should it be recoverable, since randomness is part of the game of collage, which means to say if the poet were to repeat this project all over again, a different volume of poems should ensue. It thus appears that "what one is to do with such a text is, after all, read it" (Manfredi 2014: 109). Manfredi performs such a reading of two poems in *Rub Ineffable*, "Reading" and "Tongue," as follows:

> Though the second poem ["Tongue"] is longer and therefore formally quite distinct, … the two poems can be considered companions in many respects. To begin with, both focus on the (presumably human) mouth with figurative connection to an equally related animal world of the crab and the crocodile. The close relationship between the animals … connects with the fundamentally biological nature of the tongue, a portion of the anatomy not commonly offered for visual consumption. The nexus formed between reading and pain, danger and darkness, fear and reclusiveness is typical of Xia Yu's topical territory, and the moral, social, and psychological issues are prominent. (Manfredi 2014: 114-115)

Based on his understanding that the "themes of Xia's work are relatively coherent," (ibid.: 115) Manfredi interprets the two poems as a trained literary critic would, drawing thematic connections ("The close relationship between…;" "The nexus formed between…") and extrapolating macro-level meanings ("the moral, social, and psychological issues are prominent"). To my mind, one problem with this reading lies in its *absolute seriousness*: it treats each text as a semantic unit that is eminently readable. I am not suggesting that Hsia Yü's poems should not be read or interpreted thematically at all. A number of scholars have proven that there are indeed certain dominant themes in Hsia works, such as a distinctively feminist sensibility (Yeh 1993; Parry 2007: 94-112). With *Rub Ineffable*, however, the case is different from Hsia's relatively "regular" works such as *Ventriloquy* and *Salsa*. At the outset the poems in *Rub Ineffable* are fractured composites – the ruptures within each poem are marked visually and explicitly acknowledged in the paratexts (including a preface by the poet and a commentary by the Taiwanese critic Luo Zhi-cheng). Written in non-linear fashion, the collection as a whole is a *text-in-dispersal* based on citation. I am aware that one can argue the same for poetry in general; what is different about *Rub Ineffable*, however, is its candidness, self-consciousness, and unabashedness in respect to its citational mode of writing.

A hermeneutic reading of such poetry moves against the grain of its self-professed unoriginality, and could inadvertently produce an ironic effect. The poems in *Rub Ineffable* can certainly be "read", but they need to be read with a certain irreverent playfulness, that is to say, with the understanding that any "meaning" that one manages to derive from them is only ludic and transient. Like its signifiers, the meaning of each poem is not an essence *already present* in the words themselves; rather, it is a kind of semiotic energy-in-flux that materializes as a semantic flicker at that moment when the reader *decides* to make sense of a poem. This is exacerbated by the fact that the poems in *Rub Ineffable*, as compared to those in *Salsa* for instance, are "difficult": the discontinuous syntax and marked collocations render them not readily susceptible to a comfortable, linear read. Even when the reader manages to impute some coherent sense to a poem, meaning as it were does not exist as a discrete semantic substance that can be pinned down, but as a quick flash of aesthetic epiphany that is impermanent, almost illusory if you will. A second reader can well come along to repudiate this meaning, and perhaps decide that a certain poem is gibberish (a major possibility for *Rub Ineffable*). Some of this comes close to certain strains of reception theory and deconstruction, but I do not mean to posit these as a general theory of poetic meaning here. The crucial point about *Rub Ineffable* is that, because of its radical and self-conscious positioning as a work of citational poetics, an ethical reading of its poems must adopt a similarly destructive stance that continually deconsolidates and dissipates itself, in order to resist the lure of meaning.

As with cybertexts in general, the mode of reading adopted for *Rub Ineffable* should be as intentionally frivolous as the mode of composition itself, aimed at catching at a momentary spark of meaning – we might call this a *satori* in poetic discourse – and then releasing it immediately. But this begs the question: what makes *Rub Ineffable* a cybertext in the first place? After all, as mentioned earlier, the poet alone decides what to cut and how to paste them. Marjorie Perloff reminds us, with reference to experimental poems that generate "cognitive dissonance," that "the words, morphemes, syntactic units, and sound patterns … have been *chosen* by the poet in question. Even the jagged free verse … designed to obstruct the very possibility of pattern or ordering principle, underscores the primacy of the poet's *inventio* as constructive principle." (Perloff 2010: 9; original emphasis) The same observation applies to Hsia Yü's role as grafter in *Rub Ineffable*, such that the reader has no stake in determining the actual text formations.[1]

There is, however, a material provision for the reader to affect the outcome of reading. The design of this book is such that most of its pages are bound to each other in a way that creates a fold (Fig. 3). In some cases the bottom of adjacent pages are sealed; in others two pages are glued to each other on their vertical sides facing away from the spine. For the first time in contemporary Chinese literature a collection of poems is literally manufactured into an artifact that must be worked through by tearing its pages. Without tearing apart the bound pages, the poems printed between those pages cannot be accessed, at least not in the usual way. One could of course open up a space between the folds (as I did in Fig. 3) and "peep" through the opening into the texts hidden within, which already makes for extra effort in reading. The more convenient way, however, is to separate the pages carefully along the sides to reveal the poems; this may leave the sides of the torn pages jagged and irregular – an intended material effect. All of this hassle is integral to the reading project: the book and its binding technology are meant to impede a linear read, demanding the reader's nontrivial actions (tearing, peeping) in "exposing" the poems to the light of the day. This is the ergodic-

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[1] As we celebrate the rise of the reader's autonomy, it is worth bearing in mind, as Hsia Yü's case has demonstrated, that the death of the author is often enacted by the author himself/herself. In other words, the author's death constitutes part of the game, and the apparent provisions for reader's intervention are always already part of the literary design. Seen from this perspective, it is probably too hasty to claim a writerly status for readers of cybertexts in general. Readers become writerly only to the extent granted by the "real" writer behind the scenes, and the act of "readerly writing" performs as an integral part of this reading experience.

embodied poetics of *Rub Ineffable*, one that gives the book its cybertextual quality. It gives rise to an interrupted read that goes against all the ease and linearity expected from conventional codex books: it is simply impossible to read from cover to cover without any embodied *doing* on the part of the reader. But this also means the reader has an option as to how to read, which will in turn affect what is read: one has the liberty not to read every single poem, tearing the pages randomly rather than sequentially, and skipping those poems trapped within those bound pages that s/he decides to leave undetached. In my personal copy of the book, for example, I have left several bound pages as they are, and there are a number of poems that I have manifestly decided *not to commit the effort* to read. As with reading its poems, the only responsible way to appreciate *Rub Ineffable* is to play with it capriciously in line with its ludic nature. Tearing every bound page dutifully and reading each poem with an intention to interpret it pretty much defeat the whole purpose of its technology. Decisions in respect to how to manage the bound pages, which vary from individual to individual, impinge on the number of poems that a reader consumes, the manner in which s/he reads them (peeping vs. "regular" reading), as well as the general experience of handling and mishandling the cumbersome body of the book.

The physical effort required in maneuvering through the contours of the book is matched by the intractability of the poems themselves. These poems, basically juxtapositions of cut-up words and phrases, do not provide for a smooth and fluent read. As mentioned earlier, they do not offer a veritable basis for any stable interpretation, and any aesthetic sense that one derives from them needs to be viewed arbitrarily, even cynically, as incidental bursts of semantics that happen to come through the interstitial space between the "found" characters. Just as the plagiaristic production of the poem texts subverts the conventional idea of the literary text as holistic discourse originating in some creative source, the reception of these texts brings attention to them as a "meaning-making machine" (Perloff 2010: 9) whose function is precisely to *suggest and suspend* meaning. Together with the tediousness of the reading act and the citational nature of the project, the poems offer a "resistance … to the larger cultural field of capitalist commodification where language has become merely instrumental" (Perloff 2010: 9), hence bringing into high relief the obstrusiveness of the signifier and foregrounding the unruly artifact of the book.
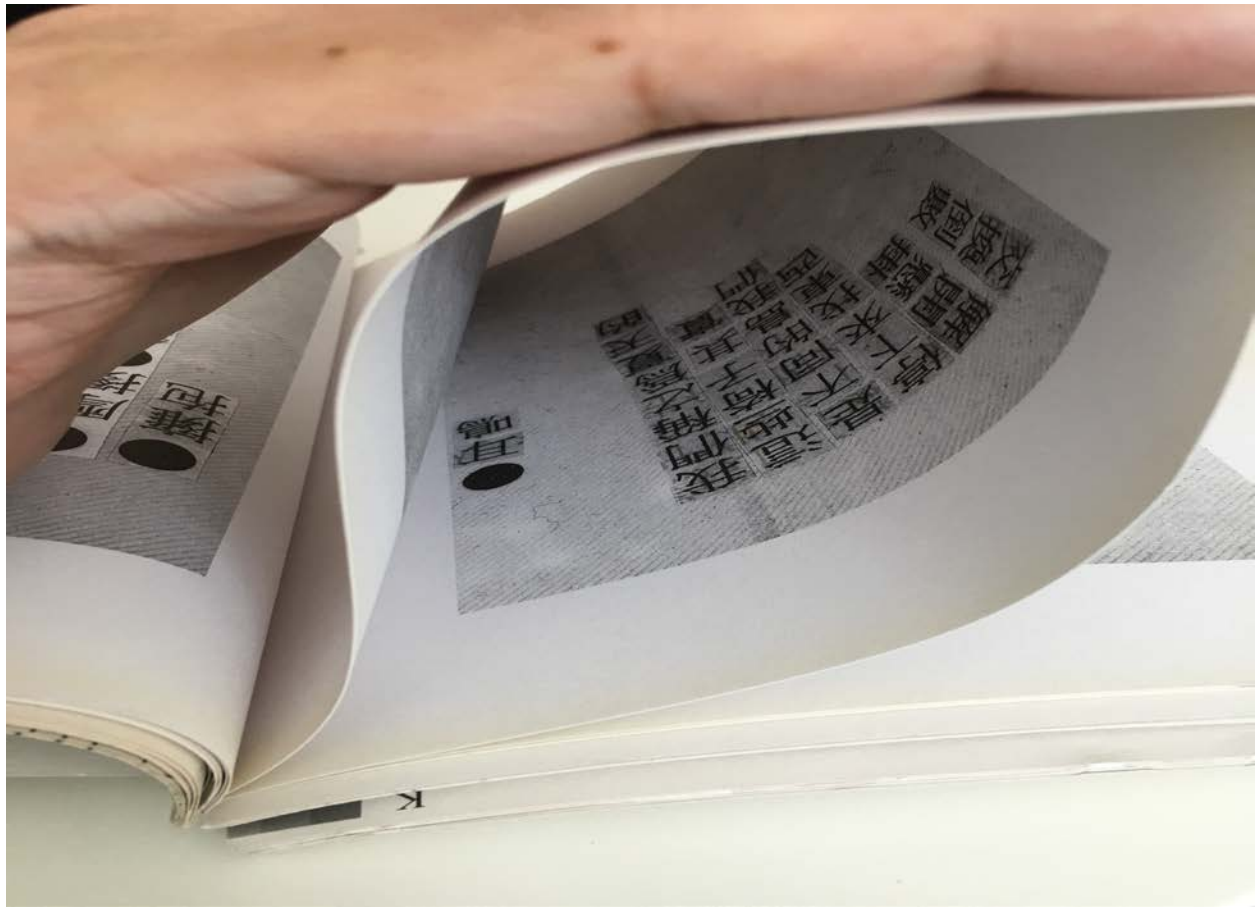
Fig. 3: Bound pages in *Rub Ineffable*. Photograph by the author.

Pink Noise

The method used in *Rub Ineffable* is extended in Hsia Yü's 2006 bilingual poetry project *Pink Noise*. If in the former work the poet still holds sway over her discursive choices while imposing constraints on such choices, in the latter work, authorial intervention is further mitigated. Elsewhere (Lee 2015: 30-41) I have discussed at length the method used in this writing project and its poststructuralist bearings. Here I want to emphasize the poet's relinquishment of her subjectivity through the use of technology, in comparison to her experimentation in *Rub Ineffable*. A two-step procedure is used: first, in the tradition of found poetry, Hsia plucks random English words and phrases off the Internet and pieces them into the formal shape of a conventional poem. Whereas in *Rub Ineffable*, the source of cut-up words and phrases is the poet's own precedent work, in *Pink Noise* that source is proliferated into multiple nodes of origin in the digital world. The very act of sourcing language from the Internet is symbolic of the disintegration of poetic subjectivity and repudiation of poetic originality, though one could argue that the poet's subjectivity is always already involved in the initial lexical selection itself.

   The second step in the process is machine translation (MT), whereby the found words and phrases are fed into a translation program (the now-defunct Sherlock) that turns them into Chinese-language equivalents. These equivalents are literal and decontextualized renditions, producing a raucous linguistic effect in the translated poems. Thus, even though the poet decides which words

and phrases to combine as well as how they are combined in the English source texts, she cannot in any way decide how these DIY (Do-It-Yourself) poems are transformed in MT. This second stage in the creation of *Pink Noise* further enfeebles the poet's position: it is almost as if the texts generated themselves through technology, first via the Internet and then via automatic translation.

Having said this, the poet does install an intermediary procedure that allows her to influence the textual outcome. For each text, based on the contexts arising from the Chinese translation, she makes adjustments to her "original" English poem and repeats the MT cycle until a set of parallel texts to her liking is borne. This is a crucial point in *Pink Noise* where the author reinsinuates herself into the writing. It also underscores a commonality between this collection and *Rub Ineffable*, and that is the reader is pretty much excluded from the composition process. The focus of the writing, however deconstructive, is on the relationship between the poet and the text; in this spectacle of poetic feat, where the author performs her own destruction, the reader remains on the sidelines, contemplating the writing procedures (paratextually explicated in an interview with the author, included in the book) and, of course, reading the poems. As with *Rub Ineffable*, the poems in *Pink Noise* are technically unreadable; as products of MT, they are chaotic in collocation and syntax. It is here that the reader's interpretative participation is activated: to make sense of a poem s/he must exert extraordinary effort, and even seek recourse to the corresponding English poem frequently. This back and forth shuttling between the English and Chinese texts is arguably a bicultural performance.

This performance, however, is primarily hermeneutic, and is not by definition nontrivial effort. Of greater interest to us is ergodic-embodied participation *with a textual effect*. This is the determining criterion of whether a text is to be considered a cybertext, and in this respect one could say that *Pink Noise* is less cybertextual – in spite of the fact that authorial intervention is considerably reduced – than *Rub Ineffable*. We have seen that the reader, in juggling with the stuck pages in *Rub Ineffable*, has at least an indirect influence on the textual outcome as received by him or her. The reader does not actually write or change any content, but by making a decision as to whether to detach two adjoining pages, s/he in effect influences what is read and the manner in which it is read.

With *Pink Noise*, the reader loses even this option, although the physical book is even more user-unfriendly, making it a very tricky artifact to handle. Made entirely of vinyl (transparency sheets), *Pink Noise* is heavy, slippery, and delicate (Fig. 4). This materiality sets out to ensure that reading is "constantly *interrupted* (the reader has to turn to the preceding page to check the English original in order to understand the Chinese translation), *prolonged* (the reader has to pause to re-read the radically defamiliarized Chinese), *delayed* (the reader has to insert a sheet of plain paper between pages so as to be able to read the words on the page), and *distracted* (the reader's face is reflected on the opposite page when s/he reads a poem and the reader catches the reflection within peripheral vision)" (Yeh 2008: 177; my emphasis). The reader is basically placed at the mercy of both the book object and the untenable texts. In interacting with the dual materialities of book and text, the reader cannot mingle with the formation of the texts s/he sees. The only case where the reader can decide what to read is to *not read* – when s/he gives up on reading, possibly out of frustration with the unwieldy book. In other words, *Pink Noise* is less of a cybertext than *Rub Ineffable*.
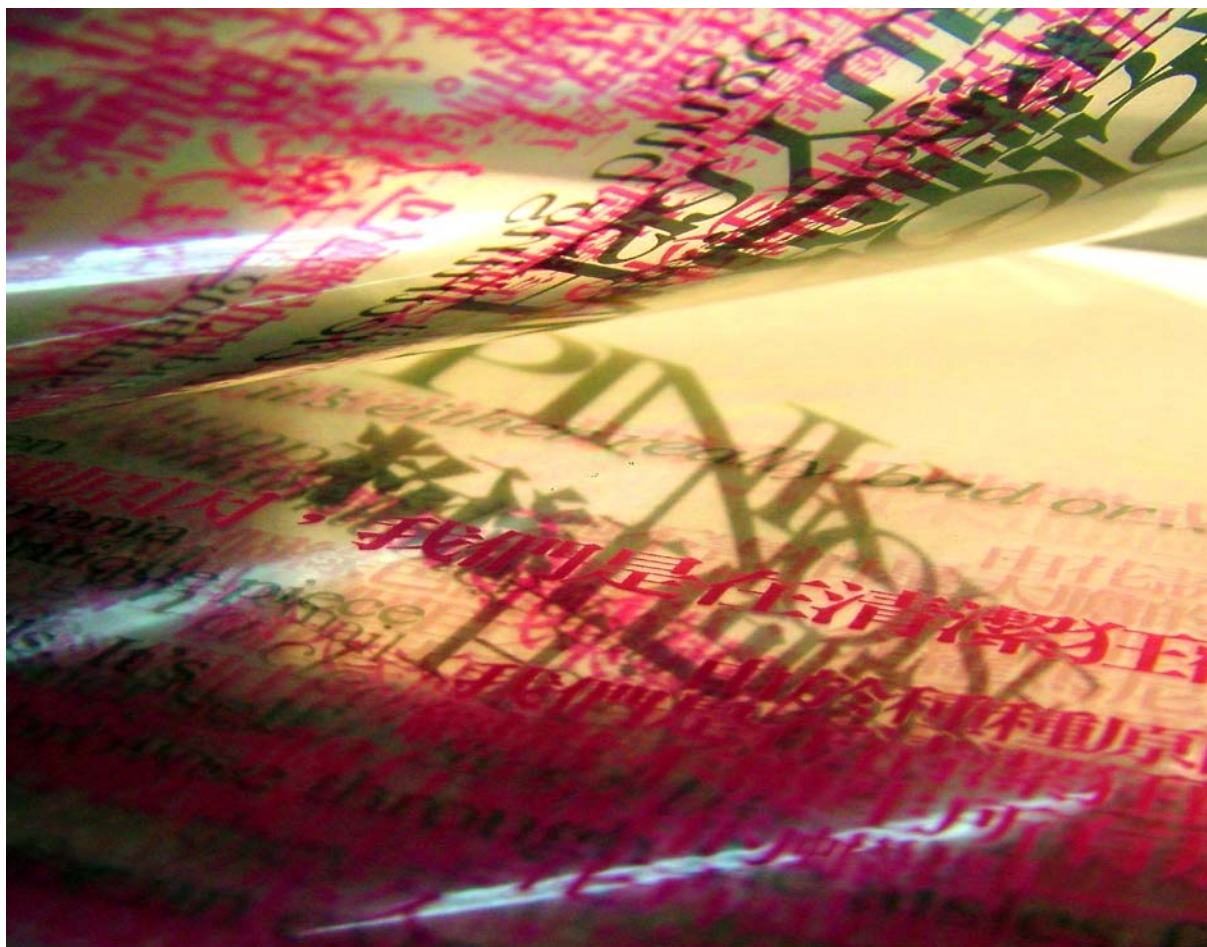
Fig 4. The vinyl texture of *Pink Noise*. Courtesy of James Kao.

Affordances of Textual Technology

With Hsia's earlier works in view, let us now return to the Zebra books. The significance of *That Zebra* hinges on the relative conventionality of *This Zebra*. The design concept of *That Zebra* is such that the reader takes responsibility for the texts, even as they have been "prewritten" by Hsia Yü in the form of the 166 song lyrics found in *This Zebra*. The Dadaist technology of collage and grafting calls up the specter of *Rub Ineffable*, but whereas in *Rub Ineffable* it is individual words and phrases that are cut and pasted, in *That Zebra* entire segments (half-pages) of text are made permutable. Thus *That Zebra* uses not so much the *cut-up* method but the *fold-in* method.[2] By recombining pages at will, the reader folds in prewritten segments to form new though ephemeral entities, fracturing the lyric/poem as an organic body of meaning. This only makes sense, as I have emphasized before, when we are given the illusion of such an organic body in the first place in *This Zebra*. Which means to say: we are first assured of the existence of a text in all its physical (pages are intact) and semantic

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[2] In experimental fiction the fold-in method is exemplified by William S. Burroughs; in his novels *Nova Express* and *The Ticket That Exploded*, "A page of text—my own or some one elses [*sic*]—is folded down the middle and placed on another page—The composite text is then read across half one text and half the other—" (Burroughs 1965, in Oxenhandler 1991[1975]: 134).

(song lyrics are supposed to be expressive or narrative or both) unity, and then we are confronted with their dispersal and potential multiplication.

As in her previous works, Hsia Yü seeks to make her avant-gardism as visually flamboyant as possible. The neatly sliced pages in *That Zebra* present such a confounding materiality to the innocuous reader that s/he is at first befuddled as s/he looks for the *path* (recall the etymology of "ergodic") to enter the text. This is compounded by the fact that there is no content page, even though the texts are arranged in the exact same order as they appear in *This Zebra*, which has a content page like any ordinary publication. This suggests, of course, that *That Zebra* is not supposed to be read linearly; the reader is unable to track down a poem by recourse to a content page and then locate it according to the title or page number. One way, indeed the intuitive way, to go about tackling *That Zebra* is to follow the color scheme and piece together two fragments of each lyric/poem – and even this is quite challenging, as the moment the book is opened the dismembered pages spread themselves out in disarray, much like an opened fan (Fig. 2). The reader who manages to jigsaw together two halves of a poem may be temporarily relieved of his/her initial anxiety; but this reader must be prepared to relinquish the newfound sense of textual security: s/he must release the new composite lyric/poem back into the field of textual potentiality and jigsaw the next poem into existence. The textual economy of *That Zebra* – the rules of playing with the book if you will – lies in its perpetual flux.

Therefore, what distinguishes *That Zebra* from *This Zebra*, and also connects the two inextricably together, is its lack of integrity. The reader's physical scrambling of textual fragments that make up textual "wholes" (song lyrics) is the motivating force that sets the former text into action. Without this force, that is to say, if the reader decides not to scramble the pages, *That Zebra* would fail to assume a separate identity of its own – it will not be fundamentally different from its twin counterpart *This Zebra*, apart from the more striking visuals. In other words, *That Zebra* is a cybertext while *This Zebra* is not, though the former is fully dependent on the latter to provide empirical grounds for an illusion of textual integrity. The aberrant text comes about only with reference to a more or less orthodox version of it. With *That Zebra*, the reader substantially intervenes as to what s/he reads: the embodied participation of the reader in the handling of scattered pages determines the specific configuration of text as received by him or her.

Cybertexts always need to be experienced, not read in laid back fashion. Of course, the "content" is there to be communicated cognitively, and perhaps interpreted (a dangerous notion) if one so wishes, but as far as cybertexts are concerned that is quite beside the point. If an arbitrary, deconstructive attitude does not enter into the reading of a cybertext (*That Zebra*), the latter is immediately reduced to an orthodox text (*This Zebra*). Take, for example, text number 51 from both books:

Fusion Kitsch

什麼時候開始的
這牧歌式的泛亂倫氣氛
那早就屬於同一本家庭相本的
已經淪落為親人的愛人們
那些淪落為愛人的動物們
還有所有羅曼史最終到達
之萬物有靈論述
裡的壓抑傾向

Fusion Kitsch

When did it all begin
This bucolic pan-incestuous atmosphere
Was it not always there in the selfsame family album
Lovers fallen to the status of kin
Animals fallen to the condition of lovers
And those repressive inclinations
In the animistic discourse to which
All romances arrive in the end

(Hsia 2011; trans. Steve Bradbury in Hsia 2014, n.p.)

"Fusion Kitsch" first appeared in 1999 as a poem in Hsia Yü's *Salsa*, and then reappeared in 2002 as the libretto of a song in Hsia's conceptual music album. It is exemplary of the amphibiousness of all the texts appearing in the Zebra books. In *That Zebra*, the lyric is cut into two halves at the fifth line, which invites us to piece one half of it with the other half of another lyric. This act is ergodic, for it entails *nontrivial* work (readers are ordinarily not expected to move texts around like that), and it allows the reader to *traverse* the space of the text in a corporeal way. In line with the affordances of the book's technology, we must do this at our whim and fancy, without regard to the semantic coherence of the textual product – whether it leads to an organic narrative or expresses a logical progression of thoughts and emotions. To add to this gaminess, we can roll a dice or use any other number generating method to decide which other lyric will montage with the first. As part of the setup of this literary game, I prepared pieces of folded paper numbered 1 to 166 (corresponding to each lyric in *This Zebra*), placed them in a container, and shook it until one piece of paper falls out. It said: 95. The 95th text of *This Zebra* reads as follows:

復仇

我早早已經忘記了你
而且我早已經
早忘記了我的忘
我曾經以為是瘋狂
現在才懂是悲傷
多麼瘋狂的悲傷
約了下輩子還要遇見
只許你愛上我
那是我愛你的復仇

Vengeance

I have long forgotten you
And I have long forgotten
That I have forgotten
I once thought that was insane
Now I know it's sadness
What insane sadness

We made a pact to meet again in our next life
You shall love me alone
That is the vengeance of my love for you

(Hsia 2011; my translation)

In *That Zebra*, "Vengeance" is fractured at its fifth line. Now suppose we combine the top half of "Fusion Kitsch" with the bottom half of "Vengeance;" what we get is a DIY composite poem, as follows:

什麼時候開始的
這牧歌式的泛亂倫氣氛
那早就屬於同一本家庭相本的
已經淪落為親人的愛人們
那些淪落為愛人的動物們
多麼瘋狂的悲傷
約了下輩子還要遇見
只許你愛上我
那是我愛你的復仇

When did it all begin
This bucolic pan-incestuous atmosphere
Was it not always there in the selfsame family album
Lovers fallen to the status of kin
Animals fallen to the condition of lovers
What insane sadness
We made a pact to meet again in our next life
You shall love me alone
That is the vengeance of my love for you

This can arguably be a lyric in its own right. It reads unexpectedly well, and the poetic rhythm flows smoothly from Lines 5 to 6, as the poem crosses the invisible threshold that divides the compound text. Between the underlying cracks of a DIY poem such as this one, novel semantic coherence can seep through where you least expect it, a testament to the disseminative quality (*différance*) of literary signification as it emerges through the movement of signifiers. For example, in an unpremeditated way, the line "What insane sadness" above turns into an uncannily apt commentary on the observation that lovers have "fallen to the status of kin" and animals have "fallen to the condition of lovers," even though they do not initially belong to the same poetic context. But an interpretation such as this is possible insofar as it is not treated in all its seriousness. The moment we get too intent about developing a theme out of the lines, we turn the cybertext into a conventional text. Any one configuration of a cybertext is meant to be transient and transitional. Let's take a further step to see what happens when we jigsaw the first half of "Vengeance" with the second half of "Fusion Kitsch:"

我早早已經忘記了你
而且我早已經
早忘記了我的忘
我曾經以為是瘋狂
現在才懂是悲傷

還有所有羅曼史最終到達
之萬物有靈論述
裡的壓抑傾向

I have long forgotten you
And I have long forgotten
That I have forgotten
I once thought that was insane
Now I know it's sadness
And those repressive inclinations
In the animistic discourse to which
All romances arrive in the end

Based on the English translation, there is a bit of a disjuncture here between Lines 5 and 6, revealing the inherent fissure in the text. But this crack can be filled by an imaginative turn of syntax: what if we read the segment "And those repressive inclinations…" as the object of the verb "know?" Then we have: "Now I know it's…those repressive inclinations…to which/All romances arrive in the end." The theme of repression here accidentally coheres with the repetitive motif of memory (forgetting) in Lines 1 through 3, the notion of "sadness" in Line 5; and "animistic discourse", whatever it means here, also seems to broadly resonate with the general ambience of the word "insanity." My reading is of course as irredeemably contingent as the poem itself, and as random as the mode of reception in *That Zebra* – and it is supposed to be so.

This reading experiment can be repeated any number of times and in multifarious ways. It is a literary game of sorts, though one without a win/lose conclusion. Indeed, by manipulating the artifact, the reader already "wins" in the first instance by asserting his/her will to play the game, thereby preempting, indeed annihilating, any authorial intention that might have been posited in the source texts. Quantitatively the reader-turned-player can spin out many more poems than the 166 texts in *This Zebra*. Qualitatively speaking, the texts in *That Zebra* are virtualized: they exist as potential forms in the discursive space within the cut-up fragments, waiting to be materialized in the reader-player's hands, only to be dismantled again and returned to the potential realm ad infinitum – not unlike playing with Lego. Each reader's embodied reading determines singular, temporary manifestations of text, folding in pages and letting them go, where poetic meaning emerges (and fades away) as fragile, perishable outcomes on a moment by moment basis.

Cybertext as Creative Geography
Literary creativity comes about through the triangulation of author, textual artifact, and reader. It has become almost a scholarly reflex to seek recourse to deconstructionist vocabulary when speaking of the tension between author and reader, such that the text – as a material object, as a modality – is sometimes glossed over, as if it were merely that which *is written*, *to be read*. What cybertext theory does for us is to put the text-object back into the equation, to highlight how a text-object negotiates the power relation between author and reader through its technological affordances. It is not so much the Author vs. the Reader, à la Barthes,[3] but the Text as the nexus of mediation between Author and Reader.

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[3] It can be said that cybertexts herald the death of the reader as much as of the author. We have observed above, for example, that even as Hsia Yü increasingly relinquishes her Author-ity from *Rub Ineffable* to *Pink Noise*, the reader is not empowered with greater freedom to manipulate the texts. In fact, the reader of *Pink Noise* has even less leeway as regards what to read and how to read it.

One point needs to be made about the scope of the cybertext, especially print cybertexts.[4] When using the term vis-à-vis more conventional texts, we seem to inadvertently imply that it is a bounded category, the members of which must fulfill certain well-defined features. This is not the case, as Hsia's Yü's examples make clear. Just as different works of literature may carry the same generic label (i.e. literature) by virtue of certain family resemblances without having to embody all of a given set of characteristics (Eagleton 2012), so a concept of cybertext must allow for gradations. The reader's nontrivial act, a core quality of cybertexts, can come in different shades, thus engaging the reader with the textuality of the text to different extents. This is where we can have *degrees of cybertextuality*, where some cybertexts display more prototypical features of this "broad textual media category" (Aarseth, quoted earlier) than others.

What are these prototypical features? They are ergodicity and embodiment. Ergodicity refers to the potential of having different textual outcomes as a result of the reader's nontrivial work; this work is often embodied, where embodiment covers our full sensory capacities, including the sense faculties and also the kinetics-somatics of our physical body. The ergodic-embodied dynamic is what separates a cybertext from a non-cybertext; but it is itself relative. A specific work can engage my body more or less intensely depending on its semiotic interface, but so long as my embodied engagement with the materiality of the work influences the textual outcome in some way or other (which means if I maneuver the work in a different way, I can arrive at a different point in the piece), then this work qualifies as a cybertext. With this line of thinking, it is possible to suggest, as I have done above, that a book such as *Pink Noise* could be considered a cybertext, since the reader does put in more nontrivial effort than usual in the reading process; but it is relatively less cybertextual than *Rub Ineffable*, where the reader has a potential stake in what and how to read by deciding whether to tear up two attached pages. *That Zebra* is no doubt more cybertextual than both these works, as the reader produces new textual compounds by way of physically interacting with the book's technology. The cybertext is therefore a spectrum category that is continuous with, and also intersects, other spectrum categories in literature, such as more conventional texts (print or digital) and multimedia writing.

Ultimately the cybertext represents a topology of reading. The terrain in question is the nonlinear text which resists the positive and progressive accruement of meaning across discrete signifiers. Rather than advancing along with the word-tracking eye, meaning is punctuated intermittently; at times it is released to flow for a bit, only to be intercepted again – this could be due to difficulties built into the linguistic texture, the labor-inducing physical apparatus of the work, or the semiotic terrain opened up for the reader-user's necessary input, etc. The cybertext, then, is constituted by a series of blockages in its textual veins, designed to hinder an effortless read along a more or less predictable syntactic-semantic trajectory. It frustrates any attempt to locate what systemic functional linguistics has called chains of collocational cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 287), where one textual element harks back to an earlier element and is in turn recalled by a subsequent textual element to form a lexical nexus. Such nexus can arise in cybertexts, too, as we have seen with our

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[4] This article has more specifically focused on the print cybertext, which foregrounds discursive modes of technology that underlie print-and-paper literature. This is in line with Hayles's (2012) call for critical attention to "inscription technology," defined as any technique that goes into foregrounding the materiality of a printed text or book, such as typography, cut-outs and binding deployed in artists' books, thus producing a "material-semiotic object" (15) out of a text. The outcome of such technology is the "technotext," that is, print texts that "strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate." (25) The neologism "technotext" itself suggests a revisiting of what "technology" can mean; it recuperates the textual and non-digital dimension of the technical expertise that goes into making experimental literature. One important claim ensuing from all this is that "paper can hold its own against the computer as a technology of ergodic texts." (Aarseth 1997: 10)

DIY example from *That Zebra*, but only as a by-product within the fluid movement of signifiers; in other words, as a sheer accident of the disseminative potential of meaning.[5]

What we are encountering is thus creative geography (Hawkins 2017: 61-69) in a literary context. In an analogous way to cultural geographers, literary critics must now turn their attention "to the creative body" of the reader in addition to that of the author and "the embodied nature of creative experiences." (Hawkins 2017: 35) Adapting Hawkins (2017), I conceptualize readers as embodied subjects who "are no longer able to remain apart from the [textual] world in and through which they [read], rather they are thoroughly entangled with it; seeing, smelling, hearing and touching." As in all embodied creative practices, cybertexts involve "the braiding together of the external bodily senses – in particular sight and touch – with reconfigured sensory and cognitive topologies that are better equipped to account for the complexities of the body's sensory system and the variegated modalities of thought." (35)

Cybertexts exemplify such a reconfigured sensory and cognitive topology. If cybertexts give rise to a topology of reading, we must return our focus to the topos, that is to say the book object. And this is where a cybertextual reading breaks with a poststructuralist reading of poetry: it is not about championing the agency of the reader vis-à-vis the author, but about the book – the book not as a repository of abstract content but as a material thing in itself (Herschend and Rogan 2014). In this connection *That Zebra* participates in the new trend of Altered Books, including dimensional paper designs (or "pop-ups"; Hiebert 2014), artists' books (Salamony 2012), and installation books (Antaya and Sloman 2011). These aberrant formations are impediments to linear reading; in fact the notion of reading is much problematized. They turn into "quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett 2010: ix). Though conceived initially by the book author/designer, these forces appear to develop a life of their own when mobilized by the reader.

Aberrant book designs dislodge the reader from a passivized and purely intellectualized mode of reception, compelling them to "get their hands dirty" by corporeally engaging with the book's makeup. In our examples, this includes tearing and separating pages containing poems; slipping a piece of white paper under vinyl sheets to facilitate reading; and piecing cut-up pages into new wholes. A corollary of this is that the textual experience often exceeds the verbal plane. Reading is no longer reading per se; it becomes a multimodal and intersemiotic event, one to be literally *done*. Some of this nontrivial effort is put in to circumvent physical obstructions owing to the design of the book artifact, such as the weightiness, slipperiness, and visually confusing layout of *Pink Noise*. For a more prototypical cybertext such as *That Zebra*, we have an untenable specimen of literature that needs to be managed, tamed, played with, and perhaps also read though not quite in leisurely fashion. Here the reader's embodied act becomes a driving force that produces a textual repercussion.

Hawkins (2017), discussing the work of Tim Ingold, speaks of conceptualizing creativity not so much as "abrupt and sudden innovations" on the part of the creator, but more "in terms of adaption and response to the possibilities and barriers presented by an ever-changing world" (47). This is analogous to literary reading, where it is not so much about a reader achieving abrupt and sudden interpretations of a text, but about this reader responding to the affordances and limitations of the book artifact in an embodied way. The reader of a cybertext rises up to take on a radical position; s/he is in a position to influence the content being read, or otherwise to immobilize a piece of work by refusing to partake in some nontrivial act expected of him or her. However, this reader is not totally acting out of his or her own will either. With cybertexts a responsible reading is a state of becoming, always contingent on and derived from the reader's interaction with the materiality and technology of the text; this interaction involves interface, collaboration, and at times resistance.

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[5] For similar examples of semantic serendipities from *Pink Noise*, see Lee (2015: 41-51).

The creative geographies of the cybertext trigger a model of literary criticism that privileges the artifact of the text rather than the text itself. It also moves away from the dichotomous and oppositional relation between Author and Reader, treating both as co-participants in a holistic process of creating and unraveling a text-in-potential, a process capable of perpetual reiteration. At one level the cybertext resists against the myth of communicability. It asks: what if the entire point about a literary work is to not communicate? What if, to cite Susan Sontag, the whole point is to demonstrate "*how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" (Sontag 1994: 14; original emphasis)? I have suggested that the poems in *Rub Ineffable*, *Pink Noise*, and *That Zebra* need not, indeed must not, be read with serious intent, as if there were an underlying semantic core to be consumed, regurgitated, and digested. In other words, the logic of the prototypical cybertext pushes against an orthodox reading stance. And to go further than Sontag, what if a work is infinitely mutable such that there is no "final" version, where the "real" work is a virtual one floating like a cloud, waiting to be instantiated by the reader's embodied, nontrivial act (as opposed to a hermeneutic-interpretive act)? The issue here is not so much the question of form vs. content. It is the textual event, its *ishness* or *suchness* as manifested in the text artifact and all its attendant technologies, that comes to the fore, superseding a priori concerns about message and meaning. The text artifact is the message as well as the portal through which a reader enters into that message with the entirety of his/her body.

Glossary

Beiwanglu 備忘錄
Fenhongse zaoyin 粉紅色噪音
Fuyushu 腹語術
Hsia Yü 夏宇
Huang Qing-qi 黃慶綺
Li Fei 李廢
Li Ge-di 李格第
Luo Zhi-cheng 羅智成
Moca wuyi mingzhuang 摩擦•無以名狀
Na zhi banma 那隻斑馬
Shi liushi shou 詩六十首
Tong Da-long 童大龍
Yu hun yuedui 愈混樂隊
Zhe zhi banma 這隻斑馬
Zhong Li-zhi 鐘籬之

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