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SPINNING CHINESE CHARACTERS, HEBREW LETTERS, AND PLAIN ENGLISH: ROBERT MAJZELS'S 85 PROJECT

CLAIRE HUOT

DESCRIPTION OF 85 PROJECT

Robert Majzels's 85 project consists of eighty-five poems, each containing exactly eighty-five characters. Extant (consecrated) poems from the Jewish and Chinese traditions are reduced to eighty-five letters in English. The letters, all of identical size and font, lower case, and equidistant from each other, are not grouped into words. As a result, letters become material, plastic, and pictorial.

Each eighty-five letter text is flanked by two backward nunim, the Hebrew letter n. In the Chinese series, the original Chinese poem is sealed in a box below or beside the eighty-five letters. The Hebrew and the Chinese characters are part of the picture. The Tang dynasty series takes on the appearance of forbidding stelae; the Bada Shanren series resembles freewheeling colophons.

WHY 85? THE HERMENEUTICAL GROUNDS

Why a series of texts each containing exactly eighty-five characters? This formal restriction comes out of thinking about what a book is, but the minimalist approach, limited to something like the number of letters in a postcard, also follows Majzels's own increasing predilection for fewer words, fewer pages, and more attention to the visual.

Majzels, a novelist, playwright, poet, and translator recognized with a Governor General's Award in 2000 for his translations of the Acadian France Daigle's novels, is best known for his experimental novels. His most recent book, *Apikoros Sleuth*, is a detective story written in the form of and following the labyrinthine mode of Talmudic enquiry. In order to write this book, he studied extensively the old Jewish sacred texts of the Talmud, which are composed of a central Midrashic text surrounded by columns of exegetic material and notes.

In the Chabbat Tractate of the Talmud, there is a surprisingly contemporary take on the question of the book. On the Sabbath, although work of any kind is strictly forbidden, a holy book must nevertheless be saved from a burning house. But what if the book is damaged? Is it still a book and worthy of being retrieved from the flames? The Talmudic sages argue that, though a book be damaged, if it still contains a minimum of eighty-five letters, it is still a book and must be saved.

But why eighty-five? First, we should recall that the ancient Jewish texts, much like the Chinese, contain no vowels, no punctuation, and only the occasional space between words. In the ancient Torah scroll, there is a unique passage containing eighty-five uninterrupted characters that is enclosed between two nunim (n) written backwards. According to the rabbinical sages, those two backward letters are meant to identify the enclosed passage as a book in itself.

The reasoning here is by no means purely formalist, as a closer reading of the contents of this passage of eighty-five characters in the Torah demonstrates. The coffer discussed in this passage is the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Law that Moses brought down from Sinai, the Law that governs all meaning. The passage stipulates that the Ark must remain mobile, always ready to travel. To ensure its portability, the poles of acacia wood that flank the coffer must never be removed.

The potential perpetual movement of the Ark of the Covenant is a metaphor for the continual movement of meaning.

This idea is at the base of Majzels's hermeneutical project: to create a series of works containing eighty-five characters, marked as books or passages by the two backward nunim, presenting the book as a dynamic relation between object, text, and reader/viewer, as a potentially endless production of meaning issuing from both the visual and textual.

EXPERIMENT: DARK WORDS

Majzels began by producing an initial series of eighty-five character texts based on translations of Paul Celan (1920–1970), a poet with whom Majzels has a strong affinity. Both men are of Jewish European background, and their parents were imprisoned in concentration camps. They also share a reluctance to invest faith in anything and a marked preoccupation with language. In Majzels's words, confronted with the impossibility of destroying language, the poet tries at least to "hurt it a little." Majzels takes loving hold of Celan's already terse poems, translated from the German, and delicately pushes their desolate, alien feel to another level.

In the following example, only a few words have been removed from the original translation, but, by refusing to group the letters into words, arranging the letters instead into five long lines of seventeen lower case characters and transforming them into intaglioed white letters in a black rectangular box, the artist creates a paradoxical effect: although words have been abraded, volume, and therefore weight, is increased. The deletion of words and the one comma in the original poem further lessens the referential burden of the Celan poem. Words string together, emerging from the black background, according to where the viewer rests his or her eye: "world, stutter, wound, a guest, a name, sweat," as nightmarishly endless permutations, or linguistic visions.

World to be stuttered after
in which I will have been
a guest, a name
sweated down from the wall
where a wound licks up high



At the same time, each letter deployed over the surface of the page carries its own weight. The viewer juggles letters while his or her brain struggles to process words. Stuttering to produce words broken by line endings, the viewer discovers emerging relations that generate meaning. From its central position, the word-group "a guest a name sweat" engages with the first line's five letter "world" and the last line's "wound," and so on, as the eye moves back and forth to yield limitless interplay.

This series of 85s after Celan, with the outstretched breadth of their presentation, the sharp linguistic cuts, and the black background (in the actual work, the box is also enclosed between two nunim), succeed in creating burning books with words of pain.

THE SECOND SERIES: THE REDUCTION PARADOX

It is not necessary to be a poet or trained exegete to decode these poems. All that is required is a willingness to play. The eighty-five-letter puzzles can be cracked like acrostics. Majzels's second series of 85s are based on the Old Testament's Song of Songs, which consists largely of love verses. Originally in Aramaic, and translated traditionally, like the Bible, into Elizabethan English, they are now grouped and reduced by Majzels into 85s. As a result, they are suddenly made resolutely contemporary:

y o u r b e a u t i f u l s t e p
s i n s a n d a l s y o u r c h a
i n l i n k t h i g h s y o u r h
c a p o f w h e a t s e t i n l i
l i e s p u r p l e d e l i g h t

The eye can easily string together the short, simple, concrete words, locating “thigh” in its central position on the grid, with “wheat” immediately below, while other terms such as “purple delight” allow the viewer to bring to the text his or her own experience. Majzels, by eliding specific biblical references (for example to King Solomon or to God), or terms indicating gender, time, and location, and by stripping down archaic expressions and eliminating similes, creates an uncanny effect. The airy distribution of the letters and the shifting signifiers (“sins” turning into “sandals”), untrammelled by a box and endowed with wings in the shape of the nunim, combine to open up the text to intricate play. Paradoxically here, reduction—reduction of words, and elimination of formal divisions (spaces between words, verses, capitals, punctuation)—acts to multiply meaning.

Majzels's 85 project is first and foremost an experimental procedure enacted on the English language upon which Anglo-American culture is founded, designed to move it away from its dominant position as the world's most assimilative tongue, to render it fragile and precarious. He imports the texts of other cultures and forces his own to become their ghostly palimpsests. Through rigorous abrasion, meaning explodes. He invests English letters, which do not even have the diacritical marks that could draw attention to individual letters, with materiality. Without a signature, bereft of their original cultural signifiers, the 85s are objects ready to be experienced, displaced, and moved by the viewer and, ultimately, those eighty-five letters move the viewer too.

THE CONFLUENCE OF RABBINICAL AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE WORLD AND WORD VIEWS

In his study of the Talmud, Majzels concentrated on rabbinical thinking as deployed in Jewish exegetical reading and writing. His vision of language is particularly founded on the work of two heretic Cabbalists, Rabbi Nahman of Braslav (late eighteenth century) and Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (thirteenth century). Without rehearsing here the many legends and anecdotes that surround these two historical figures and their work, a couple of quotations from their writings will suffice to indicate the background for Majzels's treatment of letters as discrete objects:

The letters are without any doubt the root of all wisdom and knowledge, and they are themselves the contents of prophecy, and they appear in the prophetic vision as though opaque bodies speaking to man face to face saying most of the intellectual comprehensions thought in the heart of the one speaking them. And they appear as if pure living angels are moving them about and teaching them to man, who turns them about in the form of wheels in the air, flying with their wings, and they are spirit within spirit.” (Rabbi Abraham Abulafia)

Even an ordinary man, if he takes time to read, if he looks at the letters of the Torah, he will be able to see new things, new meanings; that is to say, by an intensive gazing at the letters, these will start to cre-

ate light, to mix, to combine, and he will be able to see new arrangements of letters, new words, and he will be able to see in the book things the author did not think of at all.” (Rabbi Nahman of Braslav)

Susan Handelman, writing on the crucial legacy of rabbinical reading for modern-day hermeneutics, has traced the subversive current of such reading and thinking operating under the surface of the dominant Greco-Christian world view throughout the history of Western civilization. This vision of reading as an endless generation of meaning, as an open-ended operation, has been returned to the forefront of Western philosophy and the social sciences by a number of twentieth-century thinkers, notably Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida, who, not coincidentally, had roots in the Jewish tradition.

For the Chinese, the treatment of language as a continual exercise of metonymical displacement is nothing new. Traditionally, the Chinese have viewed their characters as both emanating and extending from nature (bird tracks on the sand, patterns on tortoises, stellar configurations). The characters have always been sacred. The Daoists have turned written words into talismans, and the calligraphers have turned writing into an enduring art where the execution, the writing itself, signifies more than the semantics. “In China words are no idle sounds, nor are characters or pictures merely ink or paint. . . . They altogether constitute or produce the reality which they express or represent. . . . Any desired magical effect may be expressed in words or writing.”

Handelman’s analysis of the rabbinical reading of texts sounds eerily like a statement on the traditional Chinese view of language as “metonymical . . . retaining differences within identity, stressing relationships of contiguity rather than substitution, preferring multivocal as opposed to univocal meanings, the play of as if over the assertion of is, juxtaposition over equivalencies, concrete images over abstractions. Rabbinic interpretation never dispenses with the particular form in which the idea is en clothed. The text, for the Rabbis, is a continuous generator of meaning which arises from the innate logic of the divine language, the letter itself, and is not sought in a non-linguistic realm external to the text. Language and the text are . . . the space of differences, and truth . . . is not an instantaneous unveiling of the One, but a continuous sequential process of interpretation.”

It was almost inevitable that Majzels would, at some point in his 85 experimentation, turn to Chinese writing. The latter part of his novel *Apikoros Sleuth* was written in Beijing, where he spent two years learning Mandarin. Imperceptibly, as the novel neared completion, and as his readings started to include more and more material on China, especially on Chinese language, calligraphy, and poetry, the Chinese influence began to affect his work. He realized that Chinese and Hebrew, two of the oldest surviving languages, had many common elements, in particular the view of writing as a system autonomous to speech and constitutive of the world around us. In fact, both civilizations are grounded in the written word, which is invested with transformative powers.

THE FIRST CHINESE SERIES, THE TANG DYNASTY: STELAE OF MEANING

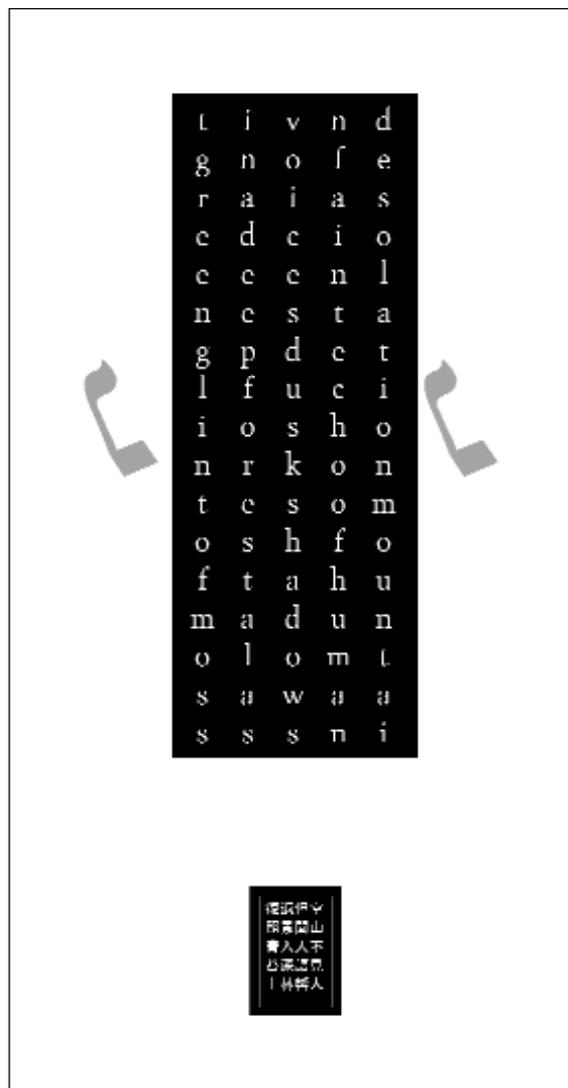
Majzels first approached China’s most canonical poems, those of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), after which he also turned his attention to Bada Shanren (seventeenth century), possibly China’s most idiosyncratic artist.

Majzels was able to get a solid sense of Chinese classical poetry thanks to François Cheng’s crucial work *L’Écriture poétique chinoise*, which not only analyzes Tang poetry in general and in great detail, but especially provides the non-fluent reader of Chinese the necessary tools to read the

works—each poem is first presented in Chinese characters, then in a Romanized transcription, then a literal (character-by-character) translation, and finally a more normalized translation. At the artist’s request, I did a more detailed, character-by-character translation, this time in English. And we followed the same methodology in dealing with the work of Bada Shanren. Majzels selected a number of the artist’s inscriptions from the catalogue of the 1991 Yale University Bada Shanren exhibition, and I transcribed the poems in Chinese characters and in Pinyin, and then produced a character-by-character literal translation.

Majzels is not a sinologist, and perhaps because of this, he is in a sense free of the specialist’s compulsion to elucidate allusions, decode symbols, and explicate the strict rules of classical Chinese poetry. On the other hand, he is not content to ogle the dazzling pictographs and cursive tour de force or wallow in the tiny poetic glimpses of nature. Majzels, eschewing these more typical Western reactions to Chinese classical art, works instead to break open the English language. The result, which may, but should not surprise us, is that his “85s” are extraordinarily faithful to the originals.

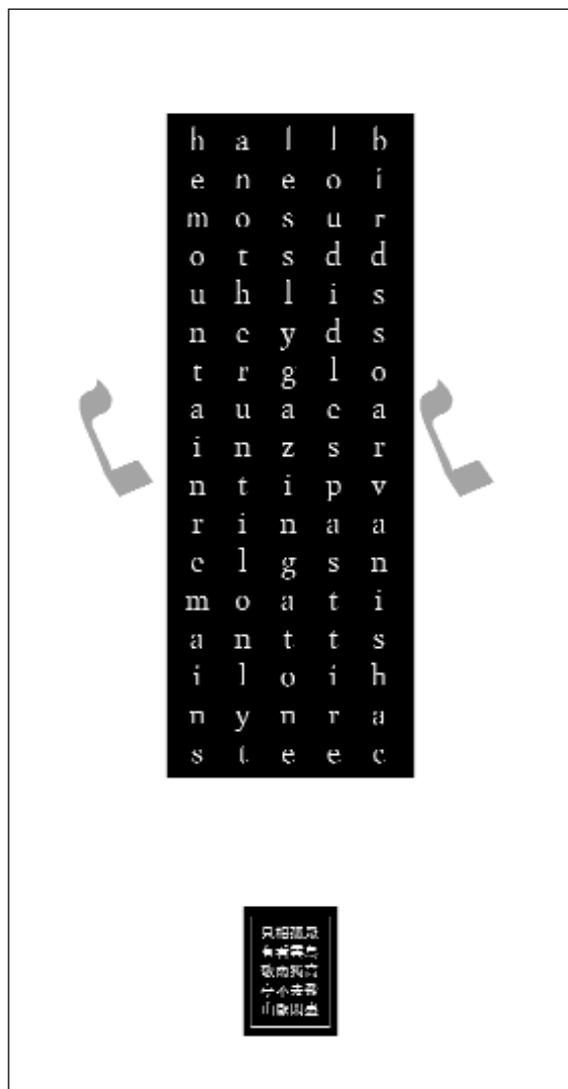
In figure 1, we see Wang Wei’s famous poem “Deer Fence” (20 characters) and Majzels’s eighty-five letters:



Robert Majzels, After Wang Wei, Deer Fence, 2005, ink on paper, 40 x 16.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The most visually striking trait is the monumentality of the work, with its eighty-five white letters ensconced in a long vertical black rectangle in five columns of seventeen letters. By contrast, the Chinese poem below it, presented in a sealed, bordered box, appears small, though not diminished because it is hard as rock, like a seal. Twenty characters, the size of a jueju, yield approximately eighty-five letters in English. Here the nunim flanking the long columns add a funereal dimension (Abulafia’s wings of angels) that transform the 85 into a stele, an inscribed gravestone. With the Chinese seal-like box marking the poem as canonic, inviolable, the work as a whole evokes the Chinese millenary practice of engraving written works on stone slabs, which are afterward transferred by rubbings onto paper, and thus preserved. F. W. Mote’s observation—“the past of the Chinese is a past of words, not of stones”—applies not only to China but also to the Jews, people of the word.

All the eighty-five-letter renditions of Tang dynasty poems follow this strict format. When they are exposed side by side, the rigid frontal effect evokes monumentality. And yet, when a viewer attempts to make sense of the text, he or she is drawn into a world of delicate emotions, understated impressions, gazing at these letters arranged, following the traditional Chinese fashion, in vertical columns, from right to left. The eye is disoriented. The change in reading direction serves to



Robert Majzels, After Li Bai, Contemplating Mount Jingting, 2005, ink on paper, 40 x 16.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

disalign and resource the eye, to draw it into another way of looking. Thus letters collide momentarily with one another, and the effect is always more than just the sum of the letters. Traditional poetic effects like alliteration and assonance are materialized, for example the repetition of “s” in the final “moss” and across the last three columns, or the echo of “o” in “echo.”

In addressing Chinese works, Majzels turns away from common Orientalist approaches, neither exoticizing nor normalizing. He avoids the temptation to tease additional meaning out of the pictographic qualities of Chinese script; nor does he pile on more words to render the poem more “Western,” more comprehensible. He refrains from individualizing the experience by not inserting the first-person pronoun, which is absent from the Chinese poems.

The effacement of self in much Buddhist and Daoist-inspired Chinese classical poetry, the diminishment of ego, and at the very least the ambiguous presence of the subject as distinct from nature and the surrounding world, coincides with Majzels’s view of writing as a whittling down of self, language, and power. His poem “After Li Bai, Contemplating Mount Jingting”—the letters a-t-o-n-e/a-n-o-t-h-e-r, the words “at one” and “another” coincidentally echoing—offers a superb visual and textual rendition of the Chinese word 互, “mutual,” itself composed of two parts both pronounced “mu,” providing an added, non-aural and non-representational surplus of meaning.

The fluidity of the Chinese text, which has no punctuation, combined with its syntactical structure, allows for the subject and, in the Li Bai poem above, the mountain to momentarily merge. This drift of subjectivity is re-enacted in the 85. Majzels also manages to maintain a tension between intense gazing at the long vertical configurations and the slow but serene processing of meaning, “until only the mountain remains.” (see figure 3, columns 4&5) The ephemeral moments that are characteristic of Chinese classical poems have been converted into an English which is respectful of difference while maintaining the exquisite tension between the visual and textual.

THE SECOND CHINESE SERIES, BADA SHANREN: FREE COLOPHONS

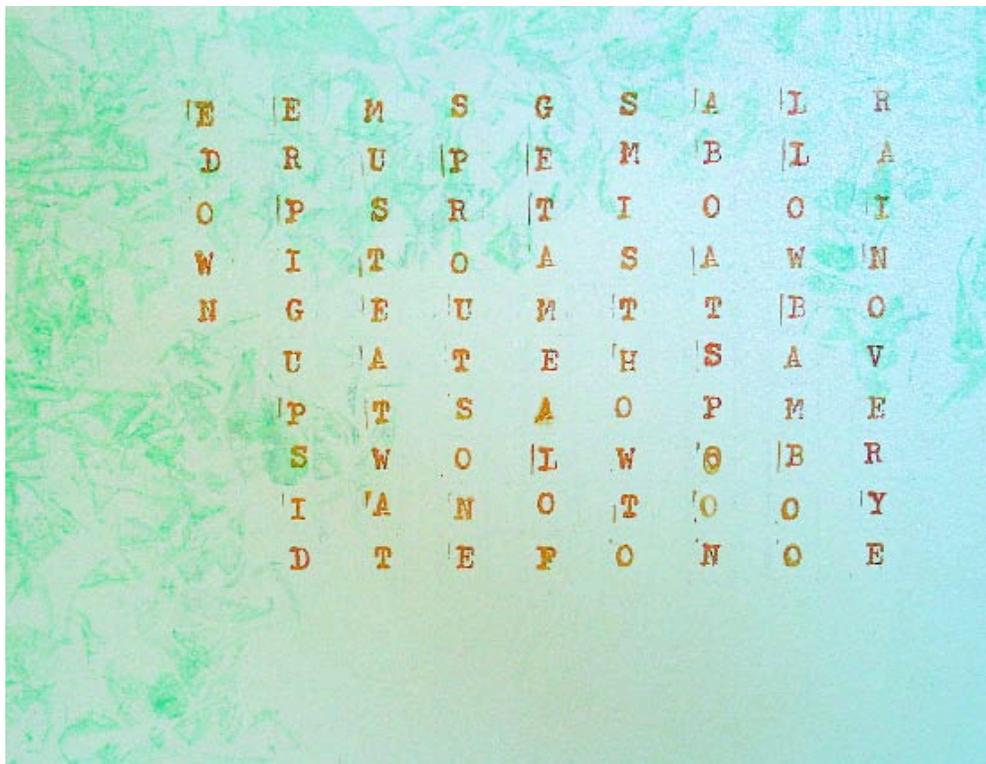
If the Tang dynasty 85s present a stark symmetry, Majzels’s second Chinese series, After Bada Shanren, produces a totally different effect; here, free form is at play. Indeed, there are no boxes around the eighty-five letters; nor are the columns entirely symmetrical. Instead, we have eight columns of ten letters and a dangling ninth of five; the nunim, until now identically angled and positioned, seem to have gone wild, occasionally flying off into blank space, as if unable to contain the letters. Meanwhile, the “seals” containing the Bada Shanren inscriptions, rather than in intaglio, are in relief, black on white, with a barely visible border, and are located differently in each work. Consequently the visual possibilities are multiplied tenfold by the now-dynamic relation of the Hebrew and Chinese characters.

Bada Shanren pushed to the limit the composition of the traditional Chinese work of art. Whereas traditional paintings had often been enriched by inscriptions and seals, these were never quite as integrated into the work as they appear in Bada Shanren. He maintains a heightened tension between calligraphy and painting wherein neither illustrates the other or is one subordinated to the other. The blank spaces in his works are tremendously fertile, sometimes adding perspective, sometimes removing it; the viewer cannot easily identify or distinguish, as in traditional Chinese art, the unpainted, unwritten spaces as water or sky. Bada Shanren uses a highly singular vocabulary and array of techniques. His inscriptions are supremely personal, yet never manifestly autobiographical. He takes liberties with calligraphic styles, even with Chinese characters. His seals often lack borders and contain characters that are commingled in starkly new ways.

Bada Shanren's works are often great puzzles, a proliferation of signifiers that cannot be fully deciphered, even when one takes into account all of their elements: the blank spaces, the brushed and written surfaces, the seals, and of course the poems.

Majzels's fascination with Bada Shanren is evidenced by the large number of 85s he has composed based on his work. Bada Shanren, the seventeenth-century idiosyncratic artist and hermit, has found a kindred spirit in this twenty-first-century Jewish recluse, son of Holocaust survivors, who shares his sense of self-derision and a love-hate relationship with the world of art, not to mention the world itself.

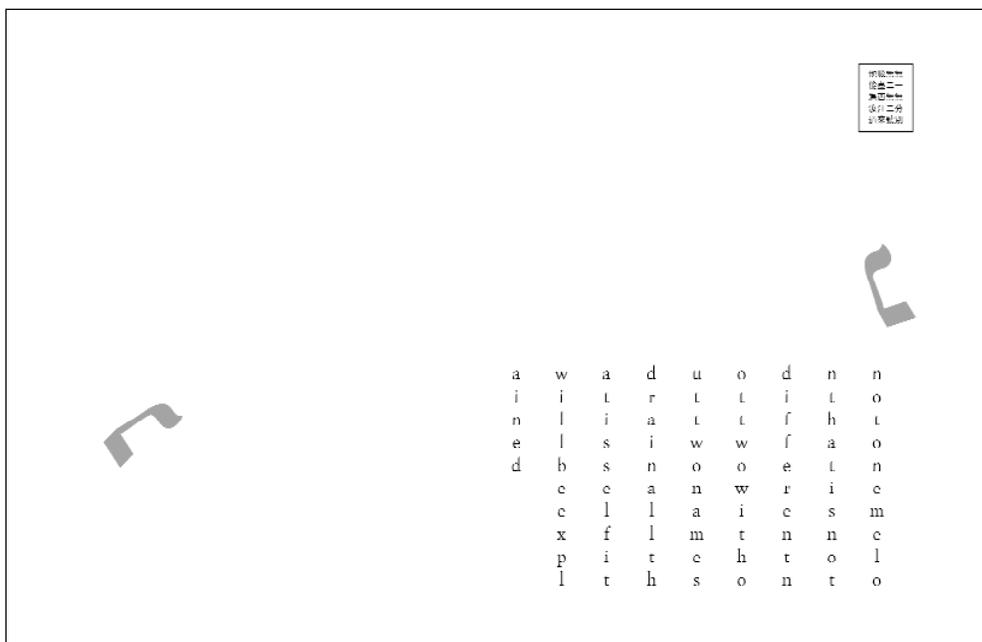
Bada Shanren's repertory of figures is equally surprising, filled with anything but the exotic: common animals and vegetables, which, however, always look a little strange. Cats, birds, fish, or bunnies eye the viewer with a mischievous gleam; melons are manifestly overripe, lotus stems emerge twisted from soft rocks. The apposed texts do not serve to enlighten the reader; mostly they baffle us. We are confronted by a double rebus. Consider, for example, a leaf album entitled *Globefish* wherein the right half is a fish; the left, a poem. The globefish—better known as puffer-fish or blowfish—staring at the viewer is clearly on the verge of puffing up, as it invariably does when threatened. There is something amusing about the fish, almost cartoon-like, but for one who knows that this species is carnivorous and poisonous, the effect is unsettling.



Robert Majzels, *After Bada Shanren, Water Pig in Yellow Bamboo Village*, 2005, ink on paper, 15 x 22 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Majzels maintains the spirit of the rebus: “Rain over Yellow Bamboo a boat spoons mist how to get a meal of sprouts one must eat water pig upside down.” It’s a light statement on the plight of the hungry artist who prefers not to compromise. At the end of this 85, the viewer may sigh, relieved: d-o-w-n points downward, easy to read; but if one backtracks, isn’t it u-p-s-i-d-e-d-o-w-n? Majzels takes liberties with Bada Shanren’s inscriptions. He sometimes also engages with the painting. For example, in the work depicting two misshapen melons in the foreground and with a

top-right inscription, the poem does not mention melons, although it is talking about two of something. Majzels inserts the melons into his 85. In this way, the viewer of the work virtually begets melons as they have been displaced in the 85. In the spirit of Bada Shanren, the mystery around the melons remains.



Robert Majzels, *After Bada Shanren, Misshapen Melons*, 2005, ink on paper, 15 x 22 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The particular play of the five letters—the most common number of letters in an English word—in the shorter last column becomes more apparent when one views all the works of this series together. Sometimes the final word standing alone brings up to the surface an undercurrent in the poem or highlights the tension in a dialectic, the word “fight,” for example, at the end of the phrase, “not to pick a fight.” A number of odd new words seem to be created: “edown,” “dsnow,” “eplow,” “emind,” and the exponentially entertaining “ntain.” Exhibited as a group, these dozen not-quite-square sheets the size of a Chinese album leaf, act as counterpoints to, or stand-ins for, Bada Shanren’s album leaves that inspired them.

The level of engagement with the work depends on the individual viewer’s degree of playfulness. Bada Shanren, himself, is often cryptic and baffling, and yet his work employs what appears to be childlike iconography. In the same spirit, Majzels’s 85 project uses plain, everyday English vocabulary, but the viewer stutters on the most deceptively simple words, the verb “is,” the preposition “at,” the adverbial negation “not,” the personal pronoun “me.”

CONCLUSION: NO SPECIAL EFFECTS

There are no special effects, no pyrotechnics, in the 85 project. On paper or on positive film, the letters—all identical in size and equidistant—are printed in a Figural Book font, known for its legibility, the sort of font one might use in books and magazines. Only black ink is used, the Hebrew letters printed in a lighter tone. In one incarnation, the letters are stencilled or stamped directly on a wall, or paper transfers are used, all in a commonly available font, and without the slightest demonstration of calligraphic or painterly mastery. Just as the texts themselves are emptied of authorial voice, the writing/painting of the 85s does not strive for effect through traditional methods of signification and metaphor: there is no effort at representation, no mimetic use of shapes or arrangement of words to mimic their meaning (an oft-used technique in concrete poetry).

The objective here is to allow the viewer to experience, using the best of his or her own abilities, the possibilities of each work. We are invited to “read” the work, much as we would “read” a work of Chinese calligraphy: we follow the motions—the loops and sweeps, the gentle initiation and abrupt stops of a stroke, a line—gathering information along the way, punctuating, vocalizing in and with our own brea(d)th. In this way, written language—Hebrew letters, Chinese characters, or plain English—is released to endlessly generate meaning, and we are engaged in the act of writing.

Notes

- ¹ For a glimpse at the book, see <http://www.bigbridge.org/rrapikoros.htm>. The cover artwork is by Shanghai artist Xiang Liqing.
- ² Marc-Alain Ouaknin, a French philosopher, discusses rabbinical thinking about the book in his philosophical treatise *Le livre brûlé* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1986).
- ³ Chapter 10:35 and 36 of the Book of Numbers, “Whenever the coffer was to travel . . .” in *The Five Books of Moses. The Schocken Bible: Volume 1*, ed. and transl. by Everett Fox (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1983-95).
- ⁴ Ten of Majzels’s Celan poems have been published as “Books from the Burning Building,” in *NO: A Journal of the Arts* 5 (April 2006), 48-58.
- ⁵ The English translation is by John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 255.
- ⁶ “Your beautiful steps in sandals/Your chain link thighs/Your heap of wheat set in lilies/Purple delight” is gleaned from verses 2–7 of Chapter 7:
 - 2 How beautiful are thy steps in sandals, O prince’s daughter! The roundings of thy thighs are like the links of a chain, the work of the hands of a skilled workman.
 - 3 Thy navel is like a round goblet, wherein no mingled wine is wanting; thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies.
 - 4 Thy two breasts are like two fawns that are twins of a gazelle.
 - 5 Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes as the pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim; thy nose is like the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus.
 - 6 Thy head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thy head like purple; the king is held captive in the tresses thereof.
 - 7 How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!
 Translation by Benyamin Pilant, 1997; see http://www.breslov.com/bible/Song_of_Songs.htm
- ⁷ Abulafia is best known for his triumph over Pope Nicholas III. Having been condemned to death by the Pope, the Rabbi spent the night engrossed in the Cabbalist ritual involving the permutation of the letters of the alphabet. The next morning, it was discovered the Pope had died in the night. Rabbi Nahman, for his part, burned the sole copy of his own master work, arguing against the reification of meaning and books and for the need to always make way for new texts. Majzels has created a performance based on Abulafia’s technique; the text (unpublished) is entitled “alphABetiCal tError.” For Rabbi Nahman’s conception of the book, see Ouaknin, *Le Livre brûlé*.
- ⁸ In Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 101.
- ⁹ Ouaknin, 394.
- ¹⁰ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).
- ¹¹ For a well-rounded account of the magic origins and lasting aura of Chinese writing, see Jonathan Chaves, “The Legacy of Ts’ang Chieh: The Written Word as Magic,” in *Oriental Art* 23, no. 2 (summer 1977), 200–15.
- ¹² J. J. M. De Groot, cited in Chaves, 209.
- ¹³ Handelman, 88.
- ¹⁴ François Cheng, *L’Écriture poétique chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).
- ¹⁵ Wang Fangyu, Richard M. Barnhart, Judith G. Smith, eds., *Master of the Lotus Garden: The Life and Art of Bada Shanren (1626–1705)* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1991).
- ¹⁶ F. W. Mote, “A Millenium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow,” *Rice University Studies* 59, no. 4 (1973). Quoted in French by Simon Leys in *L’Humeur, l’honneur, l’horreur* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1991), 46.
- ¹⁷ Some of these 85s were initially stencilled as single works directly on walls for a totally different effect. See figure 2, a stencil with Chinese scarlet pigment of “After Li He, Li Ping Plays the Konghou.”
- ¹⁸ To reorient you, here is the 85 divided into words :
desolation mountain/faint echo of human voices/dusk shadows in a deep forest/a last green glint of moss
- ¹⁹ Compare Majzels’s version with the following translation by C. J. Chen and Michael Bullock, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, Cyril Birch, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 220–21: “On the lonely mountain/I meet no one, /I hear only the echo/of human voices. /At an angle the sun’s rays/enter the depths of the wood, /And shine/upon the green moss.”
- ²⁰ Leaf C, Globefish, from *Fish, Lotus, Globefish, and Bamboo* (1689). The Chinese poem is transcribed on 103, and explicated on 104, in *Master of the Lotus Garden*.
- ²¹ See photographs of different incarnations of the work. In figures 5 and 6, the 85 was stamped on a kitchen wall; in figure 7, works from this series were produced in ink on positive film for *Vispo! Blends and Bridges*, a visual poetry group exhibition in Cleveland, Ohio, in April 2006. In this medium the black letters seem to float in space.
- ²² Melons with inscriptions, Leaf A, *Flower Studies* (1659–60), *Master of the Lotus Garden*, 43. The poem is transcribed and explained on 83.
- ²³ Having said this, I should note that Moveable Inc., a Toronto-based typographer, has provided invaluable technical support since the inception of the 85 project.