

Anna Barham

Hearing from Artists

Anna Barham's practice comprises writing, video, drawing, sculpture and performance. She examines the relationship between language, the body and technologies and uses repeated patterns, rules and systems. Anna lives and works in London. She is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator in May 2020.

HW: How do relationships between language, body and technology manifest in your practice?

AB: I'm interested in language as a way that we, as bodies, make 'sense'. How it is that we can articulate and express ourselves and communicate with other bodies? I'm fascinated by the materiality of this communication, of language as a whole. I'm interested in how it might act on us in a way that physical things do, like heat or pressure, or how it affects us, shapes us, reveals the blurriness of our boundaries.

Language, body and technology are endlessly entangled, continually forming and reforming each other. To think through these shifting focuses and relationships I manipulate the materiality of the different technologies of language. Those technologies include our vocal apparatus; ancient forms of writing and alphabets; the invention of moveable type and the printing press in the 15th Century; and contemporary computer-based technologies of speech recognition or machine translation. In prioritising the sound, the rhythm or the



Cat Licks Vitrine, 2018. Performance at La Comédie de Reims, France . Anna Barham reads 'amour insta'. Image credit La Comédie de Reims, France

spelling, above the 'meaning' of a text, I can discover new understandings and subject matter that emerge, and how language acts on the bodies that read, speak or hear it.

Since 2014, I have been developing a format I call a 'live production reading group.' A circle of people read aloud in turn, and each time speech2text software captures and transforms the features of their reading such as tone, cadence, intonation, accent, emotion, mistakes, stutters, into new words and meanings. This sets up a complex feedback loop between the readers, the texts and the computer, where the original meaning of the texts disintegrates and new themes and ideas emerge. A new body of text is created collaboratively in the group, with each reader re-authoring the unpunctuated texts as they vocalise them, trying to decide where to pause for breath or how to navigate their way through broken syntax or sentence structure and abrupt thematic shifts. Meaning ebbs and flows as the process unfolds, and the collaborative listening and dynamic response of the group changes each version.



A sentence can be ours and ours, 2016. Live production reading group, Playground Festival, Museum M, Leuven, Belgium. Image credit Museum M, Leuven, Belgium

Afterwards, I use the multiple versions of the texts to construct new, rhythmic, non-linear writing which I further develop into sound works, videos or publications. I think of the texts in these works as interfaces, something that their audience interacts with. To emphasise the audience's agency in the production and transformation of 'sense' I often build structures that carefully choreograph the relationships between the body of the viewer and the images and sounds - screens and speakers - blurring the roles of audience and performer, observer and observed.

HW: You use repeated patterns and self-prescribed rules and systems within your work. What attracts you to this way of working?

AB: Working with self-prescribed rules and systems creates unexpected freedoms and productivity. I push hard on or against those systems – sometimes to the point of breaking. The prescribed rule or system has its own agency in the process but it's still possible to make individual decisions within this framework and I'm interested in the tension between those two dynamics - how they construct each other mutually.

I started working this way when I first began working with language - thinking about language as a set of rules and systems and seeing how far they can be stretched and what is created or left in terms of meaning. I made a lot of work with anagrams - rearranging the letters in a word or phrase to create new sense. It was a sculptural way of working with words, and around the same time, I also started making seat and table height structures made of basic units that could be reconfigured.

I construct elaborate processes, knots and tangles, in a pre-existing system. These processes yield many unforeseen outcomes: a transformation between input and output. Increasingly I'm thinking about how these processes can be viewed as a kind of 'productive resistance' and in turn how that can be a model for resistance in a wider social sense - against various and pervasive forms of authority. In particular I want to find ways to resist the smoothening and standardisation of language in contemporary language technologies like auto-correct, predictive text, speech2text etc. that are built and controlled by the giant tech corporations.

HW: You are working towards a commission with us, titled *Crystal Fabric Field (MIMA)*.



Crystal Fabric Field, 2018. Installation view, *Liquid Crystal Display*, MIMA, Middlesbrough. Image credit Hynes Photography

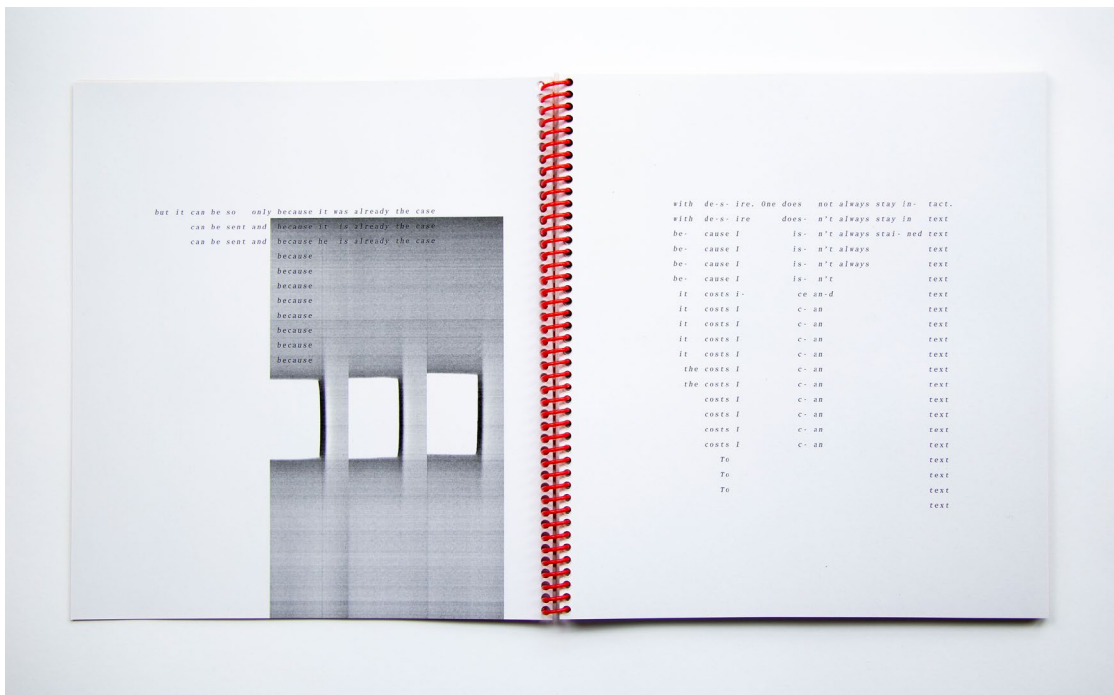
This stems from the exhibition *Liquid Crystal Display* in which you made *Crystal Fabric Field*, a sculpture and display structure to house artworks. How did you arrive at the new piece?

AB: When I was invited by Laura Sillars to make the exhibition structure for all the works in *Liquid Crystal Display*, I wanted to build something that would itself be a kind of crystal. I started by thinking about the way a crystal forms according to a repeating rule, an algorithm. The nature of the bond of the 'unit cell' – the smallest group of particles that make up the repeating pattern – completely defines the symmetry and structure of the entire crystal lattice and a crystal grows by repeating that unit cell over and over. The ultimate form the crystal takes is also governed by the shape of the space it can occupy and by other particles, like dust, that contaminate it.

Translating this idea into an architectural structure, I designed a single connecting component – a bright yellow bracket – as the unit cell. The bracket's geometry is based on the hexagonal crystal family which includes emerald, ice and quartz, where molecules arrange themselves along 60-, 120- and 90-degree angles. This allowed me to create vertical walls to hang works from or project

onto, and for the walls to be arranged in flexible, irregular shapes. The bracket is very visible in the structure, it is made from steel and powder-coated in a bright sulphurous yellow. On each side of the bracket, as well as holes for bolts, there are cut-outs in the shape of punctuation marks: a comma, an inverted comma and a full stop. These marks are recurring motifs in my work, symbols of where the breath and the body enter language. Here, they also list, join, quote and stop.

Although I've made lots of structures to hold my own work and the audience, this was the first time I made something to hold works made by other artists. That meant there were more factors outside my control: the particular physical demands of each piece, and the ways that the curators wanted to group and order the works, as well as the specific dimensions and layout of the gallery. Together these factors were the constraints determining the development of the structure – creating irregularities, splintered shapes and changes of scale. Because of the way the brackets use bolts to connect to the sheets of MDF the pieces have to be fitted together in a particular order. It's a complex way of building, the structure grows according to its own logic. There is no inside or outside, just



Poisonous Oysters, 2019. IArtist's book, edition 100.
Image credit Anna Barham

voids in the lattice, where other artworks can reside or where bodies can pass through.

In this way, the bracket creates a particular set of structural possibilities, a crystalline substance which I call *Crystal Fabric Field*. I have used the brackets to create other structures since LCD – benches to house my own audio works, bookshelves, stands for AV equipment – but they are all titled *Crystal Fabric Field* with the location or description of purpose in brackets.

The title comes from the theorist Donna Haraway's 1976 work '*Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors that shape embryos*' which explores the role and importance of metaphor in biology. I am very interested in this idea, which runs throughout Haraway's work, of the importance of how language, metaphors and stories attach to and create, the world. "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."¹

Crystal Fabric Field (MIMA) is a set of three benches made from the brackets and MDF.

I have designed them so that they can be configured to hold the audience in many different ways in relation to works in the collection – in large or small circular discussion spaces or as separate benches giving specific views across the gallery. I'm really excited about how they can be used in dialogue with other works, and to support the many ways that MIMA activates the gallery as a space for the exchange of ideas.

HW: What projects or ideas are you looking forward to pursuing?

AB: I'm thinking a lot about what effects our increasing communication via technological interfaces are having on language. I'm developing the format of the live production reading groups to incorporate a wider range of ways of reading and interacting with different language technologies. And I'm researching ways that standardised or dominant languages have been resisted historically: either via poetic or literary means; as political action such as feminist linguistic activism; or how language communities create slang, dialect and vernaculars.

¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*