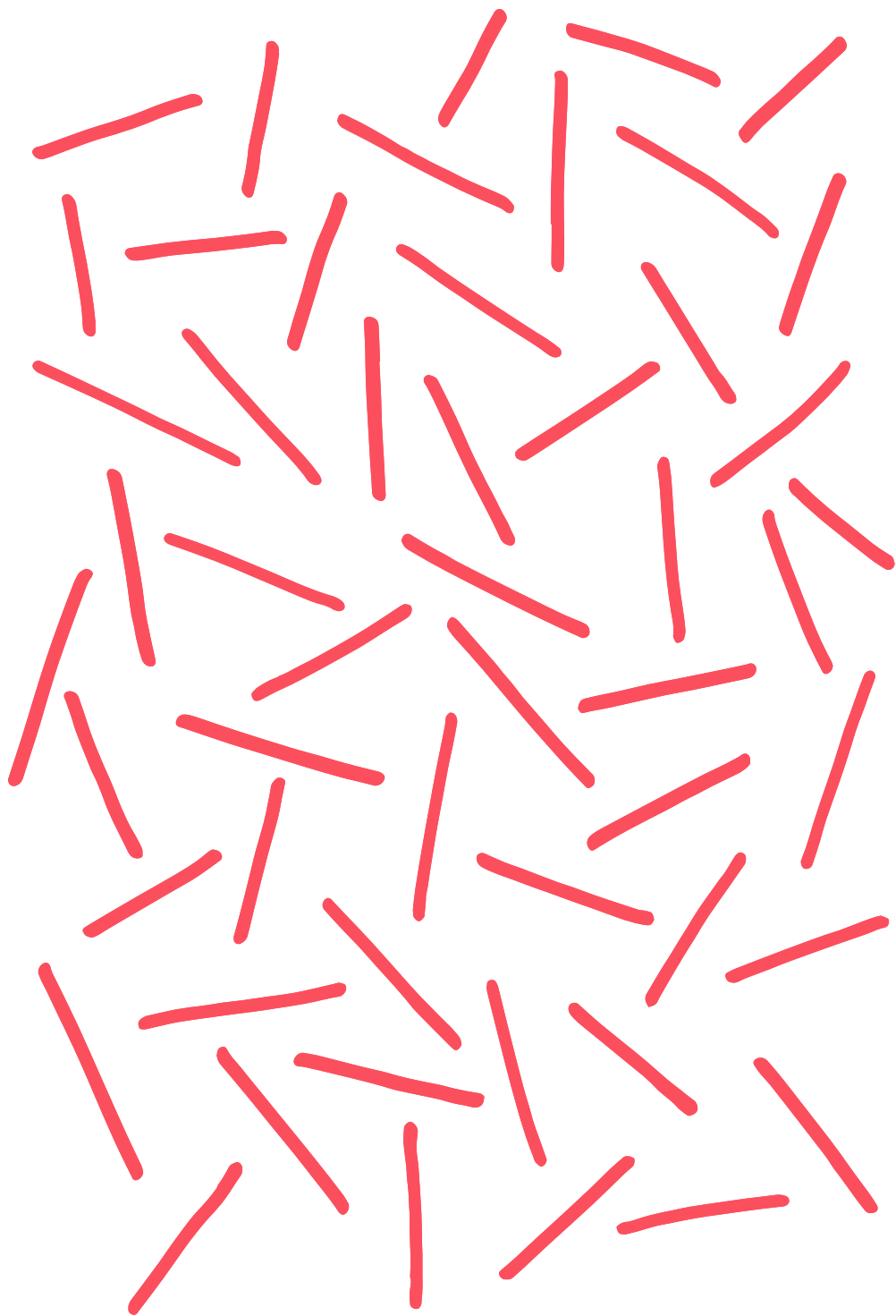


# FOR THE WAGE

CONVERSATIONS



'Neither lines nor words are ideas, they are the means by which ideas are conveyed.' *Sol LeWitt*

### For the Wall

Lisa Otty and David Bellingham

WORDS ON THE WALL THAT'S ALL, 2011

BIG UPON LITTLE, 2011

THIS JUST THIS, 2011

SOMETHING IN THE PLACE OF SOMETHING ELSE, 2012

SOMETHING TO HANG ON THE WALL, 2012

DON'T THINK LOOK, 2012

COLUMNS OF THIS AND THAT, 2012

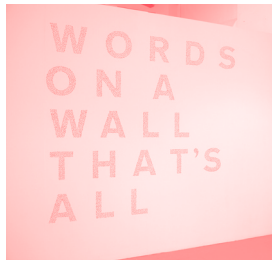
THREE WORDS ALONE, 2012

Lisa Otty Each of these wall drawings was created for a different space, from an entire gallery wall to an alcove in a corridor. To what extent did the space dictate the work?

David Bellingham The words aim to occupy the space rather than refer to something that is already there. In this sense they are not site specific, the works can be made on any suitable wall. Clearly the size and shape of the available space partly determines the choice of work, the work I initially proposed for the DCA show was a two part text that required two separate walls, as only one wall was available we made *Words On a Wall That's All* instead, it is all quite flexible, the important thing is to find something that works in the space rather than forcing something to fit.

BETWEEN  
GAPS IN  
LETTERS  
AND WORDS

BETWEEN  
GAPS IN  
BRANCHES  
AND LEAVES



When you make traditional pictures the image area is bounded by four corners and four edges, here it is the limits of the wall that frame the image; the drawn marks are integral to the surface of the wall rather than something hung on it or standing in front of it. Working directly onto the walls offers an opportunity to make things on a scale that might otherwise be impractical – given the time you can make something that fills the available space. If you want to make something portable on the same scale you have material costs and problems of transport and storage that limit what is possible.

Obviously there is a long tradition of wall drawing, the earliest examples of drawing we have were made on the walls of caves. Frescos, murals, graffiti and the work of contemporary artists like Sol Lewitt, Niele Toroni, Daniel Buren and Lawrence Weiner offer a model for drawing that uses the wall as a ground, my works come as a modest continuation of these traditions.

LO In terms of size, colour and density, the pen stroke you used in these pieces makes me think of printed works on paper. Was this deliberate? (Or is it perhaps just the imagining of my print-preoccupied mind?).

DB There is clearly a link between page and wall. Text set on a page is conditioned by the white space around it in a similar way to text set on a wall. White page and white wall are equivalent grounds in this sense. The space around the words is of as much interest as the words themselves, the words are inseparable from their surroundings like a trees in a landscape.

Each letter is formed or revealed by an irregular field of small black lines, there are no hard edges so the words appear to float on the edge of registration. This runs counter to the abruptness of signage. I am interested in the immediacy of the sign – however where the unambiguous delivery of a sign might tell you to STOP or GO, I want to see what happens if you replace this directness with a propositional or indirect mode of language.

If you want to place words on the wall there are only so many ways to do it; I was getting a bit tired of the generic use of vinyl lettering on gallery walls and was looking for something less definite, less like signage, a way of integrating the letter into the surface itself. The aim is to avoid the flatness of signage, to have the words hover on the wall indefinitely – both there and not there, provisional like spoken words in the air.

LO Why did you choose these particular phrases? While the works share visual properties, there seems to be little connection between the phrases depicted – am I missing something, or is each work intended to stand alone? To what extent is this a series of works?

DB It is true that the works appear to have little in common with one another but they do have shared qualities.

The works employ isolated words and phrases as free-floating things, there is no thematic or narrative link between them. The use of language is not metaphoric, the works are not standing in for, or

describing, something absent; the words are concrete elements to be read as things. The words are '...on the wall', 'big' is 'upon little', so the works are put together in similar way, they share an approach to language.

What I have taken from concrete poetry is the proposition that words and letters can operate linguistically and visually outside of the conventions of sentence structure. In sentences words are subordinate to the discursive flow. My interest here is in treating words as concrete elements, as units of material, as things of interest in themselves.

The words should be judged by what they do, by how they are used. There are three active elements, definition, construction and placement: the dictionary definition of the words used, the construction of words into units of sense and the placement of these constructions on the wall.

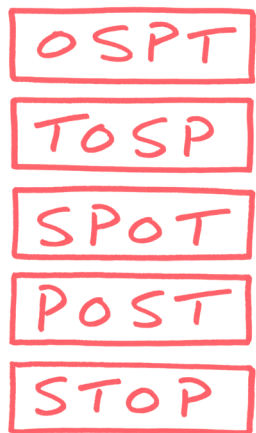
If we look at a brick wall we are not necessarily concerned with the history of the particular bricks used (an etymology of the brick). Rather we consider the wall as a complete thing, we are concerned with how well it is made and how appropriate it is to its location. The wall texts should be approached in this way. Each work is an image constructed from familiar elements – they are whole things. We intuitively understand that poems and literary forms are composed but, of course, visual artworks are composed too.

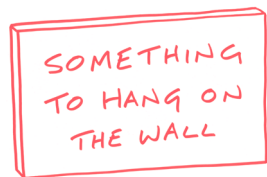
Words are treated as building blocks, most obviously in *Big Upon Little* where the stack of three words is echoed in what the words say. The word BIG is placed over the word UPON which in turn is placed over the word LITTLE.

This piece is derived from the local name given to a rock formation on the grounds of Stonehurst Farm in East Sussex. My father used to visit this farm as a child and often spoke of the place, so I have had the name *Big Upon Little* in my head all my life. I mention this as an aside, to acknowledge that the work has a source – that it comes from something concrete. So we have three secondhand words used as the material for an artwork, where they come from has nothing to do with what has been made. The words 'Big Upon Little' in the work do not refer to the sandstone rock called Big Upon Little in the south of England, they refer to themselves to the actuality of the words big, upon and little.

The work offers an opportunity to pay attention to the actuality of language – it shows things but resists saying anything. In part this is a response to a world that is full of information, where everything is moving and attention spans are short.

In *Words On a Wall That's All* the words are where they say they are – on the wall. The qualification 'that's all' is a caution not to expect any more than what is shown. There is nothing hidden nothing to interpret from what is said – what is said is what you get, with the implication that there is as much to see as there is to read. So to answer your question, it is not subject but an approach to language that the works have in common.





## A FEW WORDS IN THE PLACE OF A FEW OTHERS



LO I understand that you are interested in words as things, as 'units of material' as you put it, rather than as carriers of semantic associations: this seems to me to be perfectly encapsulated in *Something To Hang On The Wall*, the idea that looking at a word can be a process of paying attention to material properties parallel to looking at, say, a painting. This could be understood, to my mind, as a kind of celebration of the materiality of the word. When I look at *A Few Words In Place Of a Few Others* and *Something In Place Of Something In Else*, though, they seem to me to be pointing in the opposite direction. They suggest relativism, clearly: so one might say that they invoke ideas of reduction (words are just bricks/ anything in place of something) and thus the negation of material difference. In short, there seems to me an ambivalence in the works that isn't quite pinned down – are you deliberately mobilising both these readings?

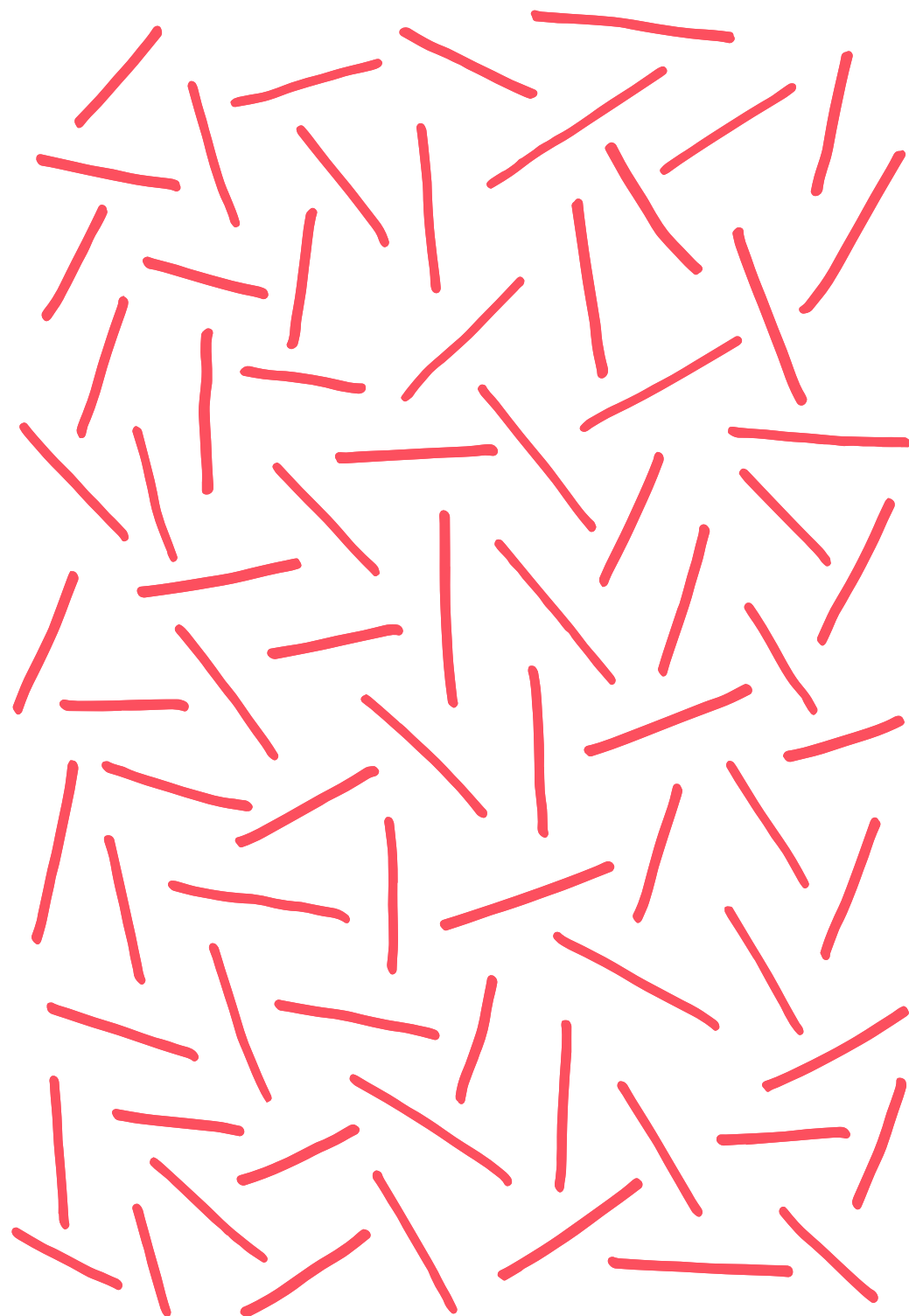
DB In the case of *Something In The Place Of Something Else* the 'something' is relative and the 'place' is specific; something replaces something that is absent and the location is altered accordingly. *Something In The Place Of Something Else* is not equivalent to – anything in the place of anything. The words are on a gallery wall where things have been exhibited shortly before and things will be exhibited shortly after, so the 'something else' is not only hypothetical it is also literal.

The word 'something' has a specificity about it that distinguishes it from the generality of 'anything'. An image of something conjured in the mind can have the resonance of something actually present. An imaginary thing has the benefit of coming without the clutter of materials and vagaries of manufacture. In this sense perhaps words are ideal things.

It would be foolish to deny semantic associations, obviously the words are there to be read and interpreted; the emphasis on the material qualities of language is to suggest a parity between the meaning and connotation of words and their actuality, their physical presence on the page or wall.

Fortunately artworks do not have to be consistent. Like the paradox of the old broom that has had five new heads and three new handles, similar parts can be put together in different ways to achieve different results. Just because things look alike it does not necessarily mean they share common purpose. Contradiction and paradox can be useful as prompts for discourse. Clearly the works do not take a completely consistent position rather there is an argumentative dialogue between them; they are not intended to confirm each other but to take issue with each other. The work 'happens' in this discursive exchange. For this reason I prefer to make exhibitions that contain a number of works in conversation.

Note: The works discussed in this interview were made for the touring exhibition, *Poetry Beyond Text*: at DCA, Dundee, Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh and the Royal Scottish Academy in 2011: and for the exhibition *Making Words – Marking Words*: at the Cooper Gallery, DJCAD, Dundee in 2012

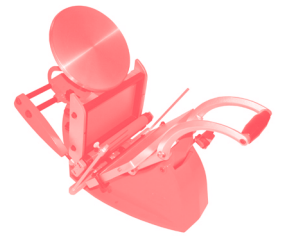
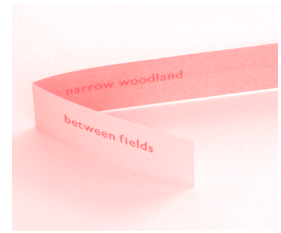


many publishers want to put out a postcard or a piece of folded paper. Form was always essential to the way these publications were realized. Take an item of true ephemera such as the tiny folding card which reads 'between fields' on the front and opens out to read 'narrow woodland'. Who else would want to publish it? You have to do it yourself; there is no other way. So it didn't seem to be about compromise. It was more about expediency: having an idea, wanting to realize it without delay. It didn't cost anything to print such things at the time, as I had a little Adana letterpress machine. You can come up with an idea, devise an appropriate form and just print it, and get it out as quickly as possible: the whole thing can be done within a working week and I like that immediacy. Lawrence Weiner described the modest means required for such publishing as: 'anyone who wants to publish a book... just has to give up lunch for a couple of weeks'. With real publishing there is always a delay and that can be infuriating. It is sometimes interesting to get work out quickly as if it were news; something to occupy the stop-press box that was always left blank in old newspapers for that last-minute bit of news. I always thought that there should be a 'stop-press' box left in the project, like a little aperture left open. A lot of this work is occasional, in that it happens in response to something – a public event, a political or artistic event, or an acknowledgment of a body of work that has been an influence. It seems important that this type of work has its own integrity, is determined by itself rather than by the company of other pages in a collection or by other works in a show. It is a non-serial activity, I think that is quite important. They are all one-off things. Together they amount to something that's greater than the sum of the individual parts but nevertheless each of them is a whole thing. They are whole things, not fragments of things.

LO That's an interesting comment, particularly as I think some of your works show a concern with fragments – or perhaps better incompleteness and partiality – not in a Romantic sense, but in a literal sense. I'm thinking of the pieces that involve drawings of numerous shards of glass, for example, or shapes created by apertures in the leaves of trees. If that is not an interest in the fragmentary or the serial, what does motivate such works?

DB Well those works are quite different. The *Sections* project, in which patches of sky are transcribed through gaps in foliage, is in fact a serial mock-Modernist project, in that the parts do not make a great deal of sense alone, it is the repetition that consolidates the work. The *Sections* are always shown in groups usually painted directly onto the wall. With the stand alone printed works we have been discussing the individual works accumulate into something greater but they are not dependent on one another. Samuel Beckett opens his text *Three Dialogues* with a clarification of this understanding of the fragment as something complete in itself: 'Total object, complete with missing parts...'.

You quickly realise, when you make things, that you can't say everything at one time. As in conversation it occurs gradually. The model was in the Wild Hawthorn Press attitude – of sending out dispatches. I felt there should be a way of making a straightforward commentary on the state of things as you come upon them; the world is not split into fragments, it is our attention that is drawn to detail. An event such as bright sunlight hitting the side of a building can



## The Point of Failure

Lisa Otty and David Bellingham

Lisa Otty David, you are both an artist and small press publisher, which is an unusual combination. I wonder if we could begin by talking a little about how you got started with your press, WAX366?

David Bellingham I think I started publishing in 1992 or thereabouts. It was then that I started to produce larger editions, although I had made publications in smaller editions prior to that. WAX366 came about because it seemed important to decentre myself from conventional publishing, to operate outside and to release things under my own terms. The ambition was to make proper books and printed works of various kinds but while there have always been some larger scale things, I have concentrated on smaller scale items such as booklets and cards. I called the press WAX366 because there is a tradition in small press publishing of naming presses romantically, after towns or flowers or whatever, at the time I had a Morris Minor car that was the love of my life and its number plate was WAX366, so it is shamelessly romantic.

LO The tradition of small press publishing that you mention can sometimes appear as a means to circumvent the politics and demands of mainstream publishing: is that what you mean by decentring yourself from publishing?

DB It wasn't really a rejection of mainstream publishing per se. I was interested in making publications as artworks and obviously not



hold our attention. It may be just a familiar grey building but the way the light falls alters it and that coming together of something fleeting and something fixed makes something new. I am interested in paying attention to that modulation of detail, those details are registered in the work. Similarly in terms of subject matter, the work touches on many subjects but it is possible to bring these apparently unconnected things together through approach: so there is a formal linkage, a shared approach to things. I have always felt that the work should be as accessible as possible but at the same time I do not want it to be summed up by a common subject. I do not want someone to be able to say 'the work looks like this', or 'the work means that', I want it to be something that is accumulative, something that takes some time to get to know. The work happens between the gaps.

LO Well it's certainly the case that one of the joys of looking at your work – and the same is true of the Wild Hawthorn Press material – is finding links between different pieces, creating your own paths through it. Is that how you envisage people engaging with it?

DB Because the publications usually come about as part of an event or exhibition and are sold or given away there, most of the people who come upon the works have never seen them before and will never see others. I understand that the work has that kind of public life, but yes there is the hope that there is a core group who have a sense of the larger project, that larger picture, and I do think of it that way. I have said before that I think of all the work that I make as image-making, as picture-making. Some of the things may look a bit like poems, some might look a bit like objects, a bit like photographs, but they are all images. Of course I do not mean image in the sense of a picture that records a likeness by way of imitation, I mean a conceptual construction, the bringing together of various elements into a unified whole; so not an image of something but an image as something, not a secondary illustration but a primary self-determining thing.

LO The extent to which you use text in your work is striking. The book *Fresh Fruit & Tables* (2008) for example, plays with the printed word and letterform and seems to me to reference concrete poets such as Ian Hamilton Finlay and BP Nichol. Yet, as you say, you see yourself as concerned first and foremost with images and image-making and, when we showed your work to some of our co-researchers they unanimously felt it was predominantly visual and that they were viewing rather than reading your work. I wondered the extent to which you understand this difference between reading and seeing operating in your work?

DB It is not a literary project. I am an artist. The words have always been used as unitary things. I use words like bricks, the brick is a unit and the word is a unit. It is a constructive process. So it doesn't surprise me that your colleagues view the work in that way, but the texts in that book are not calligrammes, or words put together in the shape of pictures. The way the words are placed on the page suggests something that is distinct from our general understanding of those words and a significant part of this is visual. There is a famous line of Robert Creeley's, which Charles Olsen used in *Projective Verse*, 'form is never more than an extension of content' that summarizes

this beautifully. How the words look and what they say is completely intertwined. The way words are written or rendered, that oscillation between handwriting and type that I sometimes use alters the way things are read. I am interested in visual things, in making pictures, so when I use words I use them as elements of a picture. I treat colour in a similar way as an additive element. When you consider that everyday situation of light hitting a building, where the insubstantiality of the light and the substantiality of the wall come together as equal elements, the fact that one element has substance and is concrete and the other is insubstantial, passing and fleeting, is not significant. In a potential image they are equivalent qualities, equal elements. I am interested in bringing things together in this way, colour, words and materials. Colour is for the most part an unavoidable thing in the world, you classify things by colour, you can't help but stumble upon it and I suppose on an emotional level I like the way it can condition things, you can use it as a way to prime the way that something is set up. I have been making a lot of paintings recently, text-based things on canvas, monochrome but quite bright monochrome surfaces and in a way this coloured ground is primary subject – you get a bright yellow surface with fractured words within it and the words almost become secondary to the colour. It is fascinating the way the colour partly consumes what might otherwise be quite graphically and linguistically potent, I am interested in that oscillation between perceptual conditions.

LO Yellow seems to be a colour that recurs in your work...

DB That is true, I use it a lot.

LO It's a colour that attracts people to it, and of course it has signage connotations and so on.

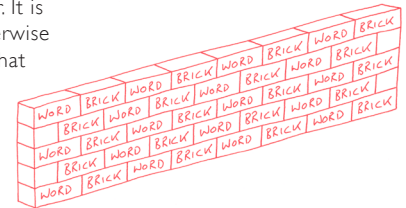
DB Yes. The world is full signs and signage is an influence on the work. There is always that awareness that there are words in the world on flat surfaces, in galleries they call them artworks and out in the world they call them signs, and I am interested in that call and response. Yellow is a colour that draws you in, it is self-illuminating. You can't use it all the time but for certain things that need to declare themselves you can use it, I suppose it is a rhetorical colour in that way. It is not unassuming.

LO Okay, but nevertheless words as such obviously have meanings and references that take them beyond the visual, in a way that other pictorial elements or 'units' do not. So what is the attraction of words?

DB In the world as I experience it, you can't get away from words, they are all around you. They hit you from the newspaper stand and they hit you from the signage that we can't escape. To some extent, the work deals with that overburdening of text that is thrust upon us and attempts to problematize it. One of the dangers of being surrounded by words is that their sense goes unquestioned; you read a word and you think you know what it means. Obviously words have a greater depth than any single surface meaning. The work is just an attempt to draw out the sense of things. In everyday usage the name of a thing and the thing itself can seem inseparable, I am interested in putting a wedge between those things. Lets separate terms, lets

machine made marks

HANDMADE MARKS



THINGS HAVE  
NO NEED  
FOR WORDS

WORDS HAVE  
NO NEED  
FOR THINGS



separate the actuality of a thing from the way you might describe that thing in words. This distinction between the idea of something and the actuality of something was a preoccupation of conceptual art; emphasised in the difference between a proposal and the realisation of a work, like the space between a musical score and its performance. I am interested in that difference between the scoring of something and the performing of something. To some extent you can control the proposal but there is always an element of chance and discovery in the realisation. In the sense that you can have an idea and it might be a good idea, you can have many good ideas, but when you start making something, something happens and I am interested in that point. When you start working things change. Most of the work I make comes about through being attentive to the shift that occurs between plan and action.

LO This distinction between the score and the performance, between ideas and their execution, might also be rephrased as a distinction between theoretical and the practical. In a lot of your work, you reference – or, as Pavel Büchler puts it, attribute things to – other artists, such as to take only a few examples, Kurt Schwitters, Piet Mondrian and Marcel Broodthaers. Do their works operate as 'scores' that you can interpret; I mean do you see your work in relation to the ideas of art history?

DB Definitely not art history. The work of those artists offers a practical model, their approach suggests a way of doing things, a way of approaching the world that makes sense to me.

LO It is conversational then?

DB I think it is almost exactly that. Often art historians package artists – usually after they have died – as if everything they did was homogenous, everything was happening within a bubble that was determined by them. That's not the experience of most artists. The experience of most artists is that they grow up together, they work together, whether literally or separated by generations, and the work cross-references itself, so – we were talking about conceptual art – certain things I do are possible because conceptual art happened. I can't pretend it didn't. I'm not claiming strategic originality. Methods have been established that enable me to do the things I do. That is cultural inheritance. So every now and again, when it seems appropriate, I reference that. It is a continuation, a response, a dialogue.

LO You've mentioned how important it is for you that your work is engaged with the world and, just as you engage with other artists, you also engage with contemporary events. Some of your recent works, such as *Turnout* (2005) and *Cruise: A Wandering Voyage In Search Of An Enemy* (1998), are responses to important historical events on the world stage. Do you see art as having a responsibility to the world beyond it and to history?

DB These works might seem atypical within the project, they can appear to be more rhetorical, more political, but I don't treat them any differently. They are just a response to the state of things. It may be a response of wonder, or appreciation or of anger. These particular works appear within a body of works that together form a response

to the world. Sometimes you can't avoid politics. So the *Cruise* piece, for instance, is a classic example of an immediate response: something happened – a series of American air strikes in the Gulf, an act of aggression with contemporary and historical implications and my initial response was 'oh no not again'. So I made the piece, printed it on a small card and sent it out as an immediate response. This happened to be a reaction to a political event but it was not necessarily more significant than other kinds of response, like choosing to work with autumn leaves because it was seasonally appropriate to do so – it felt like the right thing to do on that day. I am keen, I suppose, not to have the terms of the work pinned down by a particular subject, if you want the real content of the work to be about approach you have to shift the subject regularly, you have to make it clear that what is on the surface isn't really the central concern.

LO I think that *Cruise* is really successful in doing precisely that. It brings into play the idea of Ulysses, poetics and the history of storytelling in that way, as well as the conflict between 'leisure' and 'war', a whole range of references are working in what might appear as a brief definition.

DB Yes, and this is echoed in that more recent dictionary piece, the repackaged version of the Chambers dictionary. The full title is *An Odyssey, A Dictionary, A Tale Of Wandering*. It is a follow up to the *Cruise* piece, and it takes up the notion that the dictionary is an epic form, a wandering voyage through language by way of definition. They are versions of the same work, separated by ten years; one is quite a weighty posh thing, the other is just a postcard, but they are modulations of the same idea.

LO They're very poetic too. I wanted to ask you about this relationship between poetry and art, which seems to me to be something with which you are engaged. It's also notable that one of the artists whose ideas and models you seem to have frequently explored is Schwitters, a visual artist and poet. Do you seek out poetic influences?

DB It is one of the reference points. Although I am insistent that the work is about image-making, that is not to deny concern for other things. Poetry is absolutely something that's important, its similar to saying I am a fan of conceptual art, I am a fan of certain groups of poets. I am interested in a group of artists who made a move between literature and visual art, like Schwitters and Marcel Broodthaers. They are key for me because I am interested in that bridge between making things to be read and making things to be looked at, and they were working on the cusp of both of those specialist fields, problematizing what it is to be an artist and problematizing what it is to be a literary figure. I suppose to an extent, less obviously than those figures but still, I am on that cusp. But the work isn't packaged as poetry, as I said earlier on I don't want it to be neatly packaged, to be pinned down to a surface or a look of something. So I would assume, to answer your question more directly, that someone like Schwitters was interested in the visual aspects of the poem. He was performing sound poems, performing the *Ursonata*, but that was only one aspect of the work, as he was also extremely precise about the written score of that work. The score is a work: the last issue of *Merz* was dedicated entirely to the *Ursonata*, it is beautifully typeset and arranged on

16th, 17th, 18th, 19th December 1998

Cruise: A Wandering Voyage In Search Of An Enemy

A definition to mark four nights of airstrikes in the Gulf.  
David Bollingham WAX366

AN ODYSSEY

A TALE OF WANDERING

A DICTIONARY



the page. That approach to language sits alongside his better-known collages within his body of work – I don't see any inconsistency.

LO I'm very interested in the way that interdisciplinary work can, as you suggest, open out questions about the role and mechanics of specialisation. While the divide between literature and visual art is one area that your work bridges, I think another is perhaps the divide between art and science. One of the concerns that you come back to frequently is measurement, which is of course a marker – or perhaps language – of the rational and the scientific. Indeed, one of my favourite pieces of yours is the little sound poem, after Schwitters, *Units of Measure* (1998), which is composed of abbreviations of metrical terms – dm, mm and so on – and which gives voice to these normally unvoiced signs, fusing the rational symbols of measurement with the irrational primal noise of sound poetry. Is this clash between the rational and the irrational another conflict that you're interested in interrogating?

DB Absolutely: in those works that I have made with rulers, whether broken rulers or rulers that I have made additions to, I have used imprecise instruments. I do not usually work with precise tools, I often use school rulers and badly made rulers, on which the increments are slightly out of register. In the case of the *Painting by numbers* pictures, the printed increments of rulers are over-painted with irregular grey scales or colour scales. The slight flaws in the rulers are echoed in the stutter of the painted scales. Language too is an imprecise instrument in that it is variable and inconsistent – this is part of its charm.

LO It reminds me of Duchamp's pataphysical experiments. I'm sure you are familiar with *The Green Box*, in which he is trying to find a new language from visual stimuli, colours and measures and so on. Do you think of your work in that sense, as an attempt to find a new language? Or would that bring us back too far in the direction of words rather than images?

DB *The Green Box* is a big influence. I love the idea that the informality of this loose collection of notes and sketches is offered as an equivalent to the monumentality of *The Large Glass*. *The Green Box* is obviously a major work in its own right disguised as a commentary on the *Glass*. Yet I feel that there is an element of remove in that work, to some extent, it occupies a specialist field. Whereas, the great achievement of Duchamp was the proposition that if you take something from the world and reposition it you change its meaning. A change of context leads to a change in meaning. That's brilliant, it changed the face of art and everything that happened after it: whether it wanted to be changed or not, it changed. Of course this can be easily misread as, 'anything can be art' which totally misses the point. The focus of the readymade is not the object (however much people might want to read his things symbolically) but in the placement of the object and how that object primes the space around it. The work is the object plus the terms of its placement. What happens in *The Green Box* in which he gathers his notes on the *Glass* into archival form is an influence, for sure, but it lacks a direct correspondence with the world that I miss. As a result of his achievement there is now a self-referential cult around the world of Duchamp, it is a world that is set aside from everything else and his name is emblazoned on it.

I am not interested in that cult of personality. In his defence Duchamp famously argued that an artwork is an aspect of contemporary life and that by his estimate has a life span of 20 years. So the artwork has an active life after which it either enters the museum or private collection as a historical artefact or is lost and forgotten.

As far as is possible I aim to disassociate the work I make from myself, I am less interested in being an artist than I am in making artworks. I want the work to seem almost inevitable. I try to reduce things as much as possible. There is a lot more work in some of the things than it might appear; from a complex impulse you whittle back to a point where only the essential aspect remains, there is just enough left. The works of mine that, I think, are most successful are those that consist of very little. Ideally what is there should appear inevitable. I don't want it to be knowing, I just want it to be part of things.

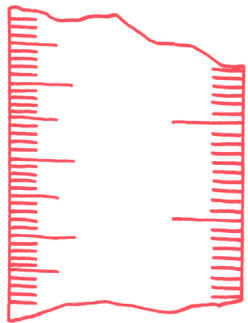
LO Do you want it to be learning?

DB It is important that you learn from what you make. In the sense that I think it is quite easy, once you have a bit of experience in how to make things, to make artworks. You can have ideas and you can execute those ideas; that is not a difficult thing to do, as long as you have some resources behind you. What I am interested in is trying to get to that point and then keep working, arrive at a point where a piece of work seems to have substance and then work beyond it to the point where you discover something new, where mistakes occur. We all know Samuel Beckett's line from *Westward Ho*, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' I think that is a beautiful way to describe learning from your mistakes, a much better way of describing what I am saying. So I am interested in that point of failure, the recognition of that point of failure and its potential as a way forward. In the process of making things you often end up with unexpected results, when these discoveries seem useful I allow them to direct the work, rather than sticking to the plan I prefer to make use of what I have found. I am not interested in confirming what I set out to do, I want the work to be a surprise. There are enough badly realised 'good ideas' in the art world, we don't need more. I am more interested in finding refreshing ways to articulate familiar things than coming up with something new. This sounds reasonable, but for one reason or another it seems to not be the norm. One of the consequences of the expansion of art education is that the activity of being an artist has been professionalized to a point where there is now a model by which people are taught how to make things that are quite tied up, neat little packaged artworks that can be readily explained. I think that needs to be resisted. It is necessary to keep a few rough edges and to leave things a little bit open, to leave enough space for the reader.

LO Is this why you work between disciplines, then, in the sense that the gaps between fields or media are there to fall through or fail with?

DB Yeah, I think this is important. In exhibitions, for instance, I almost never show one thing. I always like to show groups of things, allowing the way the pieces come together to generate new associations, with the potential for a more rewarding reading than could happen from any one individual thing. What happens when works accumulate

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is more interesting to me than when they are seen separately. The rationale behind the collections I have put together is to present the reach of the project in concise form, like portable exhibitions.

LO Lets come back again to the idea of your work being in the world, rather than operating at a remove. Books like your recent *Ideas Leave Objects Standing* (2005) obviously have a different and broader public circulation to the cards and small press material we spoke about earlier. I'm also reminded of your site-specific project *Returning* (2007), I wonder to what extent you are interested in making public art?

DB One of the nice things about doing a book with a publisher is that for brief period it is distributed, it has a life. The *Fresh Fruit and Tables* book was given away from 4 or 5 venues, published one week and distributed the following week, and then it was gone. People have kept a few copies but essentially it had its life. I see that as public art. Public art means different things to different people; one option is to cast a giant lump of bronze and stick it in a public square, another is to make a few thousand books and allow them to permeate, to have a public life. For me, it was another approach to disseminating the material. It is not about turning my back on anything: you try one thing, you try something else, you learn from each different approach, what matters is that you find a way of getting the work out there. By looking at the different means of distribution, different outlets for what you do, you inevitably raise questions about what it is you do and who it is for, and those questions are interesting. It is a fight against complacency; I am not interested in doing what I did yesterday. I want to find some other way to do it. It is the new things that are interesting, and how these new things infect what you have done before. You have old things, and you throw in some new things and that changes the terms, changes everything. The work is not fixed.

LO *Returning* was a project that developed through time, as the book shows, with new incarnations infecting older ones. Is it still on going?

DB No I think I am done with that now. That work started out as a straightforward series of type-written texts made in 2001, the form is a simple one in which the line breaks one letter at a time. *Working* and *Playing* were the first two: the word moves on the page and you have to work to read it, so there is a playful activity there. On a surface level, the form induces a stutter in the reading process. A year later I made a hand written version and became interested in the contrast between the two. Then the opportunity came up to do a public artwork and rather than make a single intervention in the building, I proposed that we make a series of ephemeral items based on these texts – cups and coasters and bags and other bits and bobs – to be used in the building, that would have an after life, have a function. That would kind of disappear within the building. It is about function and transmission, about something that has an active life rather than a passive life. I mean you could have a stationary object in a central space, or you could hang something on the walls, or have something that intervenes in the structure of the building that is fixed, but I wanted to make something – the motivation is similar to the *Fresh Fruit and Tables* book – that has a transient life, something that has a

transience to it, that is perhaps read whilst its being used. The items are latent until they are used, they are activated when they are used. The book came about really just as a way of recording that activity. Versions of the works were also made on walls in various European cities, as anonymous interventions into public space. The texts were cut in self-adhesive vinyl so they were quite straightforward to install, I would usually work on Sunday mornings when it was quiet, simply finding a suitable wall, sticking them up and leaving them to the elements.

LO And again this comes back to a concern with time, the idea of a conversation and development through time, doesn't it? Public art as not at all monumental, but in fact rather emphasising the transience of things and events. Much of the work that is in front of us today (material from the DCA archive) is from the early 1990s, so 15 to 20 years old now: how has your perception of it changed?

DB I greet it as one might greet an old friend. Clearly there are some ongoing themes. I see the project as an accumulative one, and so the work I make now sometimes refers to things I've done previously. In a way when I was younger making work I felt as though every work had to prove itself because it was based on nothing, built on sand. Now there is this foundation of all the stuff I have done before, and so there is less pressure on the individual pieces because each new work is another unit added to the project, as I said before the project is not a fixed thing it changes as new works come along. That whole strategy would break down if I were to stop adding things. One of the things that interests me about making ephemeral items is that they are ephemeral. Small pieces of printed paper and card are of the moment, like news in a newspaper. The materials do not have much of a sense of permanence about them. Such items have a brief moment of currency before disappearing to make way for other things.

Another, pragmatic, reason for regularly shifting the subject of the work is that I have a relatively low boredom threshold, sometimes you just have to put things down and come back to them later. Occasionally when I see the older work, it can prompt something new. Usually I think 'I can do that better, I'll have another go at it'. Or a deliberate echo appears, as with *Cruise* and *An Odyssey*. When I make shows I often pull out earlier work: I quite like showing a few old things along with the new work. I do the same in publications, when I put the *Ideas* book together, I put some older things in, just to add some depth to the mix. This brings me back to that point about working serially, I often make a batch of similar works but rarely show them together, I mix them in with other works. As an example we were speaking about that recent group of paintings, they exist as a body of related work but I would not show all of them together, I would show maybe two or three. As a general rule I try to avoid showing uniform things that look similar as I find this can lead to quite a passive viewing experience. What I am after is an active viewing experience. The job of the reader is to draw links between these apparently disparate works, to determine how they might infect one another. My approach to editing the work is based on this idea of infection. When I make a show or a compilation type book, I think of the sequence as a work in itself, in the bringing together of works something new is generated, a distributable public thing, which might be a show, it might be a book.

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LO You said you wanted to develop and change throughout your career...

DB Did I? I did not mean to. I am not interested in development at all, I am quite suspicious of the conceit of development.

LO Okay, that's perhaps my misunderstanding of the point about trying not to do the same thing, and not wanting to be pigeon-holed...

DB That is to do with the distinction I was making earlier between subject matter and content. I am interested in content, the subject is sometimes an aspect of what you read but it is only the literal aspect. The content has to do with what the work amounts to; the subject is merely what you are looking at. How subject matter is approached, how it is treated and turned over, how the question is formed, these are aspects of content. So the content is relatively consistent while subject is constantly shifting. It is that between the gaps thing again. You could say that that subject is a scaffold that supports this nebulous thing called content.

LO So it's a kind of iterative process, in a way, of content rather than subject, keeping that distinction quite clear...

DB Yeah the fact that the project is accumulative is important, there is a lot of repetition in it. Inevitably you return to ideas every now and then, if it has been a couple of years since I made something that involves measurement, I might add a couple of measurement works to the pile, because it is still something that concerns me. In the same way I might not have opened a book by Kurt Schwitters for years, but rereading will almost certainly prompt something. It is like keeping reference points alive really. This runs counter to the old modernist idea, the Poundian 'make it new', I am not at all concerned with that kind of progression. That word, of course, has been terribly abused by politicians of late – it's always 'Advance! Advance! Progress! It happened in the past therefore it was bad, we'll improve things, create more choice than you have dreamt of', change for the sake of change. Conversely I think the things we cherish most are constant. Those continuous elements need to be readdressed, to be looked at, reviewed on a regular basis. There are certain key questions that occur in the studio along the lines of 'why am I doing what I'm doing, how am I doing what I'm doing'; which translate for the reader into 'what is this, how did it come about?' That assessment of methodology is a big part of content, the way you form questions, the way you treat the material that you are working with.

There is a lot of work around that seems to do little more than illustrate ideas or rhetorical positions, a product of too much research. As I have said elsewhere *I Don't Know About Research I'm Just Searchin'*. There is no point setting out if you know where you are going to end up; my work is an improvised response to things and events, the variety of the work echoes the variety of everything else.

LO When you put it in those terms, it sounds as though it's very much bound up with your rejection of serialism, the repetition of the same...

DB Yes and no. There are many artists whose works I respect greatly, who have spent lifetimes working serially. I appreciate the argument

that you cannot do the same thing twice no matter how much you try: someone might spend their life drawing circles on pieces of paper, and every circle will be different and there is a beauty in that subtle variation. But it is not for me. I think you've got to be honest with yourself and find out what the terms of your project are. Ultimately I think you realise what you are able to do and then you make the best of your limited abilities. That is certainly what I've done. If what you are doing becomes a habitual style you should change it: if it looks too much like art, then there is a problem. Early on I realized that I wanted to make things that looked a little unformed – that contained some element of doubt.

LO So in a way it's work that is wearing it's gaps on its sleeve – you've used the word stutter a few times today – in the way that in *Returning* the words appear with the gaps, sort of exposing those breaks within the words?

DB That piece is, I suppose, a visual exploration of that idea. Of course in literal terms, stuttering is a disability, but when part of something is repeated, or all of something is repeated, voluntarily or involuntarily, something happens, the surface tension of the word is broken. There is something quite beautiful about hearing a word stuttered, as if it were hovering in space. I would like to make the case for a stuttered approach to subject: look at something once, look again, keep looking. Everything is so accelerated in our time. There is often not enough time – or there does not appear to be enough time – to stop and look, one of the things art can offer is time to stop and look.

LO One of the interesting things that came up when we showed students your work during our research was the almost unanimous sense that that it somehow constituted a puzzle. They enjoyed that but felt challenged by it, and had a sense that they hadn't solved it. For me, that raises the question of what we expect from art today, the question that you have just raised, of what art offers to those who engage with it. In a sense, preventing resolution might be a kind of strategy to avoid that danger of being categorised, fixed or classified: are you trying to keep your viewers puzzling?

DB No. Duchamp said: 'there is no solution because there is no problem'. So there are no hidden solutions, but obviously the work is not declarative. If something is not declarative, if something does not wear an immediate reading on its sleeve, does this constitute a puzzle? It may do. It all depends on the approach of the reader and that is the reader's business, but if they want narrative closure they are not going to get it from what I do. It is open-ended. I am not interested in answers at all; I am interested in turning things over. That drawing to attention is what I am interested in.

I am just interested in saying 'look at this', perhaps not even 'isn't it interesting?' but just 'lets look at it again'. In the culture we live in there is a kind of cult of specialisation, everyone is a specialist and all those specialists have a provisional thesis, they are expected to have conclusive answers, the answer is treated as a product. The artist has a responsibility to counter that didactic mode. One of the functions of art is to propose that we pay attention to the actuality of things as opposed to what they might mean. I resist the assumption

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that everything should come with an explanation. Like an image in a newspaper that comes with a caption, the caption conditions the way we read the image. I am interested in removing the caption, presenting images under their own terms. So if that is seen as problematizing, then it is because it is throwing responsibility back on the reader.

**LO** Yes, the idea of it being puzzling seems to me to be exactly a symptom of what you're saying, a symptom of the idea that there should be an answer to everything or have an explanation.

**DB** I could provide a commentary but I am increasingly resistant to that. I object to the little interpretation captions you find beside work in contemporary art museums, because the primary material (the work) is treated as an illustration, secondary to the explanation of the work. I think the work should be left alone to do its job.

**LO** So in that sense, your strategy of using words as units, as things within the image, is a way of breaking down that relationship between 'visual' image and 'textual' explanation, a way of re-presenting words as things to be considered and looked at again. I've often wondered, when thinking about your use of black and white, about your working relationship with print. I would have guessed, before you told me where the name WAX366 came from, that it was a reference to the idea of the imprint. Much of your work also seems to be interested in the contrast between the black of print and the white of the page.

**DB** The idioms and the media I work with are really quite basic – they are ordinary. I do not use print in the way print-makers use print, it is more like the approach of the jobbing printer; it is just print. I use it as a way of making stuff available and getting it out. I don't want it to look fancy; I want it to look ordinary. It is never more than it needs to be. It is that reductive thing again.

**LO** I get the impression that you are attracted to the negative, in the dialectical sense: the silence necessary for noise, or the gap you can move away from, the break that starts the movement. Throughout our conversation today, as we circle around your work, we seem to have come back again and again to figures of this negative, from the empty stop-press box, through the divisions between disciplines, Beckett's point of failure, stuttering pauses. Is that a fair assessment?

**DB** I think that's fair. The first step is to identify a space, the space sets the terms for what you make. So the work is like a spare part or a patch, a small part of something larger. I suppose it comes back to a set of related problems, you are making this work, you are involved in this activity, to what purpose is it best put? I am concerned with trying to identify a space that is beyond the rational, I do not want to explain things I want to show things, I think that is quite particular. It is simply a reconsideration of the familiar or that which is taken for granted. This might seem futile, but I am interested in reclaiming a space, a space of attention, just because there seems to be less and less time made available for attention in our culture. As I said earlier perhaps the most useful thing art can offer is the opportunity to slow down a bit, to stop and look, to stop and turn something over: that is the limit of my ambition really. If the work can propose that, then that is enough.

This conversation took place in the archive room in the Visual Research Centre at Dundee Contemporary Arts where there is a collection of early WAX366 printed items, in 2010.

Poetry Beyond Text was an AHRC research project at the University of Dundee that ran between 2009–2011. The project used David Bellingham's book *Fresh Fruit and Tables* as a case study.

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## Images

Between Gaps in Letters and Words, *drawing*, 2011  
Between Gaps in Branches and Leaves, *drawing*, 2011  
Words On a Wall That's All, *wall drawing*, 2011  
Five Signs, *drawing*, 2012  
Big Upon Little, *West Hoathly*  
Big Upon Little, *drawing*, 2011  
Big Upon Little, *wall drawing*, 2011  
Something To Hang On The Wall, *drawing*, 2012  
A Few Words In The Place Of a Few Others, *drawing*, 2008  
Something In The Place Of Something Else, *wall drawing*, 2012  
Three Words Alone, 2012

WAX366 at Whitley Bay, 1985  
Between Fields / Narrow Woodland, *folding card*, 1996  
Adana 8" x 5" printing press  
Section (Copenhagen), *wall drawing*, 2000  
Fresh Fruit and Tables, *book cover*, 2008  
Machine Made Marks / Handmade Marks, 1997  
Sign Not Yet In Use, *drawing on canvas*, 2008  
Word / Brick, *drawing*, 2009  
Cancelled Stop Sign, *drawing*, 1996  
Things Have No Need For Words, *drawing*, 2012  
Bus Ticket for Piet Mondrian, *drawing on bus ticket*, 1993  
Cruise, *postcard*, 1998  
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A Kurt Schwitters bookshelf, *photograph*, 1995  
Units of Measure (a sound poem after Kurt Schwitters), 1999  
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Ideas Leave Objects Standing, *book cover*, 2005  
Working, *typewritten text*, 2001  
Playing, *handwritten text*, 2002  
I Don't Know About Research I'm Just Searchin', *postcard*, 2006  
Stutter, *drawing*, 2004  
Not Only Black And White, *letterpress print*, 2010  
Something More Than Before, 2013

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