



ANNA BARHAM

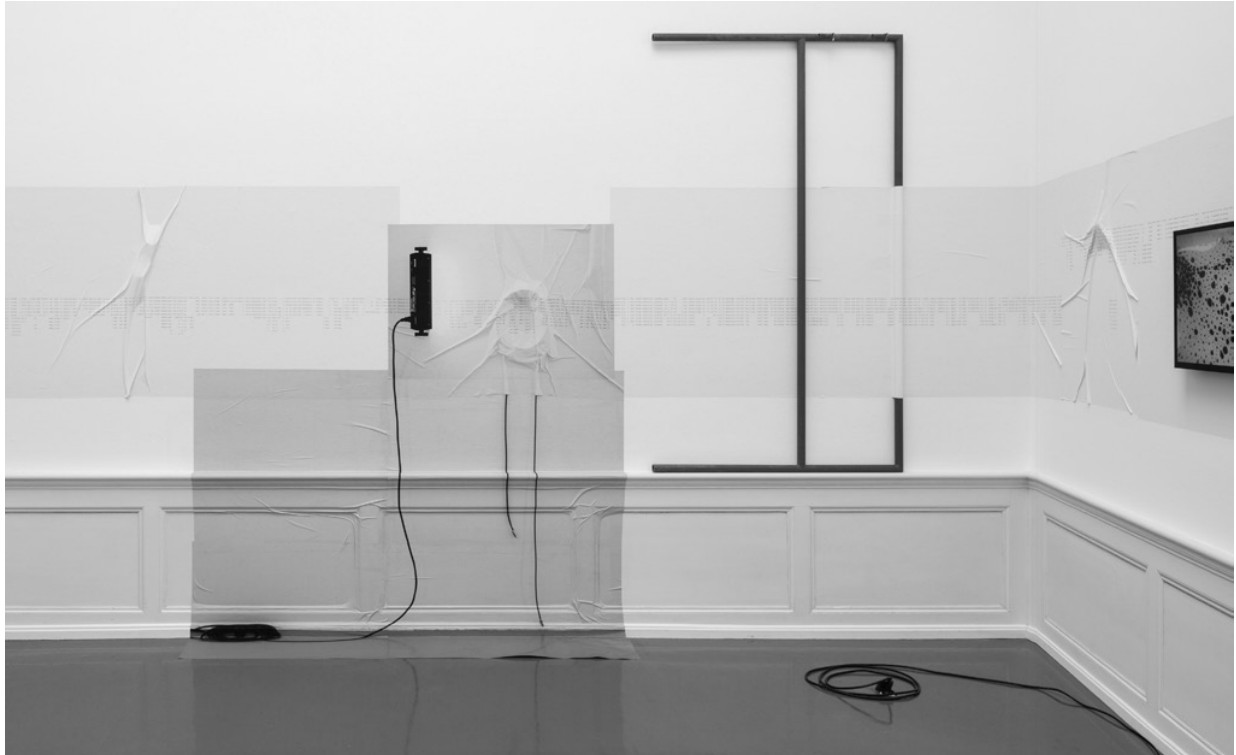
SELECTED TEXTS & PRESS

2010-2026

# Disfluency

The London-based artist, who works with sound, video and installation, discusses the importance of mishearing in creating and communicating meaning, and of using speech-to-text software to reveal the true complexity of speech and language.

Anna Barham interviewed by Lizzie Lloyd



*Out of the gravel, 2022/26, installation view*

**Lizzie Lloyd:** You recently opened a major show in Badischer Kunstverein in Karlsruhe called ‘delirious mantra’, which is such a great title – where did it come from?

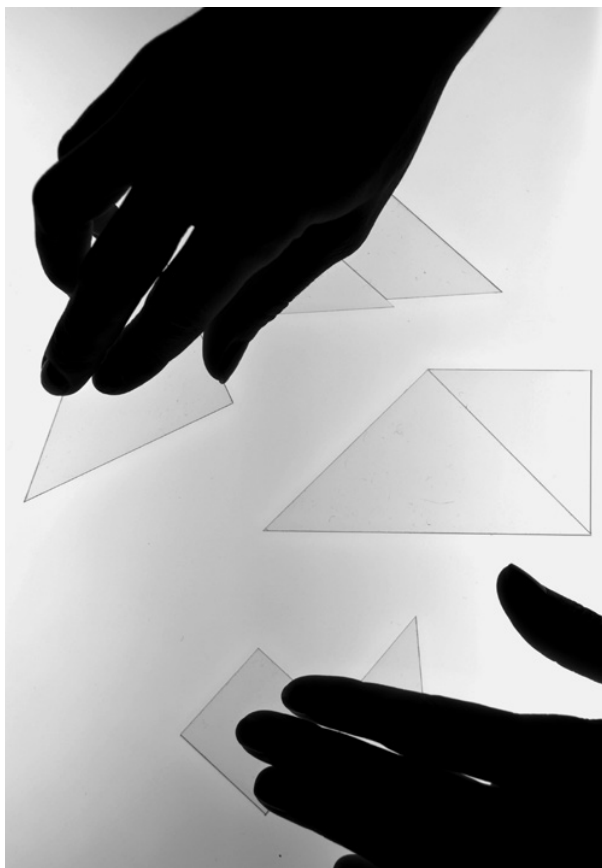
**Anna Barham:** It’s from the audio work *ZYX, 2026*. One of the stories in the work is about reciting the alphabet backwards, as a mantra of sorts, a way to regulate an experience. I also used some passages from the end of Gustave Flaubert’s 1874 prose poem *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, which describe St Anthony hallucinating in the desert and his desire to dissolve and ‘be in’ everything. I don’t use these texts in a straightforward way though. My writing process uses repeated vocalisation and transcription to make versions of an original, which I edit with numerous versions of other texts, and then revocalise and transcribe again. I have come to think of this process as a way of thinking through mishearing. Eventually I arrived at the phrase ‘Anthony delirious mantra chorusing through the grass’. It’s a mash-up of the various sources but it’s the nature of my process that I don’t know where the phrase comes from precisely.

**Your process inherently questions the myth of origination – this logic is also behind your show ‘delirious mantra’, which includes work from the past 17 years. It isn’t arranged in a linear chronology, like its title, it is a ‘mash-up’ or reconstitution**

**of your work in which you embed previous documentation into the new installations so that it becomes a living archive.**

Yes, *Out of the gravel, 2022/26*, is a wallpapered ‘score’ with objects – cables, microphones, headphones and so on – caught in between the paper and the wall. I also incorporated documentation of a previous installation of the same score so that sometimes you are looking at the lumps and buckling of the paper from actual objects and sometimes an image of them, like a *trompe l’oeil*. The same thing happens with lights and video screens that are fixed to the wall over the scores. Features of the photographed architecture and its fittings, like a window and a fire alarm, get superimposed and entangled with the actual architecture, so there is all this doubling going on.

It’s the first time I have shown different bodies of work together but, rather than view it as a retrospective or chronologically ordered show, I wanted to put the newest work *ZYX, 2026*, at the centre and to build everything else around it. The first work you encounter is *Magenta Emerald Lapis* of 2009, which establishes the idea of language as a malleable material, quite literally – it’s a silent film of my hands over a lightbox making letters out of geometric tiles. It also introduces a kind of compulsive relationship to the alphabet which is picked up in *ZYX*. Other works unfold from this idea but with a focus on language as sound.



*Magenta Emerald Lapis, 2009, video*

**You have a long-term interest in the voice as another related material, how did this come about?**

About 15 years ago I began to read texts I had written from anagrams out loud. The constraints of the repeating syllables and phrasing meant they had a rhythmic quality. There was something so physical in the slight tongue-twisting nature of the overlaps and repetitions that made me acutely aware of the intricate muscular movements involved in speech. I became fascinated by our ability to make such a range of nuanced sounds with this muscular, fleshy part of our bodies that we also use for other things like eating, kissing and so on. A bit later I read a theory that when we hear speech, we don't interpret the sound itself as language but rather our brains predict what muscular movements we would have to make to produce the sound – it is those imagined movements in our own mouths that we understand. I don't think the theory is universally accepted but I found it so interesting, the idea that meaning is as much about the way a body produces the sound as it is about the sound itself.

**In the past decade or so you have repeatedly worked through a process of exploring the transmission of human voice to machine through speech-to-text software. Why has this resonated for you?**

Around 2013 I had just started making work about the sound of the voice, and about how sound produces meaning, when speech-to-text took a leap forward and became available on iPhones. I began reading part of an essay by my friend Bridget Crone into my phone. She imagines cleaning a squid over a piece of newspaper, and how all the ink and guts change the shape of the words. My phone made really skewed transcriptions – it could never grasp the word squid, for example, it suggested loose homophones which I found so compelling. These speculative 'mishearings' opened new meanings that I didn't think of as mistakes but as ways of generating language, new readings.

As the software has developed it has gone from fantastic fabulation, through a period of conservative omission, to a kind of smoothness. There are fewer obvious mishearings, but it now tidies speech up, eliding repetitions, trimming hesitations, removing self-repairs. Speech-to-text is based on probability, so it tends towards the standard, the normal, the already said. Its evolution reveals a lot about the ideas and assumptions underlying its development, about which voices and which languages count, which accents are legible, what forms of speech are worth recognising. But at the same time, I felt it could be redirected to reveal the complexity and friction of speech – what I've called the materiality of the voice. I'm not so interested in the technology itself, but in what it reveals about language, embodiment and meaning.

**One method that you have developed that disrupts speech-to-text software is your participatory reading groups. These bring people together who read aloud extracts of texts you have chosen. Their readings are then transcribed and re-read, generating a new transcription in a kind of increasingly kaleidoscopic feedback loop.**

I started the group readings to stop the speech-to-text on my phone or computer from learning my voice. I realised that by getting other people to read, one after another, I could put a spanner in the works. It was such a joy to hear other people doing something I had previously done alone, interpreting the transcriptions and finding meanings in the text in real time and out loud, following its sounds, rhythms and associations rather than trying to recover an original sense.

Initially I used song lyrics – I was interested in them as words that are already shared, collective, embodied. Then I started collecting passages from books I was reading, things that spoke to the process somehow, about liveness, transformation, porosity, boundaries, listening, language, repetition, mimicry, hallucination ... Reading them aloud is also about sharing texts that I love, cutting and splicing them with each other and then allowing the different readers' voices to distort them.

**You have talked about these groups as effecting a kind of 'distributed authorship' through performance and participation. How important is the act of participation and how much is it a means to an end?**

**Each reader re-authors the text in the act of reading, and I was fascinated by the way agency was distributed within a group and between human and machine.**

Each reader re-authors the text in the act of reading, and I was fascinated by the way agency was distributed within a group and between human and machine. Collective listening also becomes a form of authorship – the dynamic of the group has a big impact on how themes ebb and flow, what people emphasise in their readings, or not. Meaning is being made in real time through those shifts rather than simply transmitted.

While I was doing these groups, between 2014 and 2019, they were completely about the participation, about the event itself. But through them I amassed a huge volume of ‘versions’ of the different texts, and subsequently I used these to write from. It’s a way of writing through other people’s words and voices, not only the identifiable voices of the original authors and the readers, but also the innumerable and unidentifiable voices aggregated by the speech-to-text algorithms.

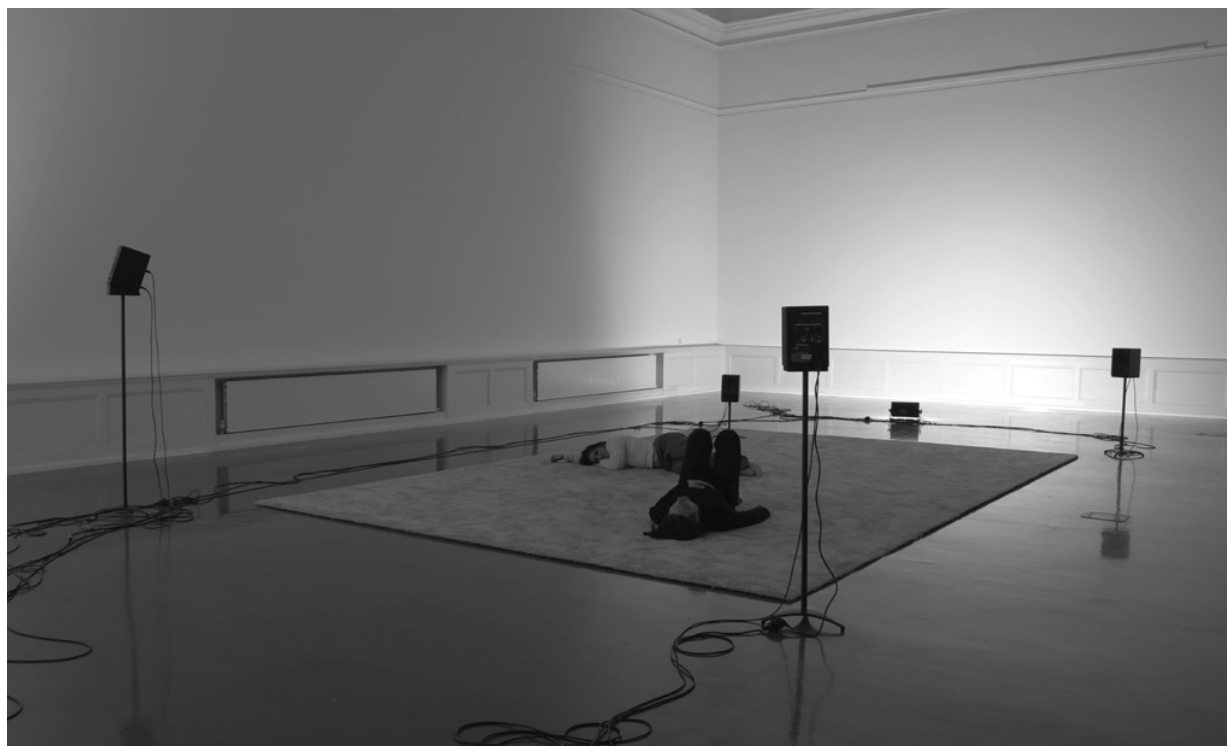
**And these transcriptions, which you call scores, became the impetus for your wallpaper works, whereby different transcriptions of the same text are presented in columns giving viewers a sense of the dissolving of the text as the transcribed reading gets further away from the ‘original’.**

I wanted to understand how the texts had evolved through the many readings, so I developed a way of formatting the transcriptions. I created very wide documents, placing the original text we had read on one line and aligning the different transcriptions underneath. I teased the syllables and letters apart so the sounds of the different versions lined up vertically. A paragraph would be, say, 2m across at a readable scale. This made them hard to view on a computer screen, so I printed them out on large-format sheets. Initially, I folded them like maps to make them manageable, but then I began pasting them directly to the wall to be able to see them all at once.

**And here again you push this to an extreme, pasting your expanded scores across windows, around corners, over architraves, architectural mouldings and so on ...**

By presenting the scores on the architecture, the viewer’s body becomes implicated in reading the text: moving around the space and choosing to read more in columns or clusters or however you might navigate a space, not really left to right like we read a page of English text. By installing the transcriptions in this way, they resist being skimmed or mastered. There is this constant reconfiguring, reinterpretation and editing, and the architecture also reconfigures and restructures the text. A corner becomes a paragraph break or a page break. A light switch or some architrave make graphic textual structures, punctuating the text. Later, I started embedding objects behind the paper and installing screens and lights on top of the paper to further this punctuation and annotation.

There is also something about interruption here because your scores are always puckered as you paste them over these unsmooth surfaces. It feels like there is visual disfluency happening here that echoes the oral disfluency that you’re interested in, perhaps for slightly different reasons. Oral disfluency pushes against standards of ‘effective’ communication that favour clarity, structure, focus, coherence. The kind of technology you are using has become more accurate but it still misunderstands speech – especially language that is accented or deviates from the ‘normative’. Elsewhere, you have discussed this in terms of a critique of technologies that ‘reduce language to a standardised, friction-free form’. We’re taught that accepted forms of communication should flow and ‘make sense’, but you’re interested in a re-evaluation of disfluency that embraces the ‘nonsensical’, right?



ZYX, 2026, five-channel audio



*Out of the gravel, 2022/26, installation view*

Yes – disfluency is a product or condition of live speech, of how someone feels in relation to what they are saying, the situation they are in, how their thought is unfolding and transforming as they speak, how they feel it's being received or understood. Disfluencies have traditionally been seen by linguists as botched performance or meaningless noise, to be omitted or censored, but they hold so much information and expression about relationships. The normative standard of 'effective' communication, as you say, doesn't reflect how a thought happens, I don't think – not for me, and I'm sure not for many people. It's something more like a bottleneck of ideas, impressions, connections, which are plural, not all fully formed – but that is somehow derided or dismissed. For me, disfluency and mishearing are closely related; they both expose how meaning is made in real time, through the body, rather than pre-existing in language.

I think of Anne Carson's description in *The Gender of Sound*: 'Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside projected to the outside. The censorship of such projections is the task of patriarchal culture that ... divides humanity into two species: those who can censor themselves and those who cannot.' I'm interested in these projections – moments where speech doesn't quite make sense, where it becomes excessive, disfluent or nonsensical, but still carries meaning.

**There is a strong sense of this orthodoxy, or notions of acceptable communication, being dictated by the political and social conditions of power. Who gets to speak? Who listens? And what's worth listening to?**

Yes, absolutely. I think disfluencies reveal some of these power structures, how you feel you are positioned within them, what Gayatri Spivak describes as 'the sub-individual force-fields of being which click into place in different situations'.

Disfluencies very clearly reflect what someone feels and how they think. I have read recent research suggesting that when you use filler words – sounds like 'um' and 'er' – it's partly because your brain is gearing up towards a new concept that you are maybe slightly unfamiliar with, but it also communicates that intention to the other person so they can prepare to travel with you. And all the clarifications – self repairs – the things you can leave trailing when you feel someone understands what you mean, are like a kind of negotiation. A beautiful dance, if you're really tuned in to each other.

**You have talked about hallucination as method, relating to the idea of excess or the nonsensical. I felt it strongly in *ZYX*, which you described earlier as the centrepiece of your show in Germany. It figures your voice – narrating a situation of sorts – which is embedded in a landscape of field recordings of recognisable sounds (water, birds, an aeroplane). There is a sense of a subject embedded in an environment in this piece where, as a listener, you have no idea what is real and what is imagined.**

In *ZYX* I was interested in how sound can produce images. Some of the images are created by words, of course, but lots are conjured by the recorded sounds. I made *ZYX* over several years. The first part was the

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script that I wrote from lots of versions of different texts that I had generated with speech-to-text. I made an audio filter to emphasise all the non-verbal parts of my speech and acoustic environment in an attempt to make the software 'hallucinate'. And with all this material I wrote about different types of hallucination – as a part of normal perception, because of bereavement, and in relation to speech-to-text – all framed through a story of a psychedelic experience (the 'narrated situation', I like the way you described that). The speaking of the alphabet backwards is part of that narration, a way that the speaker regulated the experience 'to keep time flowing'. I performed it at 60bpm, and it appears with recordings of a clock and heartbeat. I wanted to give the whole piece that beat and to give the feeling of time being produced in a body, through the pumping of the heart and the production of speech.

ZYX is a five-channel work and it's installed and spatialised to give the listener quite a disorienting experience of scale, of inside and outside, of what is real and what is imagined. For instance, the whole space becomes the heart – so a body – but also contains large exterior sounds like a plane flying overhead or the sound of the seabed. Some of the sounds in the piece – the plane, for instance – were mistakenly captured when I was trying to record something else. They're another type of generative error and, together with mishearing, they form a compositional method that shapes both the text and the listener's experience of it.

**I was surprised by how personal and emotionally touching this work feels.**

A more emotional element in my work has been emerging gradually over the past few years, but it's deliberate in ZYX, which uses some personal recollections and autobiographical details quite explicitly. I think the first work in which I tried to convey a sustained emotion or mood in a spoken piece was called *undone in the face*, 2020. It begins with a section based on a passage by Judith Butler about how 'we're undone by each other', and how clearly grief and desire reveal that.

To make ZYX I used my own recollections speaking 'live' into the machine (as well as reading found materials), and I think the quality of that – the 'thinking aloudness' of it – even though it's been through lots of processes, lots of 'mashing up', something of that quality persists that makes the emotional content more direct. It's in the delivery too – I deliberately 'act' the lines to carry the listener through all the cuts, the slips and shifting syntax, to allow them to register as felt material.

**So perhaps that slightly more direct emotional resonance was inevitable, where the mouth was a more spontaneous conduit for the internal world to be externalised.**

Language is this strange collective thing: you speak through it, but it also speaks through you. It's this shared thing, but it's the only thing you have to

express what's inside you, the illusion – perhaps? – of individuality. It's a pivot between inside and outside, but also something of a barrier because, in my mind, it's not really describing reality, it's only a surface that we might hope to make sufficiently the right shape to correspond to something that we are feeling, something that we 'mean'. Another of the texts I used to write ZYX from was a talk by Anil Seth, a neuroscientist who describes perception as controlled hallucination. He says we don't see the world as it objectively is, rather we receive sensory input and then make a best guess prediction of what the source of that input could be. For him, even our sense of self is a hallucination. I think I'm trying to always have some quality of this indeterminacy in what I make. I think what interests me about hallucination is the feeling of belief – it's not detached, it isn't necessarily conscious of itself as an 'error', it feels real. Mishearing follows a similar logic and becomes a method of speculation, not an error or glitch.

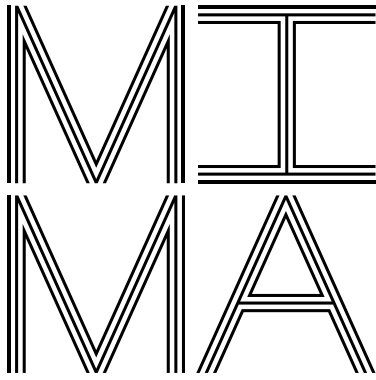
**The nature of this speculation seems to be predicated on the generative possibilities at play when systems of knowledge, understanding or belief pass between different bodies, media or visual and sonic registers. You use microphones, headphones and cables, but also lights and scanners, not only as tools to make your work but also as legible objects or motifs that are visually and physically embedded in your work. As forms of interface, we trust that these tools are designed to enable connection and communication, but the way in which you use them makes us much more aware of their potential for disruption, friction and fabrication.**

Yes, I think of them not just as tools that transmit information, but as interfaces in an expanded sense – sites where something is produced, transformed or even fabricated. In that sense, systems of knowledge or belief are also interfaces, shaping how something is received, interpreted and made meaningful. I'm interested in the frictions that occur as things pass through these interfaces – errors, distortions, mishearings – not as failures, but as points where the process becomes visible. They interrupt the idea of seamless transmission and expose how meaning is made: contingently, relationally, through bodies and systems rather than simply passed along.

That sense of indeterminacy also extends to the formation of the self – not as something fixed or prior, but as something that emerges through continual mishearing: as language is spoken, heard and transformed in relation to context.

**Anna Barham** is an artist based in London. Her exhibition 'delirious mantra' at Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe continues until 14 June and 'ZYX' is at Matt's Gallery, London to 28 June. She is also part of the group show 'the fillers the arms and the eyes in the eyes', Arcade, London to 4 July.

**Lizzie Lloyd** is a Bristol-based writer and senior lecturer in Fine Art at UWE Bristol.



## Anna Barham

### Hearing from Artists

*Anna Barham's practice comprises writing, video, drawing, sculpture and performance. She examines the relationship between language, the body and technologies and uses repeated patterns, rules and systems. Anna lives and works in London. She is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator in May 2020.*

#### **HW: How do relationships between language, body and technology manifest in your practice?**

AB: I'm interested in language as a way that we, as bodies, make 'sense'. How it is that we can articulate and express ourselves and communicate with other bodies? I'm fascinated by the materiality of this communication, of language as a whole. I'm interested in how it might act on us in a way that physical things do, like heat or pressure, or how it affects us, shapes us, reveals the blurriness of our boundaries.

Language, body and technology are endlessly entangled, continually forming and reforming each other. To think through these shifting focuses and relationships I manipulate the materiality of the different technologies of language. Those technologies include our vocal apparatus; ancient forms of writing and alphabets; the invention of moveable type and the printing press in the 15th Century; and contemporary computer-based technologies of speech recognition or machine translation. In prioritising the sound, the rhythm or the



*Cat Licks Vitrine, 2018. Performance at La Comédie de Reims, France . Anna Barham reads 'amour insta'. Image credit La Comédie de Reims, France*

spelling, above the 'meaning' of a text, I can discover new understandings and subject matter that emerge, and how language acts on the bodies that read, speak or hear it.

Since 2014, I have been developing a format I call a 'live production reading group.' A circle of people read aloud in turn, and each time speech2text software captures and transforms the features of their reading such as tone, cadence, intonation, accent, emotion, mistakes, stutters, into new words and meanings. This sets up a complex feedback loop between the readers, the texts and the computer, where the original meaning of the texts disintegrates and new themes and ideas emerge. A new body of text is created collaboratively in the group, with each reader re-authoring the unpunctuated texts as they vocalise them, trying to decide where to pause for breath or how to navigate their way through broken syntax or sentence structure and abrupt thematic shifts. Meaning ebbs and flows as the process unfolds, and the collaborative listening and dynamic response of the group changes each version.



*A sentence can be ours and ours*, 2016. Live production reading group, Playground Festival, Museum M, Leuven, Belgium. Image credit Museum M, Leuven, Belgium

Afterwards, I use the multiple versions of the texts to construct new, rhythmic, non-linear writing which I further develop into sound works, videos or publications. I think of the texts in these works as interfaces, something that their audience interacts with. To emphasise the audience's agency in the production and transformation of 'sense' I often build structures that carefully choreograph the relationships between the body of the viewer and the images and sounds - screens and speakers - blurring the roles of audience and performer, observer and observed.

**HW: You use repeated patterns and self-prescribed rules and systems within your work. What attracts you to this way of working?**

AB: Working with self-prescribed rules and systems creates unexpected freedoms and productivity. I push hard on or against those systems – sometimes to the point of breaking. The prescribed rule or system has its own agency in the process but it's still possible to make individual decisions within this framework and I'm interested in the tension between those two dynamics - how they construct each other mutually.

I started working this way when I first began working with language - thinking about language as a set of rules and systems and seeing how far they can be stretched and what is created or left in terms of meaning. I made a lot of work with anagrams - rearranging the letters in a word or phrase to create new sense. It was a sculptural way of working with words, and around the same time, I also started making seat and table height structures made of basic units that could be reconfigured.

I construct elaborate processes, knots and tangles, in a pre-existing system. These processes yield many unforeseen outcomes: a transformation between input and output. Increasingly I'm thinking about how these processes can be viewed as a kind of 'productive resistance' and in turn how that can be a model for resistance in a wider social sense - against various and pervasive forms of authority. In particular I want to find ways to resist the smoothening and standardisation of language in contemporary language technologies like auto-correct, predictive text, speech2text etc. that are built and controlled by the giant tech corporations.

**HW: You are working towards a commission with us, titled *Crystal Fabric Field (MIMA)*.**



*Crystal Fabric Field, 2018. Installation view, Liquid Crystal Display, MIMA, Middlesbrough. Image credit Hynes Photography*

**This stems from the exhibition *Liquid Crystal Display* in which you made *Crystal Fabric Field*, a sculpture and display structure to house artworks. How did you arrive at the new piece?**

AB: When I was invited by Laura Sillars to make the exhibition structure for all the works in *Liquid Crystal Display*, I wanted to build something that would itself be a kind of crystal. I started by thinking about the way a crystal forms according to a repeating rule, an algorithm. The nature of the bond of the ‘unit cell’ – the smallest group of particles that make up the repeating pattern – completely defines the symmetry and structure of the entire crystal lattice and a crystal grows by repeating that unit cell over and over. The ultimate form the crystal takes is also governed by the shape of the space it can occupy and by other particles, like dust, that contaminate it.

Translating this idea into an architectural structure, I designed a single connecting component – a bright yellow bracket – as the unit cell. The bracket’s geometry is based on the hexagonal crystal family which includes emerald, ice and quartz, where molecules arrange themselves along 60-, 120- and 90-degree angles. This allowed me to create vertical walls to hang works from or project

onto, and for the walls to be arranged in flexible, irregular shapes. The bracket is very visible in the structure, it is made from steel and powder-coated in a bright sulphurous yellow. On each side of the bracket, as well as holes for bolts, there are cut-outs in the shape of punctuation marks: a comma, an inverted comma and a full stop. These marks are recurring motifs in my work, symbols of where the breath and the body enter language. Here, they also list, join, quote and stop.

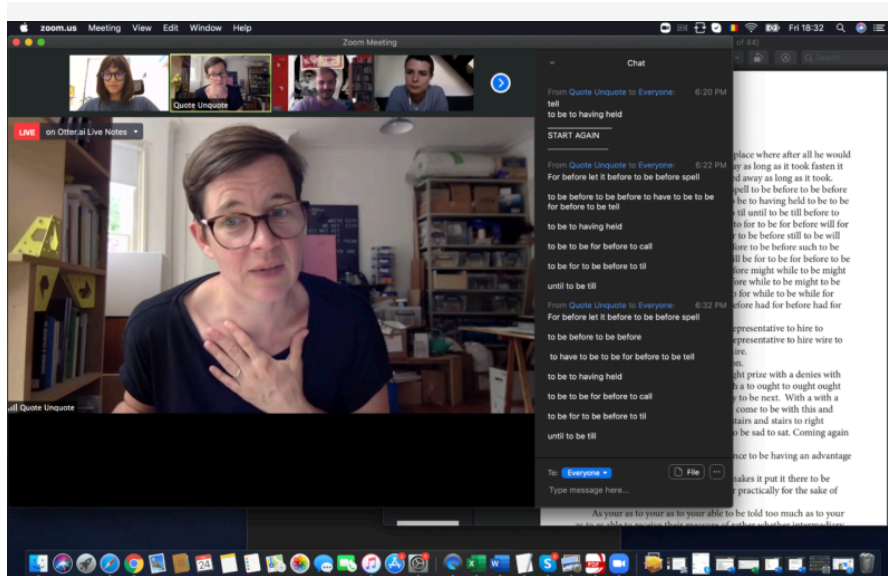
Although I’ve made lots of structures to hold my own work and the audience, this was the first time I made something to hold works made by other artists. That meant there were more factors outside my control: the particular physical demands of each piece, and the ways that the curators wanted to group and order the works, as well as the specific dimensions and layout of the gallery. Together these factors were the constraints determining the development of the structure – creating irregularities, splintered shapes and changes of scale. Because of the way the brackets use bolts to connect to the sheets of MDF the pieces have to be fitted together in a particular order. It’s a complex way of building, the structure grows according to its own logic. There is no inside or outside, just



By Melissa Ghidini

September 11, 2020

# Making and Unmaking of Sense in Language, Voice, Text and The Body



10/10 TO BE WE TO BE SCREENSHOT...: SCREENSHOT OF ANNA BARHAM'S TO BE WE TO BE, READING ENCOUNTER VIA ZOOM, JULY 17, 2020

## **I don't understand**

Summers in Milan are extremely hot. Since I don't have air-conditioning in my flat, finding ways to think clearly pushes me outside, as far away as possible from concrete. The park always seems like a good compromise, so I go sit on one of those picnic tables with my books out and my notepad, fighting mosquitos and sweat and trying to understand how to approach this text. I'm finding it hard to concentrate on my readings and notes but of course while I am able to, some bearded man comes to ask if he can sit at "my" table. I nod, even though I would prefer being alone. The man is homeless or at least seems to be, gathering from his clothing. My assumption leads me to all sorts of inherently discriminatory and intrusive thoughts: 'Is this man going to touch me?' 'Is he going to steal my phone? Shall I just put it in my bag or is that going to show that I'm a bit worried?' 'Why am I so suspicious? This man's just eating a sandwich'. As I pretend to read a book, I realize the man has been talking for the entire time. Naively, I turn to him. He must be talking to me.

The guy's gesticulating, staring right into the void, making shapes with his hands and talking what seems gibberish to me. Intrusive thoughts knock again: 'He's just crazy or drunk or on something and god he smells awful...' and once more, fighting with myself, I calmly reply to the voice in my head that 'No, he might be speaking another language'. So I gather all my courage and ask in Italian 'Che lingua parli?' (What language do you speak?) He turns to me and says: 'Hungarian!' and then starts giving me some numbers and percentages and mentioning Chicago and Hollywood and Roma and Hitler and for sometime, we are exchanging words in two separate languages. I interpret gestures and words and try to make sense. I'm putting languages together, constructing a puzzled narrative and looking to find a common ground, something to hold on to, acceptance or mutuality, something that doesn't leave me stranded here.

The guy looks and laughs at me. He's shaking his head, turning his finger around his right temple as if to signal 'You're crazy.' 'Ah, sarei io la pazza!' (Ah so I'm the crazy one now!). He's not entirely wrong but that's when I take my phone out, it kind of feels like a weapon. Here's reason coming to solve this stupid riddle. Quickly I search on Google translate:

'Come ti chiami?' -> 'Mi a neved?' -> 'What's your name?'

Everything crumbles now, like the Southern Oracle in *the Neverending Story* as they utter: "we don't know how much longer we can withstand the Nothing". I begin to realize I've broken something and have allowed sense to conquer, once again, human interaction. Shortly after, the man leaves to play chess with another man at a nearby table. They play without saying a word.

We've just lived a perfect example of poetic language, I write in my notes, if it's to be understood as Kristeva suggests, as a realm to transgress a territory, questioning linguistic structures and 'imitating the positing of meaning.'<sup>[1]</sup> The man in the park and his gibberish, were poetic acts of resistance towards language as carrier of sense and my translation was coming from my privileged position as native speaker of the land we inhabited at that moment in which I needed to understand while he was free to explore. It raised urgent questions related to agency, who's the listener and who's the speaker and how can this interaction play a role in making and unmaking of sense, of language/s, speech, utterances? Can words subside meaning? Can poetic language and text exist and generate beyond conscious acts of writing or performing?

Some of these questions and my strange encounter, brought me back to Anna Barham's reading encounters TO BE WE TO BE, conceived for Quote—Unquote, an interdisciplinary platform devised and curated by Infinite Conversation. During each of the four sessions, a closed number of participants was asked to take part in a collective online reading of Gertude Stein's text *Patriarchal Poetry*, facilitated by Anna and deciphered by voice-recognition software. During the first meeting I took part in, Anna asked us to turn our cameras off and read a section of Stein's text in unison, trying to keep up with each other. The result was a tangle, of voices, mingling, overtaking and sinking one another and into one and the other. Reading in unison on Zoom seemed impossible but there was a very strong sense of a shared experience. The feeling of going through it was very similar to talking a language one did not understand, at least not fully. A repetitive, broken and unsettling sense of disruption and restlessness permeated the text and when we stopped reading, some of us were out of breath and lost for words. Unpredictable creatures emerged, while the arbitrary quality of names and words became evident. Meaning was no longer a protagonist. There was also a tangible hyperphysicality arising from voicing the text in a certain way, as I experienced my body fading and merging with other bodies, with other voices coming together.

Reading this particular text in a group exposed language as malleable material and as a deceptive machine, revealing, in Borrowers' words, language as a technology<sup>[2]</sup>, making up conventions and breaking them again. As I listened back to the recordings of these encounters, I was struck by a participant's question asking Anna about her experience of reading the text. Anna mentions that she had been looking at it for quite some time and she's also read the entire text out loud from beginning to end, which had taken her around two hours: "How did you feel at the end?" The participant asks: "exhausted". To me, Anna's confession is also inextricably linked to the experience we had. We were not only performing a text by reading out loud but we were also asked to try and embody it, assimilating it, munching it, swallowing, digesting it and spitting it out again.

Interestingly, as Adriana Cavarero points out, before the advent of metaphysics, it was believed that speech production resided not in the brain but in the respiratory and the digestive systems.<sup>[3]</sup> She also mentions the research of Alfred Tomatis with regards to the ears and language and claims how, even from a contemporary scientific point of view, our bodies do not have an organ appointed for making language.<sup>[4]</sup> It is only with Plato and with the advent of metaphysics, that we had a 'devocalization of the logos': "The belief that speaking depends on thinking takes the place of the belief that thinking derives from speech. This substitution is decisive because, besides configuring itself as a prevalence of the head over the lungs, it moves the measure of the human being from the physicality of the body to the impalpability of the mind."<sup>[5]</sup>

The potentials of an oral body is something that sound poetry in all its forms, has habitually considered. The tension between sense and nonsense, of heard and imagined together with the use of voice often paired with machines able to record and deviate and the inherent surprises that come with emitting words, are all elements that enrich this practice. Brandon LaBelle reflects on some of these possibilities in *Lexicon of the Mouth*, tracing political and poetic aspects of the voice and considering its diverse uses and effects. In particular LaBelle devotes an entire chapter to gibberish, tracing the links between language, voice and subjectivity. Talking about the performativity of the mouth he states: “[...] the voice [is] precisely the tussle between sense and nonsense, revealing the uniqueness of the individual as a figure shaped by the pressures of proper speech, as well as the opportunities found in not knowing—in the goobledygook of experimental orality.”[6]

Looking at the Quote—Unquote platform I came across a conversation between Anna Barham and Helen Palmer where the relation between Palmer’s research on non-sense and Barham’s work on Stein, were discussed. At the end of the conversation Helen raised the question of temporality of language. I feel that goes hand in hand with that of translation and meaning and with the process at the heart of TO BE WE TO BE as shared moments of joint authorship. In Stein’s text it is very clear that the word *Before*, is loaded with multiplicity both on the level of meaning and as a sound device. It seems to me that the breaking up of conventions is also an act of sabotage, a questioning of the linearity of time as well as writing, of the spatiality of the page and, in a wider sense, of phallogocentric, dominant structures. Barham, Stein and the readers are in search of a different organization, one that can be modulated and arranged and lived with agency in a shared authoriality, in a multiplicity where a collective WE and presence in its essence BE, are positioned at the centre of the experience.

It could be seen as an attempt of enacting theorized notions of Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, which, although problematic in many ways, can offer some interesting parallels. The circular process of these sessions, as well as the structure of the text, made me think of Cixous’ theorization in her placing importance before language and privileging nonlinear forms of writing as well as her notion of cyclical writing as a form of resistance to phallogocentric structures.[7] After the sessions, I realized that there was a clear cyclic process enabling text and speech to be deformed and transformed. Indeed, we were moving from the written text to the oral expression of it, to the recorded, filtered one and the translated step via voice recognition software, which then re-wrote the enacted text. This process, which also recalls some William Burroughs’ initial use of tape recorders, suggests an attempt to subvert usual practices of making and writing, taking into account questions of agency, subjectivity, authorship but also transgression, translation and possibilities of connecting through time and space.

The relation between time, space and translation is also central to the video-work of Clarissa Thieme *Today is 11th June 1993*. In the video we see a projection of vintage amateur videos and a person simultaneously reading from a script and translating what the people in the video are saying. In each projection, a young man describes a war situation and asks help from the future to whoever will find the video he is making and in each ‘sketch’ a man teleports himself from the future using a time machine.

The video was found by Clarissa during an extensive research into the Library Hamdija Kresevljakovic Video Archive in Sarajevo and documents a moment of creative resistance of a group of young people during the war. In an interview published on the Quote—Unquote platform, Clarissa mentions the links between translation and time travel. She had found the video years later so, in a way, what they had ironically prophesised in the video had also happened historically, in a paralleled reality. The person reading in the video is also engaging in a process of translation where words are negotiated and balanced and the line of there and then and here and now, is blurred: “Language has the ability to bridge people, contexts and times. The same lines being spoken in different times and contexts can be a link that is not denying the differences. We translate all the time not only from one language to another but between different kind of experiences, lived through realities and different backgrounds. The aspect of being not the same but connected is very interesting to me. I see common ground between all kind of people. But it has to stay exactly in the process of constant negotiation [...]”[8]

I want to go back to my encounter with the bearded man. One of the questions that popped in my head afterwards was the power dynamic and roles we were playing, while trying to articulate communication with each other, and what Clarissa calls 'negotiation'. I was literally fighting with pre-conceived notions of a person I was judging solely on appearance. Listening to Elena Trifan's podcast, I was relieved of the fact I am not alone. Elena's research takes into consideration self development and motivational speech and questions the idea behind one recipe fitting all. By the end of the podcast, she also mentions how being an anthropologist has helped her in knowing herself as she needed to deconstruct her biases before analyzing any one else's: "... the way you clutch your bag when you see a group of Roma people, the way you roll your eyes when you see a woman wearing a short dress, the way you judge a beggar for not working..."[9]

This felt liberating to me and made me reflect on questions of structure and intervention that had come up during the reading sessions. Elena further explores this analysis of self by exposing the paradox of one needing to be themselves and the inherent inability to do so, due to 'structural forces beyond individual control.'[10]

The experience of accessing materials and content online played a huge role in my experience of it. Quote—Unquote had been initially conceived as a platform and project unfolding mainly in Bucharest. It is weird to say, but if we hadn't been all 'locked up' in cities, countries and homes, unable to travel, I wouldn't have been able to participate at the reading and access the works. Living the online realm and exchange, has provided a certain level of freedom, as well as intimacy and independence on the part of visitors and users, allowing the works to be more accessible even to those who were less inclined or able to physically step into that space. Accessing mother tongues DIY library, or the podcasts and workshops online, has allowed me and others, to spontaneously position ourselves, accessing content from another physical space, from another parallel reality. I felt my presence in a different way, one that has been overlooked during the lockdown but that it's essential in understanding how we might have to primarily interact in the near future. Being able to listen to the recordings more than once, re-read texts, as well as the ability to truly and calmly approach the content in my own time and space, has allowed for a diverse engagement, one that was not solely inscribed within the pressure to perform the physical happening, but was stripped by some codes and loaded with others, more personal ones, perhaps even allowed for a more reflective understanding in ways that are impossible to grasp when works feature in physical spaces, especially sound works. During a lecture, Holly Herndon mentioned: "...the laptop is the most intimate instrument".[11] I would go as far as to say that the internet also provides a post-human safe space, a parallel domesticity, a cozy belt for exchange and, going back to linear temporality and dominant structures, one that can challenge such via glitches, external sounds, latencies, movements, codes and texts, colliding diverse people, places and times.

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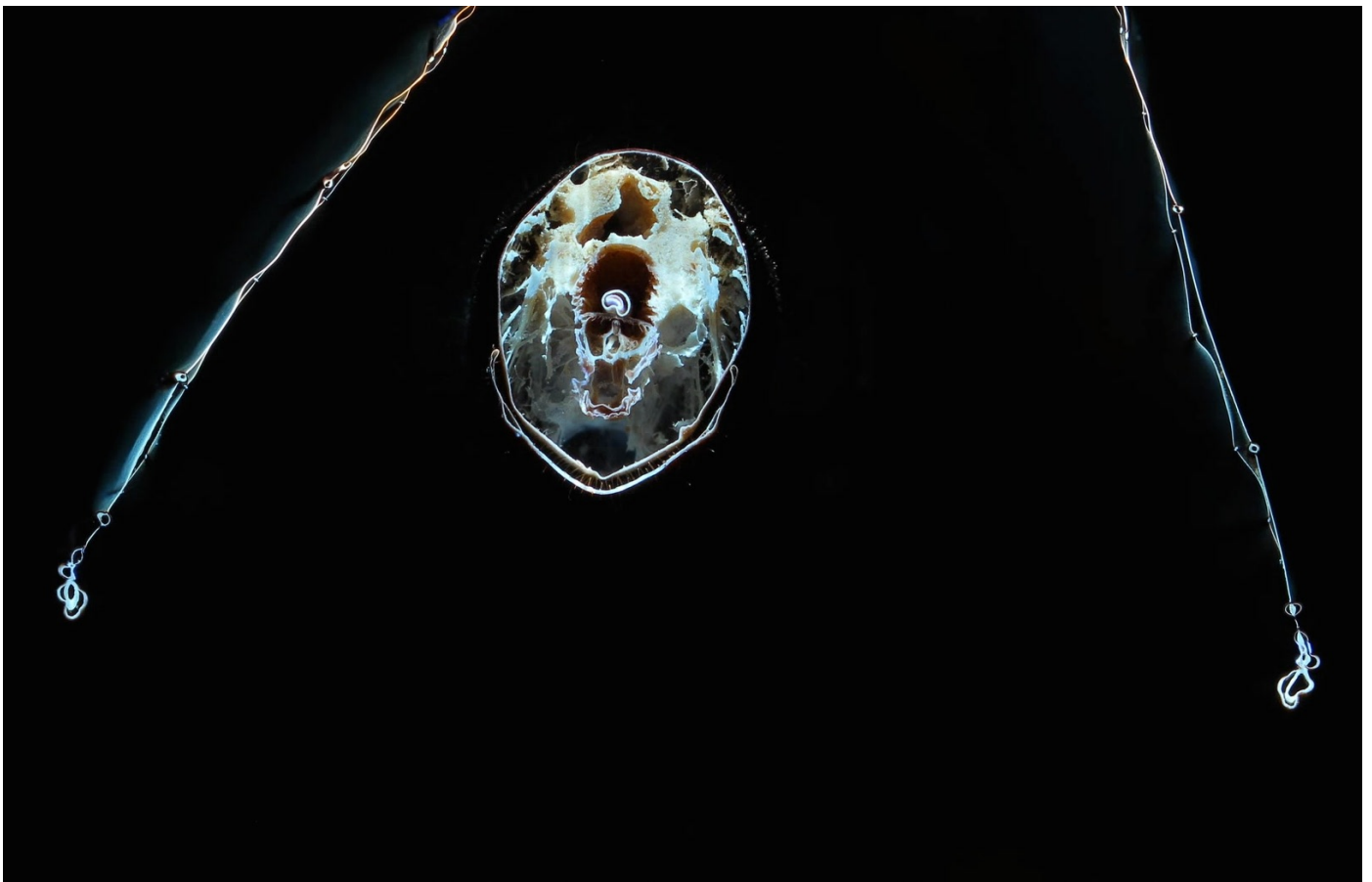
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- [2] William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1987), p. 123.
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- [4] *ibid*, p. 65
- [5] *ibid*, p. 65
- [6] Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of voice and the oral imaginary*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p. 65
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- [9] [Quote—Unquote Podcast #2 — Elena Trifan](#) — Almost Self Development
- [10] *ibid*
- [11] [Holly Herndon on Process | Loop](#)

16.03.2018 — Review

# Anna Barham: Sick Ardour

Ex-Libris Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne  
*by Adam Heardman*



Sick Ardour (2018), Anna Barham. Image courtesy of the artist.

German anatomist Gunther von Hagens is famous for (among other things, including the first public autopsy in the UK for 170 years and generally being All-Round Absolutely Terrifying) the preservation and display of human bodies via a process he invented called ‘plastination’. One of the more harrowing exhibits in his global blockbuster show, ‘Body Worlds’, is a

sort of coat-rail along which are hung several ‘body slices’ – wafer-thin, full-length cross-sections of a human cadaver. “In body slices”, (that’s how the actual caption in the exhibition begins, which should set all kinds of alarm bells ringing), bone and tissue form an exacting and colourful collage of the human anatomy, with a fixity and assemblage that’s oddly but deeply satisfying, and a playful refraction of different kinds of light that is (almost reluctantly) beautiful. They look like photo-negatives hung in a dark-room, slowly exposing, but they’re actually the real, guttural, tissue thing.

It’s a similar process of incremental anatomisation that is tracked and re-created in Anna Barham’s film, *Sick Ardour*. As curator George Vasey explains, the body of a cicada is rendered via “reverse-3D-printing”, the insect’s actual body being minutely and multiply sliced, and re-scanned with each new incision. Barham’s film delights in the glitches and slippages that occur somewhere in the ether as organic matter is translated into digital matter. Television-static patterns and data-disintegrations ruffle and fizz over the screen as the frame roves across the surface of the insect’s body, before plunging through the skin and exploring the chambers and ante-chambers within. A large vacuole of space outlined by strange light morphs, occludes, and clusters – it’s a while before you realise that this, too, is a cross-section of the animal’s body, ‘head-on’. Like von Hagens, Barham is after a literalised dramatization of the concept of ‘insight’.

Barham is an anatomist of language, too, as the wordplay of the title (sick ardour/cicada) suggests. The film’s visuals and its phonic relationship to its curatorial space are an enactment of this kind of hiccup between sound and meaning. What we are sure we experience in a concrete sense is in fact shaky, probably even erroneous. The scratchy sounds and rhythms of the film’s soundtrack, edited by Barham and spatially curated by Vasey in meticulous detail, communicate this. At one point a rhythmic, periodical ‘beep’ increases in frequency until it sounds like a solid, continuous note. Experience of even the most sure-seeming stimuli has an unsettling relationship with division and deconstruction. We’re a dividing and divisible myriad of cells and atoms, after all.

According to Greek myth, the first cicada was formed by a processing-error. Eos, the Goddess of Dawn, fell in love with Tithonus. Distraught that her lover was human and therefore would die, she begged Zeus to make him immortal. Zeus agreed, but Eos had forgotten to ask that Tithonus stay *young*. He remained organic, though immortal, and aged to such a shrivelled

and diminutive extent that he became the first cicada. It's a strange tragedy, to be doomed by a technicality, a semantic glitch. But perhaps it shouldn't seem so strange. Barham's work shows us that our entire perceptual experience exists in one accidental, wafer-thin slice of potentiality and possibility. We exist within and because of some glitch in the impossible matrix of the universe, and our endeavours (in art, in life) all try to move beyond our allotted place.

Perhaps all art, whether through film-cells or plastination, is interested in embodying the infinite, interested in the Organics of Immortality. Though *Sick Ardour* itself is both damaged and ardent, though it could easily get under your skin and drive you as mad as von Hagens if you were over-exposed, it's got truth and (almost reluctantly) beauty on a cellular level. Though full of flinches, it never looks away. It's larval, umbilical, positioned unerringly on that strange consciousness-boundary between bodied human existence and 'the soul'. It's the real/reel thing.

*Sick Ardour*, Ex Libris Gallery Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, 25 January – 10 March 2018.

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693 words

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|-------------------|---|---------------------|----|---------------|---|----------------------|----|-------------|----|-------|----|
| Ex-Libris Gallery | 2 | Newcastle upon Tyne | 73 | Adam Heardman | 3 | anatomy              | 1  | Anna Barham | 5  |       |    |
| body              | 4 | George Vasey        | 4  | iconography   | 1 | Newcastle University | 13 | sound       | 16 | Video | 33 |

returns to the original socio-medical literature. Rather than a Benjaminian valorisation of the Romantic fragment, Raqs emphasises the fracturing of the mind under the guise of total mechanised warfare. As viewers, our own experience becomes fractured and senses disjointed, resulting in Raqs' research being communicated via corporeal sensation rather than the reading of archival material.

Not everything is completely successful: given that Colchester is a garrison town, perhaps more connections between the plight of Indian soldiers in the First World War and today's soldiers could have been explored. This is not totally absent insofar as Raqs has arranged a constellation of events, referred to as a 'theory opera', as a third element of the exhibition. Centenaries are useful in unearthing hidden aspects of our history as well as for tracing Warburgian 'survivals' of the past within the present. Raqs' members have performed an important task with their archival research, but maybe something further could be done with the survival of the past. Nonetheless, it is evident that the artists are deeply aware of this issue. The exhibition's title reminds us that the past is not even past yet. Ultimately, repression is only knowable through its incompleteness, through the return and survival of the unrepressed. ■

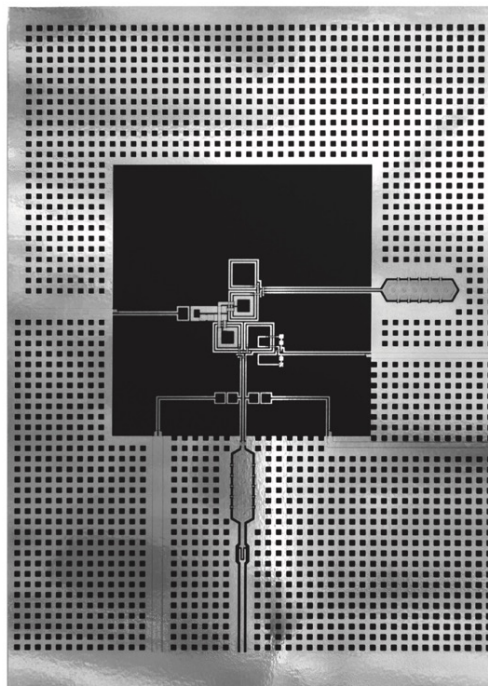
**Matthew Bowman** lectures at University of Suffolk and Colchester School of Art.

## Liquid Crystal Display

**Site Gallery** Sheffield 29 September to 29 January

When the unique properties of cholesteric liquid crystals were first discovered in 1888 by Austrian botanist Friedrich Reinitzer, and the term 'liquid crystal' was coined by Otto Lehmann in 1904, the implications for our current technological age were beyond conception. From experiments in flat-panel electronics beginning in 1962, liquid crystal displays (LCDs) have now completely replaced the bulky cathode ray tubes (CRTs) of the past; they now comprise the sleek screen substrates through which we view endless streams of images and messages. Liquid crystals have a natural relaxed state, only rearranging themselves to block certain light waves when exposed to magnetic or electrical fields, or changes in temperature. They do this in a way that is creatively ordered, aligning themselves into chiral twirls or overlapping layers, polarising light into separate rays that travel at different speeds. Technological applications aside, the 'magical' properties of liquid crystals fascinated early geologists and have captured the imaginations of philosophers, writers, artists and scientists ever since.

'Liquid Crystal Display' follows crystalline form through the great interdisciplinary minds of the Romantic era, the psychedelic image experiments of the 1960s, our LCD-saturated present and on into an apocalyptic post-human future. Objects, artworks and collections are displayed in and around a large-scale structure conceived by Anna Barham, which entirely fills Site's newly expanded gallery. Her *Crystal Fabric Field* is inspired by John Ruskin's cabinet of curiosities, in which he famously kept his mineral specimens (as an amateur mineralogist, he amassed an enormous collection), and by Donna Haraway's thesis that the 'extra-logical' dimension of artworks is what allows scientists, particularly embryologists, to make important conceptual leaps. Barham's structure mimics the growth pattern of a hexagonal crystal (along 60°, 90° and 120° angles), with



**Anna Barham**  
*SQUID*  
(Superconducting  
Quantum  
Interference Device)  
2015

polycarbonate and MDF sheets connected incrementally with specially designed brackets.

This interior architecture offers multiple non-linear routes through the exhibition, revealing different configurations of artworks and objects. One possible route: after studying a series of neat diagrams of crystals polarising light by photography pioneer Mungo Ponton, c1839, I turn a corner to find a selection of mineral specimens from Ruskin's collection (from which he produced hundreds of sketches and illustrations, not included here). Directly across hangs another series of drawings by Kiki Smith, delicate portraits of individual crystals from her mother's collection, which she remembers fondly from her childhood. This grouping (mine, and possibly others') signals a history of representing, or attempting to represent, the strange ephemeral beauty of crystal formations. Although from different historical moments, all three communicate the awe and admiration for this mysterious phenomenon. In Ruskin's case, his admiration was mixed with a lingering suspicion that crystals were somehow calculating or deceptive by nature. He went as far as to question their virtuosity, to see corruption in their unpredictable growth patterns and sharp precision.

References to JG Ballard's 1966 novel *The Crystal World* echo through the chambers of 'LCD'. Ann Lislegaard's video *Crystal World (after JG Ballard)*, 2006, is an attempt to capture the surreal dream state of his dystopic tale, the mesmerising slow process of crystallisation that lures characters to their deaths. The horror of this conceit explored by Ballard and others (Alex Garland's recent film adaptation of Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel *Annihilation*, to give a recent example) is rooted in the disintegration of biological borders, such that external elements are able to invade and alter us, both physically and psychologically. In these stories, characters are violently absorbed back into a hostile wilderness, reminding us of the uncomfortable fact that, at least on a cellular level, there is very little separating us and our exterior environments. This fear has a particularly strong grip in the Anthropocene age, as our relationship with the Earth grows ever more alienated and volatile.

Elsewhere in 'LCD', the mystery of crystals is dissected: Penny McCarthy's hand-traced pages from the 1953 issue of *Nature* that features DNA theory for the first time; biologist Waad AlBawardi's vibrant images of crystallisation using polarised light microscopy; and Ralf Baeker's *Crystal Set*, 2011, a machine that runs frequencies of electricity through transistors or integrated circuits (made from semiconducting crystals) to create an audible feedback loop. In Shimabuku's *Oldest and Newest Tools of Human Beings*, 2015, smartphones and iPads are paired with similarly shaped prehistoric rocks, sending a simple but strong message about progress and materiality. We are asked to marvel at the sophistication of our current technology and to acknowledge its growing power over us.

To balance the scientific revelry, a refreshing anti-tech vein runs through the exhibition. *The Crystal World* project (Jonathan Kemp, Martin Howse and Ryan Jordan) documents the destruction and 'cannibalisation' of junked computer parts using heat, electricity and photochemistry, sometimes combining them alchemically with rocks and minerals. As a fresh iteration, a motherboard sits in a crystallising bath for the duration of the exhibition. The Otolith Group's video work *Anathema*, 2011, manipulates adverts for mobile phones and other screen-based devices, subverting the 'capitalist sorcery' of our digitised interactions and exchanges. Such critiques are urgently needed in a society that too often slips into tech-worship, where it is easy to forget that our glossy ephemeral devices are in fact material composites and, for all their power to connect, are ultimately poor substitutes for human-to-human contact.

Beneath the playful sensory experience of 'LCD' lurks something ominous. Liquid crystals have always been part of us, our cell membranes and DNA, in foods and viruses and clothing. They have been assigned both visionary prescience and the potential to heal (a duality nicely conveyed in Eva Rothchild's paired crystal balls, one black and one clear, from 1998). Today, liquid crystals shape the way we view images, navigate the internet and communicate with others. Should we not question their ubiquitous presence in the internal glow of screens and smart glass, and in the algorithms that interpret and manipulate human behaviour? From Goethe and Hegel to the futuristic sublime, 'LCD' holds an abundance of perspectives in its prismatic layers, their intersections further expounded in the accompanying £5 book. Without it, the absence of description leaves the visitor guessing about the context and meaning of many of the works, and the ideas and histories that link them. The exhibition will follow curator Laura Sillars to MIMA, where it will no doubt accrete new sets of associations, growing, perhaps, in crystalline fashion. ■

**Tania Kovats**  
*Bleached* 2017

**Lara Eggleton** is an art writer and historian based in Leeds.



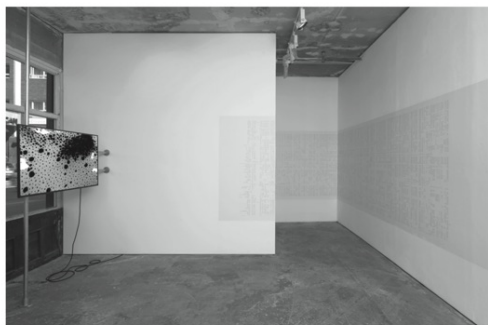
## London Round-up

MOT International • Assembly Point • Arcade

In some countries, the summer months occasion a total suspension of gallery activities as the proprietors recover from earlier fairs and prepare to meet upcoming ones with relaxed, tanned faces. In London, more generously or not, the grand tradition of the half-cocked group show still prevails, its offerings often thrown into sharp contrast if they overlap with the new season's exhibitions. For a gallery like MOT International, though – formerly a rough-edged outfit in an anxiety-producing Bethnal Green lockup, now yielding Turner Prize-winning artists from the ritzy heart of Mayfair – the summer show evidently asks for a bit of thought, a bit of artful positioning. The title **Bail Bond** is a doubly droll front for a works-from-inventory affair: it situates the six artworks on display as things necessarily left behind so that the defendants might walk the streets, and nods to the probability that the gallery owners have, while the show is up, bailed on New Bond Street.

Laure Prouvost, perhaps inevitably, is the chief draw in a show of 'new and rarely exhibited pieces'. Her painting *Woman upsidown*, 2011, comes with an MP3 player and headphones: while you look at the French artist's loose, smudgy inverted nude, you hear her brokenly recounting seeing the woman hanging upside down from an aeroplane – this being the invented character's fetish – before a cheesy Elton John ballad oozes out. Sensuality, in Prouvost's world, is its own justification. Her four-metre-long tapestry *Swallow me, from Italy to Flander, a Tapestry*, 2015, evidently based on a digital collage, is a tempestuous mélange of Italianate architecture, foliage, cats, rapturous faces lifted from advertising and snippets of Op patterning, studded with weird what-is-that passages and operating on spindly dream logic at best. As ever, Prouvost relishes both patched-together styles of affect and the productive aspects of communication breakdown, where the gap between what is meant and how it is expressed is espoused as somewhere messy, yet pleasurable, to drift within.

Perhaps sensibly, 'Bail Bond' flanks her works with relative minimalism. Perpetuating the air of reverie, Simon Mathers's pulsing yellow painting *Beurre*, 2015, presents a sketchy outline of a sleeping figure with tongue extended, crashing on illogic's shores where it meets the artist's sculptural pair of standard lamps with resin shades. Dan Rees's *Shaker Peg Painting*, 2015, dangles a pair of gestural monochromes in green and red on a row of coat pegs. Yet if all of this consequently bestows a fragmentary domesticity on the exhibition space, it is torpedoed by the inclusion of a 1981 drawing-cum-proposal by Dennis Oppenheim, as the organisers seemingly remember that too much coherence – too much bond – would register as trying too hard.



Anna Barham  
*Skw* 2015  
installation view

Meanwhile, at the other end of town (ie Peckham) and the other end of the scale, artist-run space Assembly Point's **Faith Dollars, Taxfree Imagination & Uptown Bliss** offers a whirlwind tour of potential discontents. 'The asymmetry in experiencing the current social situation from within can potentially become a diagrammatic interpretation of the battle for isonomy and the spectacle of our self-representation,' the organisers write. I'm not entirely sure what that means, but the targets become clear enough.

Eva Papamargariti's video *Someday I will buy an IKEA chair with bitcoins*, 2015, mixes together rendered views of purportedly desirable interiors with gristly bits of text and quotes from Talking Heads and Frank Ocean, effectively signal-jamming a sales pitch. Sit in one of Lawrence Lek's two massage chairs, meanwhile, and you can joystick your way through a virtual tube-train ride in a future world where the London Underground is half-Chinese, named the Sky Line and evidently existing in a deserted city half-trashed by rising sea levels. Flop into the other and an HD video unfolds that mixes the same dystopian landscape with real-looking BBC news clips of London during a tube strike ('kilometre-long queues for buses'), and a fly-through rendering of Assembly Point itself, at some (future?) point where it contains, in a *mise-en-abyme*, Lek's video and chairs and a lifeseize suspended tube train. The mingling of realities, while disorienting, asks what kind of extreme outcomes a mix of digital artificing and realism will persuade us to accept. James Lowne's series of text-heavy collages, *Electrify, parts 6-9*, 2015, drops us into the middle of some tense yet meandering and digressive attempts to define the word (though Lowne seems unsure as to whether it is one) 'electrify'. Counterpointed by sketches of burning batteries and figures around campfires, it finds the artist spinning in speedy linguistic circles, concluding that the word is 'like the rhythm of fire', though – given the sequential title – probably not ending here.

Language, for an adept artist, is a kind of plastic material, or at least semi-containable goo allowed to drip in noteworthy ways. In her solo show at Arcade, **Anna Barham** papers part of the space with the latest segment of an evolving text-driven

work that also relates – via ink, among other things – to squid. A long, loping sentence, stretching horizontally around the walls, recounts the cleaning of said cephalopod; by the time it is repeated, on the next line, it has already mutated slightly, thanks to Barham having used the flaws in speech-recognition software to evolve this text during the past two years. Over the morphing course, 'depressions' become 'impressions' become 'in pressure'. A video, borrowed from YouTube, of a squid's chromatophores, or tiny bags of pigment, being palpated so that black dots rise to the epidermal surface, offers a tactile analogue to Barham's linguistic blurriness (as does the fact that, etymologically, 'squid' may well derive from 'squirt'). The viewer's physical movement and active thinking with regard to the text are placed in opposition to the computer's mindless, disembodied mutation.

It is notable, meanwhile, that squid apparently distribute their awareness across their skin, which becomes a kind of screen displaying responses to the world – responses that apparently include attempts to camouflage themselves, to adapt to their environment. And Barham, with regard to her text but also in a series of punctuation marks printed on iridescent, light-catching paper, sets viewers into a process of adaptation and accommodation. It's a dense, idiosyncratic poetics she is forging, then; and the exhibition booklet essayist, Sabel Gavaldon, goes further, mentioning the US Office of Naval Research's recent inquiries into the uses of light-sensitive squid proteins. But within is space to consider the digital and organic divide and where its halves meet, expressed with an intelligence that eludes many artists supposedly tracking and anticipating tech's effects. As with Lowne and Prouvost, there is also expediency at work here. If communication is untameable, sneaky, flawed, another attempt at pinning it down might always be justified, even if it is guaranteed to fail – and thus succeed. ■

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NEW EXPERIMENTS  
IN ART, SCIENCE  
AND TECHNOLOGY  
TEN YEARS OF  
IMAGES SELECTED  
BY HANS ULRICH  
OBRIST

CURA. 2009–2019



In the introduction to the second edition of *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan noted the ability of art to anticipate the future's social and technological development. "Art," McLuhan wrote, is "an 'early alarm system'" allowing us to prepare to cope with new developments in times ahead. "Art as a radar environment, takes on the function of the indispensable perceptual training."

In 1964, when McLuhan's book was first published, the artist Nam June Paik was about to build his *Robot K-456*, in order to experiment with the technologies that would subsequently start to influence society. He had worked with television earlier and later made art via global live satellite broadcasts using the new media less for entertainment than to point us to their poetic capacities which are still mostly unused today. I think it's interesting to revisit some of these experiments of Nam June Paik from the point of view of today's technologies.

The Paiks of our time are now working with digital images, with artificial intelligence, though their works and

thoughts are an "early alarm system" in light of developments that lay ahead of us. Billy Klüver undertook the "Experiments for Art and Technology" in the 1960s, a fascinating project where he wanted to bring artists together with engineers, and create collaborations.

As a curator, my daily work is to have conversations with artists, and to then produce reality out of these conversations. When more and more artists started to say that they wanted to engage in new experiments in art and technology, I tried to find possible contexts where we could generate such exchanges. It all began at the Serpentine a couple of years ago, when we felt that it was important to have new experiments in art and technology. We were very inspired by Barbara Steveni and John Latham, who in the late '60s came up with the initiative of the Artist Placement Group, APG, which had idea of placing artists in society, out there in the world. It's a model that we should implement again today for contemporary society. Yana Peel and I invited the artist-author-writer Ben Vickers (who

is also a regular contributor of CURA.) to become the Serpentine's CTO. We started to work with AR and VR commissions and exhibitions with AI.

In computer technology, most algorithms work invisibly in the background. They remain inaccessible in the systems we use daily, but lately there has been an interesting comeback of visibility in machine learning. The ways the deep learning algorithms of AI are processing data have been made visible through applications such as Google's Deep Dream, in which the process of computerized pattern recognition is visualized in real time. The application shows how the algorithm tries to match animal forms with any given input.

The difficulty in the general public's perception of such images is that these visual patterns are viewed uncritically as realistic and objective representations of the machine process. One could say that while the programmers use these images to help us better understand the program's algorithms, we need the knowledge of artists to better understand the aesthetic forms of AI,

understood as true representations of processes, but we should pay attention to their respective aesthetics and their implications which have to be viewed in a critical and analytical way.

These projects give rise to unexpected and unending, unknowable situations. Nam June Paik said "Artists are always antennae," it's probably artists who are going to make us understand what digital objects are.

Anna Barham - To make them sound good in the mouth  
Essay by Catherine Wood



Anna Barham's work has repeatedly explored the proliferation of possibilities contained within codes and systems: from her tangram pieces that showed rudimentary letterforms constructed from shaped tiles, such as *Magenta*, *Emerald*, *Lapis* (2009) to her ongoing series of anagram drawings which detail extensively worked-out convolutions of words and phrases. The most recent chapter of this latter project *Return To Leptis Magna* (2010-) is a direct reference to its elaboration from a former body of work which created an equivalence between anagram letters and the building blocks of a Roman ruin. Such crossover between letters or numbers and material objects is often made tangible in the work via performative actions – a person tap-dancing, in *Slick Flection* (2009/2012) or the physical manipulation of sculptural props by the artist and a partner in *7, The Round Room* (2009).

Barham's new project uses a contemporary visual signifier – the QR code - as its material. Quick Response codes are the increasingly ubiquitous yet slightly mysterious black and white icons embedded in many advertisements and printed media. Small pixellated patches of abstract pattern, they are a graphic means of encoding a large number of characters which can be scanned and unscrambled by a smartphone.

For Cura Barham began with a phrase taken from a Socratic dialogue: “to make them sound good in the mouth”. Whilst most QR codes are simply black and white, Barham has used the codes as masks for images of these words being spoken. Like the late Belgian artist Guy de Cointet, whose use of tables of letters to conjure surreal narratives in his performance-plays revealed his obsession with all manners of ‘code’ – from cuneiform to cryptography – Barham welds pattern to text to message to create word-objects that can be ‘handled’ like sculptural entities. In their intended reception via smartphone, Barham sets up the potential for a ‘relational’ dynamic in the work which is almost immediately and bluntly aborted. Rather than actually effecting a pathway to a new site, or new experience (in common usage, one intended to sell the user something) each code cuts instead to an individual word. Moreover, the sentence they form muses upon itself, as one reads it out loud (or in one’s head). The networking function of the smartphone is truncated as it reaches an analogue dead end.

By leading the viewer not towards a new portal, transaction or elaborated consumer experience, but to a finite destination, Barham turns this digital transmission into a sculptural object. It is at once deliberately closed-down, and expansively poetic, in that not only does it not ‘lead’ anywhere, but neither does the message that it contains ‘mean’ anything in terms of functional communication. Moreover, the evocation of ‘mouthing’ words has an exaggeratedly physical, slightly sexual implication. In this simple transposition, Barham conjures a palpable sensation of language as an object that one can taste, savour, and fashion in one’s mouth. The piece brings the viewer back to flesh and breath and the texture of the human voice filtered cryptically through the cold silence of technology.



## STOCKHOLM

## Anna Barham

GALERIE NORDENHAKE

Using anagrams, Anna Barham has created a seemingly endless language network that riffs off the enigmatic words “Return to Leptis Magna”; the resulting phrases trail off into the nonsensical—“Repaint Lost Argument”—or just as often produce still enigmatic yet more resonant mutterings: “Interrupt Tonal Games,” for example. Occasionally there are phrases that appear to reflect on the network itself, e.g., “Patrol Strange Muttering.” Barham’s approach is an elastic hybrid of Sol LeWitt’s 1974 *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* and the playful nonsense poetry Hugo Ball performed at the Cabaret Voltaire. She is eclectic, ranging from installations to sculpture to artists’ books—the work on view here was a reading from her 2010 book *Return to Leptis Magna*. The ancient Roman city in the title provides a fuzzy touchstone for her practice. Now a magnificent ruin in modern Libya, it was founded in the eighth century BC by the Phoenicians, whose alphabet, the origin of the script you now read, was spread throughout the Mediterranean world as a result of their trading networks. The writing system that was germinated and then disseminated by the Phoenicians, creating a potentially endless linguistic system, is emulated as anagrams sprout and sprawl from Barham’s germinal phrase.

The resulting audio piece was here set within *Arena*, 2011, a wooden construction that served as seating for Barham’s audience and shadowed the form of the ancient amphitheater in Leptis Magna. As language dissolved beneath her anagram system, from the merely puzzling (“Armature Nesting Plot”) toward the near breakdown of meaning (“Purr Last Omega Intent”), abstract rhythms took over as pure sound forms. Where were we? Between unfolding anagrams, ancient cities, nonsense, language, and the mysterious, Barham’s art seems intentionally open to the possibility of vagueness in the sense that the mathematician Friedrich Waismann touched on in his description of the notion of the “open textured concept” (later applied by Morris Weitz to art). Waismann writes: “Take any material object statement. The terms which occur in it are non-exhaustive; that means that we



Anna Barham,  
*Arena*, 2011, wood  
and MDF, 3' 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x  
13' 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 13' 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

cannot foresee completely all possible conditions in which they are to be used . . . and that means that we cannot foresee completely all the possible circumstances in which the statement is true or in which it is false.” Language, artistic or otherwise, is in this sense pure potential, which brings with it variability. Therefore, substantiating a fixed meaning is foreclosed: It is factually impossible and not merely logically difficult. Written language, visual art, sound design, and experience itself are perennially indefinable—or so Barham, along with more than a few others, believes.

Back to the ancient world. Plato theorized that the classical elements fire, water, air, and earth were composed of regular geometric solids such as tetrahedrons and dodecahedrons. A small but intriguing light sculpture formed from tetrahedrons, *A Splintered Game*, 2009, was the perfect coda for the exhibition (and gave it its name). Here, fluorescent tubes, controlled by a computer sending random signals, turn on and off so that the work’s geometry is perpetually unresolved, in a state of constant becoming: endless pure potential. It is tempting to call Barham’s art esoteric or arcane, but such terms don’t strike the right note. It’s true that she illustrates ideas that Waismann grappled with, as did Weitz and the philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum, as they tailored fundamentals from Wittgenstein’s philosophy to the concept of art. But her art is visual poetry, albeit determined by rules, and not metaphors. As Samuel Beckett once said of James Joyce: “His writing is not *about* something; it is *that something itself*.”

—Ronald Jones

# ANNA BARHAM

Step into Tangram Rule

→ Vanessa Desclaux

ORNATE GLEAM UNSTRIP T 104

L'intervention la plus intéressante de l'art dans le quotidien réside dans sa manière de perturber le champ du savoir et d'interrompre la construction consensuelle du discours, dessinant d'autres lignes de désir, explorant la capacité de l'imagination à transformer et constamment réinventer nos relations aux objets et pratiques, dont fait partie le langage ordinaire. J'ai cherché à mettre en forme cette idée de l'interruption mise en œuvre par les pratiques artistiques à travers la conception d'une exposition intitulée «Stutter»<sup>1</sup> (en français, «bégaiement») et j'ai alors porté une attention particulière au travail de l'artiste Anna Barham. Son usage du langage a provoqué ma curiosité : partant d'un groupe de mots choisis avec attention, elle développe des structures arborescentes basées sur des anagrammes. Prenant la forme de dessins – faits à la main ou à l'aide de tampons – ou d'animations, ces champs anagrammatiques englobent autant une pratique du dessin que de l'écriture, mais aussi de la performance puisqu'Anna lit en public des textes entiers ou des extraits de ses pièces.

<sup>1</sup> «Stutter», Tate Modern, Level 2 Gallery. Organisée par Nicholas Cullinan et Vanessa Desclaux. Avril-Août 2009. <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/stutter/default.shtm>

70 G U L P O R N A M E N T S A T T I R E  
71 G U L P A M A R E T T O



Art best intervenes within everyday life when it interrupts knowledge and the consensual construction of discourse, opening up paths of desire, investigating how imagination has the ability to transform and constantly re-invent our relationships to everyday objects and practices, including our use of ordinary language. I sought to formalize this idea of the interruption carried out by artistic practices through the curation of a show titled “Stutter”<sup>1</sup> and this was when I first delved into the work of Anna Barham. Her use of language grasped my attention: starting from carefully chosen groups of words, she develops arborescent structures based on anagrams. Taking the form of drawings (hand-written or made using stamps) or digital animation, these anagrammatic fields encompass a practice of drawing, writing, and later performance through Anna’s reading aloud of entire texts or sections of her pieces.

<sup>1</sup> «Stutter», Tate Modern, Level 2 Gallery. Curated by Nicholas Cullinan and Vanessa Desclaux. April-August 2009. <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/stutter/default.shtm>

*Return to Leptis Magna* (pp. 64–65) | 2010

Lithographie monochrome, cousue en cahiers, couverture souple avec rabats, éditée à 500 exemplaires  
96 pages, 14,8 x 21 cm  
Courtesy Anna Barham

<sup>2</sup> Cité par Simon O'Sullivan in «From Stuttering and Stammering to the Diagram: Deleuze, Bacon and Contemporary Art Practice», *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 3, n° 2, Décembre 2009. University Press, pp. 247-250.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Barham, conversation par email, juillet 2010.

Si le bégaiement est traditionnellement envisagé comme un défaut de langage résultant de problèmes d'origine physiologique ou psychologique, mon usage du terme tentait de dépasser cette dimension pathologique, afin de questionner si, et comment ce symptôme pouvait nous aider à réfléchir à des enjeux sociaux, politiques et culturels plus larges. Dans la lignée de Gilles Deleuze, qui a lui-même développé le concept de bégaiement dans le champ de la pensée philosophique, et partant du principe qu'il constitue une pathologie pouvant être maîtrisée voire soignée, j'ai commencé à penser dans la direction inverse, à concevoir ce bégaiement dans le champ de l'art comme quelque chose d'intentionnel, un mouvement stratégique voué à interrompre, fragmenter et déconstruire les discours.

«La parole et la communication sont peut-être devenus corrompus. Ils ont été entièrement contaminés par l'argent – et non pas par accident mais à cause de leur nature même. Créer a toujours été différent de communiquer. La clé est peut-être de créer des poches de non communication, des courts-circuits afin d'échapper au contrôle» (Deleuze, *Négociations*, 1972-1990)<sup>2</sup>. Dans une société où les diktats de la communication ont largement contaminé nos vies, codant et ordonnant le langage au point de ne laisser que peu d'espace aux gens pour inventer leur propre usage de la parole et de l'écriture, l'art continue de subvertir la communication en postulant que le langage détient un potentiel d'expansion du sens et de la raison. Jouer avec sa propre langue (l'anglais), pousser les limites de ce langage, ouvrir des chemins de traverse pour l'explorer et prendre du plaisir à jouer avec les mots, inventer des histoires, laisser des sons et des images apparaître dans la chair des mots de façon inattendue, telles sont les stratégies qui nourrissent l'œuvre d'Anna Barham.

Ce texte, qui a pris forme à travers une série d'échanges et de conversations avec l'artiste, se concentre sur deux pièces distinctes : *Slick Flection* (2009-2010), un texte conçu comme un script pour une lecture à haute voix, et *Return to Leptis Magna* (2010), un livre d'artiste dont certaines sections sont également destinées à être lues en public.

## LIGNES DE DÉSIR

«*Slick Flection* est un développement d'une pièce précédente dans laquelle je lis à haute voix des instructions pour claquettes (*tap dance*). Je me suis intéressé aux claquettes en tant que forme car cette danse produit son propre son, et mon intérêt s'est particulièrement porté sur les instructions, car ce sont des mots qui nomment en même temps qu'ils décrivent l'action à laquelle ils font référence : "step", "shuffle", "stamp". Ces mots marquent aussi le battement, le rythme des mouvements. Par exemple, "shuffle" contient deux syllabes, et la plupart des instructions fonctionnent de manière onomatopéique, imitant le mouvement et le son que le pas de danse produit. Il y a un pas qui s'appelle «flap», que les danseurs de claquette prononcent "f-lap", simulant le son du pas, mais également la difficulté à prononcer le son "fl" qui semble buter sur lui-même.

Je pensais aussi aux claquettes comme vocabulaire ou alphabet de mouvements qui peut être agencé selon de multiples et infinies configurations, du point de vue de l'ordre et du rythme, pour créer différents pas de danse et différents sons. Ceci a produit un lien intéressant avec les anagrammes que j'utilisais déjà. J'ai aussi commencé à penser au sens commun des syllabes ou unités d'instruction. À partir de l'idée de répétition des syllabes qui décrivent la danse, j'ai réalisé des substitutions par d'autres syllabes, par exemple : "slick", "fleck", "met", "re", "ing", "tion", "slip". Leur ordre faisait en sorte que dans certains cas, elles créaient du sens et des mots plus longs ; le sens de certains fragments dépendait des syllabes qui précédaient ou suivaient ; d'autres fois encore, la répétition d'une syllabe transformait un mot en un autre : "slip", "slip", "slip", "slips", "lips", "lips", "lips", etc.»<sup>3</sup>

Avec *Slick Flection*, Anna Barham explore une trajectoire d'écriture qui transcende la fonction traditionnelle du langage et qui entretient une relation à l'idée de langage dans la mesure où elle emprunte un langage établi, celui des instructions de claquettes, mais en transgresse les règles par le biais de l'appropriation et du déplacement d'un champ de signification (les claquettes) à un autre (les arts visuels) tout en conservant ses qualités rythmiques. D'un côté, les instructions de claquettes sont devenues encore plus abstraites, puisqu'elles se trouvent déconnectées de leur champ d'usage – on concentre à présent notre attention sur les qualités musicales des mots et des syllabes que constituent

If stuttering is traditionally understood as a speech impediment, as a result of psychological or physiological problems, my use of the term intended to go beyond the pathological dimension questioning if and how such a pathology could help us think of broader social, political and cultural concerns. Following Gilles Deleuze's own interest in the idea of "stutter", and thinking of the idea that certain pathologies can be mastered, I began to think in the opposite direction about an intentional stuttering as a strategic movement to interrupt, fragment, and deconstruct discourses.

"Maybe speech and communication have become corrupted. They're thoroughly permeated by money – and not by accident but by their very nature. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing might be to create vacuoles of non-communication, circuit breakers so we can elude control" (Deleuze 1995: 175)<sup>2</sup>.

In a society within which the rules of communication have contaminated most areas of our lives, coding language(s) to an extent that people appear to be left with very little space to invent their own practice of speech and of writing, art continues to challenge communication by claiming the potential of language to expand beyond meaning and sense, and thereby offering a different creative potential. Playing with her own (English) language, pushing its boundaries, opening paths to enjoy the pleasures of word games and the invention of narratives, letting unexpected sounds and images overflow the flesh of the words is how Anna Barham has been making space for her work to occur.

The present text, the result of a series of exchanges and conversations between Anna Barham and I, focuses on two distinct works: *Slick Flection* (2009–2010), a text conceived as a script for a live reading by the artist, and *Return to Leptis Magna* (2010), an artist's book of which certain sections are also the object of live readings.

#### PATHS OF DESIRE

"*Slick Flection* developed from an earlier piece where I read out tap dance instructions. I was interested in tap dancing as a form because it produces its own

sound, and in the instructions because they are words which both name and describe the action they refer to 'step', 'shuffle', 'stamp' as well as standing in for them in terms of beat – so that a two beat step, a 'shuffle' for instance, is described by a two-syllable word, and most of them doing so in a loosely onomatopoeic way. There's a step called a 'flap', which tap dancers tend to pronounce 'f-lap', mimicking the sound of the step and also the difficulty of pronouncing the sound 'fl' which seems to trip over itself.

I was also thinking of tap as a vocabulary or alphabet of moves that can be arranged in infinitely many orders and rhythms to create different dances and sounds. That was an interesting link to the anagrams which I was already using. I started to think about the everyday meanings of the syllables or units of instruction too. Using the pattern of the syllables that described the dance I then made substitutions with other syllables, for example: 'slick', 'fleck', 'met', 're', 'ing', 'tion', 'slip'. Their ordering meant that they would sometimes make sense or longer words, sometimes not, that they might change their sense according to which syllables they were surrounded by, and sometimes through repetition they would morph into other words 'slip' 'slip' 'slip' 'slips' 'lips' 'lips' 'lips' etc."<sup>3</sup>

With *Slick Flection* Anna Barham fulfils the desire to explore a path for writing that transcends the traditional function of language. It relates to language in the sense that it borrows the codes of tap dancing instructions, yet it transgresses this code through appropriation and displacement from one field (tap dancing) to another (visual art) while conserving its rhythmic qualities, and building up from them. On one hand the tap dancing instructions become even more abstract, disconnected from their field of usage; we thus focus on the musical quality of the words and syllables. Yet, on the other hand, the functional working of these instructions is subverted by substituting other syllables, reshaping them and sneaking back another code, another signifying regime: ordinary English language. In a sense it is "reality" creeping back into abstraction, to the point that no one can distinguish between what might be tap dancing instruction to what is not. "Silver

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Simon O'Sullivan in "From Stuttering and Stammering to the Diagram: Deleuze, Bacon and Contemporary Art Practice", *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 3, n° 2, December 2009, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 247–250.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Barham, conversation by email, July 2010.

MUTTER PROTEAN SIGNAL <sup>21</sup>  
 ORNATE TRUMPET SIGNAL  
 LATE SONAR TRUMPETING  
 TRUMPET SONATA <sup>49</sup>  
  
 TEMPER AURAL SONG TINT <sup>50</sup>  
 STRINGENT AURAL TEMPO  
 STRING A NEUTRAL TEMPO  
 NARRATING LUTES TEMPO  
 ROAMING LUTE PATTERNS  
 PENTAGRAM LUTE INTROS  
 MAP ORNATE LUTESTRING  
 AS MORNING LUTE PATTERN  
 ROUSING MENTAL PATTERN  
 SING OUR MENTAL PATTERN  
 SING A PETULANT TREMOR  
 PUT IN STRANGE TREMALO  
 PUNGENT SITAR TREMALO  
 TART TONE GULPS REMAIN  
 STRANGULATE PRIM TONE  
 TRIM PERT NASAL TONGUE  
 OR NASAL TRUMPET TINGE  
 MUTTERING NATAL PROSE  
 ORNATE MUTTERS PALING  
 ATTUNE PALING TREMORS  
 ATTUNE RETRO SAMPLING  
 SAMPLING TAUTER TENOR  
 PUTS NEAR MOTTILING EAR  
 ALONG TIN EAR TRUMPETS  
 PULSATING EAR TORMENT  
 MOULTING EAR PATTERNS  
 MOULT ERASING PATTERN  
 73

ces instructions. Cependant, le fonctionnement de ces instructions est subverti par la substitution d'autres syllabes, transformant les instructions initiales et y introduisant furtivement un autre régime de signification : la langue anglaise. Dans un sens, la réalité rattrape l'abstraction, au point qu'on ne puisse plus reconnaître ce qui est une instruction de danse de ce qu'il ne l'est pas. «Silver Met Her Lips», «Eclipse Slicking Light», «At Slick Angle Met» : l'abstraction et la figuration se superposent, juxtaposant en rythme sons et images en l'absence de toute structure narrative.

*Slick Flection* et *Return to Leptis Magna* formalisent l'une et l'autre une méthode d'écriture. À travers ces œuvres, Barham se confronte à l'espace de la page en tant qu'espace plastique au sein duquel elle va tenter de maîtriser un texte sur lequel elle ne cesse de prendre et perdre le contrôle. Les limitations physiques du livre constituent des paramètres imposés dans le jeu de l'artiste. En tant que système

d'écriture, le jeu de Barham avec les anagrammes est un processus qui repose autant sur sa capacité à agencer et diriger que sur son acceptation de la nature mécanique, automatique du processus qui la guide, l'obligeant à consentir à une certaine perte de contrôle. Barham a ainsi développé une pratique d'écriture qui se nourrit des répétitions et interruptions, et qui perturbe la hiérarchie entre le récit, les sons et les images, révélant le potentiel du langage à être toutes ces choses à la fois. Dans le contexte plus large de la déconstruction du savoir et du discours, Anna Barham invente un espace unique pour les mots.

«On peut peut-être dire alors que l'erreur ("glitch") nomme deux moments ou mouvements. Détruire un monde et en faire un. En fait, les deux ne sont jamais vraiment séparés l'un de l'autre : le dissensus veut dire simultanément affirmer autre chose et affirmer un ailleurs. Pour affirmer un ailleurs, nous devons nous tourner vers ce qui existe déjà. L'erreur est alors un moment de critique, un moment de négation – mais

PARROT TANGLES MINUET 23  
 PARROTING LAMEST TUNE  
 TUNE PARROT LIGAMENTS  
 MINUTEST ANGEL PARROT  
 TEN PARROTS EMULATING  
 PARROTING METAL TUNES  
 PARROTING EMU TALENTS  
 STOP ERRANT EMULATING  
 SO TINT ERRANT PLUMAGE  
 MUTAGEN IS ERRANT PLOT  
 LUSTING AT ERRANT POEM  
 GENTLEST ARRANT OPIUM  
 MET ARRANT TONGUE SLIP  
 SIGNAL POTENT ERRATUM  
 24 TER PROTEAN SIGNAL  
  
 49 TRUMPET SONATA LINGER  
 PURRING SONATA METTLE  
 50 R AURAL SONG TINT

Met Her Lips”, “Ellipse Slicking Light”, “At Slick Angle Met”: abstraction and figuration overlap, rhythmically juxtaposing sounds and images in the absence of any narrative structure.

*Slick Flection* and *Return to Leptis Magna* both formalize a method of writing. Through these works, Barham confronts herself with the space of the page as a plastic space within which she will attempt to master a text over which she is constantly taking and losing control. The physical limitations of the book are the given parameters of the game led by the artist. As a system of writing, Barham’s play with anagrams is a process that relies on her ordering and directing as much as her letting the automatic nature of the process taking over, forcing her to release some control. Barham has developed a practice of writing that expands from repetitions and interruptions, and upsets

the hierarchy between narrative, sounds, and images, revealing language’s potential to be all these things at once. Within the broader context of the deconstruction of knowledge and discourse, Anna Barham creates her own unique space of words.

“We might say then that the glitch names two moments or movements. To break a world and to make a world. In fact these two are never really divorced from one another: to dissent means invariably to affirm some where/ thing else. To affirm an elsewhere we have to turn from that which is already here. The glitch is then a moment of critique, a moment of negation – but also a moment of creation and of affirmation. Indeed, the glitch – in whichever regime it operates and ruptures – is the ‘sound’ of this something else, this something different attempting to get through. To end this first section then, we can return to the artist as the one who specifically uses this logic of the glitch. The artist as traitor prophet

<sup>4</sup> ▶ Simon O'Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>5</sup> ▶ Anna Barham, *Return to Leptis Magna*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> ▶ Anna Barham, conversation par email, juillet 2010.

également un moment de création et d'affirmation. En effet, l'erreur – quelque soit le régime dans lequel elle opère et établit une rupture – est le "son" de cette autre chose, cette différente chose qui essaie de se frayer un passage. Pour conclure alors cette première section, on peut retourner à la figure de l'artiste comme celle qui utilise spécifiquement cette logique de l'erreur. L'artiste comme traître prophète nomme une direction double : la trahison d'un monde et l'affirmation d'un-monde-qui-vient.»<sup>4</sup>

L'écriture d'Anna Barham prend la forme d'un jeu euphorique qui l'amène à rencontrer sa pratique du dessin. Chaque page du livre *Return to Leptis Magna* disperse le texte selon des formes et motifs radicalement différents. Les lignes de texte / groupes de mots sur la page semblent composer des notations irrégulières. La structure de ces textes suit la production de nouveaux anagrammes ; chaque page commence avec un arrangement particulier, comme par exemple «Step into Tangram Rule»<sup>5</sup>, et progresse, zigzagant de gauche à droite, du haut vers le bas, selon différentes combinaisons des mêmes lettres. Ces arborescences multiformes apparaissent page après page – ou dessin après dessin dans la série d'œuvres précédentes intitulée «Spied Elegant Arm» (2009) –, empêchant l'œil de facilement suivre l'architecture du texte. À l'inverse, elles encouragent la dispersion du regard, induisant chez le lecteur une confusion à même de provoquer des pensées d'une autre nature.

#### LA CHAIR DES MOTS, LES SONS DU CORPS

«*Return to Leptis Magna* constitue une autre exploration de la lecture à voix haute. Dans *Slick Flection*, le point de départ du texte et la performance entretiennent une relation au son, et bien que j'ai permis au texte d'exister en tant que tel, la pièce existe véritablement sous forme de lecture ou d'enregistrement sonore. Mais *Return to Leptis Magna* est d'abord et principalement un livre, à partir duquel je peux aussi lire à voix haute. Alors que *Slick Flection* prend les syllabes comme unité de base, *Return to Leptis Magna* envisage les lettres comme point de départ et s'écrit à partir d'anagrammes. Bien que le texte décrive parfois des sons, ce n'est qu'un thème parmi d'autres, et cette relation au son est contingente au groupe de lettres à partir duquel le texte est produit ("sing a petulant tremor" / "put in strange tremalo" / "pungent sitar tremalo" / "tart tone gulps remain" / "strangulate prim

tone" / "trim pert nasal tone" / "or nasal trumpet tinge"). Le texte est construit sans que le son produit par les mots soit la chose la plus importante. Et pourtant, en raison des limites posées par l'usage des anagrammes, il n'y a qu'un nombre fini de syllabes dont la répétition au cours du texte crée un rythme particulier.

L'intérêt que je porte à la lecture est moins en rapport avec le son produit par les mots qu'avec la temporalité de la lecture et la façon dont un texte est lu et un son reçu par un public. Dans ce contexte de lecture, il y a le temps partagé en commun par les gens qui écoutent ce qui est lu, et aussi la possibilité de manquer un passage par inattention. Le texte est dense et juste au moment où la personne qui écoute saisit une ligne et commence à se l'approprier, une autre passe et peut ainsi être manquée. Cela crée une forme d'écoute discontinue, et le public peut ainsi s'immerger dans ses pensées puis être saisi par un mot ou une phrase et revenir ainsi à l'écoute du texte.»<sup>6</sup>

Les œuvres *Return to Leptis Magna* et *Slick Flection* opèrent de différentes manières entre l'espace de l'écriture et celui de la parole, entre le texte et la voix qui incarne les mots. Dans ce passage du texte-partition à la voix-son, de multiples événements interviennent. Le texte, en tant qu'objet, se transforme en événement par le biais de son activation par le corps et par la voix du lecteur et du spectateur. Dans *Slick Flection*, les qualités rythmiques et musicales des syllabes introduisent le mouvement de la danse à l'intérieur du texte. Des phénomènes accentués lors des lectures-performances réalisées par l'artiste. La voix agit comme guide pour ceux qui écoutent, ce qui m'a amené à penser à la performance comme une forme d'incantation et à la figure de l'Enchanteur.

«De la même manière, ces anciens Egyptiens ne faisaient pas usage des mots comme nous le faisons, c'est à dire comme symboles ou sons liés les uns aux autres, ayant des relations fixes et mémorisées, avec lesquels nous composons des séquences formelles dans notre tête. Pour eux, les mots ont une nature musicale ; ou pour être plus précis, parler est une façon de générer des champs sonores qui établissent immédiatement une identité de vibrations avec le principe essentiel qui définit chaque objet ou forme. (...) La voix humaine est l'instrument par excellence du prêtre et de l'enchanteur. C'est la voix qui cherche au loin les Invisibles convoqués et qui transforment les objets nécessaires en Réalité...»<sup>7</sup>

names a twin orientation: the betrayal of one world and the affirmation of a world-yet-to-come.”<sup>4</sup>

Barham’s writing takes the form of a pleasurable play through which writing encounters a practice of drawing. Skipping through the pages of *Return to Leptis Magna*, each page “disperses” the text according to radically different shapes and forms. The lines of text / groups of words on the page seem to compose erratic notations. The structure of these texts follows the production of anagrams; each page starts with a particular arrangement such as “Step into Tangram Rule”<sup>5</sup> and progresses across the page, zig zagging left and right, from top to bottom, through different combinations of the same letters. The shapeshifting arborescences appear page after page (or drawing after drawing in the previous series of works “Spied Elegant Arm” (2009)), preventing the eye from easily understanding or following the architecture of the text. Instead they encourage the dispersion of the gaze, leading the reader to a state of confusion that might trigger a different set of thoughts.

#### THE FLESH OF THE WORDS, THE SOUNDS OF THE BODY

“*Return to Leptis Magna* is another exploration of reading aloud. In *Slick Flection*, the starting point and the delivery are both sound, and although I have allowed the transcript out into the world, the piece really only exists as a live reading or as a recording – as a sound – but *Return to Leptis Magna* is a book first and foremost from which I can also read. While *Slick Flection* takes syllables as its basic unit, *Return to Leptis Magna* takes letters and is written from anagrams, and although parts of the text describe sound that is just one of a number of themes and is contingent on the starting group of letters (‘sing a petulant tremor’ / ‘put in strange tremalo’ / ‘pungent sitar tremalo’ / ‘tart tone gulps remain’ / ‘strangulate prim tone’ / ‘trim pert nasal tone’ / ‘or nasal trumpet tinge’) and it’s constructed without the sound of the words being the most important thing. And yet because of the limit of the anagram, there are only a finite number of syllables creating repetition and a certain rhythm.

My interest in reading it aloud is not so much the way it sounds as such but more to do with time and the way

something delivered as a sound is received. There is the shared social time of people listening to something being read, and also the slippery blink-and-you-miss-it (can’t think of an aural analogy) of this kind of delivery. The text is dense and just as the listener grasps one line and begins to digest it; another passes by which is missed. It creates a distracted form of listening, and one can drift off and then be caught by a particular word and drawn back into the text.”<sup>6</sup>

In different ways the works *Slick Flection* and *Return to Leptis Magna* operate between the space of writing and the space of speech, between the text and the voice(s) that incarnates the words. In this passage from text/notation to voice/sound a multitude of events take place. The text, as physical object, is transformed into an event through its activation by the body and voice of the reader/listener. In *Slick Flection*, the rhythmic and musical qualities of the syllables introduce the physical movement of the dance into the text. The voice of the artist enhances these qualities through the performance. The voice acts as a guide to the listeners, which led me to think of the form of a chant and the figure of the Enchanter.

“Similarly these ancient Egyptians did not use words as we do, that is, as symbols or sounds linked together, which have fixed, memorized associations and which we compose in sequential patterns within the mind. For them words were of a musical nature; or more precisely speaking was a process of generating sonar fields establishing an immediate vibratory identity with the essential principle that underlies any object or form. (...) The human voice is the instrument par excellence of the priest and the enchanter. It is the voice which seeks afar the Invisibles summoned and makes the necessary objects into Reality...”<sup>7</sup>

Anna is very interested in this idea of sonar fields, and by extension, the idea of fields of meaning triggered through sound. Her work has the particularity to limit itself to a use of English language, therefore exploring this exact tension between sound and sense within the signifying regime of language. De Certeau talks about “foreignness-at-home”<sup>8</sup> in relation to Wittgenstein’s writing on ordinary language, stressing that for Wittgenstein, we cannot “leave” language, we can only act as

<sup>4</sup> ▶ Simon O’Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>5</sup> ▶ Anna Barham, *Return to Leptis Magna*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> ▶ Anna Barham, conversation by email, July 2010.

<sup>7</sup> ▶ Henry George Farmer, “The Music of Ancient Egypt”, *The New Oxford History of Music*, Oxford University Press, London, 1957, p.259. This quote was found in one of the notebooks of French artist Guy de Cointet (1934–1983).

<sup>8</sup> ▶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1984, p.14.

<sup>7</sup>► Henry George Farmer, «The Music of Ancient Egypt», *The New Oxford History of Music*, Oxford University Press, London, 1957, p. 259. Cette citation se trouve dans un des carnets de notes de l'artiste Guy de Cointet (1934-1983).

<sup>8</sup>► Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire*, Paris, Folio Essais Gallimard, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup>► *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>10</sup>► *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

Anna s'intéresse à l'idée de champs sonores évoquée à l'instant, et par extension, à celle de champs de signification tels qu'ils peuvent être suggérés par le son. Son travail a la particularité de se limiter à un usage de la langue anglaise, explorant ainsi le lieu même de la tension entre le son et le sens au sein du régime signifiant de la langue. Michel de Certeau fait référence à Wittgenstein et à l'idée d'être «étranger dedans mais sans dehors»<sup>8</sup>, mettant l'accent sur l'impossibilité de sortir du langage ordinaire. Il n'existerait pas de dehors du langage, mais seulement une manière étrangère de l'habiter.

Comme Anna le mentionne plus haut, *Return to Leptis Magna* n'a pas été conçue pour fonctionner seulement comme performance ou pièce sonore, il s'agit avant tout d'un livre. Elle explique très clairement comment les anagrammes créent de manière mécanique un rythme et des sons par le biais de la répétition cyclique de certains phonèmes. *Return to Leptis Magna* propose des labyrinthes de fragments, combinaisons de mots qui se déplacent infiniment sur les pages du livre, donnant lieu à un nombre illimité et unique de motifs. Ces architectures verbales permettent à l'artiste de continuer à visiter le motif de la ruine comme celui de la folie architecturale, en référence au site historique de Leptis Magna – une importante cité de l'Empire Romain dont les vestiges sont situés à Al Khums en Libye, et dont certains fragments ont été ramenés en Angleterre au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle pour créer une folie pour le roi George IV à Virginia Water. La distance qui sépare la ruine de la folie semble refléter la transformation, ou la confusion, qu'Anna Barham opère entre la figuration sémantique et l'abstraction sonore. Entre ces champs de signification, le texte est un espace d'égarement qui laisse l'esprit du lecteur libre de prendre le chemin de la rêverie. Les segments de *Return to Leptis Magna* pourront être lus à haute voix par l'artiste, pourtant le texte n'a pas été conçu pour la voix, ou pour une voix particulière, mais est plutôt là pour n'importe quel lecteur qui désire s'en saisir à sa manière ; une partition pour des voix multiples. De Certeau analyse et discute la présence continue mais métamorphosée des pratiques orales dans le contexte de la littérature moderne. Il observe «des réminiscences de corps plantés dans le langage ordinaire»<sup>9</sup> ou l'irruption de la voix dans le contexte de l'écrit.

«Le texte littéraire se modifie en devenant l'épaisseur ambiguë où se remuent des sons irréductibles à un sens. Un corps

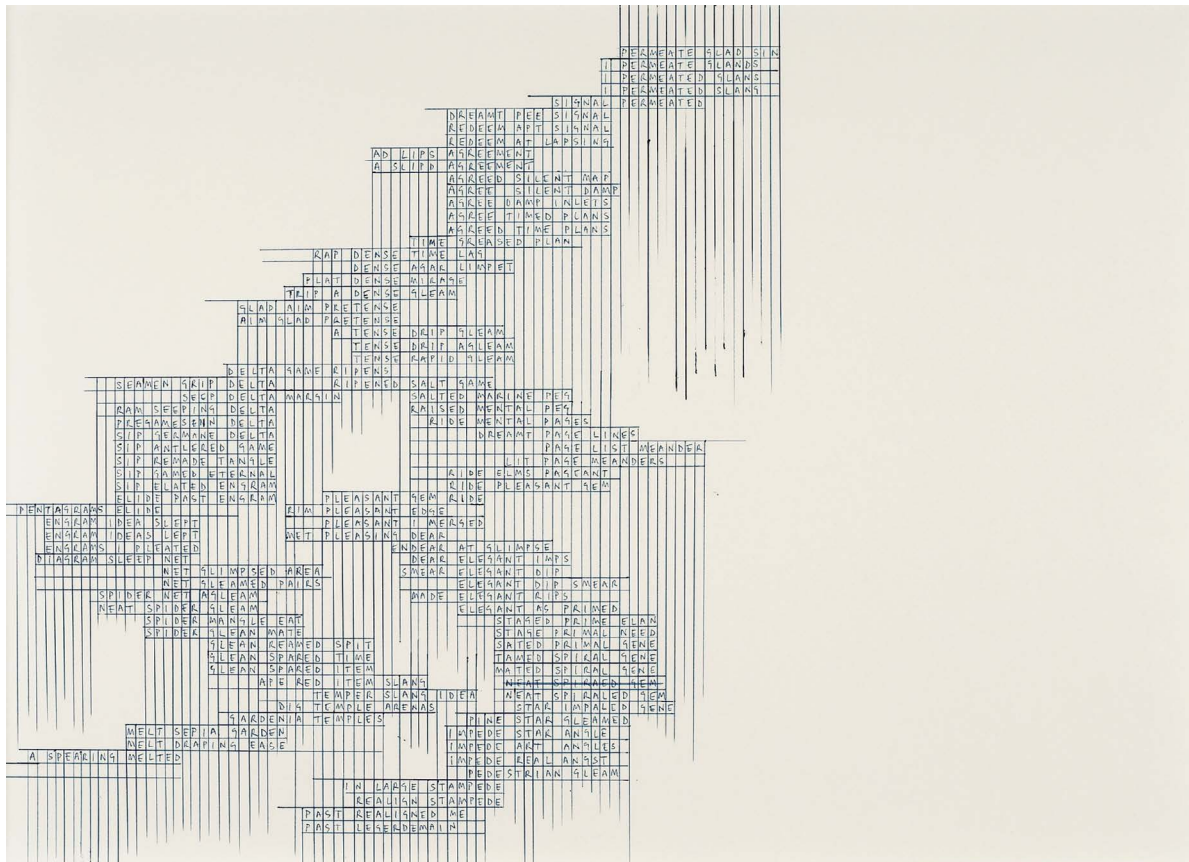
pluriel où circulent, éphémères, des rumeurs orales, voilà ce que devient cette écriture défaite, "scène pour des voix". Elle rend impossible la réduction de la pulsion au signe.»<sup>10</sup>

Durant notre conversation à propos de certains dessins de l'artiste Guy de Cointet, Anna souligne : «Ils décomposent progressivement les lettres non pas en unités de sens mais en unités de poids ou de mesure, en sensations sonores et en rythme. Ils ressemblent à des partitions mais plutôt pour la voix que pour des instruments de musique. Je suppose que penser à ces dessins en relation avec ses performances accentue d'autant plus leur qualité "vocale" ; mais je pense que c'est intimement lié à l'abstraction des mots aussi, au fait que mots et lettres sont un matériau brut. Même les dessins qui utilisent les nombres (j'ai une réédition de *A Few Drawings* de Guy de Cointet, 1975, que j'ai également regardée) ont des lettres et des mots qui conduisent à ramener le centre de l'attention vers la voix plutôt que vers une liste de nombres (tel un annuaire) ou un code pour une partition musicale.»

Dans *Return to Leptis Magna*, le texte se donne comme une esquisse incomplète, un diagramme labyrinthique dans lequel la voix du lecteur doit trouver son chemin. Elle errera dans des régions de rythmes et de sons, d'images et de récits, mais aussi d'espace vierge, vide. Sa voix rencontrera d'autres voix (altérées, intérieures, imaginées) à travers les détours de sa lecture silencieuse ou de son écoute en public, ralentie, quasiment à l'arrêt, dans les méandres de l'écriture d'Anna Barham.

## ESPACE PLASTIQUE ET ESPACE POLITIQUE

«Il existe un lien fort entre le langage comme son, comme truc dans la bouche, une voix avec toutes ses qualités musicale et rythmique, et le langage comme récit et sens. Cette ligne est ce sur quoi le travail de Guy de Cointet semble vibrer. De la même manière, il y a un lien entre la représentation graphique du langage et le son dans ses dessins, et leur expression dans ses performances. Je pense que c'est fascinant car ce langage a littéralement un sens (une combinaison de nombres et de lettres) mais pas de signification explicite. Cela crée une situation dans laquelle la signification doit être activement construite par le lecteur-spectateur. Cela permet à quelque chose de se passer, d'être produit au sein de cette construction. Je pense que c'est le lien, pour moi en tout cas,



foreigners in the inside – being no outside.

As Anna stresses above, *Return to Leptis Magna* has not been conceived to work only as a performance or sound work, it is first and foremost a book. She explains very clearly how anagrams mechanically create sounds and rhythm through the cyclical repetition of specific phonic units. In *Return to Leptis Magna* we are given a labyrinthine series of fragments, combinations of words that endlessly move on the pages of the book, giving birth to a potentially unlimited number of unique patterns. These word-architectures allow the artist to continue visiting the motif of the ruin as well as the folly in reference to the historical site of Leptis Magna – a prominent city of the Roman Empire whose ruins are located in Al Khums in Libya, fragments of which were brought back to England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and used to create an architectural folly for King George IV at Virginia Water. The distance that separates the ruin from the architectural folly seems to mirror the shift, or glitch, that Anna Barham

operates between semantic figuration and sonic abstraction. Between these two fields of meaning, the text is a space of wander, which allows the mind of the reader to go off dreamlike digressions. Sections of *Return to Leptis Magna* may be read aloud using the artist's voice, yet it has not been conceived for the voice, or for a particular voice, but is rather out there for the reader to engage with the text in his own way; a score for multiple voices. De Certeau analyses and discusses the continuous but transformed presence of oral practices in the context of modern literature. He observes "reminiscences of bodies lodged in ordinary language"<sup>9</sup> or the irruption of the voice within the context of the written.

“The literary text is modified by becoming the ambiguous depth in which sounds that cannot be reduced to a meaning move about. A plural body in which ephemeral oral rumors circulate: that is what dismembered writing becomes, a ‘stage for voices’. It makes the reduction of the drive to a sign impossible.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> ▶ *Ibid.*



<sup>11</sup>► Anna Barham,  
conversation par  
mail, juillet 2010.

avec l'idée que tu mentionnes de transe, d'incantation, et la figure du prêtre ou de l'enchanteur. Cela place le rôle du langage et de la parole au-delà de la simple signification, mais construit plutôt un cadre pour que quelque chose d'autre soit proposé. Cette "autre chose" peut invariablement être appelée le mystique, l'inconscient, ou Dieu. Je ne m'intéresse pas au *New Age* ou à n'importe quelle connotation religieuse mais plutôt à l'impératif humain de projeter et construire du sens, par le biais de l'imagination et l'association libre d'idées générée lors d'une écoute distraite.»<sup>11</sup>

Est-ce que cette « autre chose » pourrait aussi être appelée le politique, et comment ? Que se passerait-il si le contenu politique de l'œuvre n'était pas situé dans les mots eux-mêmes,

dans ce qui fait sens, raconte, représente ou communique, mais plutôt dans la façon de déformer le sens, le récit, la représentation et la communication ? Cet acte de déformation ne se fait pas en réaction contre, mais constitue un acte de création, un geste fondamentalement artistique. Ceci est politique dans le sens où il permet au langage d'échapper à l'enclos de la signification qui tente de le maintenir dans une normalité consensuelle du point de vue de la syntaxe comme de la fonction – le texte de Barham rend la frontière entre les champs de la poésie, du dessin ou du récit caduque. La dispersion et la fragmentation qui forment le nouveau paradigme du langage dans ces œuvres échappent aussi à l'autorité du contrôle en laissant le hasard et l'erreur déterminer en partie le processus d'écriture. Le contrôle

Guy de Cointet ▼ *Sans titre (I hate to sleep alone)* | 1983

Encre sur papier (page de carnet à dessin Sennelier), timbre sec de la Succession, 37 x 46 cm  
Collection privée, Toulouse  
Courtesy Galerie Air de Paris  
Crédits : Marc Damage

In our conversation about some drawings by the artist Guy de Cointet, Anna notes: “They progressively break the letters down not into meaning but into weight or measure, into sound qualities and rhythm. They look like scores but for the voice as opposed to instruments. I suppose that thinking of them in connection to his performances also heightens this ‘voiceness’; but I think it’s inherent in their abstraction of the words too, that words and letters are the raw material. Even the number drawings (I have a reprint of *A Few Drawings* by Guy de Cointet, 1975, which I’ve been looking at as well) have some letters or words in them which swing the emphasis back to the voice rather than as lists of numbers (like a phone book) or as code for musical (instrumental / melodic) notation.”

In *Return to Leptis Magna*, the text is given as an incomplete sketch, a labyrinthine diagram that the reader’s voice needs to navigate. It will wander in regions of rhythms and sounds, of images and narratives as well as blank, empty space. His/her voice will encounter other voices (altered, interior, imagined) through the detours of his/her silent reading or live listening, slowed down, often down to stillness, through the meanders of Barham’s playful writing.

#### PLASTIC SPACE AND POLITICAL SPACE

“There’s a taut line between language as sound, as stuff in your mouth, as voice with all its musical and rhythmic qualities, and language as narrative and meaning that Guy de Cointet’s work seems to vibrate on and around. Similarly between graphic representation of language and sound in his drawings and its actual expression in performance. I think that’s so compelling because having literal sense (a combination of letters and numbers for example) but not explicit ‘meaning’. It sets up a situation where meaning has to be actively constructed by the viewer/listener. It allows for something to happen and be generated within them. I think that this is the link, for me anyway, to the ideas you mentioned of trance and the priest or enchanter. It sets up language and speech not as an end in itself, as neatly delivered meaning, but a framework and an opportunity for something else to happen. That ‘something else’ might be variously called

the subconscious, the mystical, or God. I’m not interested in New Age or specific religious connotations but more in this human imperative to project and construct meaning, in imagination and in the free association allowed through a distracted listening.”<sup>11</sup>

Could this “something else” where something is allowed to happen, also be called the political, and how? What if the political content of the work was not found in the words themselves, in what they might signify, narrate, represent or communicate, but rather in how they deform signification, narration, representation and communication at once? This act of deformation is not a reaction against something but an act of creation, a fundamentally artistic gesture. It is also political in the sense that it releases language from the enclosure of signification that intends to maintain it within a certain consensual normality from the point of view of syntax as much as function – Barham’s text blurs the boundary between the fields of poetry, narration and drawing. The dispersion and fragmentation that constitute the new formal paradigm of language in these works also eludes control by letting chance and error partly determine the writing process. Control becomes an active force in the process of creating the work, producing an enduring tension between an act of thinking and one of making.

Anna Barham talks about the difference between something created and something discovered. Here the notions of the figure or the figural might help us sketch out a possible approach to look at the resulting forms that Barham creates through her textual arrangements.

“First of all we will distinguish textual and figural space. Graphic (or phonic) units have no value in and of themselves according to the plastic force of their form or rhythmic impact on the reader’s eye or body, but only by being opposed within a system (e.g., the alphabet, if we accept the letter as a unit). This play on opposition is rule-bound, and breaking the rules leads to the effects of signification jamming. The system assumes a spatial cutting-up (here visual; vocal in the case of speech) according to invariant intervals which allow for fast recognition. This cutting-up is textuality.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Anna Bahram, conversation by email, July 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Plastic Space and Political Space”, *Boundary 2*, vol. 14, n° 1/2 (Autumn 1985–Winter 1986), pp. 211–223. Published by Duke University Press.

devient une force active dans le processus de création de l'œuvre, maintenant une tension entre l'acte de pensée et la production. Anna Barham parle de la différence entre ce qui est créé et ce qui est découvert. Les notions de figure et de figural deviennent alors utiles pour envisager l'interprétation des formes résultant des arrangements textuels d'Anna Barham.

«Tout d'abord, nous distinguerons l'espace textuel de l'espace figural. Les unités graphiques (ou phoniques) n'ont pas de valeur en et pour elles-mêmes selon la force plastique de leur forme ou leur impact rythmique sur l'œil ou le corps du lecteur, mais seulement par leur opposition à l'intérieur d'un système (comme l'alphabet, si nous acceptons la lettre comme unité). Ce jeu d'opposition est une règle, et briser les règles conduit à l'effet d'une saturation du sens. Le système suppose un découpage spatial (ici visuel, vocal dans le cas de la parole) selon des intervalles invariables qui permettent une rapide reconnaissance. Ce découpage est la textualité.»<sup>12</sup> La textualité définie par Lyotard est ce qui crée pour le lecteur un espace d'action : questionnement, spéculation et invention. C'est à l'intérieur de cet espace que nous devenons conscients et investis de la capacité de nous définir comme êtres singuliers et pensants. Notre compréhension

de la «textualité» des œuvres de Barham reflète notre relation complexe et personnelle au langage et au contexte dans lequel il prend forme. Les figures écrites de Barham détournent l'image autant que le récit, formant à la place des partitions cryptées, interrompant et ralentissant notre capacité à lire et déchiffrer ce langage. Ces fragments énigmatiques nous forcent à reconnecter le langage avec le corps et l'intelligence : d'un côté, ses textes interpellent le corps du lecteur-spectateur d'une façon extrêmement sensuelle par le biais du rythme, des mots et des sons ; de l'autre, ils testent les limites de notre aptitude à articuler nos pensées lorsque nous faisons face à des structures formellement très complexes. L'absence d'une claire économie de représentation mise en scène dans ces œuvres crée un vide que l'esprit humain veut s'empresse de remplir d'une façon ou d'une autre. Face aux textes et lectures-performances de Barham, nous devons tenter d'abandonner nos habitudes de lecture et d'écoute. Nous n'avons plus qu'à suspendre notre désir de compréhension et de critique de manière à pouvoir saisir l'opportunité qui nous est offerte d'inventer et de fabriquer. Nous essaierons peut-être de nous inscrire dans les dédales de ces labyrinthes de mots-ruines. Ses précises partitions esquissant une œuvre à interpréter et mettre en scène, à l'infini.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Plastic Space and Political Space", *Boundary 2*, vol. 14, n°1/2 (Autumn 1985 - Winter 1986), Duke University Press, pp. 211-223.

traduit de l'anglais par Vanessa Desclaux

The textuality defined above by Lyotard is what creates for us, readers, a space of action through questioning, speculation, and invention. It is within that space that we become conscious and empowered of the possibility of defining ourselves as singular thinking beings. Our understanding of the "textuality" of Barham's work reflects our complex and undeniably personal relationships to language and the context in which this language is articulated. Barham's written figures elude image as much as narration, forming instead cryptic notations, interrupting and slowing down our ability to read and decipher language. These enigmatic fragments force us to reconnect language with both body and intelligence; on the one hand her texts engage the body of the reader/listener in an extremely sensual manner through words, sounds and rhythms; on the

other hand, they test the limits of our ability to articulate our thoughts when facing their intricate formal structures. The absence of a representational economy within these works creates a void or at best a sketch that the human mind feels the need to complete in one way or another. Confronted with Barham's texts and spoken-word performances, we need to abandon our habits of looking, reading or listening; we can only suspend our desire for comprehension and critique in order to seize the opportunity for invention and fabrication. We may try to write ourselves through her labyrinths of word-ruins, her intricate notations outlining a work to be interpreted and performed *ad infinitum*.

## Anna Barham

Tangrams, prints and performance; the Phoenician alphabet, Roman ruins and Greek mythology *by Colin Perry*

The 19th-century proto-Surrealist playwright Alfred Jarry once said: 'We shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish even the ruins. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine, well-designed buildings.' The early history of the 20th-century avant-garde would prove Jarry's point: the rubble of the past is indelible. The Futurists' kaleidoscopic visions were realized with oil on canvas; Dadaists proclaimed the death of art, but continued to produce it; writers broke language into pieces, only to put it back together as novels and poems printed on paper and bound in cloth.

In her recent exhibition at International Project Space in Birmingham, Anna Barham explored the conflict between structure and ruination. *Proteus* (2010) is an animated video work in which a flickering array of words rapidly appear and vanish, letter by letter, rendering them almost unreadable. Words such as 'negotiate', 'transmutation', 'granite' and 'tongue' seem to vanish before they can be registered properly by the human eye and understood by the mind. The order underpinning this shifting array seems, at first, entirely random. In fact, the work is a visual and textual analogue of the description in Homer's *Odyssey* of the Spartan king Menelaus' struggle with Proteus, the Greek god who could foretell the future to anyone who might capture him as he morphed between forms. Occasionally, I had the impression of seeing words that may or may not have been there: was that 'antelope' and 'spume'? Proteus – the shape-shifting god – is an apt subject for such quicksilver impressions (the adjective 'protean' is etymologically related to his qualities).

But there's another story here. The words in *Proteus* are anagrams of an enigmatic phrase invented by Barham: 'return to Leptis Magna'. The ancient Phoenician city of Leptis Magna, in modern-day Libya, is one of the best-preserved ancient cities in the Mediterranean, a city that was inherited by the Romans, and which UNESCO describes as: 'One of the most beautiful cities of the Roman Empire, with its imposing public monuments, harbour, market-place, storehouses, shops and residential districts.' It also took the fancy of 19th-century English aristocrats, who plundered and transported a sizeable chunk of it (including columns, entablatures and walls) to a park near Windsor Castle, England, turning it into a rather fetching folly. *Proteus* thus draws an unexpected equivalence between the city's architectural afterlife and the shifting wordplay of an anagram.

The Phoenicians are of course, best remembered for their alphabet, which colonized and replaced the written systems of much of the western world (the Greeks and Romans adapted it, and the printed words you are reading are its heir). Another work, also shown at International Project Space, hints at this phonetic morphology: a series of prints of numerals rendered in a sharp, angular fonts. Barham has created these from tangrams, a shapes game (popularized in the 19th century) whose geometric units can be arranged in endless formations. Here, they look slick and futuristic, but also awkward (one variant of the numeral '4' is almost illegible). Barham explored this

disrupted elocution in her performance *Slick Flection* (2009) at Arcade in London for which she read a fragmented text whose concrete logic derives as much from its spelling as its speaking: 'Ill verse ill verse ill verse sill ver sil ver silver'. Midway through her reading, a male performer (Derek Hartley) stepped up onto a specially constructed metal platform and started to tap dance. Clickety-click: the words became an incantation, the dance a rite.

Barham's performative texts recall English philosopher J.L. Austin's definition of 'speech acts' as formulated in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), in which he states that there are some utterances that are, in fact, actions. Examples of this include: 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*', and 'I take this man as my lawfully wedded husband'. This action-like quality is suggested by the platforms that populate Barham's installations, which take the form of minimalist, modular tangram-shaped units. Similarly, in her animated video work, *Magenta, Emerald, Lapis* (2009), which also consists of a series of words based on an anagram of 'Leptis Magna', plus the additional letters R, E, E and D, we see Barham literally 'doing things with words' as she arranges a set of tangrams into letters from the work's title, her silhouetted hands moving as deftly as a conjurer or card-shark.

When I met Barham in her London studio, she read me a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): 'If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs.' Barham's work suggests that our endless rebuilding of our cultural and linguistic rubble is an attempt to express this mathematically perfect knowledge, one articulation at a time.

**Opposite page:**  
*Magenta, Emerald, Lapis*  
2009  
Production still

**Below left:**  
*and ... reading and dancing ...*  
2009  
(A reading of *Slick Flection*, 2009  
with tap dancing by Derek  
Hartley)  
Performance at Arcade, London

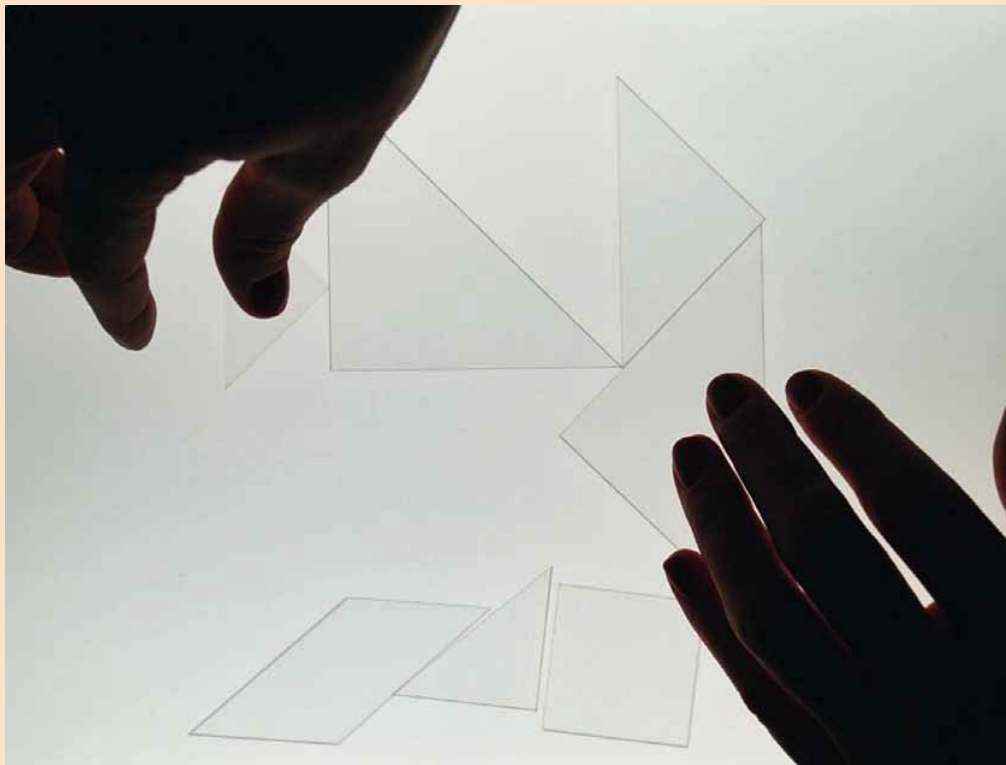
**Below right:**  
**Background:**  
'Tangram'  
2010  
Relief prints  
Each 55×38 cm  
**Foreground: Posture**  
*Proteus*  
Chipboard  
Dimensions variable  
Digital projection  
Installation view at International  
Project Space, Birmingham



# Anna Barham

Whether working in film, sculpture, drawing or performance, Anna Barham often dramatizes the interplay between a system and the paradoxical freedom and potential it engenders. In 2007, she began what has evolved into a sustained investigation into the anagram as a poetic take on this theme. Starting with the name of the ancient Roman city Leptis Magna, she drew long sequences of its two-word anagrams in sprawling, biro grids in an attempt to visualize the graphic relation between the words when considered formally as different patterns of letters. The artist's interest was not only the fact that Leptis Magna yielded an unusually high number of permutations ('magenta lips', 'elating amps', 'pliant games', 'plant images'), but that the very concept of the ruined Roman city was conjured as a sculptural equivalent to the idea of letters as building blocks, each sharing a capacity to construct fantastical visions.

This plastic idea of imagination was also present in models that Barham made of the theatre at Leptis Magna, *Pliant Games I–III*. Constructed from discarded packaging and plaster, the models oscillated between illusion and materiality, resembling the crumbled stone of the original



*Magenta, Emerald, Lapis*, 2009. Still from digital projection. Silent, 30 min.



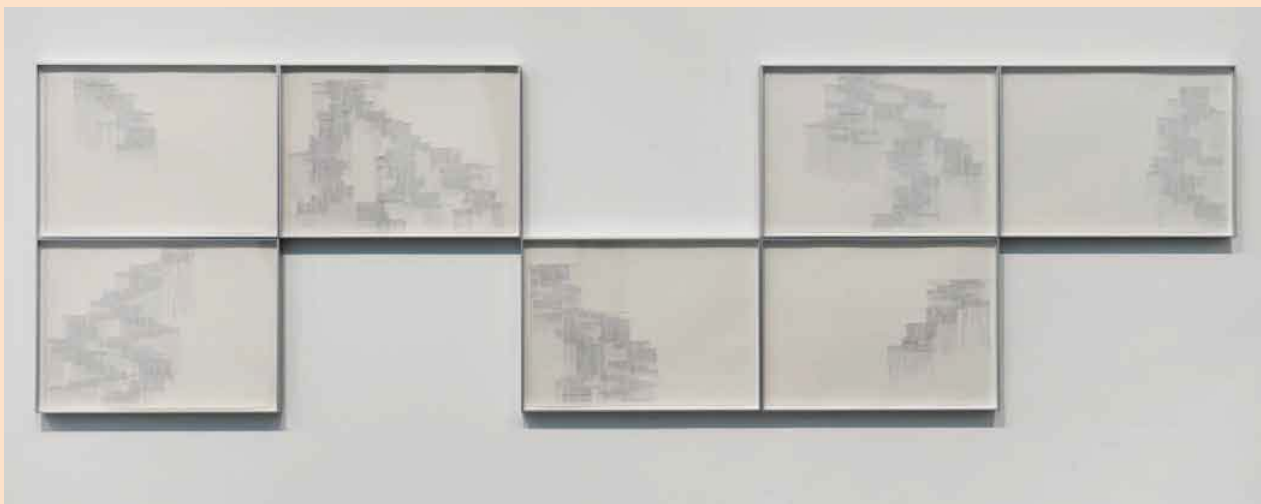
*7 (The Round Room)*, 2009. Performance, 20 min

while resolutely revealing their constitution from studio detritus.

In 2008–09, Barham added four letters to Leptis Magna to create the phrase 'replanted images', from which she generated more than twenty-five new drawings. Rather than ordering words solely according to the contingency of spelling, she began to use the computer as a tool with which to 'mine' sense. From the nearly 67,000 possible three-word anagrams of the phrase, she made deliberate and charged choices, set in sequences that created allusive or rhetorical resonances (SPIE GENTLE DRAMA / SIP ELEGANT DREAM / NEGATE DREAM SLIP / INGEST DREAM LEAP / MAD STEERING LEAP). Barham describes her interest in anagrams as a way of seeking out the 'unconscious' of a word, as though its set form is simply the skin on a teeming proliferation of alternative possibilities that might be conjured if it loses its shape.

In a performance at Arcade, London, in 2009, Barham set up a configuration of sculpture, film, performance and spoken word that brought together the different

## Spied Elegant Arm

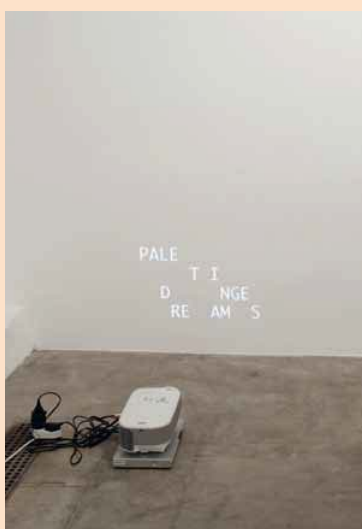


**Spied Elegant Arm**, 2009. 7 drawings, biro on paper, aluminium frames, 315 x 91 x 4 cm

## Slick Flection



**Slick Flection**, 2009. Performance with Derek Hartley, 10 min



**Time Slid Me Again**, 2008. Digital projection, 1 minute loop



**Pliant Games I**, 2007. Plaster, clay, cardboard, glue, wood, sellotape, plastic 40 x 30 x 20 cm

aspects of her practice in a single event. The space was filled by a multi-level structure made from tangram shapes, which acted both as sculpture and as seating to view the film *Magenta, Emerald, Lapis*. For the performance, Barham used the construction as a platform, from which she read *Slick Flection*, a text based on tap-dance instructions substituted with other syllables, sometimes making sense and sometimes just creating a rhythm. A projection of a disc of light 'beat' out the original tempo of the instructions as a male tap dancer moved with an insistent but irregular rhythm in and out of the beam of light across the platforms. Typical of Barham's aesthetic investigation, the three systems were choreographed with an impression of chance resonance so that sometimes they were in synch, and at other moments obliterated each other.