

### 21.03.13 Joanna Gavins – Text World Theory

An event as part of ‘Suppose I call a man a horse, or a horse a man?’  
Anna Barham’s residency at Site Gallery, Sheffield, 09.02 - 23.03.13

#### Laura Sillars:

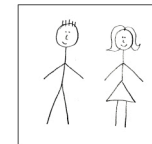
During her platform residency Anna has connected with academics working at the University of Sheffield and in Sheffield more broadly – looking at her ideas and thinking from a whole range of different perspectives. And we’re delighted that Jo Gavins is with us tonight. Jo has been working in the development of Text World Theory for the last decade which directly connects with Anna’s thinking and work. She’s the director of the Text World Theory Special Collection housed in the Western Bank Library at the University of Sheffield. A lot of her work focuses on cognitive experiences of contemporary poetry and she has particular interests in absurdity.

#### Joanna Gavins:

I agreed to start by providing some background into what I do and what text world theory is. I’ve tried to keep it as simple as I could and it may be way too simple but when we open the discussion out I’m happy to answer any questions that anybody’s got.

My work is based within cognitive linguistics. It crosses over all kinds of different disciplines but really text worlds developed from cognitive linguistics. What I do as a text world theorist is look at language and the effect that it has on peoples’ minds and I’m interested in what happens when people read language or hear language or speak language. Cognitive science recently, in all its developments, has allowed us to know an awful lot more about what happens when we produce and receive language and that’s what text world theory has really developed out of.

In text world theory we examine language at different levels and the first level we look at is what happens when language is produced or received and we call that the discourse world. This is a discourse world that we’re in now and that [slide] is a ridiculously simplified picture of a discourse world (I don’t know how I dare even put up pictures like that in an art gallery but...) [audience laughter]. But discourse worlds are basically real life situations where language is produced and received. The important thing about it is that it’s produced and received by real people and that cognitive linguistics isn’t interested really in looking at language on a page, as something to be dissected and examined in a vacuum, it’s interested in its real life manifestation and how it’s negotiated and understood and how people in all their complexity feed into that.



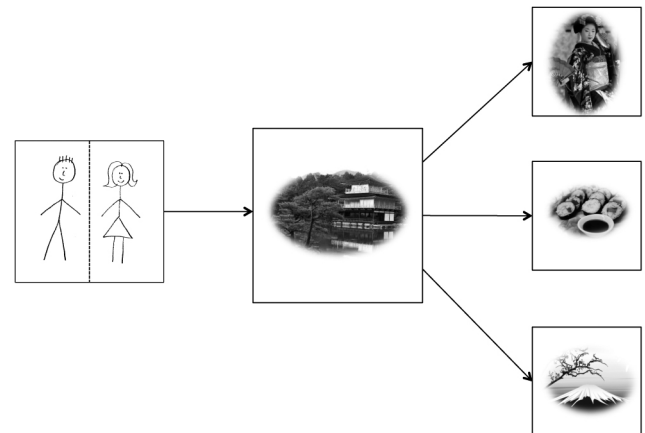
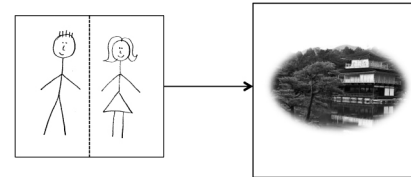
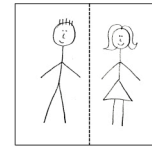
We look at people as cognitive human beings bringing their background

experiences and knowledge and understanding with them and bringing it to bear on a piece of language before it's even happened. So when you walked in and sat down this evening you had all kinds of expectations about what I would say, how dull or how interesting I might be and that kind of thing, and those expectations will all be affecting how you're interpreting what I'm saying.

So first of all we look at the people that make up language, and the interesting thing about artworks, and I think this is true about Anna's work as well as the sort of poetry and literature that I look at, is that it often takes place in a discourse world that's split [slide]. So you have a situation where the producer and receiver of the discourse are in different spaces and times. Most of the literature you read for example will have been written by someone who's dead or in a different country from you, certainly in a different room. That has all kinds of consequences for the language that's produced and the things that you have to do with language to understand it. When you look at Anna's work, most of the time - of course tonight's an exception - she's not in the room. So you have to bring all kinds of your own information and inferencing to the language to understand it. Text world theory looks at that and it examines how real people converse, or write, or read, and tries to understand all of that knowledge that they bring with them to language and the effect that it can have. And what it does is feed into the construction of what we call a text world.

With any piece of language that you encounter, you create a mental representation of it in your mind in order to understand it. So say for example somebody says to me the words 'golden temple' or tells me a story about a golden temple, I will create a mental picture from the language that they produce and I build a text world in my mind [slide]. Text world theory is built on that very common sense, very ordinary experience, that I think everybody has, of seeing language in your mind. Sometimes when you see language it can be incredibly immersive, you can get completely lost in a novel for example to the point where you emerge from it an altered person, at least for a short while. For me, golden temple, because of my own background experiences and my own history, means Kyoto and a particular golden temple and that will feed into my mental picture [slide]. Unless I get other information through language, that's what I base that text world upon.

So that's what a text world is - a mental representation of language that can be incredibly powerful, it can move you to tears, bore you to tears and draw you in. But that can also be incredibly brief - lots of text worlds don't develop very far, they're very fleeting. Once language is developing, once you have a complex piece of language, you can have all kinds of worlds that develop from that. Text worlds are very dynamic - they're developing all the time, we're adding to them all the time, and using not just the language on the page or that we're hearing, but all that background knowledge and experience to develop something quite complex sometimes. This is a bit of text world theory that we



probably won't talk about much today but text world theory also has this other layer of all the multiple worlds that can become embedded within each other within a piece of text. When you're reading a novel for example, say about Japan, about the golden temple, you might have lots of different switches in scene, in time, people's thoughts and feelings that become embedded in the main text, when somebody expresses their beliefs, when you get an insight into someone's mind or character for example. Text worlds don't stay still, your mental representations are shifting and changing all the time, particularly in literary texts. You get lots of different worlds emerging from the initial world and it can become incredibly complex. So I spend a lot of my time drawing diagrams that actually look very similar to this simplified one that I've drawn here to try and understand which bits of language are creating which bits of mental representation and how once you've got a text world, why it can affect you in certain ways, why certain bits of the language attract your attention more than others. Which bits move you, which bits do you feel most empathy with and things like that. Which bits cause you the biggest challenge. I'm interested in challenging texts in particular because I like things that make my theory break so that I can put it back together again. I'm constantly breaking text world theory in order to mend it and make it better. Anna's broken it a few times since I've known her so it's really interesting for me to be here tonight talking to her.

**Screening of 'Argent Minotaur Slept', 2012**

>> <http://www.annabarham.net/video/argentminotaursl.html>

**Anna Barham:**

I don't know if you wanted me to say anything about it, I feel very conscious now of the effect that will have on it.

**LS:**

We wanted to have, not a sociological or scientific test, but before Anna says too much, and before Jo says how she reads it through text world theory, we want to have some conversation about how you as an audience and as readers might respond to this. You don't have to do it through any particular theory, it can just be 'I noticed this word' or 'I responded to this idea' - just a very raw and direct point of departure.

Maybe I'll kick off to realise how basically we can start: certainly from when I've seen this text or when Anna gave a performance of a similar text the other evening, what I've noticed is the most disgusting words really became most noticeable, I can't think of one now, there was mutant something - slime? - mutate errant sloping - whenever there were words that seemed like something

almost believable – mutant lisp generator – those were the things that stuck out most to me and I think I connected to even on that level of slight disgust. A smuttier porn tangle – those were the things that struck me as being, on some level, maybe its to do with shock or the incongruence of them, were the things that I remember about the text even though that’s not at all the entire text but it seemed like there was a playfulness in that, creating images that were quite borderline uncomfortable yet meaningless in that some of them didn’t make sense as ideas but it felt like you could make sense of them yourself.

**LS:**

That zoning in and zoning out create a reflective space?

**AB:**

Yes, what Laura’s talking about is a reading.

**Gareth Bell-Jones:**

I think for me the speed and the mechanical, computerised appearance of the way it’s presented means that in terms of the text worlds it’s absent for me. Because I don’t think about the language as having a particular meaning and I don’t look at what each sentence means to me unless I hover over something, something that particularly stuck out, but then I just stop watching and I have to consider what I’ve just been reading. Which means I stop watching the video and I’m outside of that. And then I have to go back to watching again and nothing has meaning anymore I just go back to the structure.

**GBJ:**

On the whole I’m more interested in the structure of the language than the meaning of the language.

**Audience 1:**

When you performed it did you read it out loud?

**A1:**

Just looking at it... the assumption that we’re all literate, that’s why we may have a reaction to this... there are obviously many illiterate cultures and I’ve worked with people with learning difficulties for a long time in my life, some of whom were totally illiterate. It’s interesting how this is quite specific in that sense. And also with the whole thing about typing – I mean I type quite fast and sometimes when I’m typing its like the words don’t reach my mind and in a way its just a mechanical thing. It’s interesting how you may view words depending on your cultural or life perspective.

**Lotte Juul Peterson:**

I found the energy of the structure made me want to follow, not stop off as you said Gareth, it kind of prevented you from doing that, being drawn to keep going.

**GBJ:**

But when you continue there's no meaning in the language that you're reading and so whilst you're trying to create a meaning from it you're unable to do so simultaneously which kind of negates this kind of comprehension so it's like a continuous mechanical reading rather than a reading.

**Mike Simpkin:**

I'd avoided this exhibition because reading about it, it felt rather pretentious, but I came in the other day and looked at it and found myself getting very drawn in. Very drawn in by the work next door [Liquid Consonant] and then I looked at the Leptis Magna book and I found myself absolutely fascinated by the presentation, by the associations, the rhythm, the colour. It was a complete opening out. And my response to this is actually very different because I found [Return To] Leptis Magna quite musical as a text and this is a dance to me, on the screen, and images come, sometimes associated with the shape on the screen, sometimes generated by the text, so.... I'm buying into it.

**LS:**

That's marvellous! I think actually as a curator it is quite difficult to write about Anna's work and give... you know, we have to write a 50 word synopsis that goes in an advert, it's quite difficult to express the richness of it and the engagement of it and the content and also do that kind of 'come and see this' thing, because it's very rich. I'm glad that you've found a way in.

But it's interesting in terms of the dance as well because Anna has a piece where she works with a tap dancer, she does a live reading performance alongside a tap dance.

**Audience 2:**

I had no problem with that as a story, I didn't see any difference between reading at that speed and processing meaning. The times that it was the easiest was when there was potential for the apparent or immediate meaning at the end of one line to follow onto the next. But even with the constraint of the line length I had no problem reading that as a story. The scenes roll past.

**GBJ:**

So how did the story go, what was the narrative?

**A2:**

It was describing lots of different things that were all inherently related, you could see that they were immediately related lexically by... there was always some element of the word... I noticed towards the end that that connection was getting a bit less, just syllables. I don't know if that was happening all the way through but I only noticed it towards the end. What I mean is not that it immediately defined a definite narrative, just that it didn't have anything that broke all the rules sufficiently to convince me that there couldn't possibly be one.

**GBJ:**

I just found that the words... there wasn't any language structure because it was more interested in the connections... the list of words seemed pretty incongruous to me and so it was very difficult to create a narrative from it.

**Audience 3:**

I was detached from the meaning as well, I suppose when I was watching it I was thinking in more of a technical sense – I spent quite a while counting the letters and trying to work out which ones were repeated and then thinking about... 19 letters, there are only certain combinations that 19 letters can take that we consider to be a word within the English language and I thought of it more like that, completely detached from the meaning. And also the pattern on the screen, how the letters were stacked, I kind of lost track of meaning entirely.

**JG:**

I find all of the responses really fascinating and luckily for me a lot of them do tie in with cognitive theory. Some of the most recent work in text worlds has been not necessarily looking at the structure of a whole text but just at individual words and small text worlds related to them and why certain bits of a text can draw your attention more than others. And when I encountered Anna's work for the first time, particularly this piece [Argent Minotaur Slept] I felt what Anna described earlier as a push and pull occurs – you have the urge to create a mental representation but something keeps getting in the way.

A lot of cognitive theory at the moment builds on work in the psychology of perception and the notion is that language, and the way we see language in our minds, works along a lot of the same psychological principles as how we see anything and certain things attract our attention more than others. So

somebody scratching their head like that is distracting to us, movement when described in a text distracts us and causes our attention to shift in the same way as movement in the gift shop area does while we're sitting in here. And the notion is that anything new, when something new appears in text, the view is described or the next word obviously that you're focussing on with your eyes is the one that's drawing your attention most. So as Anna's work kind of shifts like that the appearance of the words in sequence directs your attention a particular way.

There are other things that draw our attention: anything bright, things that are full are more visually attractive to us than things that are empty for example, big things, noisy things, things that are higher up all kind of attract our attention more and what we're finding through cognitive linguistics is that the same effect happens in texts, in written text as well. And one of the things that I find really interesting in relation to Anna's work that I'll come back to a bit later maybe, is that anything with empathetic recognisability attracts our attention more, so there's kind of a sliding scale starting with humans – they're the most attractive and the most empathetically recognisable to us so we're more interested in them when we read or talk about them – and it kind of slides down through animals that we anthropomorphise all the time but also then to objects and things.

There's also a lot of theory about how parallel structures and repeated patterns draw our attention in text and I think in my own personal experience of that piece of work, that's what I found happening all the time. That I was starting all the time, when a new sentence - I'm not even going to call them sentences - when a new word appeared, my eye went there first but then if there was a pattern down the right hand side I felt that that was distracting my attention all the time and I would often find my attention going on the repeated words that were appearing in a different part of the screen. And what people are reporting here seems to be the same sort of thing and I think that then your attention falls on a particular part of the emerging text and that's where you start to form a mental representation that's a bit more solid, that isn't quite so fleeting, or that you can actually construct at all. That's what I mean about Anna breaking my theory is that there is no way of accounting for how you can start or want to start to build a text world but you can't quite bring it off.

But I do think it's really interesting what you [MS] were saying about the Return To Leptis Magna text because I think once the text stays still something entirely different happens to it and so where the movement and the newness and the parallelism were all kind of working together with the moving piece [Argent Minotaur Slept] I think in the book there are different things that are drawing attention and that we're starting to settle our text worlds on.

Could you say a bit more about how you experienced the written Return To



Letpis Magna text and what it was that you found so engaging about it?

**MS:**

Once I'd sort of realised what the rules, the basic rules might be, it was the amount of variation that can be achieved within really quite a tight set of rules. That's part of the analogy with music that you have a certain number of notes and you rearrange them... I just found myself all across the page. Some of it's quite hard to read isn't it, some of its in yellow...

**AB:**

It's all one colour - blue.

**MS:**

Is it?

**AB:**

That would be great if you had a synaesthetic experience.

**JG:**

Do you want to say something as well?

**AB:**

I don't know where to start really, I suppose everyone's realised that they're anagrams – that's my basic rule – but a lot of what I've been interested in is the process of reading, which I think in a kind of naïve way without knowing anything about text world theory some of my ideas were overlapping with that. So in terms of what you bring as a reader to a text and what you project onto it yourself, I was very interested in that, and also periods of attention and inattention so that if you're listening to someone you might properly get some of it but then zone out and that could happen with any text but I particularly I make a point of making that happen. So I expect that you'll get hooks and then you'll not be able to sustain it for that long and particularly with the vocal performances I think that happens, because you're in a much more passive role – you have to work quite hard with those moving words [in the animation] but when you're listening it's a much more passive experience, you can just let it flow over you.

I won't allow myself to use an anagram that for me doesn't create a text world – now I know what to call it – but they all give me an image and that's my rule. I use a computer programme to help me find the anagrams in the first place but the ones that I disregard as 'meaningless' in my terms are basically ones where

TRANSMIT ELEGANT POUR LATENT STREAMING 02  
 IMPUREST POUR TANGENTIAL TERMS  
 ORAL TANGENT  
 POUR TANGENTIAL TERMS  
 PROTEAN GENITAL STRUM  
 PROTEAN STRUM ELATING  
 ENTREATING OPAL STRUM  
 TONAL STRUM REPEATING AT INSTRUMENTAL GR 02  
 ALMOST REPEATING TURN  
 SLIT POMEGRANATE TURN  
 SLUR POMEGRANATE TINT  
 PURR LAST OMEGA INTENT  
 GAMEST PARLOUR INTENT  
 PARTS GLEAM OUR INTENT  
 OUR RAPT INTENT GLEAMS  
 GRASP OUR METAL INTENT  
 04 NTAL GRASP MUST INTERPRET ANALOG  
 INTERRUPT ANALOG STEM  
 INTERRUPT MOLTEN SAGA  
 ERUPT ORNAMENTAL G I 06

I can't create an image from them. So to me there's total meaning between every layer but I can understand that I've written it and I've spent a lot longer with it and at a different pace. There are things that happen, maybe we can get onto that, there are intricacies between the lines in the book where some things are quite obvious because they're a whole word that repeats or other times its just a fragment of a word that's embedded in another one. There's one there [points to slide] where the word 'pomegranate' turns to 'omega' – one of my rules is that at least 3 letters have got to overlap so the o-m-e-g of pomegranate and the o-m-e-g of omega – but then a pomegranate even looks like the omega shape if you turn it upside down so there are... a million little links and threads for me. Whether you call that narrative or not is maybe another question, but...

I just want to create something as open textured as possible – so that when someone comes to read it that they have the ability to really project into it and to get something of themselves back from it, rather than it being a kind of dogmatic text that is trying to say something clearly.

**JG:**

You were saying to me earlier as well that even the order in which you present different sets of words, you often deliberately mess around with those as well. There's one that you were talking about with parrots and that you deliberately put one in the middle that wasn't parrots or something and it broke the pattern.

**AB:**

Yes. Well, it's to kind of know where I can go because of the 3 letter repeating rule. That particular bit that we were talking about, it was something like ten parrots emulating so I was all excited about the fact that parroting and emulating meant the same thing and here were these parrots emulating, and then parroting metal tunes is the one you... it not confused but it seemed to break the pattern and then it went on to, I've forgotten what the next line is, but basically I wanted to get back to emulating and an emu, oh yes it was parroting emu talents something like that... so there's because of this linear ordering that forces decisions if I wanted to include... I could have just not included the metal tunes one but I liked it.

**JG:**

That's interesting because on a previous slide I was talking about parallelisms and repeated patterns in language drawing attention that when you have a repeated pattern, it's just as attention grabbing when somebody breaks a pattern as when somebody has established one. So for me I found that incredibly playful when you do that. I know that you're working to a rule but

when you do that it's highly playful, for the reader anyway. You think you're safe and you're developing a nice image of a parrot and you're starting to draw narratives around it and so on and you're drawing on your background knowledge to have something a bit more fully fledged and then you deliberately break it. But my attention is why is she breaking it, what is she doing here? And that still maintains attention on that particular part in the text.

I picked out some of those particular patterns to talk about, again this is my own subjective response to the text, but my first experience of it was opening the book and my eyes just falling on those very obvious groupings of the same word. On that page I was particularly struck by the fruit, and then having to go and look up termagant, I can't remember what it is now.

**AB:**

I think it's a loud and violent deity.

**JG:**

Yes... In my experience that was what happened to begin with... When we first met my response to it was that it reminds me of concrete poetry but somehow the clear signification of concrete poetry wasn't there, I had to go and make that [for myself] a lot more, and like you say, work much harder to do it. But I don't think it's as hard as when the text is moving.

**LS:**

Do you think - because I relate to what you [A2] were saying in terms of not finding it that hard to find a story - and so it's really interesting to me that you've uncovered the [repetition] ...obviously the repetition is there but for me I bounce away from the repetition and so in that little block I read 'into true stating tasting tasting tasting purring at pert saturating treat'. And I'm like right there's the story! And it doesn't really make sense but on the other hand it does make a strong picture going downwards. I'm personally trying to locate strong bits of meaning rather than the repetition. It's interesting to me that you've sought out these really structural elements away from searching from more narrative meaning.

**JG:**

Aha though, but this is another bit that I looked at: man posturing a letter - this is on a different page [slide]. I wanted to show this because I think that there are those structural attention grabbers where your attention might fall and you start to build those text worlds, but one of the most... I think we are drawn to those bits of the text that do fill our narrative expectations the best and that do allow

us to develop something more coherent and narrative based. Again in those textual attractors that I spoke about earlier one of the things that draws a lot of attention in textual comprehension is people with empathetic recognisability so people, but people in a subject position with agency, so somebody doing something – man posturing a letter – and I loved that as well because of the play with posting a letter – and I’m able to form a really clear representation of that, in fact he’s a postman in my head, and he’s got all kinds of characteristics that aren’t defined in the text but that the text allows me to build in. So I think aside from those obvious kind of first impression structures that grab your attention I think the parts where the narrative is strongest are also the ones that draw us in the most. And that seems to be what everyone’s trying to do, even if they can’t – the work invites you to do that.

PUT AS ROMAN LETTERING 15  
MAN POSTURING A LETTER  
LATER MEANT POSTURING  
TOUR MEANING SPLATTER  
OUR LEARNING ATTEMPTS  
RING OUR LEAN ATTEMPTS  
RULING REASON ATTEMPT  
LURING REASON ATTEMPT  
ATTEMPTING ORAL RU 21  
ALSO UNERRING ATTEMPT

**AB:**

Or do you think that text just does in general, that we try to make sense out of something?

**JG:**

Yes, we don’t tolerate lack of meaning very well.

**LS:**

Except that with absurd poetry, you do walk away from it with a very strong image of what’s happened even though the words sometimes are not really words. But one of Anna’s rules is the words always do have to be words. There aren’t fake words in there, are there?

**AB:**

I am beginning to make words up, but I still have to feel that they have an image, for me.

**LS:**

A meaning?

**AB:**

Yes, even if that was just a description of sound, you know like a ‘thwack’.

**JG:**

That’s really interesting and there’s a whole area - I think it’s called phonosemantics – is that what you’re playing on, the sounds of the words to make an image?

**AB:**

I'd like... that's the direction I'm interested in going, I don't think it does it very strongly in the book at all, but through reading [the texts aloud] I think this sound element is coming in more and more and I'm considering that more as I write, rather than it being a graphic experience.

**JG:**

I think the two are related as well, the sound and the graphic. I was reading some work by a PhD student today who's writing about some work in neuroscience where they gave a spiky shape and a shape with the same footprint as it were, but with rounded corners, and presented it to people on the Canary Islands, strangely enough, and asked them which shape is kiki and which shape is bouba. And of course they all said the round shape was bouba and the spiky shape was kiki so there's a whole theory about why people do that – why do certain shapes and sounds have this interrelationship which seems to be what you're playing with in there [Liquid Consonant in gallery 2].

There's another one as well that I picked out which really struck me: 'poets term Alan Turing / translate Turing poem'. I loved that, that to me was a complete narrative about Alan Turing being a poet and having all this embedded meaning. I found that really easy. I think some parts of the text I find quite immersive and other bits not and it is as you described that push and pull backwards and forwards I think.

**LS:**

Shall we show the next work?

**Screening of 'Proteus', 2010**

>> <http://www.annabarham.net/video/proteusvideo.html>

Can we do that sociological experiment again and see how people responded? I feel a bit dizzy personally. And I suddenly realised that we were having a potentially dual experience with some people looking at the screen here and other people looking at the wall and they're quite different because one of them's got this rich deep black background and the other one actually just looks like it's on the wall.

**Audience 4:**

I think there's a desire to put in letters where they're missing when they're moving that fast. You want to get as much out of it as possible and words

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TAUTER MENTAL PROSING  
 ALTERING TRUANT PROSE  
 ALTERING TRUANT POEMS  
 AS LATTER POEM TURNING  
 POETS TERM ALAN TURING  
 TRANSLATE TURING POEM  
 LATENT A M TURING PROSE  
 SOME AL TURING PATTERN  
 TO SLUR ENIGMA PATTERN  
 AS TURN ENIGMA PLOTTER  
 NAME AS TURING PLOTTER  
 NOTATE TURING SAMPLER  
 PROTEAN TURING METALS  
 PUT ORNATE METAL RINGS  
 ROTATE SPUN METAL RING  
 PORTMANTEAU RINGLETS  
 ELATES PORTMANTURING  
 ROTATE TUNING SAMPLER  
 ROTATE TURNING SAMPLE  
 ROTATE SUPERMAN GLINT  
 ROTATE UNTANGLE PRISM  
 ENTER ALONG TAUT PRISM  
 RIM ALONG TAUT PRESENT  
 TRUEST PENTAGONAL RIM ON TAUT ERRANT 28  
 SET POTENT ANGULAR RIM  
 EMIT ANGULAR PORTENTS  
 TEN TRIANGULAR TEMPOS  
 REGULAR TEMPO INSTANT  
 SPENT TO GRANULAR TIME  
 INTO GRANULAR TEMPEST  
 SPUR AT MOLTEN GRANITE  
 MENTAL GRANITE STUPOR  
 GRANITE TANTRUM SLOPE  
 GARNET TUNA TRIM SLOPE  
 PROTEAN GARNET LITMUS  
 29 LT PROUSTIAN GARNET  
 PROUSTING LEAN MATTER  
 POSTURING LEAN MATTER  
 39 AN POSTURING

30 STUTTER POLAR MEANING  
 POLAR TERMS TAUTENING  
 TAUTENING PERT MORALS  
 IGNORE PERT TANTALUMS  
 UNSETTLING PERT AROMA  
 MOP UNSETTLING ERRATA  
 MOP A SULTRIER TANGENT

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appear as whole words and then consonants appear and you want to fill them out and make your own words and I like the Greek names that keep coming up, so you really really want to try and make a narrative.

**JG:**

Do those Greek names help?

**A4:**

Well they seem to be leading it for me. Yes.

**LS:**

I find this one a lot harder to make a narrative out of than the other one. It might be to do with the fact that this one disturbs how you do reading – start at the left and you move along – because it's coming at you across the space rather than in a learned way – which relates to your [A1] point in a sense to do with literacy. We've had a series of reading groups with this exhibition and one of the texts that we read [The Gutenberg Galaxy - Marshall McLuhan] was all about the movement of language from one linguistic form into another and how some languages are image/symbol based as opposed to alphabetically based and the problem between those in that one fails to adequately connect with the other.

**A1:**

The way this is moving is much more... I suppose in a way appropriate to the form of the computer screen and the electronic graphic, whereas the previous one was more flowing in a more organic and natural way – you don't necessarily see those rhythms strictly in nature but say more how a river flows where this is more what you'd expect from a computer: more speed, the sporadic rhythm. That's interesting when you have the ancient Greek words with it – past and present.

**MS:**

I'm very suspicious of it, I can't relate to it in the same way because I suspect the possibility of subliminal messages [audience laughter]. So I won't surrender to it.

**JG:**

It's funny you say that because when Anna first showed it to me in the café I said that's really interesting that Regan's in there and she said 'it isn't'. But I'm still convinced it is – every time I watch it I'm thinking Ronald Regan is in the text.

**GBJ:**

There are quite a lot of words where you fill in the gaps and words linger for some time afterwards and kind of contaminate the pairings that are there. I actually found it a bit easier to grip. I think because in the previous work I was getting caught up in the structure and didn't allow myself to linger on meaning and was more concerned with language structure. In this one you're less concerned with what isn't on the screen as with the wider image as you showed in the publication and you have all the letters there straight in front of you and you know what words have previously been made and you only have one thing in your mind at a time.

**LJP:**

I think I appreciate the words more, I feel less stressed. With this one there's something different, a totally different structure.

**LS:**

I find that really interesting because I actually find this one more stressful than the other one. I can only look at it for a little bit of time and then I feel a bit dizzy. I mean I really like it but it's that thing maybe when it's adding up to something you're almost at that moment of it adding up and then it departs again whereas at least with the sense of a sentence [in the other work] you can be seduced into believing that there might be something not grammatical but storytelling about it because you see one fragment of a sentence after another, whereas in this, as soon as you think it's got somewhere it's gone away again so it's quite, I wouldn't say flirtatious, that's absolutely the wrong word, but it's got that sense of come hither and then it bounces you back again straight away.

**A3:**

It's almost hypnotic, it's got you into that rhythm as it breaks. It seems to me I can focus more, it describes the structure of how it is I'm focussing on those words in a negotiation, but that's probably because of what I'm interested in. That's what I'm bringing to it but those are the things, Proteus and all of those words and I'm ignoring the rest.

**LS:**

So it more strongly brings out your own filtering system?

**A3:**

I'm looking for different things in the two works. It was pattern that I was looking for in the other but here I'm focussing on the meaning of... 'mutating'

just came up and those things but I don't find I'm looking for narratives.

**A4:**

I like the sense that it's some sort of message from the past which might be again because of the Greek names but also a lot of the other words are animals or things that have always been around like streams, the structure of the planet, they're ancient, but then it's a very contemporary format, so it seems like a message that echoes back, that somehow it's reaching us from a long time ago. I like that sensation.

**AB:**

It's interesting because this actually... I used different rules. I'm still using the letters from 'Return to Leptis Magna', but this [piece] does actually create a really coherent narrative which is the story of the Greek god Proteus: The King Menelaus gets separated from the other ships in his fleet and he lands on an island and he wants to find out where the others are. Proteus knows everything past present and future and but tries to evade telling people what they want to know by changing his form [he becomes different animals, a tree, water etc]. The way to get him to tell you what you want to know is to hold him fast while he goes through all his mutations and once he comes full circle, to the first thing that you held him as, then he's duty bound to tell what you want to know. It's from Homer's Odyssey.

So the piece does have a totally coherent (minus ofs and thes etc., it is a little bit stilted) it does have a totally coherent narrative. And when I've shown it in galleries the invigilators have said that after a while they could read it really easily – you begin to remember, it's a process of building it up through memory, and then you've got it and it's not a puzzle any more. But I was really interested in misreading and again fragments of words, which is what goes throughout the book as well, and that possibility of projection onto it. Because if you haven't watched it to the point of remembering it, then everyone has a different set of words that they've managed to grasp.

**JG:**

Some of them are incredibly evocative like Proteus - all those Greek names all have their narratives behind them don't they.

**LS:**

When you say that I do remember that the biggest message I got was 'lost at sea' and that's sort of how I feel about this work.



**JG:**

What about this description of the work as stressful? Was it very stressful in its creation... or how do you feel about people describing it as stressful?

**AB:**

Not too much really. I suppose that's just one reaction - lots of other people have said that they found it quite hypnotising.

**Audience 5:**

I quite like that it's doing the work for me to find the words. I think its interesting that different people are reading it in different ways. I like the idea that literacy isn't something innate, that it's learned and cultural and quite recent. There's nothing innate about how we read, it could be based on other mental resources, but everyone has different ways of reading because it's something that we learn in different ways I suppose.

**JG:**

I think the nature of the reading experience changes, as you say, even from looking at it on a screen to seeing it projected on a wall, to reading it in a book. The situated-ness of reading is really important. I think Anna could have been introduced to me as a poet and I would have been completely accepting of that as her identity. Or as a writer, an author. But as she was introduced to me as an artist I approach her work in a completely different way. And the experience of seeing her work here projected onto that wall is quite new for me, it's opened up another side of the work to me. As you say I've noticed how black and white that one is [on the screen] and how the other one is emerging from the wall, it's a very different context.

**AB:**

Yes, I mean the projected way is the way for this piece of work, but for the other one it was actually designed for the screen.

**JG:**

Do you think your work is poetry?

**AB:**

I don't know. I feel like that's quite a claim.

**JG:**

In a way that being an artist isn't? [audience laughter]

**AB:**

No, not that that isn't but...

**GBJ:**

How important is that?

**JG:**

I don't know, I'm just interested about Anna's feelings about it really. Like I say you rarely get to grill the creator of an artwork – however you want to describe that – about how they feel about their work and I'm just fascinated. I know how I respond to it and that's so much to do with my background, and a playful text to me is poetic...

**LS:**

But would you feel comfortable... I mean Jo has a prodigious list of publications in particular in language and literature... would you for instance feel comfortable writing about this in one of those contexts or would you feel like it operated in a different text world rule system, for want of a better word?

**JG:**

I think that what critics and theorists think is absolutely unimportant. So I would be completely happy writing about Anna's work in a journal that would normally deal with poetry or literature, yes. I mean it doesn't matter what.... I think I'm actually much more comfortable swapping between those genres, those labels and those rules, because that's the nature of my training. I think [for other] people [they can] carry a lot more significance.

**LS:**

But for you Anna, do you think that's to do with a conceptual space in which you're operating or just not needing to put that layer into it?

**AB:**

Of calling it poetry? I suppose I feel it gives me more freedom to do what I do from an art perspective than to call it poetry but maybe that's my own blinkered idea of what poetry or the poetry scene is.

**A1:**

It was taken from the Odyssey, a piece of poetry itself.

**AB:**

Yes.

**JG:**

I think that's what prompted me to ask that question. If you're going to play around with literary texts of that weight you're inviting trouble really aren't you? Would you be comfortable if somebody else described it as poetry?

**AB:**

I suppose what I mean – and this is a blinkered vision on my part – but in order to create this animation, somewhere on my computer I've got the text that I've written, just as a word document, as a static, still, easy to read piece of text. And it's almost as if it's that content that is the 'poem' - just those words stored in that static way, and that's what I don't.... on its own, it's not that it's not interesting to me, but it's not the interest which is tied in with this presentation of it.

**JG:**

Because that's what gives it its slipperiness?

**AB:**

Yes. And it would be quite a boring poem – if you want to call it that – if you just encountered it printed out on the page.

**MS:**

It would be like making a list of the things in a picture.

**JG:**

So then the person that's created all the playfulness and the slipperiness and the beauty of it is a poet surely?

**LS:**

I want to ask Anna a question because when we were searching for, let's say sparring partners, in the city – a lot of searching the web for people who were

thinking in the same space that you were thinking – you were really excited about finding Jo and her work. And then when you actually met each other you were even more excited and also you felt maybe that she got more where you were coming from as well from the meeting, whereas in the email exchange where you were coming from was less clear, but there is a territory that is mapped out by certain words which is what we're talking about. But I wondered from your point of view, now you've investigated text world theory from Jo's perspective, how do you feel that shapes your own reading of your own work?

**AB:**

I think it feels like it crystallises these naïve ideas that I had. That's how I see it. You were going to talk about gestalt I think but I feel like I'm having this gestalt moment with the way that you talk about it, it's as if suddenly all the things that I've been thinking about in quite a nebulous way have become very vivid through these simple ways of describing something as a text world. I think that's what really drew me to your research profile on the website was that in terms of the.... really I've been treating 'Return To Leptis Magna' as a text world, maybe in slightly different way in terms of rearranging the letters. I've got a massive list of all the words that you can spell from it which I've called 'the terrain' so it's already laid out in my head as a kind of world. And then I'm also very interested in how the idea of a text world as you were explaining it at the beginning with the temple is like there's a text world for each text but there's also a text world for each person as well.

**JG:**

Yes there's a text world for every moment too. I think we talked about this a few weeks ago, that we're beginning to realise in cognitive science that every reading of every text isn't just based on you as a person and your own background and your own experiences and expectations, it's based on where you are at that very moment in time. What you're doing, what your motivations are etc. I was telling Anna a few weeks ago that recent research has shown that when you see the word 'car' written down, the same bits of your brain fire as if you were seeing the actual car. And if you read about the car being started then the same bits of your brain that are related to the motor actions that are required to start a car are fired as well. So we realise that we don't just build something in our minds, we actually simulate previous experiences as if they were happening for real.

There's a lot of theorising now that that might be where the real power of language and literature in particular lies, that we're actually experiencing things as if they were happening to us. So when you cry for a character in a novel it's because you're feeling what they're feeling.

**AB:**

Does that tie in with mirror neurons? Florian, I know you organised a talk about that.

**Florian Roithmayr:**

It's a very similar base for these kind of empathic relationships that are established, but the... I mean science is very divided about mirror neurons.

**LS:**

Could you tell us what a mirror neuron is?

**FR:**

It's a very recent discovery, it was discovered in Italy in the early 90s in primate research. Actually the myth is that it was discovered with peanuts, I don't know how true this is. Mirror neurons are a neurological function of the brain that can, on a neurological level, mirror movement. So that means if I see you do something I have a similar experience as if I was doing this myself. It's literally that my brain behaves as if I am doing the same movement without doing it.

**LS:**

Is this related to child development? Like a young baby, if you stick your tongue out it will do the same thing? Or is it different?

**FR:**

It's slightly different. Because I'm not actually doing it, I'm not copying, it's just a mental process, it happens on a neurological level that I'm sticking out my tongue, but I'm not actually physically doing it.

**AB:**

It was explained to me by the researcher in computer speech synthesis [Roger K Moore] that came in – in fact he said it was bananas – but that they had this poor monkey wired up, they were looking at motor responses in the brain and then when they went on a break and one of them peeled a banana the motor side of the monkey's brain started firing just by watching the banana being peeled. I can't remember his link but there is this speaking – hearing dynamic with a mirror neuron as well.

**JG:**

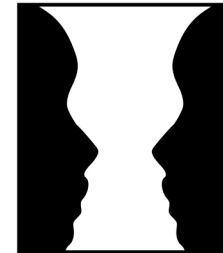
The controversy is what it means – what kind of particular levels of neural activity mean in terms of our human experience. That's where there's always a gap. It's why cognitive linguistics draws mainly from cognitive psychology not neuroscience, because at some point you have to make a huge leap from activity in the brain to the mind – the mind and brain are not necessarily the same thing – so that's where the controversy comes from. People had very quickly started making all sorts of claims about mirror neurons, [that they] must be where our empathy lies and that's an incredible step to take. But the evidence builds all the time, it's very early days. What can we actually learn about human experience from the chemicals that are active in our brains is a different question.

**LS:**

I think I've read some pop-version of this that you can actually get fit without doing anything. It's absolutely marvellous because you could get fit just imagining yourself running.

**JG:**

The last slide that I brought in was to explain.... as Anna said I was going to explain a bit about gestalt psychology because that's where I would more comfortably sit and make more comfortable claims. It's a very old idea now, normally using this example to explain it. It is whether you see two faces or a goblet and that the mind will fill in gaps wherever it can and we perceive things as wholes. And that was my first response to Anna's work and again it's what people have reported here – that what you're trying to do is make a whole from separate parts and that that's what we seem to be driven towards all the time – to get hold of Proteus and hold him down to make the words into something solid.



**MS:**

That fits in with what you said at the beginning – you used the phrase golden temple and you showed the picture of Kyoto and the golden temple there, but golden temple to me means the golden temple in Amritsar and it might mean somewhere else. My feeling about Anna's approach is it offers you the chance to go on a journey which actually allows you to integrate and assimilate the different interpretations and different energies without taking possession of them necessarily. They're there in the space which is around and jostling, but you don't actually have to say this is mine, that's yours, it challenges that line that you drew down the middle.

**JG:**

Yes, I think that's right.

**AB:**

I'd like to ask you about... when you came in and I was talking about whether, or what relationship text world theory had to signification... I don't know if there's anyone here who would have come to the reading group last night but it was cancelled. One or two of you – I'm really sorry. But if you read the texts\* about puns and portmanteaus and how they seem to disrupt this sense that one thing signifies one other thing. And it seems like a real richness of text world theory that it does allow for this much more fluid and dynamic sense of what words are and what they can attach to.

**JG:**

Yes. It doesn't contradict that notion that there is a word that signifies a thing in the world, but that that thing in the world is something different for everyone experiencing the language and that it shifts from moment to moment as well. So 'Proteus' for me now will ever be this piece of work. Our understanding of the words in our, what we call, schema, in the cognitive sciences, we talk about previous knowledge and people's experiences being stored as packets of information, packets of knowledge in the mind that we can access at any time very quickly but that they are incredibly complex and we're adding to them constantly so that kind of structuralist idea of a fixed relationship is somewhat challenged by that I suppose. Language is much more personal and, I keep coming back to this word, situated, embodied, momentary.

**LS:**

That's such a neat ending. And we're more or less exactly on time! I just wanted to say that feedback is really valuable and welcome because, these residencies, we feel are important in that actually a lot of the process... and Anna's going to have to go away and process a lot of this stuff and we have been recording it so we're going to be making transcripts of these discussions. This time last year we hosted a series of reading groups around some work by Jeremiah Day and the reading group have written texts which have now been incorporated into a reader with the texts that they read and their responses to those texts and I think one of the things that's important for us at Site is that the thinking that's going on in this room tonight is feeding into the thinking that will happen as Anna continues to develop and complete the new piece of work that she's making. And that means that there's a real spirit of generosity – not just from Anna in making her thinking visible, shared, exposed and critique-able by a group but also of you, the people in the room, putting your ideas and your thoughts into that space that she'll be developing. So I wanted to say thank you

\*

Derek Attridge - Unpacking the portmanteau, or who's afraid of Finnegans Wake?

Soeren Hattesen Balle - Slips of the pun: signifying sex in the poetry of John Ashbery

for that because it's very important and I think it's one of the things that from us as a gallery we're trying to open out more: that space, a sort of reflexive space. But also really thank you to Jo for your, thought, responsiveness, interrogation and time in creating such a thoughtful response [to the project].

**JG:**

I thoroughly enjoyed it, thank you for having me.

With thanks to all the speakers

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Links:

Text World Theory  
<http://www.textworldtheory.net/>

Suppose I call a man a horse, or a horse  
a man?  
<http://supposeicall.blogspot.co.uk>

Anna Barham  
<http://www.annabarham.net>

Site Gallery, Sheffield  
<http://www.sitegallery.org/>