

INHABITED 1 SPACES

Outside the margin

In the first of a six-part series 'Inhabited spaces', Alice Angus presents artists' perspectives on language and its relationship to place.

BOOKS ARE GOOD TRAVELLING COMPANIONS. People often take books that are somehow related to their journey or destination; *Invisible Cities* to Venice, and so on. In the hope of finding some unique insight I used to try it the other way round – say take Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey* to Cornwall – but mostly it's confusing. Reading in a place, like drawing, connects us to that place and I remember the places I read books in, the qualities of those places and the new relationship I formed with them through reading.

Artists working with the written word are as concerned with its physical sculptural attributes as with its inherent meaning and often disrupt the form and structure of text, stretching its limits to offer new perspectives on language and its relationship to place. Recently there have been a number of projects where artists are extending the spaces for reading and writing outside the gallery. Some seek to embody text with an independence from the page. Some create new systems and forms of language whilst others connect diverse voices to map new ideas and open up new avenues for discourse.

Simon Pope's book *London Walking: a handbook for survival*, with its "70 unhelpful illustrations" and guide-book-meets-survival-manual-text, confronts contested spaces and non places revealing invisible or forgotten knowledge through discussion of subjects such as navigation, the underpass and the anatomy of the pavement. Pope's numerous historical and contemporary references reflect a diversity of voices and perspectives on urban space. It excavates the historical and cultural strata of the city sketching unorthodox maps of urban experience. This section on 'directional walking' illustrates the richness of the text as we encounter Thoreau, Pevsner and Peabody on our journey; "Thoreau preferred to walk west. It is one of life's conundrums that wherever you live, the rich always live in the west. Dr Pevsner alludes to this (Macinnes, 1996: p126) when noting that George Peabody's statue at the Royal Exchange faces west away from the poor whom he helped to rehouse."

In a similar way Pope's collaboration with Mark Greco *Ice Cream For Everyone (ICE)* (an internet work that gathers lost ice cream recipes) reveals the social histories of food and examines ways that cultures of food (handing down of recipes, etc) and technology can learn from each other. *ICE* is engaging because it exploits what is left of the amorphous space of the internet – the fluidity of structure and the relative freedom from traditional categorisations of artistic practice. I enjoy both works' dispersed meandering conversations with



place and memory. They offer so many things that civic monuments fail to – the sense of belonging and motivation to participate that are the essence of citizenship. *London Walking* and *ICE* utilise subtle strategies that connect bodies of knowledge, people and geography.

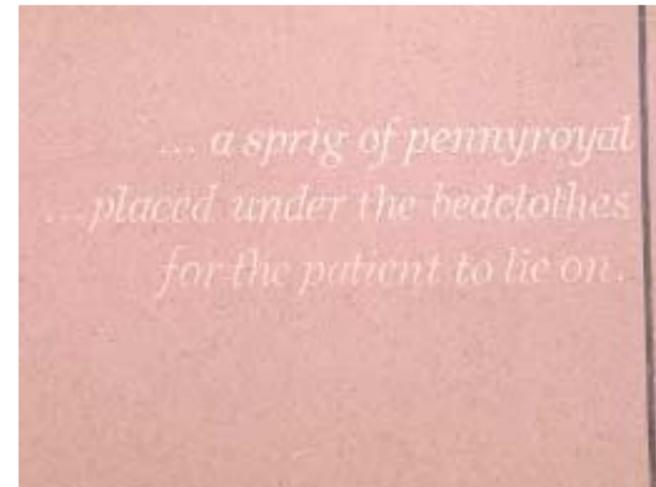
These works are compelling because they inhabit an 'in between', liminal space that illustrates the

growing fluidity between artist's practices. There are increasing examples of artists (looking to define new destinies and social significance for their work) initiating projects that establish new contexts and new sites for working.

Through her many site-specific and gallery-based projects Susan Brind has opened up areas of practice that traverse both. Her recent commission for the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine *bad air [mal'aria]* (2001) is significant because it is relatively unusual that a non-art institution would choose so physically subtle a project for a permanent commission. In *bad air [mal'aria]* fragments of historical texts that map associations across time tell experiences of the "delirious mind and fever'd body"², illuminating tensions between the logic of medicine and emotional reasoning, the body and the institution. To read the text one has to come close to the two-inch-high letters. It is difficult to read the long sentences from a distance so you have to walk along the sentence and when you reach the end you have lost sight of the beginning. In this way the narratives seem to come in and out of focus as if in a dream.

Gair Dunlop also uses juxtapositions of text and forms of writing from different historical and social circumstances to make new propositions. In works such as *Index*, *Utopia* and *Languageland* he uses language to create avenues for people to engage in dialogue. Through a combination of writing, text works, residencies and work with young people in rural Scotland he; "...has developed innovative ways of working with people in action research (projects), that furthers knowledge of lived experiences of environments, both natural and built"³. In a recent publication, *Keep Focus*, he suggests that self-image and self-determination may change as artistic practice and media production become more fluid.

A number of Dunlop's works address romantic traditions of place and heritage presenting combinations of text, still and moving images to build "labyrinthine series of propositions about the ideal place". His combinations of words weave social and



Opposite page: Simon Pope, *London Walking: a handbook for survival*, 2000. Illustrations by Claudia Schenk. This page top: Gair Dunlop, *Index* (detail), 2002. Commissioned by Meadow Gallery. Middle left & right: Susan Brind, *bad air [mal'aria]*, permanent installation at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2001. Photo: Gary Kirkham. Bottom: Jill Henderson, drawings from the Brewster Project, 2002.

historical maps drawing new connections to the sites in which he works. His use of text relates back to the form of the printed word in scale and style and he uses unfamiliar presentations to offer unexpected perspectives. His recent Meadow Gallery commission, *Index*, includes texts from landscape writers of the 1700s and 1800s in the form of contemporary horticultural signs distributed around Burford House Gardens, Shropshire.

In a similar way Jill Henderson's development of public works locates her in a process of dialogue. Her work attempts to expose imbalances between space and the human presence that inhabits it. She recently drew cartoons and wrote on the walls of an alleyway that acted as a hangout for day labourers, in Brewster, USA. Henderson used large handwriting reminiscent of notes and messages to create signs such as *Trouble: One Way, Paradise: One Way, Stop and Talk to me*. The drawings and messages prompted conversations between the people in the alley and Henderson. She used the project to talk – but to whom, and why? Her motives are unclear but I like the ambiguity of the work and recognise that it is a moment in a process of dialogue that is part of a larger, less visible process. The majority of Henderson's work is gallery-based and these large-scale wall drawings illustrate an interest in locating new sites and relationships.

Artists' use of text and language is a rich and fluid area with practitioners initiating a combination of gallery and non-gallery projects such as in the work of Slovenian artist Vuk Cosic, whose text-based works are experiments with ASCII computer code. (Introduced in 1963 ASCII changed relationships between humans and computers by creating a bridge between creative thought and binary logic through using the familiar characters on a key-

board). Most of his work is online and could be seen as a marginal 'technology orientated' activity. Yet the work has a wider significance in its interrogation of the structure of language and the issues it raises about technology development.

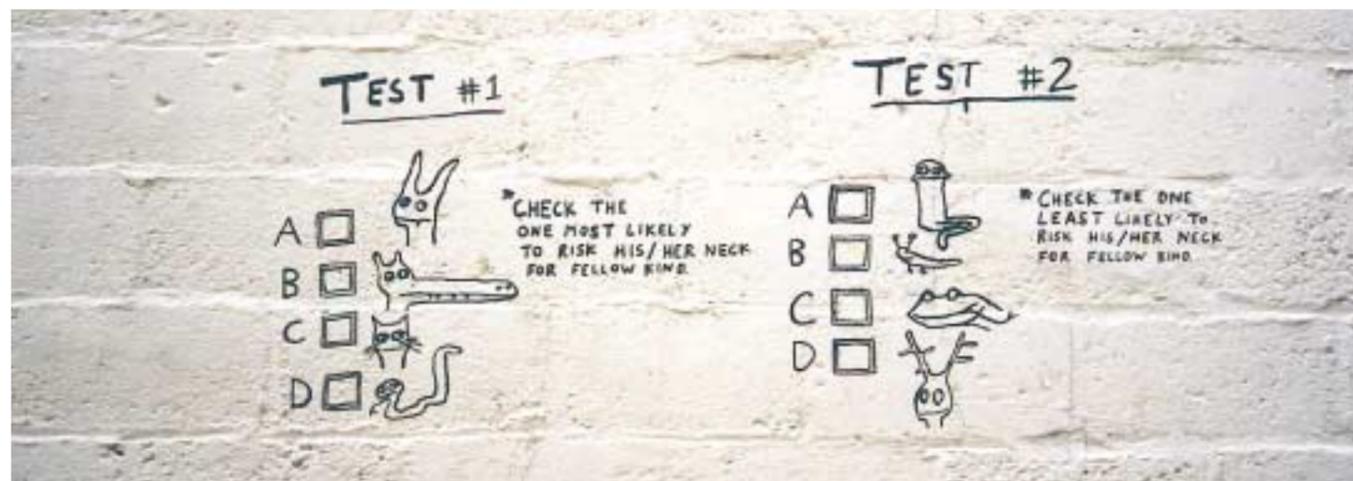
His *ASCII Architecture* (2000) was a projection onto the huge façade of Liverpool's St George's Hall of an ASCII code representation of the building itself. As it shivered over the Neo-classical civic building (that watches over Liverpool, a testament to past indus-



trialisation and social change) the text seemed to represent the space between familiar and unfamiliar languages revealing a hidden language of technological change.

Large-scale projection is not representative of Cosic's work, as public wall drawing is not of Henderson's. What is it that draws artists to project large-scale text onto public buildings, to embody the words human scale? Is it because the act of projecting onto a civic building draws the work into a major public site? It lifts the work off the screen and out of the gallery into a wider social discourse. A link might be drawn between this and Charles Sandison's *Bloody Maundy Thursday* (forthcoming

2003), a night-time projection onto the classical architecture of Tampere Town Hall, Finland (site of a battle between the communists and nationalists during the Finnish Civil War). The projection is of the words 'red' and 'white', moving backwards, forwards, up and down, following the architecture of the building; red on one side, white on the other. Sometimes they meet and white turns red and vice versa. Enlivened by an 'artificial life' computer programme similar to those that simulate the attack of a virus, the words jostle for supremacy of the building. In creating artificial life programmes Sandison must create rules for the words' behaviour – a grammar. It is a pared down minimal grammatical language unlike any grammatical structure known, almost as if he set to make a machine that could 'do writing' and through a process of accident and random chance made a machine for 'not writing'. This reminds me of Xu Bing's creation of linguistic systems through changing the physical shape of characters. He finds new spaces in which to challenge understandings of 'language' (working in galleries, on performances and in non-gallery sites such as libraries) as well as subverting the form of language itself. His work uses text and disrupted forms of language including non-existent Chinese characters and his ongoing system of New English Calligraphy – a language of words composed of Roman letters in shapes reminiscent of Chinese characters. The *Tobacco Projects* (2001) (in the libraries and Tobacco Museum of Duke University, Durham, USA) interrogated the relationship between China and the tobacco products of the Duke family using historical and narrative texts in Chinese, English and his own systems of writing. They were in neon, print, on cigarette paper, on cigarettes, and sheets of tobacco leaves. Placing



Opposite page top: Xu Bing, *Tobacco Project* (detail), 2001. Middle: Jill Henderson, drawings from the *Brewster Project*, 2002. Bottom: Aaron Williamson, *Phantom Shifts, Performance Notations*, 2000. *Diffusion eBook* commissioned by Proboscis. This page above: Charles Sandison, *Bloody Maundy Thursday*, work in progress.

experimental text works such as these in the familiar environment of public libraries can make them more 'accessible' without diluting the intellectual rigour of the work.

All these approaches suggest a concern with new forms of language and ways of reading as well as, in the case of *ASCII Architecture* and *Bloody Maundy Thursday*, a linguistic relationship between humans and computers. These concerns are central to the work of Dan Norton who has been introducing text into the liquid space of his ongoing project *abl* – an online, interactive, visual and sonic work. Words and phrases inhabit the screen as a series of dismembered fragments. His *logo generating machine* represents a move towards finding methods to develop a system for writing that can be read into and through, rather than across and down. He is interested in what happens to the written word when released from the gravity of the page.

There are no technical or conceptual explanations of the work and you navigate it through processes of trial and discovery. This anonymity is what sets this work apart from many web-based projects – its apparent lack of authorship. There is no provenance to the text and in that sense it has no 'authority'. Its existence poses questions on the impact that new technologies of communication have on the potential for language. Developments in technologies of communication suggest new potential for dispersal of text-based works. *Diffusion* downloadable eBooks and *the-phone-book.com*, developed by Giles Lane with designer Paul Farrington, offer opportunities for writers and artists to connect with audiences beyond their reach. *Diffusion* consists of free publications designed for readers to download, print out and make into books bypassing typical distribution problems allowing small artist's books to be published and distributed worldwide. It shifts conventions of interactivity away from the screen and blurs distinctions between producer and consumer of knowledge. *The-phone-book.com* is an internet and wireless technology publishing initiative that commissions short fiction to be read in a variety of

formats; from a mobile phone screen, to PDA (Personal Digital Assistance) or website. It has enabled people to find new sites for their work and encouraged artists to explore the impact new modes of delivery will have on the experience of reading.

In one way or another all of the projects discussed push the boundaries of text-based work. Several of the works fall between visual arts and writing disrupting the form and structure of language. These artists work with language in several different ways; bringing together diverse voices to map new ideas; creating new perspectives through unusual juxtapositions; producing new forms, systems and structures for language; exploring connections between machine and human languages and challenging ways of reading. There is in these works intangibility and ambiguity, conflict and disruption in the normal pattern of language, they release words from the page and they open up new dialogues extending the parameters within which to experiment with language.

In *The River of Words*, by Donald Bissett, the river is flowing to the storybook sea and decides to write a story:

"I know", said the river, "Let's write a story!... Once upon a time..."

"Hooray!" shouted all the other words, "That's the way to begin a story. Now what comes next?"

The river makes a tale about itself, inside another story about writing a story about an otter that swims in the river and mixes up all the words and the story within the story has to begin again. Like dreams within dreams you never quite know whose story is being told. The tale folds and twists, comes apart and reforms, story within story about the making of a story, the arranging of words, and the words flow out of the book and off to a life of their own.⁴ Now, what comes next when the words escape the story?

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¹ Simon Pope, *London Walking: a handbook for survival*, Ellipsis (BT Batsford), 2000.

² Interpretative brochure on the commission, London School of Hygiene and Medicine, 2002.

³ Jan Marontate, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Acadia University, Nova Scotia, Canada.

⁴ Donald Bissett, *The River of Words*, from *Time and Again Stories*, Puffin Books, 1973.

Further information:

London Walking [a-n] MAGAZINE has 6 copies of Simon Pope's book to give away, see Subscribers' pages for details.

Ice Cream for Everyone <http://bak.spc.org/ice/>
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine www.lshtm.ac.uk/art

Gair Dunlop www.gairspace.org.uk; *Index* was commissioned by the Meadow Gallery www.meadowgallery.co.uk; *Utopia* can be seen at www.mediascot.org/host/utopia; *Keep Focus*, is a *Diffusion* downloadable eBook available from www.diffusion.org.uk

Brewster Project www.brewsterproject.com

Vuk Cosic www.ljudmila.org/~vuk

Tobacco Project www.duke.edu/web/cis/tobacco/main.html

Xu Bing www.xubing.com

Dan Norton *abl* www.ablab.org

Diffusion www.diffusion.org.uk

the-phone-book.com www.the-phone-book.com

'Inhabited spaces' is devised and commissioned by Deborah Smith in collaboration with [a-n] MAGAZINE. The series compliments and enhances existing editorial taking us on a journey through innovative practice exploring definitions and reinventions of our ideas of expression, looking at the shifts in language and discourses of art. In the November issue Sally O'Reilly discovers the rules of the game! Deborah Smith is an independent curator and co-director of smith + fowle.