

Entry for the Chartwell Trust Student Art Writing Prize 2016

## INHABITING TEXT

**An essay on the role of language in the exhibition *Inhabiting Space***

**Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, 14 May—17 July 2016**

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As I stare at the long acrylic string scissoring through the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, I feel uncertain. On the backfoot. And so I make the proverbial grope—not blindly for the light-switch or a doorknob, but for language. *I am visiting the exhibition Inhabiting Space, I tell myself, curated by Stephen Cleland. I am looking at ‘Untitled (Triangle with a Broken Leg)’ (1988), by Fred Sandback.* What else? The acrylic yarn is mint-green, and stretches at a steep diagonal across a four-storey-deep room that cuts into the hillside. *You can do better than ‘mint-green’, I think. No, don’t say dental floss! Be smart! Activate, architecture? Geometric, green?* And then a phrase nests in my head, and I have to shut my mouth in case it gets out: *how long is a piece of string?*

The need for eloquence, or at least coherence, is greater than in the usual gallery visit, since I have a work in this exhibition. I have to get my language together. Even as I stand mutely in front of ‘Triangle’, I can feel the air crackling with words. Where are they?

*Inhabiting Space* is not an obviously “text-heavy” show. Of the seven individual works, the only one that depicts text visually is Mike Parr’s ‘Facts about the room’, an installation first exhibited in 1970. So I start there, on the second floor. ‘Facts about the room’ comprises one hundred numbered statements, issued in vinyl lettering across several walls. The statements describe “the room”:

xviii. On the other hand the windows frame the light.

- xix. Light travelling through glass is a concept.
- xx. The interior of the room is dark.

The version of ‘Facts about the room’ I am looking at is by a window—so while statements *xviii* and *xix* seem to apply to this room, *xx* does not. “The room” Parr refers to is not this one I am standing in. Still, the text seems very authoritative, and I doubt myself. Maybe it’s dark in here, after all?

- xxvii. Always the room is at my back.
- xxviii. The world exists outside the room.
- xxix. I am looking at something.

Well, yes. All of these could be me. Not am I only “looking at something”, I’m looking in a very particular way; I’m *reading*. I start, as English has trained me to, in the upper left corner of each block of statements. I read the characters across the lines, and then down. I can see a beginning, and I anticipate an end. I move through space accordingly. I am walking like I am reading, which I realize is the same way I often move through museum-style exhibitions, the ones with wall text. I am reassured, obedient. I respond to full-stops.

I follow Parr’s text down the angled staircase to the first floor. The lettering is still visible on the wall, although now that it’s above me, I can’t read it. But mine’s not the only wordless mouth, down here. In ‘Untitled (Sing)’ (2004), a two-channel video playing on monitors, the artist Campbell Patterson presses his face to the floor, and groans. Which floor? I can tell it’s not this one—the surface Patterson kisses is concrete, and I’m walking on black rubber. But Patterson’s head is larger than life and displayed right at my feet, and he’s being quite noisy. So he might as well be here. Like Parr’s ‘Facts’ above us, Patterson’s work appears to allude to the room I inhabit, and at the same time rejects it. I listen to Patterson’s low moans, but strain as I might, I hear no words in his song.

Making another turn, I'm at the base of Sandback's 'Triangle'. The yarn stretches across the floorboards (I'm walking on polished timber now), then angles into an upward "leg". The yarn on the floorboards is white, but the connecting upward leg looks rusty. I'm triumphant (*this must be the broken leg!*) but bemused. Earlier, I only noticed one leg, and one colour. How did that happen? I squint up at the Adam's roof, to the triangle's apex. *Is it the beginning, or the end?* The fixtures don't provide any clues; they're invisible. Okay, I think, accept it. The answer to *what does this mean* actually is *how long is a piece of string?*

I wind back up the stairs, to a room that checks another of Parr's "requirements": *familiar*. This room houses two videos; 'Summer of Supine', by Juliet Carpenter (2015), and 'Luma Turf', which Carpenter and I created in 2013. 'Luma Turf' is projected on a suspended screen; 'Summer of Supine' on a larger screen that leans across the opposing corner. Both pieces feature narrators who demand attention, so we've looped the videos to alternate. I watch 'Luma Turf' for a minute, to reassure myself it isn't glitching. 'Summer of Supine' I can still look at with fresh eyes. The video's narrator is lying in a sun-bed, which lends her face an unlikely green-and-purple cast. She looks at the camera; *you*, she says, *baby*. It occurs to me that, while 'Summer of Supine' and 'Luma Turf' both use direct address, Parr's 'Facts' also has an implicit, pointed-at "you": the reader. In all three works, stream of statements of *I* confront the viewer, who may find herself echoing, meekly, *me?*

Retracing my steps, I check in on Sandback—there's a mezzanine platform on this floor, so I can look both up and down at the work. It's looking quite green again, and I feel more confident. I'm enjoying visiting these different look-outs, like I'm a tourist finding a waterfall's best angle. 'Triangle' is pushing me to question the space, to move through it not like a reader, but a conscious inhabitant of the space myself. I can stop and think. I can double back. Can it be that 'Triangle' is making my looking less linear? Perhaps my mistake has been in interpreting "triangle" as a single plane. Maybe it's a sketch for a

pyramid, and when I seem to walk ‘past’, I’m actually embraced within its walls. I’m inside it!

Back on the top floor, I visit ‘The Fourth Notebook’, a 2015 video by Sriwhana Spong. ‘The Fourth Notebook’ films a single dancer performing in front of a white drop-cloth, as the letters of Nijinsky, the great Russian dancer, are read in their French translation. Spong has translated Nijinsky’s prose a third time, as a choreographic score. I find myself focusing on the dancer’s bare hands and feet, as they hit the floor. Another floor! This one is dark and smooth. I wonder if it is cold. The voiceover continues: it’s language, but I don’t speak enough French to “read” more than a word here and there. I stop trying, and the text becomes simply the sound of the room.

The last work in the gallery (or the first, depending on how observant you are) is a discreet line, stretching high across the walls of the gallery foyer. The line, drawn on opening night by the Adam’s technician, Andy Cummins, is nine parts blue pencil, and nine parts black. I’m looking at ‘Untitled (Blue: For Fred Sandback, 2001-08)’ and ‘Untitled (Black: For Fred Sandback, 2001-08)’, by Julian Dashper. Dashper’s titles reflect the year in which Dashper and Sandback first met, and the year in which Dashper installed the first part of this work, one blue line and one black line, at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts. A space is left, in the line on the Adam’s walls, for those two initial editions.

Both Sandback and Dashper’s works, it occurs to me, as I wander between the two, are more ‘text-based’ than appearances suggest. Both artists created pieces that would achieve a kind of permanence, by using written contracts and instructions to ensure the continued iteration of their work. In both ‘Triangle’ and ‘Blue/Black’, neither of which were installed by Sandback or Dashper themselves, it is in the originating text that the artist’s hand remains most constant.

Similarly, in the various installations of Parr’s ‘Facts’, the language stays the same, while the space it inhabits varies. My head spins. Is *Inhabiting Space* really a show about text?

Spong's work repurposes a notebook as a dance score—a means of animating a body in a room. Carpenter adapts texts by Margaret Atwood and Janet Frame to find a language for the sunbed hero in 'Summer of Supine'. In 'Luma Turf', repeated performance revises and reanimates a monologue. Patterson's work titillates us with the promise of speech: a moving mouth, but with no words in the sounds coming out.

Having pulled all these strings, the text in *Inhabiting Space* then disappears. Like my imagined Sandback pyramid, language occupies a room invisibly. Even in Parr's 'Facts about the room', the words produce, and dissolve into, an array of surfaces and sounds and shapes, and something else—a network of ideas. This is, of course, what language is supposed to do: fix a story in place, and at the same time, fill it with air.