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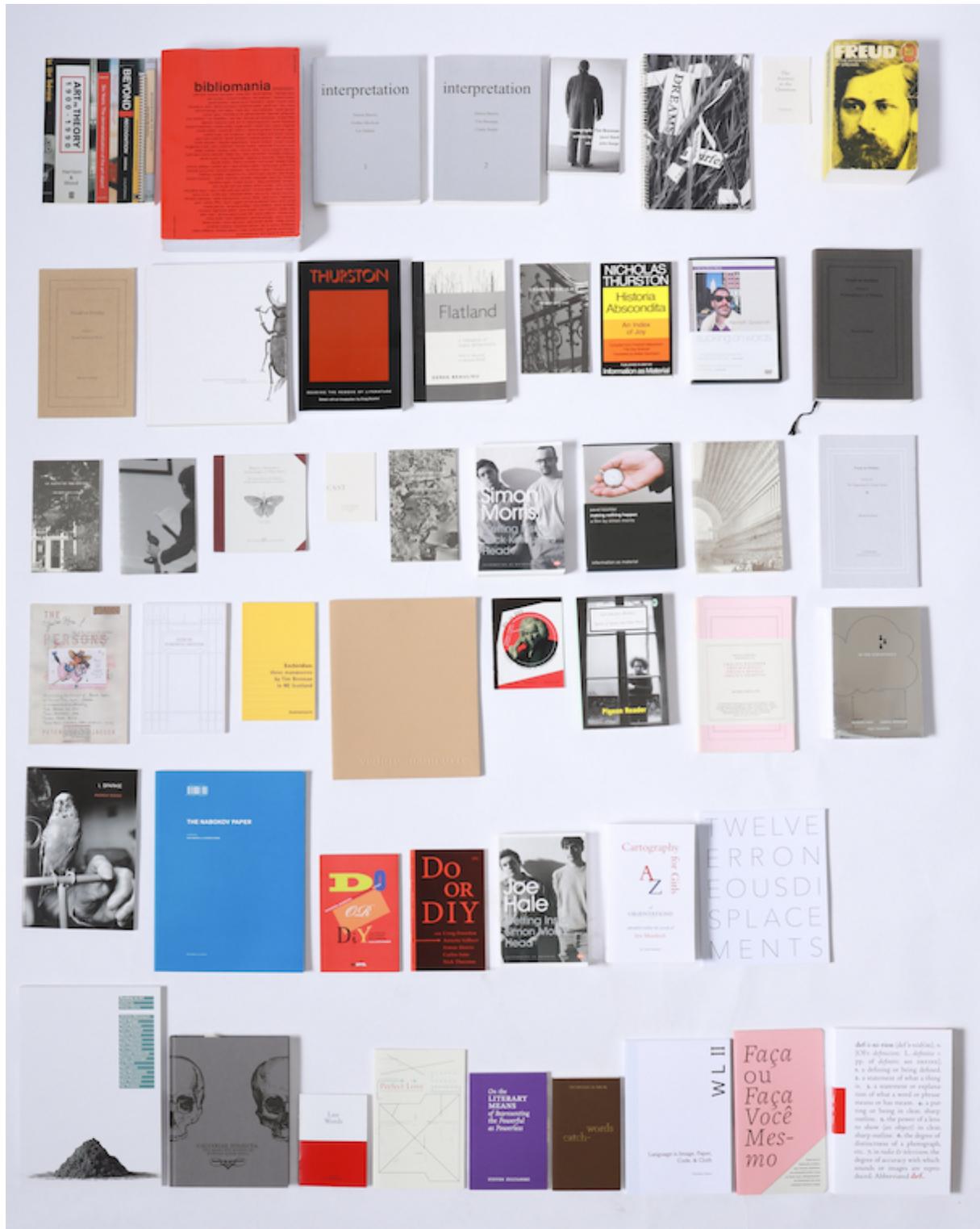
### Abstract

Responding to an invitation from Felipe Cussen and Riccardo Boggione to examine the state of ‘conceptual writing’ in 2021 for the Uruguayan journal *Tenso Diagonal*, Morris tackles the framing of conceptual writing on Wikipedia which cites Johanna Drucker, who claims that the movement is “probably over now, even in its newest iterations.” He responds vigorously by claiming, far from being over, the movement is ‘in rude health’ and cites three exemplary examples of recent conceptual writing and a new interdisciplinary journal as evidence of its continued investigations. He also uses the space to critique the idea that North America is the epi-centre of activity for this movement and hopes that future histories will remember the work that has taken place across the globe. Morris points out, like any cultural movement that presents a body of new ideas and radical thinking, there are some brilliant works; some average works; and some works that are just awful. In the illustrated essay, Morris tracks his own contributions as well as detailing the distinction between conceptual works that use an excess of information and those that use erasure and other procedures to work on the edge of perceptibility, in the space of the infrathin.

**Key Words:** Conceptual Writing; Information as Material; Carolyn Thompson; Jo Hamill; Michael Hampton; Inscription.

**in rude health**  
by Simon Morris

Conceptual Writing as a movement and like any other movement has produced some brilliant works, some average works and some awful works. I'd like to think I've produced all three.



[image 1: publications by Information as Material]

I don't believe in any of the originary myths that are bandied around about conceptual writing. Of course, like any writing and with a nod to TS Eliot's, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', there are many precursors to this body of work such as Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Joseph Kosuth, Luis Camnitzer, Robert Smithson, Adrian Piper and Ulises Carrión – to name but a few.

For me, I reckon it's pretty hard to talk about something until it's been given a name and so I would personally credit Craig Dworkin for deploying on *The Ubunweb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (ubu.com) in 2003, the new category of 'conceptual writing'. As soon as I heard it, I started printing it on our books on the cover where the category of publication (such as literary studies, philosophy, sociology...conceptual writing) is recorded next to the ISBN. The first time I included it in the paratextual information was for *Re-Writing Freud* in 2005. If I was going to explain conceptual writing to anyone, I would suggest it is a fusion of art and writing in response to the digital age and the potential of the internet. The strategies that tend to be used include appropriation, constraint-based systems and concepts that determine the form of the work. There's a recognition that two identical pieces of writing can mean completely different things, depending on their respective context. As it says in our moniker on our website for the publishing imprint, Information as Material: "We publish work by artists and writers who use extant material — selecting it and reframing it to generate new meanings — and who, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things."

Included in my own contribution to this field have been a few works that I would count as precursors to conceptual writing, *Bibliomania*, 1998-99 which had 15 participants [with Helen Sacoor] and *Bibliomania* 2000-2001, with 150 participants, were collections of international artists', curators' and writers' book selections that reflect their individual interests and practice. In essence, a book of bibliographies with contributions from Julie Ault, Victor Burgin, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Joseph Kosuth and Haim Steinbach, amongst many others. The exhibitions, the website and the publications present the participants' practice through the multiple sources that inform or contextualise it rather than the more traditional route of presenting their physical work.

This was followed by *Interpretation*, volumes 1 and 2. The question I was asking here was can you mentally picture someone's work or practice through his or her references? I think you can, as the footnotes and bibliographies act as noematic triggers to the work. Having thought about this, it occurred to me that this was the foundation of an interesting project in its own right in which I would invite one writer to reconstruct another writer's work from his or her footnotes and references. My liminal role would be of the artist, setting the parameters of the project and inviting others to perform within the collaborative space of encounter. The project provides an opportunity for two writers, working in a similar field, to step outside their own set of references and make a construction using the references of another. The artist Sharon Kivland wittily referred to this as an 'academic blind date.'

Following those two projects, I have personally completed the following work in conceptual writing: I founded a publishing imprint for experimental literature called Information as Material (2002) which then went on to publish many examples of conceptual writing by over sixty artists and writers from around the globe [the imprint, edited by Craig Dworkin, Kaja Markzewska, Nick Thurston (2006-18) and myself and was the very first publishing imprint dedicated to conceptual writing]; *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* (book and multiple exhibitions in this country and abroad, 2003); *Re-Writing Freud* (book and multiple exhibitions in this country and abroad, 2005); *sucking on words: Kenneth Goldsmith* (the first documentary film on Kenneth Goldsmith, DVD, 2007, screened at the British Library and the Oslo Poetry Festival); *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* (book, 2010), *The Perverse Library* (the world's first exhibition of

conceptual writing, reviewed in the Guardian and the Independent, UK national newspapers); *Do or DIY*, [with Craig Dworkin & Nick Thurston] (book, 2012 translated into German by Dr Annette Gilbert and published by Salon-Verlag, 2013, translated into Spanish by Carlos Soto Román and published by Das Kapital, 2013; translated into Portuguese by Pedro Franz & Regina Melim and published by par(ent)esis, 2018; also published in the anthology, *Publishing Manifestos*, ed. Michalis Pichler (Berlin: Miss Read, 2018) and in the anthology, *Publishing Manifestos: An International Anthology from Artists & Writers*, ed. Michalis Pichler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019); *Pigeon Reader* (book, 2012), *Reading as Art* (exhibition and catalogue, 2016, multiple exhibited in this country, North America and South America), *Copying* [with Kaja Marczevska and Valérie Steunou] (pamphlet, 2017), *Inscription: the Journal of Material Text – Theory, Practice, History* [co-edited with Gill Partington and Adam Smyth], (two issues of the journal to date, 2020 & 2021 and an accompanying exhibition, *Holy, Holy, Holy: an exhibition of books with holes* at No Show Space in London, 06-30 October 2021).



[Image 2: *Holy, Holy, Holy* exhibition at No Show Space]

The exhibition, *Reading as Art* at Bury in 2016 drew on some of Craig Dworkin's ideas in *No Medium* (MIT Press, 2013) and basically examined two distinct categories of work in conceptual writing, the obscenity of language and the infrathin (of which, more in a moment).

The proliferation of language in the digital age or what could be seen as an excess of information have been referred to as the 'obscenity of language' by the cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard.<sup>1</sup> He also used the term 'an ecstasy of communication' for instances where information overload degenerates into incomprehensibility. Confronted by an excess of information, language falters, stumbles, repeats and challenges us to learn to read differently. This body of work is exemplified

by the contributions from Rob Fitterman – *No wait. Yep. Definitely still hate myself*, Kenneth Goldsmith – *Seven American Deaths & Disasters* and Carol Sommer – *Cartography for Girls: An A-Z of Orientations found within the novels of Iris Murdoch*. While the volume of words may at first appear overwhelming, these works also exploit the malleability of digitised text, and show how its signification can change when rapidly shifted from one context to another.

The second set of works revolved around paper, the surface of writing, the materiality of the ground and its physical size while playfully and purposefully removing language. I'm fascinated by works that seem to ask only that they're not read. I like to think about what Marcel Duchamp terms 'the infrathin,' the point at which one can just barely begin to perceive a threshold between two states. As Craig Dworkin refers to in his book *No Medium* (2013):

“The concept, Duchamp insisted, could not be directly defined but could be elaborated through examples: the moment between the report of a gun and the appearance of a bullet hole; the temperature change in a seat that has just been vacated; the volumetric difference between the air displaced by a clean shirt and the same shirt after it has been worn; the noise made by corduroy pants rubbing together when one moves; the impression formed between two sides of a thin sheet of paper...something to be studied!”<sup>iii</sup>

Something to be studied indeed and many of the works in that exhibition addressed this barely perceptible state. But when almost all language has been removed or erased, the works seem to speak more clearly than ever. As Dworkin notes: 'Erasures obliterate, but they also reveal; omissions within a system permit other elements to appear all the more clearly.'<sup>iii</sup> This trend for the infrathin was exemplified in the *Reading as Art* exhibition by the work of Jérémie Bennequin - *ommage À la recherche du temps perdu*, Kate Briggs – *Paper Size Poems*, Martin Creed – *Work no. 88 – a piece of A4 paper crumpled into a ball*, Craig Dworkin – *Fact*, Jo Hamill – *Gutter Words*, Tom Friedman – *A piece of paper, ISO edition* and Nick Thurston, *Erased Kosuth Concept (Art as Idea as Idea as Art)*.

It's worth noting that the writer and editor Paul Stephens has also covered these two polarities in depth through two academic titles, *The Poetics of Information Overload*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015) and *Absence of Clutter: Minimal Writing as Art & Literature*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020).

Despite my contributions to conceptual writing as artist, author (who 'writes by not writing'<sup>iv</sup> which would explain to you why my favourite book of all time is *Bartleby & Co.* by Enrique Vilas Matas), curator and publisher I'm dismayed to see in Wikipedia my contribution to 'conceptual writing' is noted as one book only: *Re-Writing Freud*, (2005). My book is listed as one of many 'international' contributions, firmly placing north America as the epi-centre of this particular movement. It's interesting that the framing of conceptual writing on Wikipedia<sup>v</sup> presents 'historical examples', Recent Examples 'In the USA' and then lumped together 'Around the World'. I guess it makes you reflect on who is responsible for writing these histories and I hope this journal article is an opportunity to further our knowledge of other histories and developments in the field.

After the exhibition *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art* first appeared (October, 2012) and the accompanying publication (published much later in 2018) was being put together, the curator and editor Andrea Anderson emailed me on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2017 the spec sheet for design purposes which included a page of Nora Burnett Abrams' preface as well as a proof copy of my text. This exhibition was undoubtedly the first large-scale touring show of the field. It opened at the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art, USA, October 12, 2012 – February 03, 2013 and

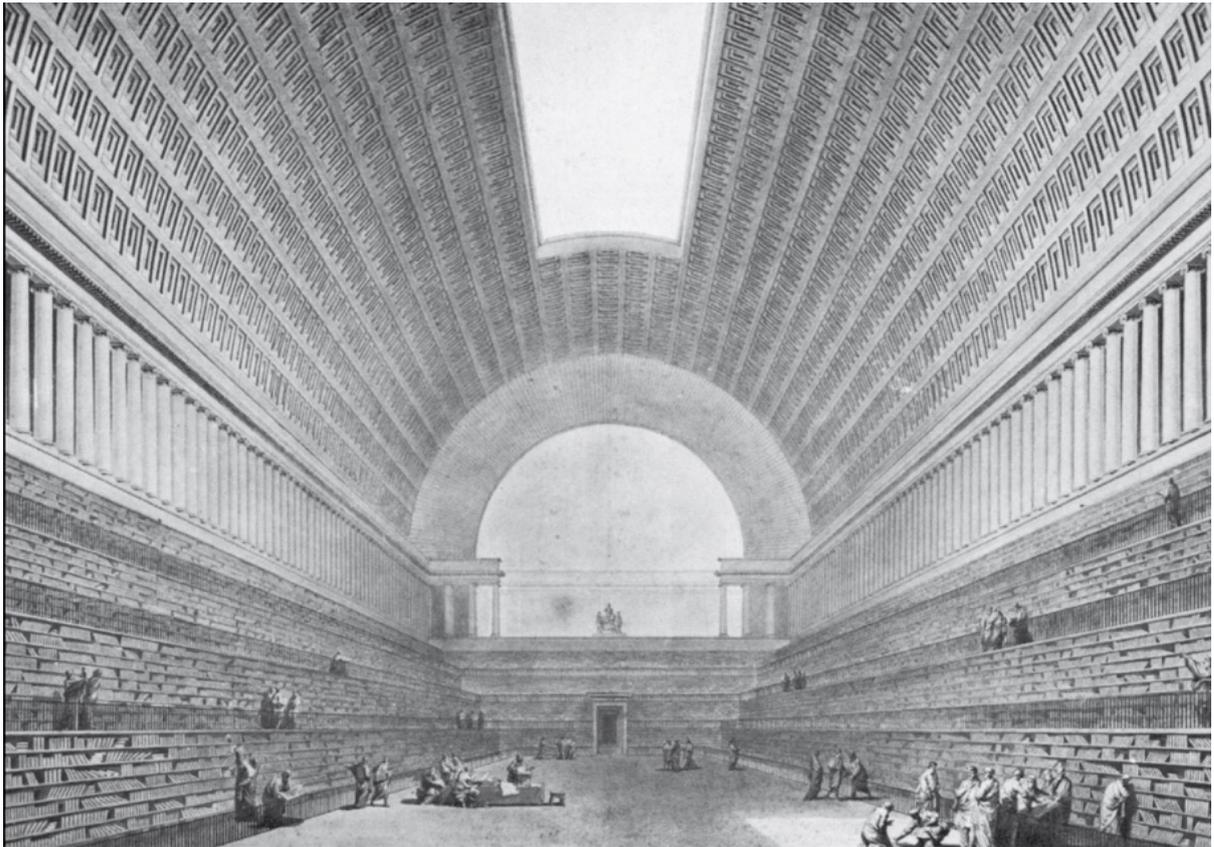
then toured to The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, June 21-September 02 2013, Canada, and then to the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, USA, March 21 – September 21 2014. In Abrams' preface, I was surprised to read the following:

“That Postscript stands as the first such exhibition to acknowledge both literature and visual art as mutually informing creative engines of Conceptual Writing – privileging neither discipline's history – reveals how urgently this collective endeavor needed formulation and advocacy within the contemporary art world. Though keenly articulated and defended within the literary field, Conceptual Writing had yet to receive a full, comprehensive and critical treatment from the visual arts. While some exhibitions had ably demonstrated how artists utilized found language as source material or as the subject of their inquiries, none had put forward the argument that both writers and artists deployed similar strategies, that they shared the same historical precedents, and that their works looked remarkably similar, despite wildly different intentions and significations.”<sup>vi</sup>

I responded by writing the following to Anderson:

“This statement in the preface is just not true. In 2010, I curated an exhibition of conceptual writing at Shandy Hall in Coxwold, entitled *The Perverse Library* involving some 25 of the same artists and writers that appear in *Postscript*. The exhibition was at a museum, Shandy Hall, managed by the Laurence Sterne Trust, admittedly a small museum with a small gallery. The exhibition was funded by Arts Council England and was reviewed in the national press. Nick Thurston did point this out to you all in the closing seminar event held in Denver at the end of the first leg of the *Postscript* exhibition. Tony Trehy, the Director from Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre also did an exhibition entitled ‘Sentences’ which involved eleven of the same artists in the *Postscript* exhibition. Both exhibitions clearly present Conceptual Writing and the mutually informing creative engines of Conceptual Writing, literature and visual art. Here are some published comments from national newspapers in the UK referring to my exhibition, *The Perverse Library* in 2010, explicitly recognizing it as an exhibition of conceptual writing:”

‘What is decidedly avant-garde is conceptualism in a quite different art form – literature. Visit Shandy Hall in Yorkshire, where Laurence Sterne wrote his experimental novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, and one will encounter the first exhibition in Britain of conceptual writing. Conceptual writers sometimes steal from other writers, reordering their text and jumbling it up. Bringing together conceptual art and language, this movement has led to fierce attacks from conventional authors. Influenced by Sterne himself (who plagiarised and rearranged passages) and writers like James Joyce, one leading figure in the movement says conceptual writing “seeks to ask what would a non-expressive poetry look like? A poetry of intellect rather than emotion.” Conceptual writing determinedly makes no claim on originality. It includes a transcription of a year's weather reports and, in the case of one conceptual writer, the simple repetition of the sentence “I will not make anymore boring art.” It's fitting that the house where one of the world's most famous experimental novels was written is in the forefront of avant-garde literature.” – by David Lister for the Independent in an article entitled ‘ICA: Trouble at Mall’ from Tuesday, 28 September 2010.



### The Perverse Library

The Laurence Sterne Trust and information as material warmly invite you to attend the Grand Vernissage of The Perverse Library to celebrate the opening of the exhibition (at the end, of course) on Saturday, 30 October 2010 from 2 – 8 pm.

Edwin Abbott Abbott, Walter Abish, Vito Acconci, Kathy Acker, Bruce Andrews, Guillaume Apollinaire, Antonin Artaud, Paul Auster, John Baldessari, JG Ballard, Fiona Banner, Georges Bataille, Derek Beaulieu, Samuel Beckett, Dodie Bellamy, Hans Bellmer, Caroline Bergvall, Jen Bervin, Nayland Blake, Giovanni Boccaccio, Riccardo Bolognino, Maurice Blanchot, Christian Bok, Jorge Luis Borges, Alastair Brotchie, Pavel Büchler, Paul Buck, William S. Burroughs, John Cage, Sophie Calle, Miguel De Cervantes, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Elisabeth S. Clark, Steven Clay, Carlo Collodi, Joseph Conrad, Coracle Press, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Craig Dworkin, Michael Farion, Robert Fitterman, Gustave Flaubert, Sigmund Freud, Edward Gibbon, Allen Ginsberg, Mary Godolphin, Kenneth Goldsmith, Douglas Gordon, Rodney Graham, Brion Gyssin, Lucy Harrison, Ernest Hemingway, Eugène Ionesco, Sarah Jacobs, Peter Jaeger, Alfred Jarry, James Joyce, On Kawara, Emma Kay, Arnold Kemp, Jack Kerouac, Sharon Kivland, Richard Kostelanetz, Joseph Kosuth, Jacques Lacan, Sherrie Levine, Sol Le Witt, Gareth Long, John McAndrew, John McDowall, Stéphane Mallarmé, W. H. Mallock, Michael Maranda, Harry Mathews, Herman Melville, Yukio Mishima, Simon Morris, Scott Myles, Friedrich Nietzsche, George Orwell, Peter Osborne, Georges Perec, Tom Phillips, Michalis Pichler, Vanessa Place, Simon Popper, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, Karen Reimer, Gerhard Richter, Kim Rosenfield, Jerome Rothenberg, Raymond Roussel, Dirk Rowntree, Ed Ruscha, Klaus Scherübel, Peter Schlemihl, Yann Sérandour, William Shakespeare, Robert Smithson, Daniel Spoerri, Gertrude Stein, Laurence Sterne, Chris Taylor, Carolyn Thompson, Nick Thurston, Alison Turnbull, Herman de vries, Lawrence Weiner, Darren Wershler, Robert Williams, Wilf Williams, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Greville Worthington

Professor Dworkin will be present as poet-in-residence at Shandy Hall.

The exhibition is curated by Simon Morris.

2 pm – 6 pm Enjoy the exhibition in the gallery above Wolfson Cottage, tour Shandy Hall – the house where Laurence Sterne lived and wrote *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, visit the church where Sterne preached his sermons and enjoy refreshments in the local hostelry, The Fauconberg Arms.

6 pm – 8 pm Coxwold Village Hall for premiere of the film on celebrated expatriate Czech artist Pavel Büchler: making nothing happen (winner of this year's Northern Art Prize). Food and drinks will be served at the hall.

SATURDAY 4 SEPTEMBER — SUNDAY 31 OCTOBER 2010  
SHANDY HALL COXWOLD YORK YO61 4AD T: 01347 868465

Supported by



ABOVE Scott Myles *Full Stop* 2006  
COVER Étienne-Louis Boullée *Deuxieme projet pour la Bibliothèque du Roi* 1785

[Images 3 & 4: *The Perverse Library*, 2010]

[Also:]

“This autumn, the gallery opened *The Perverse Library*, the first exhibition of conceptual writing to go on show in this country. It claims to be an emerging art form, a fusion of art and literature, influenced by the first artists' books by Ed Ruscha and Sol LeWitt, as much as by writers such as Sterne, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. "Conceptual writing seeks to ask what would a nonexpressive poetry look like? A poetry of intellect rather than emotion?" says Professor Craig Dworkin, a leading figure in the movement. The blog of the Poetry Foundation has had fierce online debates where poets have expressed fury about a form of literature where "writing is the idea and the idea is writing". Conceptual writing is not easy to grasp, or to read. It is not about pleasure, or narrative. It brings together conceptual art and language. The excitement is intellectual rather than aesthetic, and it can be witty. It might be a transcription of a year of weather reports by Kenneth Goldsmith, or John Baldessari's repetition of the sentence: "I will not make anymore boring art". – by Hannah Duguid in an article entitled: 'Works of art that will never win the heart', the Independent, Monday, 4 October 2010.

Continuing my response to Anderson, via email: “I don't think this is a huge issue and very easy to fix. You could just add these ‘three’ words [bolding – my emphasis] to Nora's preface and then it would be a factual statement:

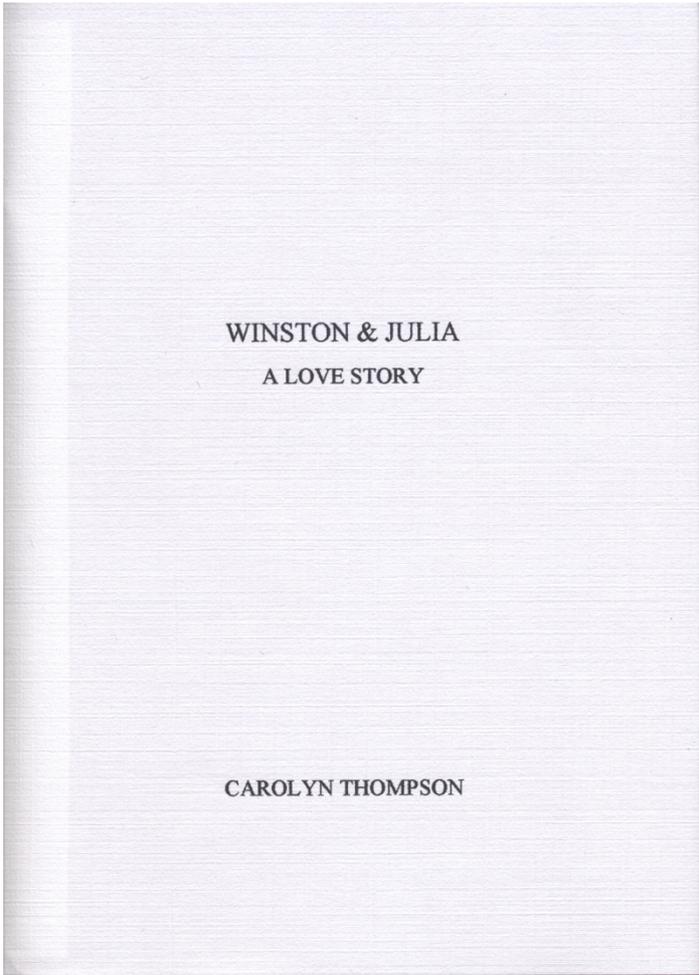
That *Postscript* stands as the first such exhibition **in North America** to acknowledge both literature and visual art as mutually informing creative engines of Conceptual Writing—privileging neither discipline's history – reveals how urgently this collective endeavor needed formulation and advocacy within the contemporary art world.

I hope you don't mind me pointing this out. Those three additional words could make a significant difference to how the history of these events are understood. I reconfirm I think the touring of three major museum exhibitions of *Postscript* you pulled off in North America are of enormous significance and I am delighted to have been involved but, equally we don't want our own work in the UK to be forgotten.”

Anderson was charming in her response and happy to correct the publication before it went to press. In the publication, *Postscript*, our exhibitions were cited in a footnote to Nora Abram's preface which read: “Two important precedents in the UK include the exhibitions “The Perverse Library” organized by Simon Morris at Shandy Hall (2010) and “Sentences” organized by Tony Trehy at Bury Art Museum and Sculpture Centre (2011). I love footnotes, so that was completely fine by me.

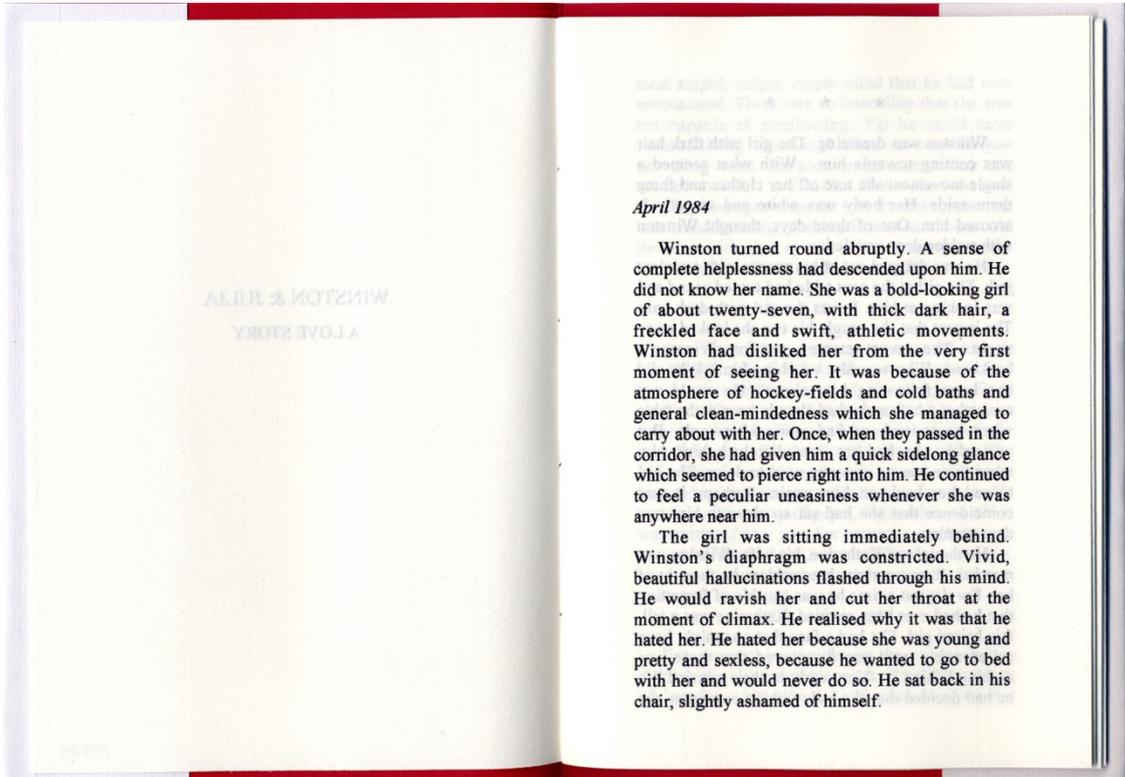
The reason why I titled this essay, ‘in rude health’ is because I want to tell you about five conceptual works that I think are brilliant and worthy of note: *Winston & Julia* and *The Beast in Me* by Carolyn Thompson, *Gutter Words* by Jo Hamill, *Against Decorum* by Michael Hampton and the new journal, *Inscription: the Journal of Material Text – Theory, Practice, History* which is co-edited by Gill Partington, Adam Smyth and myself.

Carolyn Thompson made *Winston & Julia: A Love Story* in 2003 (edition of 100 handmade books, 11cm x 15.5cm) and it's one of my favourite pieces of conceptual writing.



WINSTON & JULIA  
A LOVE STORY

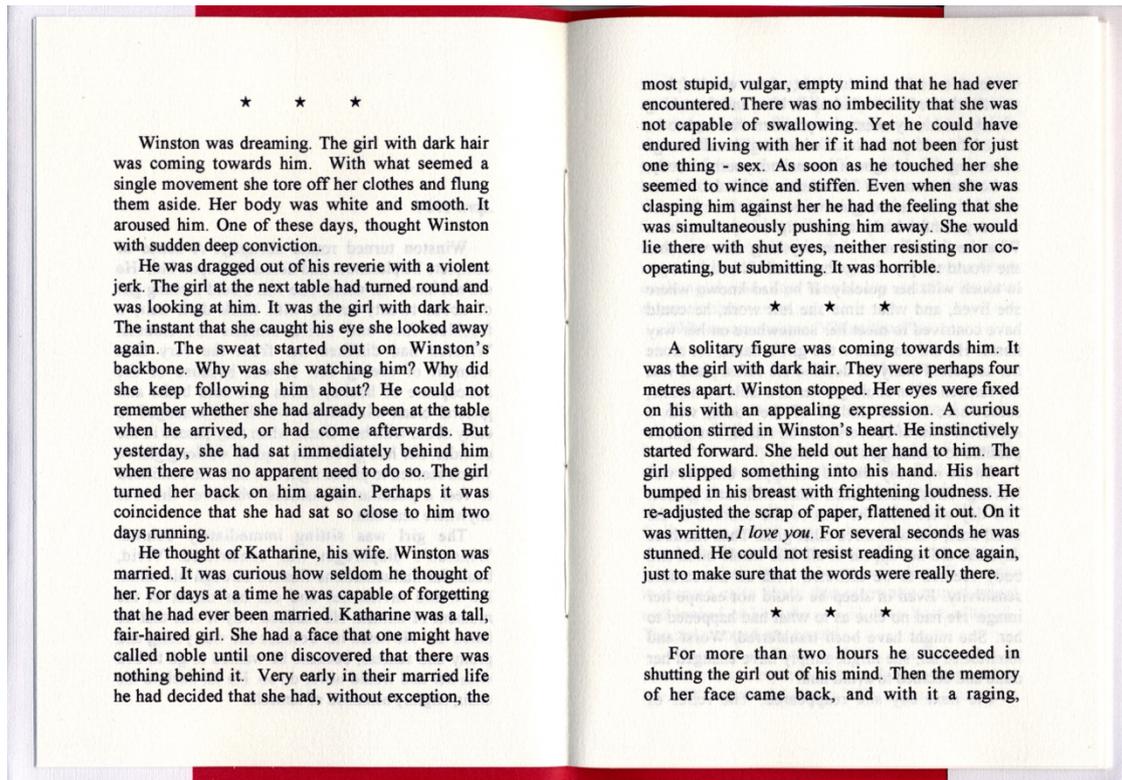
CAROLYN THOMPSON



*April 1984*

Winston turned round abruptly. A sense of complete helplessness had descended upon him. He did not know her name. She was a bold-looking girl of about twenty-seven, with thick dark hair, a freckled face and swift, athletic movements. Winston had disliked her from the very first moment of seeing her. It was because of the atmosphere of hockey-fields and cold baths and general clean-mindedness which she managed to carry about with her. Once, when they passed in the corridor, she had given him a quick sidelong glance which seemed to pierce right into him. He continued to feel a peculiar uneasiness whenever she was anywhere near him.

The girl was sitting immediately behind Winston's diaphragm was constricted. Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind. He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax. He realised why it was that he hated her. He hated her because she was young and pretty and sexless, because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so. He sat back in his chair, slightly ashamed of himself.



[Images, 5, 6, & 7, *Winston & Julia: A Love Story*, 2003, self-published, limited edition of 100 handmade books, London]

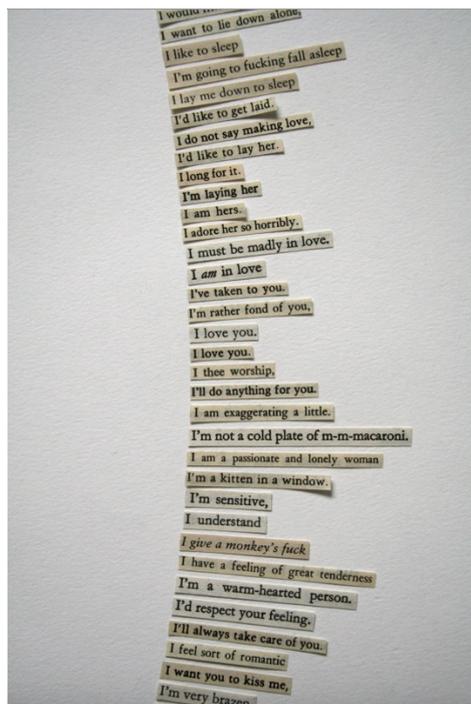
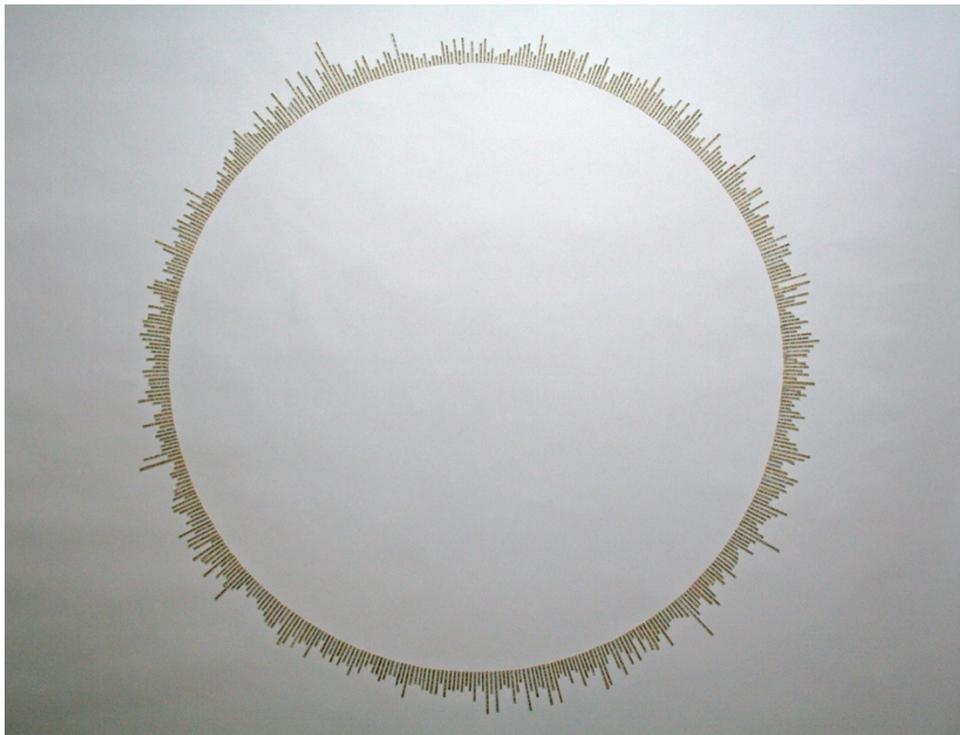
*Winston & Julia: A Love Story* is an adaptation of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. The original political and futuristic content has been removed. From the remaining text, sentences and part sentences have been chosen, but left in the order of the original novel, to create a similar but different narrative, based solely on the relationship between the characters Winston and Julia. For example, an extract from Thompson's book:

"A solitary figure was coming towards him. It was the girl with dark hair. They were perhaps four metres apart. Winston stopped. Her eyes were fixed on his with an appealing expression. A curious emotion stirred in Winston's heart. He instinctively started forward. She held out her hand to him. The girl slipped something into his hand. His heart bumped in his breast with frightening loudness. He re-adjusted the scrap of paper, flattened it out. On it was written, *I love you*. For several seconds he was stunned. He could not resist reading it once again, just to make sure that the words were really there." (Thompson, 2003, p.3)

I think what I love about it so much, is even though the spectre of Big Brother has been erased/removed from the novel, it almost is more present in its absence, exerting a very real pressure on the fragile love affair. I sent it to the editors of the anthology *I'll Drown Your Book: Conceptual Writing by Women* but sadly my recommendation arrived too late for them to include it.

In 2010, Thompson first made *The Beast in Me* for a site specific installation for the Bury Text Festival.

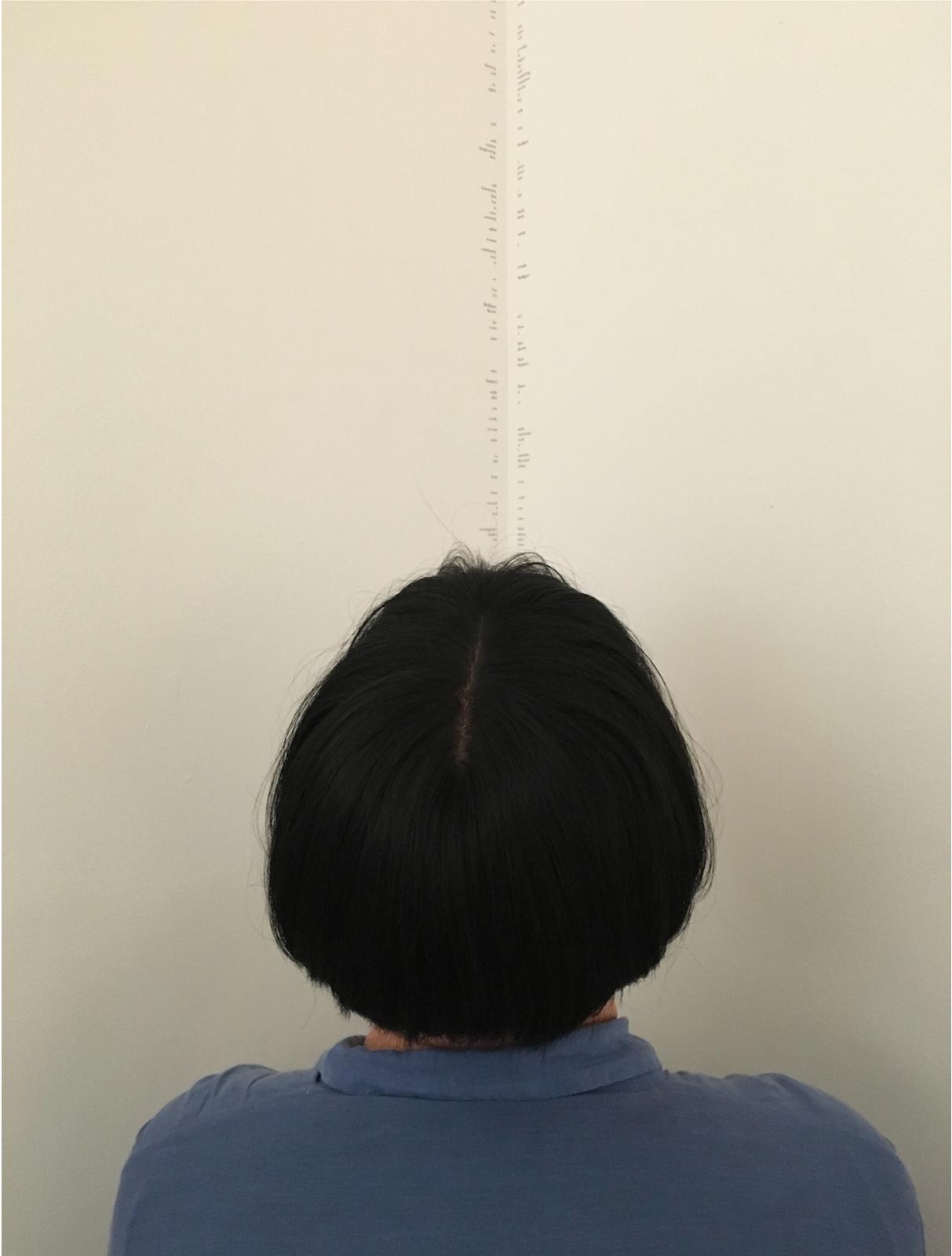
*The Beast in Me* is a collection of sentences and part sentences beginning with 'I' cut from eight novels by different authors. The statements are presented one after another in a circular narrative with no natural beginning or ending and can therefore be read from any point. When removed from their original context, they become ham-fisted stabs at self-revelation and blurted snapshots of confession. The narrative, whilst light and frivolous in places, descends into a sinister and uncontrollable rant in others. For *Inscription: the Journal of Material Text – Theory, Practice, History*, issue #2 on 'holes', a new print edition of 500 (118 X 118mm) was commissioned and distributed to subscribers across the globe.



[See images 8 & 9: *The Beast in Me*, 2010]

Jo Hamill produced *Gutter Words* as an installation in several exhibitions, as a book published by YSI in partnership with Leeds Beckett University and Information as Material in 2019 and is currently working on it as a sound work for *Sensational Books*, an exhibition in 2022 at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, curated by Kathryn Rudy and Emma Smith.

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[Images 10,11,12,13, 14 & 15, *Gutter Words*, 2019]

As it says on the website, advertising the book launch for *Gutter Words* at the Henry Moore Institute in 2019:

“Working with an edition of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Hamill systematically obliterated the words of Joyce but carefully retained those words positioned closest to the gutter – the technical term used to describe the central margin of a bound page. The retained fragments form two extended columns that continue for 933 pages. Notable here is how design and typographic terminology is so entrenched in bodily references. Header, footer, body-copy, the arm of a ‘K’, the crotch of a ‘Y’, the foot of a ‘T’, the ear of a ‘G’, the shoulder of an ‘R’ and so on. As is the architectural scaffolding of Joyce’s schema which underpins the structure of *Ulysses*, kidney, genitals, heart, lungs, oesophagus, brain, blood, ear. etc. Lawrence Weiner refers to language as material for construction, the act of deletion in *Gutter Words* exposes the architectural scaffolding that holds words in place. Voids are physical spaces to be read and words become unanchored, set adrift in an uncertain space. The architectural qualities of this physical space will be exposed, *Gutter Words* is devoid of the accoutrements associated with a ‘book’ such as cover, boards, end papers, dust jacket and will retain only the innards, an unprotected text block.”

It’s a great work and is fascinating in all of its iterations: installation; book and sonic work.

Michael Hampton has written this new piece, *Against Decorum* and it is currently in production as a new Information as Material title, due out in 2022. Hampton has collated descriptions of damage from listings in catalogues of antiquarian books. They make for remarkable list poems of damage and destruction that have befallen treasured volumes through repeated use, wear and tear over centuries of handling. You can imagine wonderful poetry readings from this eclectic volume. Here is a blast of the first two months collations to give you an idea:

1. Gleanings from Blackwell’s summer catalogue **FIRSTS: one hundred recent acquisitions**, 2019. Blackwell’s Rare Books, 48-51 Broad Street, OXFORD, OX1 3BQ

Dustjacket [price-clipped]; [faded] backstrip panel; later ownership [inscription] to initial blank; [browning] to free endpapers; dustjacket with very minor [rubbing]; hint of [chipping] at head; [rubbing] to extremities; light [edge-spotting]; partial [browning] to free endpapers; minor [rubbing]; the odd tiny [nick]; ends of spine [bumped]; a few stray [pencil strokes]; small patch of [dustiness]; slight [wear] to extremities; [lean] to spine; top edge a trifle [dusty]; [spots] to endpapers; dustjacket a little [rubbed]; few faint [spots] to edges; [chipping] to extremities; faint [spots] to prelims; some minor [rubbing]; edges [untrimmed]; head & tail-pieces a bit [browned] and [spotted]; light handling [marks]; minimal [worming] in the lower margins of the first 4 gatherings; page with contemporary [annotations]; [tipped-in] note at end; a hint of [foxing]<sup>vii</sup> on the title page; spine slightly [faded]; upper cover slightly [rubbed]; endpapers [toned]; lower inner hinge [stained]; dustjacket [price-clipped]; edges [untrimmed]; minor [soiling] in places; tiny bits of [worming] in the lower margins; a little [cracking] to joints; headcaps [defective]; couple of minor [pen marks]; corners [bumped]; top-edge a trifle [dusty]; some headlines [cropped] though none eradicated; variously [browned]; [wax-stains]; spine slightly [cocked]; [toning] to backstrip panel; small pink [stain] at head of lower board; occasional [browning]; plates [spotted]; lightly [rubbed] at extremities; mild [damp-staining]; marginal [notes] in a miniscule hand; staples slightly [rusted]; spine ends [pushed]; small [tape stains] to boards; minor [water-staining]; faint [foxing] to free endpapers; a little [chipped]; the odd [nick]; trivial [wear] at head; minimal [underlining]; [erased] pencil lettering; faint blue ink [mark]; a bit [rubbed]; [bump] to one corner; short closed [tear] at head of backstrip panel; a little [frayed] around head; [speckled] edges; minor [chipping]; [drink-staining]; edges lightly

[foxed]; very faint [offsetting] of the plates; a bit [discoloured]; label [damaged]; light [dust-soiling]; insect [damage] in middle of upper joint; [biro]; small bookseller ticket [W.H.Smith Paris] to rear pastedown; [nicked]; some [worming]; copiously [annotated]; faint [spots] to borders; trivial [knock] to top corners; [browned] around the edges; ownership [inscription] at head; a few [spots] to flyleaf; vestige of [string tie]; miniscule spot of [worming]; [cracks] to joints; [loss] of page numeral; headcap [defective]; small [split] at foot of spine; turn-ins a little [spotted]; very light [handling marks]; [price-clipped]; top edge [dusty]; a trifle [foxed]; a little [sunned]; internal [tape repair]. – December 2019

2. Bits & pieces from Paul Green's **Recent Imported and British Small Press Poetry together with A Number of Secondhand Acquisitions, A Catalogue for May, 1999**, 1999, and **Imported and British Small Press Poetry together with Recent Secondhand Acquisitions, An Interim Catalogue for November, 1998**, 1998. Paul Green, 83(b) London Road, PETERBOROUGH Cambs. PE2 9BS

Minor exterior [scuffing]; [price-clipped]; some [shelf-wear]; [tatty]; some [discolouration]; page edges [foxed]; top inch of the spine has a lightish [stain]; ex lib; [creased] cover corner; [scuffing]; [splits] to top and bottom of spine; gift {inscription}; slightly [wrinkled] dw; small [stain] somewhere; some [foxing] to prelims; text heavily [annotated] in pencil; no dw; both covers [chipped]; [wear]; [torn] and repaired dw; minor cover [rippling]; edges [browned]; [nicks] to dw; signs of [use]; slight front cover corner [fraying]; cloth in [tatty] but intact dw; top inch of the spine has a lightish [stain]; very small [mark] seems to be present on the front cover; [signed] by a previous owner; slight [fading] to spine and board edges; [clipped] dw; slight shelf [fading]; some edge [scuffing]; covers [browned] along edges; [lacking] dw; [discoloured] but intact; [fading] to edges of cover boards; pages [browning]; [chipping] to wraps; [tears] to dw; slightly [soiled] dw; heavily [annotated] in pencil; [faded]; small [wear]; [aged] but intact; somewhat [aged] dw; minor cover [rippling]; [browned]; [nicks] to dustwrapper; some effort made to [repair] the hinging; [fraying] to spine top of coverwrap; stapling [rusted]; [chipped] areas to book cover; top corner mail [bumped]. – January 2020

It has a wonderful foreword by Adam Smyth, Professor of English and History of the Book, Oxford University called 'Grubby Handling'. A sample from Adam's foreword:

"The discourse of book use buried in catalogues but raised to prominence by Hampton's cutting is teeming and strange. It is a language of chipping, foxing, staining, cracking, soiling, corroding; of the tipped-in, the oxidised, the creased, and the dusty; of the torn, the mottled, the thumbled, the cropped, and the nicked. Some of the terms ('embrowning') are beguilingly unusual. Some of them are erotic: there is a lot of 'rubbing', particularly at the 'extremities'. Sometimes books are like bodies (they might be 'sunned', as if on a beach in August); sometimes ('worming') books are a kind of food. There is a pathos in this, too, a sense that these signs of use mark the passage of time: the language of 'grubby handling' is (in Hampton's words) 'shot through with melancholy', and *Against Decorum* might be read as a poem about, and composed out of, bibliographical entropy. Bibliography – literally, 'book-writing' – is, in Hampton's hands, cut back to a vocabulary of the 'defective', the 'lacking', the 'fading', and the 'gone'... What we see is that books have never not been altered, and in place of the fantasy of the pristine volume, Hampton gives us an index – that is also a poem, and is also a manifesto – of handling, of wear and tear, of water-stained pages and insect damage. Books here are in the world, on the move,

not behind glass, and in this culture, no person can definitively ‘own’ a book: the book always exceeds them, and the best we can do is feel it pass through our hands.”

For me, conceptual writing has always been about the space where art meets literature and this is exactly the space that our new journal, *Inscription: the Journal of Material Text – Theory, Practice, History* occupies. *Inscription* is no ordinary journal. It is an exciting multi-media artefact that comes with signature extras – a vinyl LP, print editions, AR artwork and more – it is a unique interdisciplinary space where art and literature converge. *Inscription* combines imaginative thinking and critical rigour to take the study of material texts in new directions. *Inscription* is at home equally in the first century and the twenty-first, as well as all points in between, and features work by practitioners – book artists, printmakers and writers – alongside academic discussion. *Inscription*’s focus is not just on the meanings and uses of the codex book, but also the nature of writing surfaces (papery or otherwise), and the processes of mark-marking in the widest possible sense: from hand-press printing to vapour trails in the sky; from engraved stones to digital text. The journal’s theoretically aware, trans-historical, and cross-disciplinary remit will break with the conventions of academic ghettoization, creating connections between areas that have much to say to one another – bibliography, media theory, conservation, the history of the book, museum studies, and artist’s book studies, for instance – enabling wide-ranging conversation and unexpected juxtapositions. *Inscription* not only adds to the field but sets new agendas for the next phase in the study of material texts.





[Images 16 & 17, *Inscription: The Journal of Material Text*, issue 1, 2020 and issue 2, 2021]

If books are one-off heavy-weights, then journals have a lightness that encourages risk, and a seriality that creates connections and personality across editions. Journals work the minor miracle of being both item and series: the pearl, and the string of pearls. At *Inscription* Adam, Gill and I aim for the mobility of the seventeenth-century pamphlet, the intellectual rigour of the monograph, the walk-through-wonder of the art gallery and a delighted dance between form and content.

*Inscription* is a double blind peer reviewed journal that is completely open access. You can have a look at it here:

[www.inscriptionjournal.com](http://www.inscriptionjournal.com)

If you read the Wikipedia entry on conceptual writing, you could mistakenly believe it has been kicked into touch by postconceptual writing. I say mistakenly because I don't believe Futurism eradicated Cubism, anymore than Surrealism superceded Dada, or Pop Art ameliorated abstract Expressionism or Conceptual Writing surpassed the Language poets. All these movements are just sites for different forms of investigation and there's room, in my opinion, for lots of different positions, different histories and different ideas. When someone writes the definitive history of conceptual writing, let's hope they remember the work that has gone on in the Nordic countries, in Europe, in the UK, in Latin America and in Australasia. If Johanna Drucker is right (writing in 2012) that the movement really is "over now, even in its newest iterations"<sup>viii</sup>, then I would make the suggestion that the work pervades in terms of its reach and significance. Works and ideas take a long time to gain currency and if Thompson's *The Beast in Me* was originally made as a temporary (3 month) site-specific work in 2010 in an old Victorian Museum in Bury on the outskirts of Manchester, England, it is not until 2021 that it is manifested as a permanent print in an edition of 500 and distributed all around the globe (via the *Inscription Journal of Material Text*). Let's remember, it took Sigmund Freud eight years from the date of publication in 1900 to sell the first 600 copies of *Interpretation of Dreams*. It takes time for ideas to

spread and as Walter Gropius remarked: “only an idea has the power to travel so widely.” And so it continues, conceptual writing being made and distributed around the globe, art and literature converging: some brilliant works; some average works; and some works that are just awful. It’s up to you, the reader, to take it or leave it, but I can assure you, conceptual writing is in rude health.

**Simon Morris** is Professor of Art and Director of Research for Art & Design at Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Morris is co-editor of *Inscription: the Journal of Material Text - Theory, Practice, History* [with Professor Adam Smyth & Dr Gill Partington]. His books include: *Bibliomania* (1998); *The Royal Road to the Unconscious* (2003); *Re-Writing Freud* (2005); *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head* (2010); and *Pigeon Reader* (2012). He curates and lectures on contemporary art and also directed the documentary films: *sucking on words: Kenneth Goldsmith* (2007); and *making nothing happen: Pavel Büchler* (2010). His edited anthology *Reading as Art* (2016) accompanies the exhibition he curated of the same name at Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre. He has had solo shows at the Freud Museum in London and Printed Matter Inc., New York City. In 2002, he founded the publishing imprint *information as material* (iam) which publishes work by artists and writers who use extant material — selecting it and reframing it to generate new meanings — and who, in doing so, disrupt the existing order of things. [www.informationasmaterial.org](http://www.informationasmaterial.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Obscenity begins for Jean Baudrillard ‘when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication.’ in Craig Dworkin, ‘The Logic of Substrate’ in *No Medium* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013) p.8.

<sup>ii</sup> Craig Dworkin, ‘The Logic of Substrate’ in *No Medium* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013) pp.17–18.

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

<sup>iv</sup> From the profile by Dr Howard Britton on the inside back cover of *Interpretation*: “The work of Simon Morris [...] is entirely constructed from the words of others. The radical nature of Morris’ practice is one of self-effacement, whereby he is obscured by the words and the work itself. To the extent that Morris is not absent or present in the work, but simultaneously absent and present, he inhabits an in-between space. In creating such an undecidable space, Morris maintains a gap which resonates for the duration of the project, and functions to stimulate the desire of others. This place of self-effacement necessitates a collaborative approach and raises questions of the of the role of the other in creating and interpreting the meaning of an art work. In relinquishing control, Morris takes an extreme view that the conceptual artist relies on the spectator to complete the work. Indeed, the work only exists in relation to others.”

<sup>v</sup> The history of Conceptual Writing on Wikipedia [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conceptual\\_writing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conceptual_writing), accessed 13<sup>th</sup> November 2021, 13:28]

<sup>vi</sup> Nora Burnett Abrams, Preface, *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018) p.xi

<sup>vii</sup> *The Centenary Handbook of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association* (2006), gives this clarification: ‘foxing describes the red-brown patches, spotting the smaller darker blemishes’ [*sic*].

<sup>viii</sup> In *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, #231 of April/May 2012, Johanna Drucker publishes an article named ‘Beyond Conceptualisms: Poetics after Critique and the End of the Individual Voice’, in which she considers that: “Conceptual writing was intriguing and provocative. In the last few years, its practices have generated much debate. But as its outlines have become more defined, it seems to be passing into another phase. Institutionalization often signals that energetic innovation is becoming history or at least has ceased to break new ground. [...] Conceptualism is probably over now, even in its newest iterations”. [<https://www.2009-2019.poetryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/PPNL-231-FINAL-FOR-PRINTING.pdf>, Date accessed 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021: 15:18]