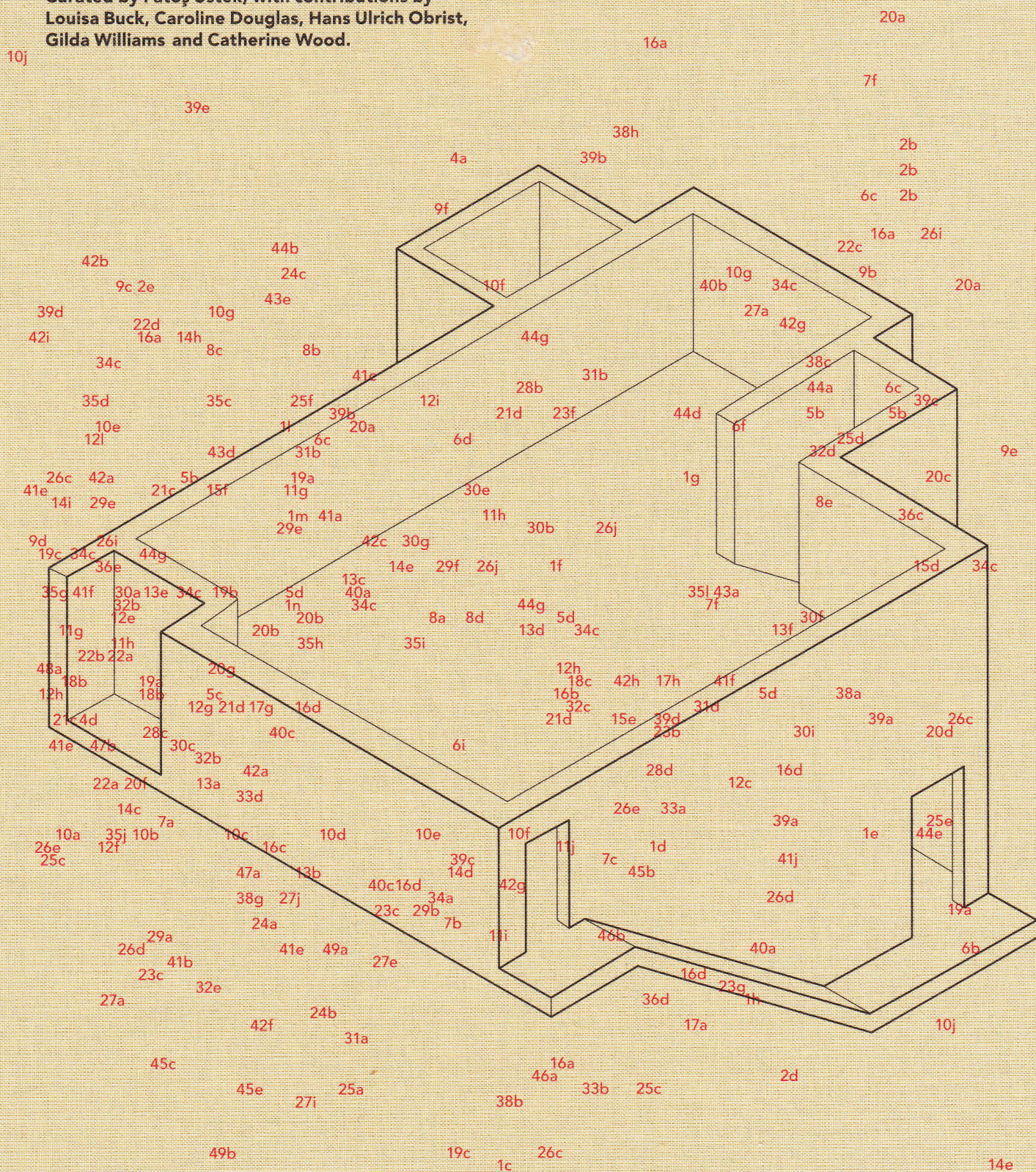


fig-2 | 50 projects in 50 weeks

Curated by Fatoş Üstek, with contributions by
Louisa Buck, Caroline Douglas, Hans Ulrich Obrist,
Gilda Williams and Catherine Wood.



REMAINS OF THE PLAY: ART, FIG-2 AND PLUGGING
THE GAPS IN LANGUAGE
 Gilda Williams

Opening my fridge door, lighting a cigarette, even lifting a carrot to my mouth: these gestures... had been real; I'd been real – been without first understanding how to try to be: cut out the detour. I remembered this with all the force of an epiphany, a revelation. Right then I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my money. I wanted to reconstruct that space and enter it so that I could feel real again. I wanted to; I had to; I would. Nothing else mattered.²⁰

As many will know, Tom McCarthy's game-changing novel *Remainder*, 2005, was rejected by a slew of established publishers (boo, hiss) before finding a willing publisher in the small Parisian art press Metronome (yay! hurray!). McCarthy has explained that, in order to get published, he "detoured through the art world"²¹ – a place he found more open-minded and risk-loving than the publishing industry. Despite its flaws, the art world can be more curious, hospitable and adventurous than, say, most Creative Writing MFA programmes, which seem increasingly mired in genre and formula. From US poet laureate Kenneth Goldsmith to pluri-award-winning writer extraordinaire Hilton Als, a growing number of twenty-first-century literature's strongest and most innovative voices hold powerful ties with the contemporary art world. Just as young filmmakers in the late twentieth century – eager to rethink from scratch the moving image – began in the 80s and 90s to prefer the unorthodoxy of art school over the constriction of graduate film programmes, the most daring young twenty-first-century literati seem to find the contemporary art world more tolerant of their language experiments than most university English departments, who resist the uncharted margins and gaps of linguistic expression that artists increasingly explore.

Remainder is a mind-spinningly original novel about a young man who, in the aftermath of some unnamed traumatic accident, is awarded a gargantuan sum of money. Uncertain at first how to use his fortune, our increasingly eccentric protagonist decides the money would be best spent restaging quotidian scenes remembered from earlier in his life. He pursues these hyperbolically detailed replays of past memories in the oxymoronic search for "authenticity through re-enactment".²² These elaborate, labour-intensive stagings – replicating the exact formation of, say, recollected black cats strolling across a red roof, as observed from an upper-storey window; the background sounds of inept piano-playing and a motorcycle noisily revving up in the courtyard; the pungent smell of liver being cooked downstairs – only begin to materialise when he joins forces with a man named Naz, his 'executor': the well-paid fixer who scouts

locations, performers, props. Naz evolves into the protagonist's indispensable enabler and confidante because with Naz, finally, he can communicate. The protagonist's hazy memories are first slowly articulated in his mind, then reworded into explanations for the ever-patient Naz. Naz translates these desperate messages into instructions to performers or the obliging crew – even into the legal language of council permits and contracts. The whole novel is a kind of giant game of Chinese whispers, as messages and images from the past are verbalised and eventually shaped into present-tense "authentic re-enactments" – however self-contradictory. Repeated attempts to substantiate the protagonist's bizarre desires and visions are constantly derailed by accidents of miscommunication; the gaps in the protagonist's patchy mental logic are necessarily resolved by those around him by resorting to trial-and-error, guesswork and improvisation, all in the attempt to fill the blanks riddling his increasingly fragile mind.

In many ways the subject of *Remainder* is language itself: its schizophrenic registers of voice; its readiness for manipulation; its ability to shape reality and reshape memory – even its telltale silences; emptying through repetition; and frustrating pathways into misunderstanding, even deception. In the following sections I will borrow from *Remainder* as an encyclopedic overview of the linguistic possibilities explored by language-based artistic practices today, observed in the ICA's unforgettable year of week-long exhibitions and realised by these artists' own indispensable 'Naz': their ever-enabling curator, Fatoş Üstek.

LIVE VOICEOVER – THE PAST TURNS REAL
 Kihlberg & Henry

But who's to say that these are genuine memories? Who's to say my traumatized mind didn't just make them up, or pull them out of somewhere else, some other slot, and stick them there to plug the gap – the crater – that the accident had blown? Minds are versatile and wily things.²³

In *Remainder*, the action gets underway when our protagonist determines that the authentic episodes of his past are not hopelessly lost but could be painstakingly relived, paradoxically existing in the present by re-experiencing the past. Karin Kihlberg & Reuben Henry's *This Building, This Breath*, 2015, combines video imagery with live voiceover, resulting in an uncanny coexistence of past and present. Visitors assume that sound and moving image coexist under the same skin of the video installation, and are surprised to discover a live performer behind the screen, occasionally moving off-script and speaking without microphone, even hitting the

back of the screen and causing moving images to move in 'unnatural' ways.

The projected images – such as birds, statues, buildings and floating houses swept by a tsunami – have been sourced from the internet; as the artists have explained, their attempt is to use the web as their own recollected past, ie the internet is a prosthetic memory bank. In this way Kihlberg & Henry seem also to ask the question at the outset of this text: "Who's to say that these are genuine memories... [not pulled] out of somewhere else?"²⁴

THE LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE

Ruth Beale

I thought back to the time I'd been a student. I'd been conscious all the time that other people in the crappy provincial town, the people who weren't students, knew I was a student and expected me to be a certain way... I once went on a demonstration, and the police and onlookers all watched us with a mixture of bemusement and contempt as we shouted out our slogans – and I shouted with conviction in time with the other demonstrators just because I knew that everyone was watching and expecting this. I can't even remember what the demonstration was about.²⁵

Effective political resistance, almost by definition, requires the acquisition of a voice and the development of a workable language, both to counter official channels and to spread alternative views. The centre of Ruth Beale's installation is occupied by a temporary library of utopian and dystopian speculative novels – from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, 1984, and PD James's *Children of Men*, 1992, to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, 1932 – as if to drive home the historical power of fiction in imagining the future. Where McCarthy's protagonist chants the hollow words of a forgotten protest, Beale points instead towards the centrality of language to agitate, disseminate and effect change, starting from Thomas More's essential reinvention of a Utopian alphabet. We are made aware of the writers' freedom to articulate dystopian prophecies, as well as the importance of ensuring the public's access to ideas – crucial to democracy – offered by free education, galleries and libraries. The printed word is accompanied by live discussions, for example on radical librarianship (Ian Clark) and reframing the real (Nick Mahony) – the latter topic arguably the very essence of *Remainder* too. Alongside the books is a giant acorn: at once a symbol of potential knowledge and healthy growth, also able to return us to the magical world of childhood reading, and the precious long-ago moment when books entered our lives, never to be abandoned.

TRANSLATION, CODES, INEFFICIENCY OF LANGUAGE

Anna Barham

We hired an architect. We hired an interior designer. We hired a landscape gardener for the courtyard. We hired contractors, who hired

builders, electricians and plumbers. There were site managers and sub-site managers, delivery coordinators and coordination supervisors. We took on performers, props and wardrobe people, hair and make-up artists. We hired security guards. We fired the interior designer and hired another one. We hired people to liaise between Naz and the builders and managers and supervisors, and people to run errands for the liaisers so that they could liaise better. Looking at it now, with the advantage – as they say – of hindsight, it strikes me that Naz could probably have devised a more efficient way of doing it.²⁶

In *Remainder*, verbal instructions are perpetually given, received, interpreted, reinterpreted, reworded and replayed across different roles, functions and tones of voice; the same instructions are unreliably filtered across inefficient layers of 'translation'. Throughout, our protagonist fails to observe that these lengthy ordeals of attempted communication are themselves 'real'; instead, for him, these preparations occupy a dead time while he awaits the desired "authentic moment", elaborately staged by an army of scripted players.

In Anna Barham's work, a text is read out using voice-recognition software, then read by the next person, and then the next, resulting in a snowballing accumulation of content gathered across spoken, written, read and performed mediations of language, both human- and machine-made. Each voice seems to find its own meaning within the words; and each new performer can potentially interact with live reading groups, distorting the text's message and embedding changes, passing these along. The stilted software voice seems somehow to 'grapple' with the text, eliminating punctuation (as did Samuel Beckett) and thus forcing subsequent readers to interpret their own stops, starts, pauses, continuities, quotes and questions concealed in the words.

Projected in signage-sized snippets on nearby screens, the text is objectified and fragmented, transformed into screen data – perhaps a kind of screen-based sculpture. The final words become a record of the events and moments that have affected the results we hear, emphasising language's infinite capacity to absorb each new player's idiosyncrasies, embedded as a new trace within an unfolding text.

VISUAL LANGUAGE AND THE SPOKEN OBJECT

Patrick Coyle and Francesco Pedraglio

'Could you have the word "speculation" looked up?' I asked Naz as we were driven to a glazier's that afternoon. / 'Of course.' He took his mobile out and tapped in a text message. / The reply came ten minutes later: 'The faculty of seeing,' Naz read, 'observation of the heavens, stars, etc.; contemplation or profound study of a subject; a conjectural consideration; the practice of buying and selling goods. From the Latin speculāri: spy out, watch, and specula: watch tower. First citation...' / 'Watch tower,' I said. 'Heavens: I like that. You could see the heavens better

from a watch tower. But you'd be exposed.' /
'Yes I suppose you would,' Naz answered.²⁷

In Patrick Coyle's performance for fig-2, he narrates in real time his own actions while showing a video of pouring a mysterious purple gloopy substance into a purple glass – "bouncing the bottom, slapping the side like a little tongue" – then improvises his own words – "lapping the side, slapping the thigh" – even incorporating the audience's reactions into his spoken performance. Time seems to stand still: words and live action seem at once to overlap while simultaneously veering apart.

Whether performing a duet with a 'singing' hoover (Coyle), enacting an unauthorised translation of a poem by Edoardo Sanguineti, a member of Italy's Gruppo 63 or neoavanguardia, which also numbered Umberto Eco (Pedraglio) or spinning off into chains of associations and rhymes ("beer and fear, site and side, and sight; side seat, sight-seeing, side seats, side seeds"), Coyle and Pedraglio occupy the gap between accurate narration and manipulated historical record. Their language construction produces unhinged meanings that belong solely to the moment of its production, relieved of any obligation to document faithfully a past – or passing – 'reality'.

HUMOUR, DIALOGUE, REMAKES
Bruce McLean

One of the black cats [had fallen] off the roof. By the end of the second day of re-enactments three had fallen. They all died. We'd only bought four in the first place: one wasn't enough to produce the effect I wanted. / 'What do you want me to do?' asked Naz. / 'Get more,' I said. / 'How many more?' / 'At a loss of three every two days, I'd say quite an amount. A rolling supply. Just keep putting them up there.' / 'Doesn't it upset you?' Naz asked two days later as we stood in the kitchen looking down into the courtyard at one of his men sliding a squashed cat into a bin bag. / 'No,' I said. 'We can't expect everything to work perfectly straight away. It's a learning process.'²⁸

At times the protagonist seems unable to interact sensitively with others, following almost autistically only his own irrepressible demands and internal dialogue. In a similar scenario, in *Bruce McLean Interviews Bruce McLean*, 2015, the artist is filmed in heated conversation with himself, engaged in a humorous, unpredictable, somewhat aggressive and ultimately unresolved self-interrogation regarding the very artwork the mirrored pair are producing as they speak. The 'Artist' is forced to assume a defensive position, as the bespectacled 'Interviewer' – a parody of an unsympathetic art critic, or the artist's own demanding, internal voice? – insists that the Artist articulate what the fig-2 artwork will be. Desperate for a believable, 'real' artwork to emerge from the conversation, the Artist summons an 'authentic' work from the past,

Barry Flanagan's carved granite sculpture *a nose in repose*, 1977–1979 – just as *Remainder* can only recognise authenticity re-formed as a concrete remnant of the past. The Artist admits his uncertainty, perhaps resolved in creating an updated version of a 'true' artwork extracted from the past, *Nose in Repose (Homage to Barry Flanagan)*, to which his sceptical interlocutor responds with boredom, dissatisfaction and demands for greater clarity. Plainly the 'authenticity' of this Artist fails to convince the Interviewer.

McLean's one-man dialogue rehearses the same looping back-and-forth experienced by McCarthy's hapless protagonist, as he struggles to realign with an authentic moment from his pre-accident self. The absurdity of the endeavour and the entropic tendency for disorder and confusion – whether between the Artist and his caustic Interviewer, or between *Remainder's* lead character and Naz – ultimately lead to humour.

Interviewer:... I think you're actually being kind of unbelievably tedious in your approach, and rather uninventive, and rather unscholarly, and generally sloppy. / Artist: Well that's... really... tough talk from somebody like you who's just about as sloppy as I am, as far as I can see. Where were the questions? Where were these very very in-depth probing questions that you were going to ask me, about, uh, philosophy, ideology, and all sorts of things? Cosmology? Etymology? Ornithology? / Interviewer: I wasn't going to ask you about birdwatching.

REGISTERS OF VOICE: SCIENTIFIC, SURREAL, EVERYDAY
Suzanne Treister

'He's manifesting,' I heard [Doctor Trevillian] explain, 'the autonomic symptoms of trauma: masked facies, decreased eye blink, cogwheel rigidity, postural flexion, mydriasis...' / 'Mydriasis?' Naz asked. / 'Dilation of the pupil. All these suggest catecholamine depletion in the central nervous system. Plus a high level of opioids.' / 'Opioids?' Naz repeated. 'He's certainly not taking drugs. I'd know if he were.' / 'I'm not suggesting he's been taking drugs,' Trevillian answered... 'He wasn't shot was he?' I heard Trevillian counter. 'In real life, I mean?'²⁹

In *Remainder*, contrasting registers of voice sometimes describe the same events – for example, the doctor's specialist knowledge and Naz's inquisitive concern for the protagonist's weakening mental condition. Once again, which language is truer to 'reality' is up for grabs.

Suzanne Treister's *HEXEN 2.0*, 2009–2011, untangles the overlap of scientific and social research in the proto-history of cybernetics, the internet and the rise of Web 2.0 that spawned from the seminal Macy Conferences, 1946–1953. The conferences' primary goal was to set the foundations for a general science of the workings of the human mind – ostensibly in the pursuit of peace, but in practice at the service

of mass crowd control. Within a framework of American post-Second World War governmental and military imperatives, *HEXEN 2.0* additionally charts alternative forms of investigation in the form of countercultural and grass-roots movements that also responded to new technologies, including (as the artist lists): anarcho-primitivism, post-leftism, Theodore Kaczynski/the Unabomber, technogaianism and transhumanism. *HEXEN 2.0* also traces precursory thinkers, such as Thoreau, Warren, Heidegger and Adorno. The languages of science, the military, bureaucracy, literature, philosophy, activism, fanaticism and control are spliced with magical voices drawn from alchemical diagrams and a tarot deck, all presented in an array of media that spans photo-text works, a video, audio and a website. As with *Remainder*'s difficult conversation between two figures lording over the protagonist's semi-conscious body, the whole resulting in a fuzzily overheard, mismatched exchange, Treister pools together numerous attempts with which different professions and agendas attempted to read the future, concocting a hybrid voice able to accommodate their many, often contradictory, registers.

LANGUAGE TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS

Simon Welsh

I turned now to the concierge. / 'Now, you,'
I told her, 'are already static. I mean, you
just stand there in the lobby, doing nothing.
Which is good. But now I want you to do nothing
even slower.' / She looked confused, my
concierge... / 'It's important,' I told her.³⁰

In *Remainder*, our protagonist must continually find the words not merely to explain what he needs, but to coax and cajole his team members into performing exactly what is required, however incomprehensible, such as doing nothing more slowly. Anything short of a pitch-perfect simulation is an unbearable deviation, almost to the point of anguish and pain. Simon Welsh is a poet whose work – as he explains – holds as its principal aim establishing and revealing the connections between people. In pre-booked sessions at fig-2, visitors could talk one-to-one with the artist; resulting from each encounter was a portrait-poem penned by Welsh. Here, for example, is a stanza from "I am not subversive":

Just behind the KFC is where I sit and work. /
I often stand and pace to stop my mind from going
berserk. / Thoughts and feelings emanate and
land upon the page / of the sketchbook that
I keep in which the friction burns. Like rage.³¹

Welsh gained notoriety during the 2013 Balcombe anti-fracking protests, in which he was arrested for singing. His ultimate ambition is world-changing in scale: to prepare for a coming future when an individual's consciousness is able to connect with others. In the meantime Welsh directs his energies

towards breaking down the system with his chosen set of timeless linguistic tools: truth, love and poetry.

THE TROUBLE WITH DEFINITIONS

POSTmatter

'Lambeth Council are happy to give permission for the re-enactment to proceed, but there's confusion about what type of licence they need to give us,' he said. 'It's not a demonstration and it's not a street party. The activity that it most closely resembles is filming.' / 'No,' I said. 'No cameras. No filming. You know that.' / 'Yes,' said Naz, 'but we should apply for it under filming. We need to designate it as a recognized type of event so that they can grant us permission to do it. Filming's the easiest route. We apply to use the area for a film shoot and then just don't have any cameras.' / 'I suppose so,' I said, 'as long as we don't actually film.'³²

Much of *Remainder* hinges on the questions of definition: what exactly is our protagonist engaged in? Does it fall under the heading of art installation, or living sculpture? Perhaps a performance; an audience-less theatre piece? Particularly when the elaborate scheme is translated into the language of permits and bureaucracy, the impossible pursuit of definition becomes apparent, forcing Naz to resort to the paradoxical 'film without film'.

POSTmatter is an online magazine whose work here overlapped art-making with art-documentation. The project included essays (written within an hour limit); web chats between contributing artists and selected writers and curators; artist contributions for the online publishing platform on their website; and a live event at fig-2 that generated a communal text composed by five writers. The multitasking overlaps enacted by POSTmatter bring to light how discourse is generated in the art world not merely by the primary event of the artwork and the reactive events it spawns – exhibition, curation, criticism, discussion – but as a multi-channel, singular, ongoing, shape-shifting event wherein all players contribute to the work's meaning and place within artistic debates. On view are artworks which expand conventional definitions of many art forms, including the landscape genre, new media art and the readymade. For example, Clement Valla's *Postcards from Google Earth*, 2011, which catalogues the glitches and mistakes found on Google Earth – highways that stretch fluidly, morphing into a single looped ribbon by digital correction – and John Gerrard's *Working Drawing for Infinite Freedom Exercise (near Abadan, Iran)*, 2011. Both these artworks literalise the fluidity of borders – across nations, disciplines, media – shaped by digital culture, and occupy the increasingly indefinable gap between textual and visual data.

ARE RE-ENACTMENTS REAL?

Rebecca Birch

'A hold-up. He will simulate the robbing of a bank.' / 'Yes,' I said. 'Re-enact.' / 'And re-enact and re-enact again, one presumes,' he continued. 'His ultimate goal, of course, being to – how shall we put it? To attain, no to accede to – a kind of authenticity through the strange, pointless residual.' / Just then I had to take up my position – I was Robber Re-enactor Three – but after we'd rehearsed the procedure again, I went looking for him so that I could ask him what he meant by 'residual'. He'd used the word twice now. I couldn't find him.³³

As with *Remainder's* re-enactments, Rebecca Birch too is engaged in the telling and retelling of a story – indeed, the refabricating of a tale through its repeated telling. Birch's multi-channel video and drawing installation hinges on conversational encounters based around a chosen 'McGuffin': an object or idea enlisted to generate a story. The artist's 'McGuffin' is a lichen-covered stick, able to introduce a narrative to the audience and give sequence to the events that brought her here. The performance-based piece rehearses a re-enacted road trip connecting now with the original discovery of the stick – like *Remainder*, a doing and redoing which begins to resemble a performed ritual. Lichens themselves are extraordinary living things: not a single organism, like a plant or an animal, but the result of two or more separate organisms living permanently together, shaping into intricately patterned, robust collectivity. They become allegories for how society itself can be peacefully shaped through ties, as well as a symbol of writing itself, slowly built up from loosely related individual elements – words – which add up to considerably more than their separate parts.

KEEPING IT UNREAL: WRITING THE NEW NOVEL

Shezad Dawood; Tom McCarthy

'They don't know.' / 'What?' said Five. / 'They don't know,' One repeated. 'These people don't know that it's a re-enactment.' / There was a silence for a moment while Five and Two digested what One had just said. One turned to me and, voice still quivering, whispered: 'It's real!'³⁴

For fig-2, *Remainder* author Tom McCarthy organised a think tank which included media consultant Alfie Spencer, critic and novelist Mark Blacklock and Dr Clémentine Deliss, the heroic first publisher of McCarthy's game-changing novel. Further linking different cultural roles and disciplines, McCarthy's 2015 novel *Satin Island* is built on a triangle linking anthropology, capitalism and literature. The story is narrated by U., a corporate anthropologist pimping his skills to an elite consultancy in contemporary London. McCarthy was inspired by the real-life statistic that 50 per cent of anthropology

graduates are hired in the corporate world. fig-2's all-day reading of the novel generated a real-space version of the protagonist's world, providing visitors with a unique opportunity to physically step into, walk around, touch and interact with a work of fiction.

Artist and writer Shezad Dawood similarly uses the space of art as a springboard towards his forthcoming novella. In his digital animation, two strange, cartoonish siblings, Brother P and Brother S, discuss such subjects as secret societies and cults, and their impact on the future. Alongside the interior/exterior space of the animation, Dawood exhibits a new painting and accompanying woodcuts that chart the project's expression in more traditional art media. Both these fiction writers extract from the art world the support, feedback loops and flexibility of the gallery to experiment with hybrid methods difficult to test elsewhere. The malleability of text – from statistics to scripts, fiction, conversation and more – is endlessly reconfigured. These artists' works are not merely hosted by the contemporary art gallery, but actually enabled by the liberating circumstances and resources found there.

END MATTERS

'Well tell them to go and find a bigger dictionary, then!'³⁵

Famously, Hunter S Thompson claimed to have retyped *The Great Gatsby* word for word, just to feel what it'd be like to write like F Scott Fitzgerald. In this spirit I might as well confess that I've probably retyped some of *Remainder's* brilliant passages just to feel what it'd be like to write like Tom McCarthy. The closer you read the novel, the more it seems to become a collection of ventriloquised voices, all attempting to capture reality, all relentlessly failing. Despite the plethora of electronic devices that abound in the story, simple communication of a single memory buried in our protagonist's mind is high impossible: perhaps an allegory for humankind's chronic, basic condition of mute isolation, however much we attempt to externalise our innermost selves. Contemporary reality, then, is reduced to an unprocessed mix of tones and deliveries – repeated/slowed; live/recorded; 'real'/scripted; flowing uninterruptedly across image and text; as varied and adjustable as the myriad automatic settings on your smartphone's voice-activated software. The above listing gathered from fig-2 is a mere sampling of these competing and misfiring voices.

A silence followed, not the quietness of the office but the type of silence you get when no input's coming down the line.³⁶