

# the order of things

A series of examinations, through exhibition and publication, of contemporary interpretations of *Systems* in relation to legacies of Concrete and Abstract Art

- Exhibition, Publication and Seminar, at The Wilson, (Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum)
- Billboard commission (Guy Bigland) in Cheltenham Town Centre
- Book launch with The Everyday Press and Flat Time House, London

Bick devised this exhibition, seminar and publication, to explore, through the collaboration with his current research student Jonathan Parsons and independent researcher artist Katie Pratt, specific forms of practice emerging from the British *Systems* art movement, ideas of the social in relation to abstraction and crossovers between scientific methodology and communication generated with visual art. The **exhibition** used as a *leitmotif* the display of a 1977 print portfolio *Rational Concepts*, seven British Concrete and/or *Systems* Artists, published in Germany/Switzerland with an essay from key Zurich Concrete artist Richard

Paul Lohse. This copy of the portfolio was gifted to Bick by artist Jeffrey Steele, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/steele-rational-concepts-p07429> and forms a key part of his personal archive of the British *Constructionist* and *Systems* artists. The selection of a range international contemporary artists with approaches capable of making diverse examinations of System in 21<sup>st</sup> Century art practice and through the exhibition, seminar and publication of seminar texts presented a detailed examination of the findings in art practice. As a keynote for the **seminar** Curator and Writer Jo Melvin gave an interpretation of her work archiving and re-examining the legacies of Barry Flannagan, with particular reference to his connections with concrete poetry and dom sylvester houedard (a significant international figure from the 1960s who was based locally at Prinknash Abbey. Bick, Parsons & Pratt gave papers on their individual approaches to the project and PhD candidate Katrina Blannin presented a visual essay on her interpretation of Piero Della Francesca's *Madonna Del Parto* as a sequence of systematic grid drawings. The **seminar** concluded with A K Dolven's performance of her vinyl record with John Giorno *JA as long as I can*. <https://www.akdolven.com/ja-as-long-as-i-can> In August 2017 a sequence of six **billboards** by artist Guy Bigland appeared around central Cheltenham. These word-games offered a contemporary and playful approach to *Systems* but also allowed the social media element tracking the project to reach a peak of 16,385 accounts. The project is documented as a **publication** with The Everyday Press, ISBN 978-912458-00-4 and was launched as a hard copy publication at Flat Time House, London on 19 July 2018. <http://flattimeho.org.uk/events/order-things/> . The **publication** takes a discursive approach to the project, being an analysis of the ideas and their presentation as text in the seminar as much as documentation of the exhibition itself. The launch, and Bick's brief talk at Flat Time House regarding the future development of the project in collaboration with Cyber Researchers and Stiftung Konzeptuelle Kunst, Soest, Germany was both a summary of the publications content and indication for the future trajectory of the research.

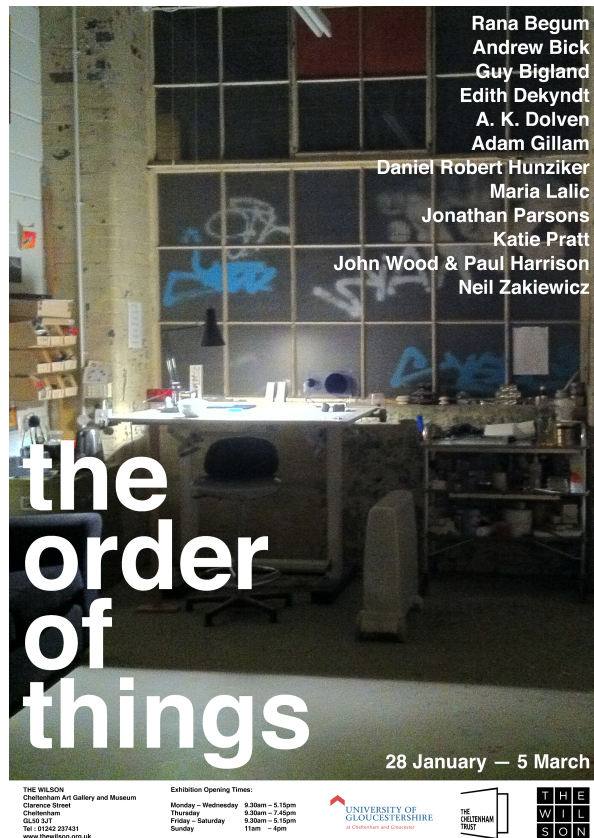


**Katie Pratt**

*Moscrack*  
2000-2016  
oil on canvas

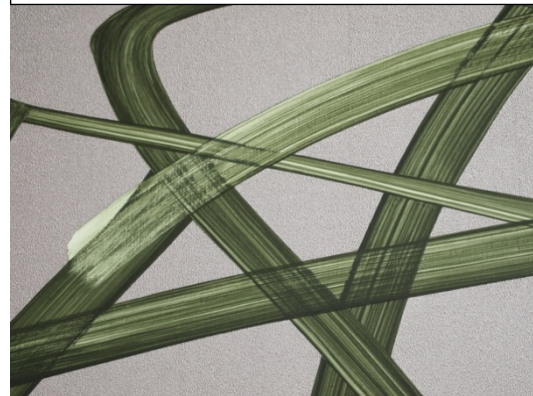
Katie Pratt uses abstract painting to contemplate how humans organise themselves. She combines spontaneity and control within her work guided by her own set of rules. Each painting is treated as a chance encounter; starting with a casual gesture or spilling paint onto canvas, appearing random they are in fact systematically organized.





Left; poster with studio view, Jonathan Parsons  
Below; Jonathan Parsons *Small One Forty (detail)*, 2004, oil  
on linen.

The configurations in these paintings are direct transcriptions from found and photographically recorded graffiti tags. What appears to be the 'background' colour of each painting was applied as one unified rolled texture, which is cut through by carefully shaped masking that was applied beforehand. What appear to be freely gestural marks were then painstakingly and thinly painted-in. They present the illusion of gestural abstraction, but they are, in fact, a recreated 'portrait' of the original found mark. These are 'reverse' paintings, both in the way they are constructed and in how they present a flipped relationship between 'figure' and 'ground'.



- Devised by Bick in collaboration with current PhD student Jonathan Parsons and independent researcher Katie Pratt the project takes a discursive approach to the relationship between historic understandings of Systems in visual art practice and a contemporary re-working and re-appraisal of the concerns this British Art grouping were preoccupied by.
- Exhibiting Bick's copy of the 1977 print portfolio 'Rational Concepts' in parallel with 13 contemporary artists jointly selected by the three co-researchers was a way to physically demonstrate the relationship of contemporary practice to archival research;
- Creating a public seminar which combined the model for the exhibition of Jo Melvin's Raven Row project 'Five Issues of Studio International' with papers from Bick, Parsons and Pratt, a visual paper from PhD student Katrina Blannin & A K Dolven's performance of 'Ja, As long as I can' was a way to create a broad pattern of discourse around the subject operating between the written word and visual-experiential approaches to the subject matter;
- The curatorial positioning of work in the installation deliberately emphasises the outward facing aspects of contemporary abstract art's dialogue with other disciplines and histories. This ranged from Hunziker's re-purposed as Modernist reference point crocheted quilt facing off with Begum's minimal acrylic on mdf multi-panel pieces (see catalogue cover and flaps) to Lalic's carefully composed panels referencing the local soil and dimensions of specific historical landscape paintings;
- In the introduction to Bick's published seminar paper he writes 'Exploring grids and improvisation through an ongoing series of my drawings and paintings in relation to legacies of British Constructivism has, since 2008, underpinned my approach to art practice. As an extended project, this has paid careful attention to the artist Gillian Wise's approach to the grid. The exhibitions presenting the artworks considered here were: Conversations around

Marlow Moss, (co-curated with Katrina Blannin) at &Model 2014<sup>1</sup>; The Human Abstract, at Gallery No4a 2015<sup>2</sup>; Andrew Bick: Conversation at The Cornerstone Gallery, Liverpool Hope University, 2015<sup>3</sup>; original/ghost/variety/shifted/double/echo at Museum Haus Konstruktiv 2017<sup>4</sup>, and finally, The Order of Things (co-curated with Jonathan Parsons & Katie Pratt) at The Wilson, 2017<sup>5</sup>. The following publicly delivered excerpts document the development of my studio production and critical thinking. Here they are collated for my paper given at the seminar for The Order of Things at The Wilson, Cheltenham<sup>6</sup>.';

- For Parsons 'My ontological position is rooted in the primacy of the experiential and perceptual: specifically, that of 'autopsy' in the original sense of the act of 'seeing with one's own eyes' (Onions, 1973, 1990, p.135). I consider this to be the primary source of visual evidence and information. Art practice is my attempt to externalize an autoptic encounter with reality.';
- Katie Pratt refers to studio practice, as a form of research and that 'We do not seek to apply our studio practices to our environment so much as to use the organisation of our social framework to systematize our artistic projects;



**Maria Lalic left to right:**

*Dutch Brown Landscape Painting, 2016*  
(A Country House on the Vliet near Delft. Heyden. 1660)  
*English Green Landscape Painting, 2007*  
(Flatford Mill. Constable. 1816–17)  
*French Ochre Landscape Painting, 2016*  
(The Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil. Monet, 1872)  
*French Red Vermilion Landscape Painting, 2016*  
(View of Vetheuil. Monet. 1880)  
*Studio wall notes*  
(December 27<sup>th</sup> 2016)

These four paintings are part of Maria Lalic's *History Paintings* series (1996 – 2004). There are 53 in total. They take the histories of pigments as their starting point. Lalic created the paintings as part of her research into pigments used in historical paintings and investigation into how these are applied within different genres of paintings.

<sup>1</sup> &Model, Leeds, 12 June - 18 July 2014

<sup>2</sup> curated by Katie Pratt at Gallery No4a, Malvern 23 May - 13 June 2015

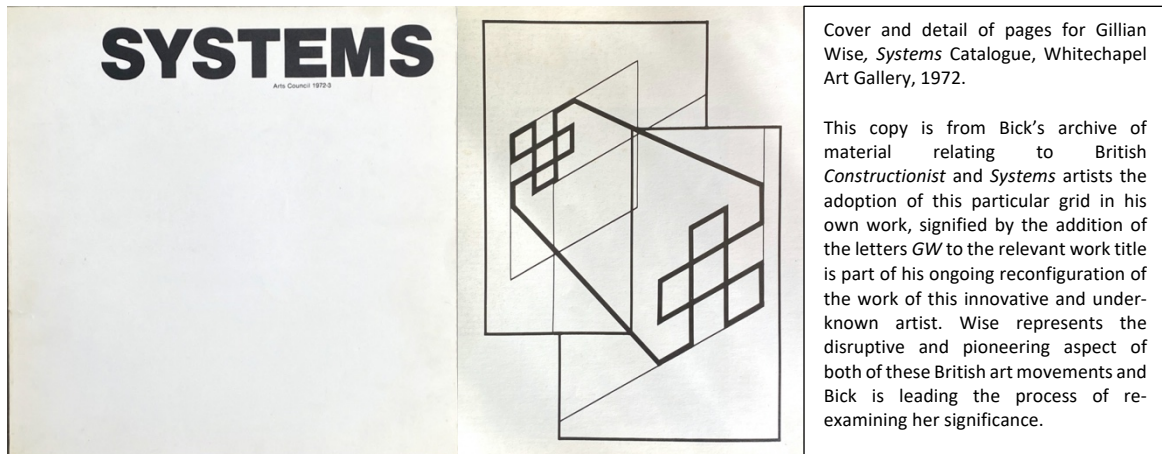
<sup>3</sup> The Cornerstone Gallery, Liverpool 16 Nov 2015 – 18 Dec 2015, as part of the 2015 Creative Festival

<sup>4</sup> curated by Sabine Schaschl at Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, 9 February – 7 May 2017

<sup>5</sup> The Wilson, Cheltenham 28 January – 5 March 2017

<sup>6</sup> on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2017

- The significance of research around Systems is currently growing despite its relative scarcity in the UK and the short life span of the original movement. The recent death, at 84, of artist Gillian Wise, one of only two artists with John Ernest who was part of both the Constructionist and Systems movements, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/apr/29/gillian-wise-obituary> indicates the vitality and need for re-examination of this field of art practice. This project makes a critical contribution to that process and to the related reappraisal of the significance of concrete art and poetry. Key examples of related research would be the emphasis on connections with concrete poetry in Jo Melvin's subsequent Barry Flanagan exhibition at Ikon, the dsh exhibition at Lisson Gallery <https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/dsm-sylvester-houedard> & Bick's inclusion in *Gegenwerts Konkrete*, at Haus Konstruktiv (2019) <https://www.hauskonstruktiv.ch/de/CH/ausstellungen/filmarchiv/movie-konkrete-gegenwart.htm> The latter exhibition in Zurich was a conscious echo of Max Bill's plural and international approach in *konkrete kunst 50 jahre entwicklung*, (Helmhaus, Zurich, 1960). Evidence of an international appetite for new examinations of this field is clear in these subsequent exhibitions. Bick's continued development of this particular thread of research is in planning for a project at Stiftung Konzeptuelle Kunst, Soest, Germany in 2021-22.
- Swiss Concrete Art, Max Bill, Camille Graeser, Richard Lohse, Verena Lowensberg, the international development of concrete poetry, British Constructionist and Systems Art, International Modernism are models for this piece of curatorial research. The selection of artists, developed between the three researchers under Bick's leadership devising, focussed specifically on recent work by internationally recognised contemporary artists, notably Begum, Dolven, Dekynt, Lalic, in relation to the established but under-known discourse of the 1970s Systems movement.
- Bick's own copy of the 1977 *Rational Concepts* portfolio was displayed as a leitmotif for the contemporary work.
- The published essays based on papers delivered at the symposium surveyed the context with particular focus on the reinvention of contemporary art practice through examinations of under-known art histories (Bick, Melvin); visual correspondences as a method (Blannin); the primacy of the experiential and perceptual (Parsons); abstraction as a means of examining the social (Pratt).
- The structure of the project reflected Bick's longstanding research interest in Constructionism and Systems and research work with Henry Moore Institute, papers at TATE and Leeds Art Gallery and projects with Museum Haus Konstruktiv (Zurich) and Galerie von Bartha (Basel). Similarly it supported the funded PhD of Parsons, Bick's longstanding curatorial collaboration with and supervision of the PhD of Blannin (&Model, Leeds 2014, Uni of Worcs) and ongoing research collaboration with Pratt.



Cover and detail of pages for Gillian Wise, *Systems Catalogue*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1972.

This copy is from Bick's archive of material relating to British *Constructionist* and *Systems* artists the adoption of this particular grid in his own work, signified by the addition of the letters *GW* to the relevant work title is part of his ongoing reconfiguration of the work of this innovative and under-known artist. Wise represents the disruptive and pioneering aspect of both of these British art movements and Bick is leading the process of re-examining her significance.



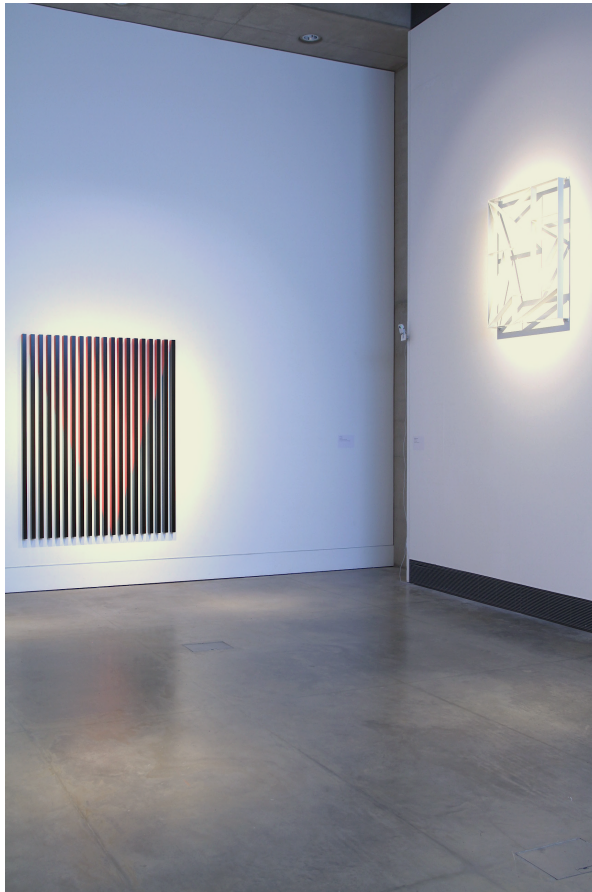
## Finished Output



Left: Daniel Robert Hunziker *Patch*, crochet found quilt framed under glass. Right: Rana Begum, *No. 703*, 2017, Acrylic paint on MDF



Left: A K Dolven, *Teenagers lifting the sky*, 2014, Oil on aluminum, Right: Rana Begum, *No. 480*, 2013, Paint on powder-coated aluminium



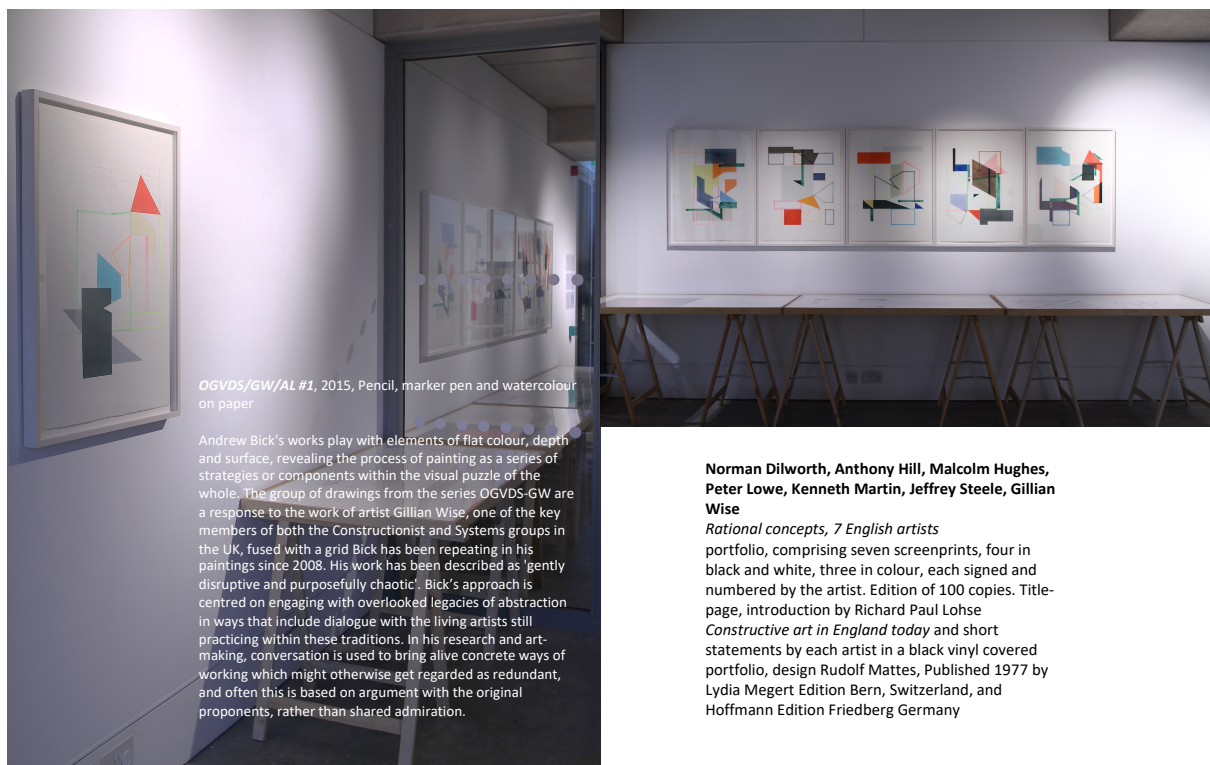
Left: Rana Begum,  
No. 480, 2013,  
Paint on powder-  
coated aluminium,  
Right: Daniel  
Robert Hunziker,  
*KALK\_16/1*, 2016  
Powder coated  
steel



Installation view left:  
Guy Bigland Rules  
Paintings (2014)  
right: Jonathan  
Parsons One Forty  
(2004)



On the wall; a sequence of six drawings from Andrew Bick's series *OGVDs-GW*. In the table vitrines; the 1977 print portfolio *Rational Concepts*, a copy of which Bick was gifted by artist Jeffrey Steele.



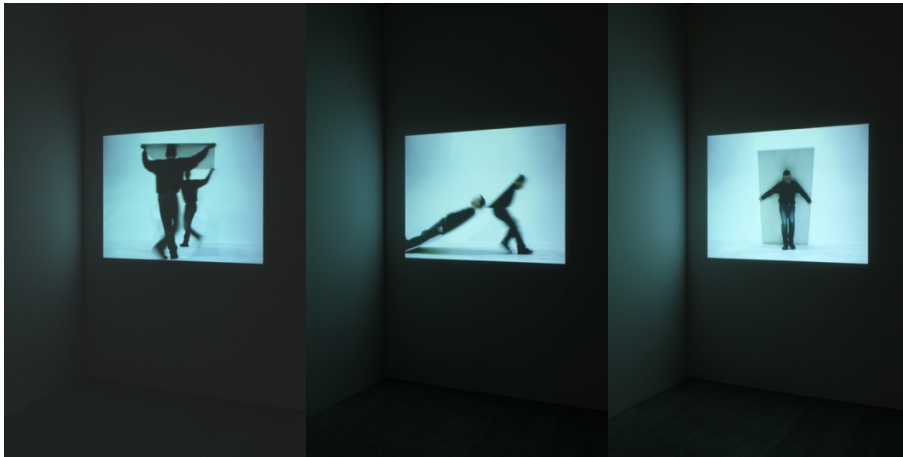
*OGVDs/GW/AL #1*, 2015, Pencil, marker pen and watercolour on paper

Andrew Bick's works play with elements of flat colour, depth and surface, revealing the process of painting as a series of strategies or components within the visual puzzle of the whole. The group of drawings from the series *OGVDs-GW* are a response to the work of artist Gillian Wise, one of the key members of both the Constructionist and Systems groups in the UK, fused with a grid Bick has been repeating in his paintings since 2008. His work has been described as 'gently disruptive and purposefully chaotic'. Bick's approach is centred on engaging with overlooked legacies of abstraction in ways that include dialogue with the living artists still practicing within these traditions. In his research and art-making, conversation is used to bring alive concrete ways of working which might otherwise get regarded as redundant, and often this is based on argument with the original proponents, rather than shared admiration.

**Norman Dilworth, Anthony Hill, Malcolm Hughes, Peter Lowe, Kenneth Martin, Jeffrey Steele, Gillian Wise**

*Rational concepts*, 7 English artists portfolio, comprising seven screenprints, four in black and white, three in colour, each signed and numbered by the artist. Edition of 100 copies. Title-page, introduction by Richard Paul Lohse *Constructive art in England today* and short statements by each artist in a black vinyl covered portfolio, design Rudolf Mattes, Published 1977 by Lydia Megert Edition Bern, Switzerland, and Hoffmann Edition Friedberg Germany





#### John Wood & Paul Harrison

*Board*, 1993, S-VHS, 3:02 min

Video projection with sound, dimensions variable

This three-minute video works both as a test of physical endurance and a playful allusion to the standardisation of materials, which came about with Modernism and has also become the staple of studio screen divisions in art schools across the country. Wood and Harrison's deadpan performance turns the ideas of sequence and repetition of Conceptual Art in to something more human and quirky, in which the heavy thump of the plywood sheet as it hits the floor and echoes around the studio where it was filmed, acts as a reminder of the weight and heft of materials.

### Additional images



Adam Gillam's sculptural installation, *Oh OK*, takes improvised form and title from his conversational response to the exhibition invitation. As with previous collaborations (his inclusion in *Conversations Around Marlow Moss, & Model*, Leeds 2014) a playful approach to discursive context becomes an alternative form of system







**Edith Dekyndt**

*One Second of Silence* – N.Y., 2008

video projection

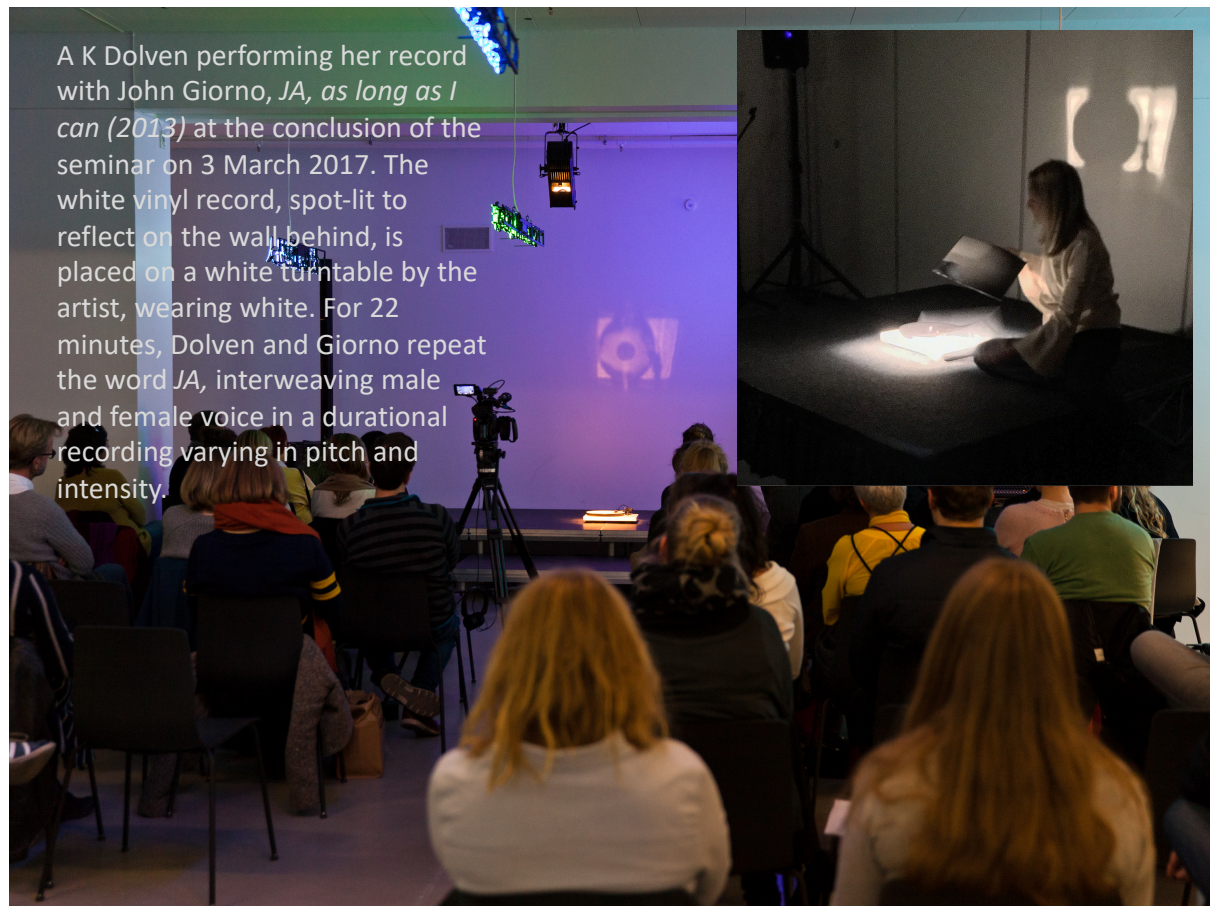
The title of this work comes from reflections about the meaning of a flag, the idea of commemoration and the trajectory of sound in the air. A moment of silence is the expression of a period of contemplation, prayer, reflection, or meditation. Similar to flying a flag at half-mast, a moment of silence is often a gesture of respect, particularly as an act of mourning or as part of a commemoration ceremony of a tragic historical event.



*THINGS YOU HAVE DONE, 2014/UN CERTAINTY, 2015/VARIOUS VERSIONS, 2016 Perfect bound paperback books*

Guy Bigland deliberately situates his practice in the awkward void between language and image. His paintings are composed using formulae taken from the grids of Sudoku puzzles and his artists' books use abstract formulae to generate text. Chance plays as much a part in these found instructions for artworks as in the association and memory operations he also employs – for example, in his artists' book *All the four-letter words that are sometimes used with another four-letter word (that I can think of)*.



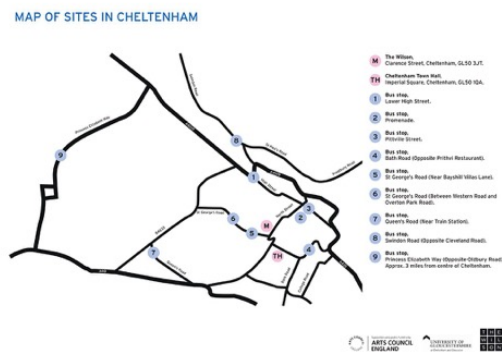


A K Dolven performing her record with John Giorno, *JA, as long as I can* (2013) at the conclusion of the seminar on 3 March 2017. The white vinyl record, spot-lit to reflect on the wall behind, is placed on a white turntable by the artist, wearing white. For 22 minutes, Dolven and Giorno repeat the word *JA*, interweaving male and female voice in a durational recording varying in pitch and intensity.



A K Dolven  
*JA as long as I can*  
 2013  
 Sound installation  
 Voices: John Giorno and A K Dolven  
 Curator: Gaby Hartel  
 Vinyl LP, record player, amplifier,  
 two loud speakers, cables  
 Duration 22 min, dimensions  
 variable  
 Edition of 3 + AP

## Guy Bigland, Billboards, Cheltenham Town Centre, August 2017



<https://www.guybigland.com/about-is-like-about>





Bigland's 'jeux de mots' actualised as art-work Foucault's speculation on the relationship between word and image, both in the artists books and paintings displayed in the gallery and later billboards around Cheltenham. Effectively Bigland's practice summarises Foucault's remark on painting and language that 'neither can be reduced to the others terms';



