Sans titre

This is a transcript of a discussion between Alan Dunn (AD) and John Wood (JW). It was recorded in March 2017 as part of an editorial policy meeting.

JW - In 2016 you contributed a research paper to the archive issue of Journal for Writing in Creative Practice and now you are a guest editor. Can you talk about the two roles from the wider perspective of creative practice?

AD - I worked with Rowan Bailey at University of Huddersfield, who edited the archive issue, for around ten months. Submitting and publishing that paper was one of the most rewarding experiences I can remember and it makes this opportunity a real honour and pleasure. To engage in artists' development, no matter what stage of their career, and to offer them different relationships, responsibilities and roles is invaluable. And, by artists, I include those working with curatorial, authoring or editorial processes. When artists are approached to do anything, they grasp them as opportunities. In my case, this issue very much fits in with some of the sound art and digital billboard projects I've been engaged in, particularly looking at curatorial processes around highly specific themes. The framework this journal offers comes with a certain history. It is an exciting space within which various practitioners built up the recurring theme of hard to read. Actually, it is hard to act as editor and artist at the same time. It presents me with a dilemma, especially as academic research papers are supposed to be highly disciplined. (Why) do artists crave creative freedom, instead of rigour?

JW - It's a good question. Concerns about the limitations of alphabetical writing have been bouncing around for thousands of years. Plato talked about the fear of dumbing down because of the shift from pictographic to alphabetic writing. Once you commit something to paper, in an almost legal sense, you trap yourself. Clement of Alexandria is said to have complained (in 200 AD): "To write all things in a book is to leave a sword in the hands of a child." And we have both seen many art and design students who are very wary of writing. Could this be because they feel they are giving up their freedom of thought, just to create a little book?

AD - Yes, in my own teaching experience I have noticed an anxiety or, even a neurosis, about the relationship between reading, writing and studio practice. We are noticing art students that simply do not, or will not, read. The gap between reading, authoring and making seems to be widening by the year. These concerns definitely inform the way I will edit this issue of the journal. There is a useful publication *How to write about contemporary art* by Gilda Williams (Goldsmiths) that distills the process of writing down to three main points: describing what you see, reflecting upon the decisions that led the artist to produce this artifact while considering and significance of the whole process and product and, finally, asking yourself why we should even spend time writing about it. It is a very nuts and bolts approach that can be incredibly useful to get students started, whether they are writing an artist's statement,

museum label or exhibition review. On the other hand, it can take a lot of the magic or experimentation away. I was recently reading Malcolm Lowry's *Under the volcano* and his visions of New Brighton as seen through a Mexican Day of the Dead mescal drinking session. This is part of our educational anxiety, do we encourage art and design students to write experimentally, leading to artifacts that may be hard to read, or do we give them some of the rules and tools of a more traditional art writing?

JW - I think it has to be a balance. In 1990 I created a hypertext authoring system called IDEAbase (c.f. Bailey, 2016). Initially, it was to give artists and designers easier access to reading material that might inform their practice. Of course, we all have Wikipedia and Google Scholar now. But I think the digital industry has missed the point by focusing almost exclusively on text searching and reading, rather than better authoring software. Surely, writing is even more important than reading? But national education policies were founded upon a notion of knowledge that emerged from the monastic traditions, where the slavish copying of books led to the idea of scholastic rigour. It is easy to lampoon the puritanical tradition of criticality. The bullying tactics that were used to maintain a power elite included the reading of serious books that were meant to be hard to read and used a lot of Greek and Latin words. It was deemed more important to read every book by a particular author, rather than to use them in a re-interpretation, or practical application. There is still a prevailing assumption that 'advanced' thinking is built upon the literate (and numerate) skills of analysis, summary and condensation. As you know, I believe that the metaphor of academic 'rigour' remains a dubious, if not ludicrous, conceit. Without creative insight, adaptability, flexibility and resilience it merely denotes the slavish adherence to certain rules. Perhaps we could envisage a system of governance that augments the framing of laws, taxes and treaties with visual logic and design-thinking?

AD - The first line of my editorial will be "Our motives may be hard to read." For me this is not about completely bringing down any particular system, as I still think there is a place for that tradition. One of my colleagues, amicably known as 'the human Internet', has read virtually every book by Derrida, Lowry, Huxley, Ballard, Barthes and so on but he is also a visual artist and has a way of applying his knowledge and sharing ideas with staff and students in an incredible manner. In terms of writing forms, some of those decisions have been devolved within Universities down to a course or school level and made it possible to offer students a range of options for writing, whether that be dissertation, contextual statement, extended essay, contextual document or artist's statement. The brief can become about words, ideas and authoring within the same assessment criteria of demonstrating knowledge of a subject and the ability to research and form arguments. The form can be a pulp fiction novel or a scroll. The piece by Bryony in this journal was actually her contextual document submission while she was studying on our Advanced Professional Diploma in Professional Practice in Art and Design course at Leeds Beckett University. For us it was an important moment because she satisfied all the assessment criteria yet took her investigations into Bowie and Burroughs and presented us with something that made us rethink how we even begin to formally read submissions and how we are

introducing processes of authoring and editing to visual art students. Sometimes you notice such an artwork and you 'bank' it as something significant, then unpack it later when the opportunity arises. The works I have been banking recently have all had to do with words being crossed out or reduced, restricted word counts and faded or buried texts. I know these artists. They do have something to say, but they choose very particular words, and do not grant the reader an easy task of reading. It is as though they are saying "I have something to say and that is what I am saying." In some ways this is as defiant as Cage's 1973 statement "I have nothing to say and I am saying it."

An important feature of this issue are the hyperlinks and routes away from the contributions. In my editorial will I use Jeff Young's metaphor of the "motorway ballasted by old books" as a side road for exploring associated texts. When I refer to the Cocteau Twins on the other hand, I am referring to an insular, self-perpetuating world. In the included texts, what is blurred or crossed out is meant to be the beginning, not the end of the comprehension.

JW - You raise some interesting questions. How much of a transgressive, or even an iconoclastic attitude is reflected here? Are these acts of refusal? This makes me think about the difference between artists and designers. Having myself moved from Fine Art to Design, I wrote design courses and thought a lot about what design might be, and what designers might learn. For me, it is proper and even desirable for artists *not* to know what they are doing or, at least, not until a much later time. It seems wrong to expect artists making funding applications to state clearly what their work will be about, before they make it. For designers, it is a different matter. Eventually, the professional decisions they make may be replicated around the world, so there are different boundaries, ethically speaking. Whereas a designer in a commercial world may have to monitor his or her role quite carefully, artists need more freedom. They should therefore be allowed to make work that is unclear, useless or impermanent. This also raises the issue of paper versus digital screen. I guess the Letterists, or Situationists would have loved Snapchat! Although…actually, if you know the words are going to disappear, you do not need to cross them out … (laughter)

AD - Just to be clear, I think you can still read this issue and I want it to be read. Nathan's *Action Score Generator* for example is a printed link and the online version allows you to read these scores clearly, but only for five seconds at a time. My giant animated billboard piece *FOUR WORDS* can be easily read and the main constraint was just the number of words allowed and again a time restraint of ten seconds. Other contributors use devices that slow us down, forcing us to read their intentions in a slightly different way. But then, isn't that what artists have always done when working with words? And, as part of this editorial process, I have been thinking around formal design issues – can we flip that text, or can we have that section in shorthand? And how would the journal sound?

We have touched upon the roles of artists and designers, but what about the role of the editor of a journal containing artworks? Some might see this a type

of curating. Actually, I don't want to dwell on these words as nouns, but to think more about the processes behind them. I would like to think of the behavioural drivers that help me to arrange, organise, juxtapose or create connections across time and space – say, between amateurs and professionals.

JW - For me, it is more helpful to acknowledge that you are co-creating something, rather than imposing an authoritative judgement. Ten years ago I co-wrote a paper *Synergy and Sympoiesis in the Writing of Joint Papers*. We invented the term 'sympoiesis' to mean a co-evolutionary process, rather than an editing process. There were four tests to determine whether sympoiesis had taken place. One of them was to ask if the collaborative work was better than what any of the co-creators might have produced separately. This means that terms such as 'curator' or 'editor' can be applied in a more involved, less hierarchical way. But that brings us back to the clumsy nature of text, relative to the sophisticated and performative nature of human beings.

AD - I will write a lot in the editorial about singers and lyricists making their communications difficult to comprehend. The idea of burying your voice in a recording parallels the evolution of the electric guitar and multi-track studios. This seems a more fluent way to say – while not saying – something or nothing. If we propose that visual art students sing, speak or perform their written tasks, does that unlock the freedom we are calling for? Or does it simply breed artists who will never be able to write even the simplest of personal statements?

JW - One of the origins of writing is the ancient Greek notion of 'poiesis', which is the art of 'bringing forth' as a vocalist might do, when improvising a love-song from the heart. This suggests that anything might happen. In other words, in abandoning pre-conceptions and inhibitions, everyone – including the singer – might be surprised. We might note that the act of research will usually provide surprises. Of course, they also used the term 'techne' to refer to a less spontaneous, more synthetic and artificial idea of creating something. This can useful for analyzing, or commenting on, something that already exists. Since the 1960s, artists and designers got sucked into a culture of academic research that, in some respects, was alien to their core values. As Edward de Bono so irreverently put it, "modern academic writing is a triumph of form over content." In my view, students of art or design should be given no rules for writing. Instead they should learn to harness their curiosity in ways that are increasingly wise. This probably means being more self-reflexive. Our assessment criteria included a certain number of marks for 'reader-empathy.'

AD - In selecting artworks and texts that create the idea of being hard to read, I thought a lot about how a journal might sound. This is not as grandiose as composing or conducting the issue, but those were some of the processes in my mind. On one level, I am imagining our readers being at a concert. Some have earplugs in.

JW – As I said, I don't think there are rules that will tell you how someone will interpret your editing, or your texts. But you can reflect upon how they are likely to be read. Do you want the reader to gently bob up and down in an in-between state? That may be what you want. But do you really intend your reader to feel completely at sea? Will she find the experience tedious, or unproductive? Or will there be an inflatable ring or rubber duck lurking below the surface?

You raise an interesting question with your notion of the interruption, especially with the *FOUR WORDS* project, which makes me think about theft and hacktivism. If you hack something you may feel you are doing it for the greater good, but you are also stealing in order to do so.

AD - I think I try to build on whatever is already there. It is about being aware of spaces for creative practice and recognising the in-between spaces. For a time, I wanted to break with conventional styles and genres and 'curated' a series of CDs, which give the listeners 74-minutes to find new connections from within the infinite possibilities of streaming, remixes, out-takes, bootlegs and downloads. Part of the power of printed or pressed matter is that it forces us to make decisions. And we make those decisions to engage the reader and to make them want to turn the pages. In this case, they could listen to the next track and click the next hyperlink.

In my *FOUR WORDS* project, I created a huge physical space - a large advertising hoarding - that became part of many people's daily commute. It was a space to be creative, in between home and work. Although the huge digital screen was a familiar presentational genre, each week I watched more and more people *not* dealing with it. I expected it to be unmissable, yet fewer people were reading it or taking anything from it.

JW - A couple of ideas come to mind here. The first is the notion of spectacle that was important for the situationists. The Marxist philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has criticised the modern notion of society, saying that the notion of 'We' now only consists of a plurality of egos – i.e. "being-together at the Spectacle." Your *FOUR WORDS* piece seems to be trying to re-appropriate that spectacle, so it is interesting that it somehow became humdrum, over time. Secondly, you raised the question of how many transgressions of form that artworks should be allowed to have, and on how many levels. Reading Simon Morris's terse account of throwing ripped up fragments of poetry from a Renault Clio reminded me of the term 'Intertwingularity' as coined by the Internet pioneer Ted Nelson. He argued that there is no intrinsic hierarchy of importance in disciplines, forms, topics or genres. Nonetheless, as a text, Simon's creates bright, hallucinatory fragments in the mind. The fact that the ordinary saloon car is French, would take many readers back to their memory of young Clio driver, Nicole, and her dippy father, Papa.

AD - Yes, the gloriously surreal image of a blizzard of paper being unleashed through a car window was soon brought down to earth by the image of Simon's poor students having to pick all the words out of nearby bushes. (more laughter)

FURTHER READING

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