

Anna Barham in conversation with Keira Greene, 25 October 2019

Interview Transcription

This conversation, between Anna Barham and myself, Keira Greene, took place on 25 October 2019 at the Horsebridge centre in Whitstable. The recording begins with Anna's audio work 'Undone in the Face' [not transcribed] and is followed by a conversation discussing Anna's work, in particular, her process of making 'Undone in the Face' from material generated in a series of live production reading groups at St John's College, Oxford, during her residency there earlier this year.

Anna Barham: The first time language entered my work at all, I was working with anagrams, and I was thinking about how a word, if you rearranged the letters in a different way, produces a different meaning, and how those meanings are somehow embedded in the contingency of the spelling of the word.

I'd studied sculpture before that, so it was this really, to me, a sculptural way of thinking about language, and moving these building blocks, the letters around to make new sense.

And then I used to write with them, at first just kind of exploring the possibilities of what was in the words I was using, and then I used it more as a method of writing to try and conjure some sort of images out of the material.

Then I started reading those texts aloud, and at that point I got very interested in the construction of words inside the mouth. As you can imagine they're really quite hard to say, these anagrammatic texts, because there's a lot of repeated letters and syllables, and it really felt like I was 'chewing' the texts to bring them out.

So I got very interested in language's sound rather than language's alphabetic text, and started thinking about current technologies that we have which are able to grasp language's sound and try and decipher it. So that's when I started working with voice recognition software.

KG: *So at that point that was a sort of practice, an intimate practice on your -*

AB: Yes, a studio based [practice], and in fact, when I first started working with voice recognition software, it was also just me reading into my phone. Then, as I was using voice recognition software as a kind of motor to produce difference and slips and glitches, the stumbling block for me was

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that these programmes actually learn your voice, so they get better at interpreting you the more time you spend with them.

So I was beginning to have to whisper or put on accents or speak quite quickly to try and fox the machine.

And then I had this eureka moment in a way, where I realised I could use other people, like if we kept changing who was reading, then that would stymie this learning machine.

So that was where, that's when I started doing these reading groups or this format that I call a live production reading group.

In the reading groups each person is presented with a text that they then have quite quickly to read aloud. They're not given time to decide how they're going to break it up, and the output from the machine has no punctuation, so there's -

KG: *So nothing is circulated in advance.*

AB: No. So it's really quite a spontaneous interpretation, which I really see as a kind of form of re-authoring that the person then has to apply to this material. I mean okay, they read the words in that order, but that's pretty much the only kind of adherence to the piece of paper.

Everything else is them deciding where punctuation or, you know, or breaths should go, intonation, tone of voice, like the emotional content they want to give it, all that stuff is created in quite a spontaneous moment by the reader.

KG: *So the interruption of the non-human, that was introduced by the voice recognition software.*

AB: Yes, yeah. Although I would say that the alphabet as a system is also a non-human that intervenes. So there is, you know, in the sense of like any kind of system creating some sort of agency, because there are limits and it directs the way something can unfold. I would consider the alphabet also to be a sort of [00:08:47] intervening non-human agent. But it becomes more pronounced, I think, with using the actual machine.

So in the reading groups the texts are printed out after each person has spoken. What the computer thinks they've said is then printed out, and the printer sits as part of the group of people. It takes the same amount of space as a person, and you hear this noise of it producing the text and it

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makes the technology very present as an actor, as a participant in the group, I think in a way that is less visible with the anagrams.

You have to think conceptually about the alphabet being an agent, whereas you don't so much in the group.

KG: *And this is a closed group.*

There was one time that I did it as part of a performance festival, so it was a more durational thing that people could come in and out of, but usually it is a closed group, yeah, which is quite important in the dynamic of the group, or I mean it changes it.

So if you spend an hour reading together with people stuff which is increasingly abstract and losing its syntactic structure, there is a real dynamic between the group that builds up through the understanding of the repetitions and the themes that survive and the ones that recede.

KG: *So do the participants who are present at the reading group have this foreknowledge that the reading is producing a future text; that they're offering this future text that is -*

AB: You mean the one that *I'm* going to build something out of?

KG: *Yeah. Exactly.*

AB: Yes, but to varying degrees. That's not hidden, and I usually give a little bit of introduction, but it's also possible that I might forget. I might have forgotten one of those times to mention that.

KG: *I suppose that's a way of me [saying]: The instant at which they engage with the material, that's what's being interrogated in the room.*

AB: Yeah.

KG: *It's not so much this knowledge of a production process towards an end.*

AB: No, it's a collaborative creation of a text in that moment in that room. That's the thing that goes on there really.

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People read in a variety of ways down to their level of enjoyment of performing I suppose, but also it evolves during the group.

Some people maybe come in and really from the beginning are quite keen to push the machine as far as they can, and try and make it almost impossible, like maybe by whispering or putting on a very strong accent.

And then other people are perhaps experimenting throughout the group, sometimes with reading in quite a monotone way, and other times really trying to draw imagery out of the text or little chunks of sentences out of the text.

And for some people I think, it's an awkward thing. They're interested in the process but they're not really enjoying that side of it so much at all, and they read in quite a flat way.

But it's all productive for the system. That changes more the dynamic of the group, I think. If you get one person really pushing at the text, more people are likely to join in and have a go at pushing it, whereas sometimes [everyone] settles into a bit of a consensus of how to read.

KG: It sounds as though the participants are actually riffing off of one another, and that's informing the outcome or the dynamic. Is there also an interrogation in narrative being produced across the texts as they interchange between material?

AB: I think there is but really, [with] the groups as I've done them, we start this process of reading and being interpreted and reading one after another, and don't stop to reflect on what's happening during that process, and then when that finished in Oxford, we then would have a bit of a chat about what had happened.

So then it really would transpire that people had been following particular little bits of plots or narrative. If a proper name, like a person's name, comes into the text; that normally persists. It doesn't tend to get eroded back into another sound.

You get these things that carry some sort of continuity or narrative, or they're recognisable markers I suppose. I also asked for suggestions of text from the participants, and someone brought in a part of Exodus, and so you had this discussion of Moses, and that then began to really inflect how we were understanding the other texts.

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I think that happens anyway, but it was so marked with this name Moses, it would keep appearing in this particular language that the Bible is written in.

***KG:** So we should say something about the texts that you used in this iteration at St John's.*

***AB:** For this piece I've particularly used an extract from Judith Butler's 'Precarious Life' and 'The Temptation of St Anthony' by Flaubert. They're the two main texts.*

But then there are pieces of Gertrude Stein's lecture 'Portraits and Repetition', Pauline Oliveros's 'Deep Listening' TEDtalk, Beatriz Preciado, 'Testo Junkie', and Jane Bennett, 'Vibrant Matter', and a tiny snatch of David Bowie, 'Sound and Vision'.

And then there were other texts. There were probably about four or five texts per reading group, so about 16 to 20 texts over the whole four workshops, so there are texts I haven't used at all in this piece.

***KG:** And how do you make the decision about which texts you're going to introduce to the group?*

***AB:** As I'm reading at large, I'm often collecting fragments of texts that I feel in some way speak to the process or the things that I'm thinking about in this activity, or things that I think would work really well.*

So I've used a lot of Gertrude Stein in different formats. This piece is less [typical of Stein's written work], it's from a lecture, [though] it still has the quality of her way of writing, but I've used much more repetitious pieces by her as well, or bits of sound poetry or things that really act in a performative way in the group, as well as the ones that reflect more on the process.

So the Judith Butler [text] is where she's saying that we basically undo each other through interaction. The Flaubert text, 'The Temptation of St Anthony', comes at the end of St Anthony being in the desert and he has these hallucinations where things start looking like other things, and leaves start looking like they're animals or the stones look like plants.

And there was this idea of memetic animals, which has come through other pieces of work as well. I started thinking about one thing looking like another thing, being somehow analogous to how the voice recognition software, one word sounds like another word, so it's like a visual analogy

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really for how the computer is struggling to hear which word you're talking about.

The other texts refer to camouflage or this inability to find the edges of things.

***KG:** It sounds like there's something reflexive about identity inherent in the Judith Butler and in the Beatriz Preciado as well. That also is reflexive of the identity or the kind of elusive identity of the subject that is resultant in the final text, and then the embedded identity of the readers.*

***AB:** Yes, and of the speaker of the text as well. Yes, it's really [intended] to pull away from the idea of a coherent subject that is speaking. I mean in every level of it, by creating it collaboratively and then using all these different texts to begin with, and then writing and re-using the texts.*

It's not like I just choose one version of each text to then write from, I'm using multiple versions and repetitions within a text.

***KG:** I was reading an interview that you had done with the Quietus I think a few years back, and in that conversation I'm not sure if it's you or the interviewer refers to the software that Siri uses as being developed out of what is known as a process called Markov process?*

***AB:** Yeah I think they're called hidden Markov models.*

***KG:** Okay, named after a Russian mathematician, André Markov. I hadn't heard of the term Markov processes before, and when I looked into it on a cursory initial search, this Markov process is also sometimes characterised as memorylessness, which I thought was really fascinating.*

I wanted to ask you if you consider this a process of forgetting each iteration, each performance, that is then followed by this process of printing and re-reading, if that's also a process of forgetting what came before, if you've thought about it in those terms.

***AB:** In the audio work or what I anticipate to be the reception of the audio work, the listening feels very much like it might be a state of memorylessness, or in that I'm trying to create the text that kind of flows over you, that there's a kind of passivity in the listener, or it allows for passivity I think.*

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But you can grab things and obviously things do recur, so that involves some memory to know that it's a repetition and it hasn't just happened for the first time.

I'm not saying that the listener is without [memory] or is in a total state of memorylessness, but I think there is a cutting adrift that is different to listening to something where you're following a piece of information or a narrative. So that's what it made me think of.

KG: *So are you interested in evoking or producing a kind of state in the listener that if there's a passivity you're interested in kind-of inducing?*

AB: Or perhaps allowing for?

KG: *Because we touched on this on the way here, didn't we? I wonder what the prosody is, if that's the right term, what the effect is of that on the nervous system of the listener and how that might actually invite a state of listening in the delivery or the voice's delivery of the text, and how much it's a construction.*

AB: I think what I'm trying to create is that the listener creates their own text from the material, according to which bits they get caught-up in and which bits they don't listen to so much. [Also,] the language is not straightforward, so two people might listen to the same short chunk and think it's about something quite different, because it just doesn't explain what it's about.

And so I'm trying to make this experience of listening in a way passive, because you can let it wash over you, but in another way very active, because you're the one that has to, if you want to make any meaning out of it, you really are the one that has to glue everything together and make some meaning out of it. So it's a strange idea of passivity I suppose.

KG: *It makes me think about the first encounter I had with your work, which was the reading at Lux. Can you remember the name of that text?*

AB: Yeah, it's called 'Yet as Yet'.

KG: *'Yet as Yet'. The repetition of the word 'knife' [in the reading] and then the way in which that keeps resurfacing out of more complex associative language structures. The symbolism of that word breaks loose, almost, from the other words.*

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And it has this sort of dominant agency, or it did for me listening, that I'm then taken into symbolism and archetype and mythology and associations from fiction, even though what the text is doing isn't necessarily born from that set of references, which is a subjective response, but in listening to the new audio work it made me think about all of those many possibilities that are taking place, dependent on the listener.

AB: There's a theory called Text World Theory, which is a kind of cognitive literary theory about how we respond to words. There's this idea that each word carries its own world around it, and each short text also carries its own world around it.

And the world for you would be different from the world for me that that text carries around it, according to your experience of what those words have referred to for you in the past, and other ideas in that text are about certain words being attractors, so anything that relates to a human is very attractive, in the sense that it would get our attention in a text.

KG: *You've spoken about your interest in re-inserting the body back into the text, and I thought about this as taking place through the reading aloud on the one hand, but also, [your own public readings of the texts].*

AB: Yes, so my way to work with material is to read it aloud or... a mixture of writing from it, which is sort of zig-zagging through the score, like looking for bits and taking them out and writing them down, but then reading aloud, and then realising [something about] that word. The fundamental thing is there's no punctuation anywhere [00:40:05], so a word could always be cut loose from the one before it and added to the idea after it.

And so through reading aloud I will then realise that that could happen or that maybe a word has a different sense altogether [when it's read aloud], or is a homonym; once you've read it aloud it means something different.

So it's kind of continual, it's been born out of all these excesses of the text in a way, like the tone of voice, the cadence, all those sorts of things that the computer has to deal with.

And then through this process of writing and then me re-reading out-loud, and then changing what I've written and reading it out-loud again, and then the fact that it ends up in this format which is a spoken piece, I suppose that's what I mean by 'writing to read' and 'reading to write'. It just becomes one process.

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KG: *Is there an element of editing for meaning that takes place? How much reconstruction takes place at this point, reading aloud in private and re-writing?*

AB: Yeah, quite a lot. From looking at all the different versions that we generated in the group, which are then turned into this score, and then looking at the score and seeing connections, and then wanting to draw some of those connections out, because sometimes maybe there's something that feels like a form of close reading of the original text.

Even though it [might] take it off on tangents, sometimes those tangents are useful in terms of revealing something that perhaps is embedded in the original text, or a way of thinking about the original text, or a connection between it and another one of the texts, or one of the things I feel about the process or the things that motivate the work in the first place.

The writing process almost is an editing process, because it's a score that gets edited down in a sense, or re-ordered and edited.

KG: *And they become a body of texts.*

AB: Yes.

KG: *You've spoken about the scores, and I wonder what a score means to you.*

AB: Right, yes. I suppose the first way of thinking of them as scores is actually retrospective, so it's after all the versions have been generated in the reading groups, and they come out just as chunks of text on pieces of A4 paper.

And then I put them all on different lines under the first, original text, and then I start combing out all the letters and words to try and understand which word changed into which word, so how the sounds are changing.

So I arrange that like a timeline really, so any vertical position in the score shows you what that particular sound changed into, so it's not quite time, because of course one text might be shorter than another, but it kind of aligns them in a linear time based way.

KG: *So you're syncing -*

AB: Yeah I'm syncing the -

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KG: - *to one word, for example.*

AB: Yes, exactly. Every word get synced with its ancestor, as it were. So that's the first idea of scoring.

And then the second idea of scoring is to then use that document to be read again, to be interpreted again so –

KG: *As more of a performance score.*

AB: Yes, so either in the sense that I've created this text and read it, or sometimes I have presented those scores as a book or as large posters which are printed and pasted to the walls, and then it's the movement of the viewer in the space who then dictates the order the words come together, the reading order which begins ...

I mean obviously nobody is going to walk around the space and follow line by line. You really read a lot more in clusters and columns and you move around, and that's much more like what my writing process does form the score as well. So that's another way, I think, of the body re-entering the score.