

## Reading Matter

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Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) is considered to have been the first manuscript written entirely on a typewriter and delivered to a publisher as a typescript. In 'The First Writing Machines' Twain wrote:

I was the first person in the world to apply the typewriter to literature [...] The early machine was full of caprices, full of defects – devilish ones. It had as many immoralities as the machine of today has virtues. After a year or two I found that it was de-grading my character, so I thought I would give it to Howells. [...] He took it home to Boston, and my morals began to improve, but his have never recovered.

– Mark Twain, 'The First Writing Machines', 1917 <sup>1</sup>

Twain gave his typewriter away three times but, as he put it, 'it wouldn't stay; it came back'.<sup>2</sup> He subsequently employed a typist who was responsible for processing his works. The machine, for Twain, was capricious and demanding, but it was not, at the same time, without its appeal. All it required, Twain wrote elsewhere, was 'swiftness in banging the keys [...] one may lean back in his chair and work it. It piles an awful stack of words on one page. [...] of course it saves paper'.<sup>3</sup> Twain was an early adopter and his initial struggles with word processing anticipate some of the debates among twentieth century writers and artists. This explicit recognition of the possibilities brought about by the mechanical means of producing, recording and manipulating language becomes particularly prominent in twentieth century avant-garde circles. The avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century typically affirmed and subverted media technologies of their time. Similarly, the neo-avant-garde impulse is often driven by a commitment to a certain technological imagination. For example, in his manifesto *Projective Verse* (1950) Charles Olson points to the advantages of the typewriter, which 'can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends'.<sup>4</sup> Olson's typewriter, 'due to its rigidity and its space precisions' is both predictable and surprising, rhythmical and jarring. The typewriter also plays a central role in the creation of Warhol's *a, A Novel* (1968), typed by a team of typists transcribing a collection of recordings taped by Warhol at his Factory studio. And the list could continue.

The same preoccupation with the possibilities of the machine for writing characterises Kenneth Goldsmith's work: 'I used to be an artist,' claims Goldsmith, 'then I became a poet; then a writer. Now when asked, I simply refer to myself as a word processor'.<sup>5</sup> Informed by the dynamics of contemporary means of (re)producing language, Goldsmith's works include appropriations of a vast array of texts, retyped, scanned, copied and pasted. His *Day* (2003) is a transcription of the entire issue of *The New York Times* from 1 September 2000, word for word, inclusive of all content, commercial advertising, cinema listings, bar codes, and photo captions are all included. *The Weather* (2005) is a retyping of New York radio weather forecasts and *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013) – presented as part of Simon Morris' exhibition *Reading as Art* – includes seven transcriptions of real-time radio and television reports of seven events recognised as pivotal moments in recent US history. The collection focuses on the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and John Lennon; the space shuttle Challenger disaster; the Columbine shootings; 9/11; and the death of Michael Jackson. The opening transcription of John F. Kennedy's assassination is of particular significance to the volume. It features as an event that marks a turning point in the history and politics of the USA but also as a defining moment in the history of the media. It emerges as a statement on technological change and means of textual production. As Goldsmith explains, 'the modern era of media spectacle begins with John F. Kennedy's assassination, hence [the] choice to start the book there'.<sup>6</sup> Like the opening section, the subsequent six passages all iterate footage of heavily mediated events.

This commitment to media and technologies of writing is important here and serves as a frame for understanding the complex dynamics informing *Reading as Art*. Originally published as a paperback collection of prose poems, *Seven American Deaths* is transformed for the Bury exhibition. Goldsmith's work is presented here on seven screens, each displaying text of one disaster. The screens are set up to create an illusion of the text being live-typed, making visible the process of writing itself. The emergence of the seven texts on the seven screens is also accompanied here by the sound of seven typewriters, presented in a somewhat nostalgic gesture for the retro qualities of the now antiquated technologies and the related writing processes. The possibilities inscribed in the swiftness of banging the typewriter keys Twain was so interested in become the focal point of the piece in which language does not produce meaning but instead, a cacophony of typing sounds generated by seven typewriters, simultaneously producing textual material. To borrow from Truman Capote, this is not writing, then, it's typing.

And this focus on typing rather than writing, on textual material rather than text itself, and on the process of generating it is what interests me here. Goldsmith often stresses a commitment

to unreadable texts, texts written not to be read, but to be thought about. But as challenging, unusual, boring or tedious *Day*, *Weather* or *Seven American Deaths* might be, in their original form, these works are presented as books of prose poems, published in a format which implies and encourages traditional practices of reading; page by page, line by line. Remediated in the context of Morris' show however, the work invites a different kind of reading. By reconceptualising *Seven American Deaths* Morris offers an important insight into the work itself and Goldsmith's practice more broadly, foregrounding a characteristic orientation towards technology and, in particular, Goldsmith's preoccupation with the Warholian artist as a machine. Unreadability in the context of the installation at Bury does not stem from the nature of the text itself but is a result of the condition of its presentation. The verbi-voco-visual illusion of live word processing and the distracting dissonance of the typing machines make reading Goldsmith's text impossible, or a challenge at the very least. Here, the rhythmicality of typing to which Olson pointed is obscured; instead, attention is drawn to the physical condition of the process of textual production itself.

Morris' focus on the sound of a typewriter rather than a contemporary computer keyboard is a means of foregrounding this commitment to materiality of text. Although the same typing skills might be required for a personal computer and a typewriter, the nature of contact differs. The act of pressing the keys is much more laborious when a typewriter is employed, with each action also announced by a characteristic clacking sound. The ease and swiftness of working with a contemporary computer and the hardly audible typing associated with a modern keyboard mean that certain material qualities of the writing process are lost when a typewriter is abandoned in favour of new and improved technologies. To turn to a typewriter then, is to invite an engagement with material process of writing. A typewriter seems to embody the process of writing itself; it makes the act of writing commensurate with the work of inscribing it, as opposed to producing what Daniel Chandler describes as a 'suspended inscription' characteristic of contemporary word processing technologies. Mallarmé spoke of the challenge and uncertainty of facing a blank page. A page produced on a manual typewriter is a record and a reminder of the torturous thought processes becoming text. This process is eradicated when contemporary word processing software is used, a system which, as John Updike put it, makes the production of a 'perfectly typed' text 'almost too easy'.<sup>7</sup> As such, Morris' installation of Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths* can be seen as a timely nod towards media history and contemporary interest in changing technologies of textual production brought about by the rise of digital tools and techniques. The somewhat ambiguous conflation of a pre-programmed computer screen and a typewriter — of the new and old technologies — employed in *Reading as Art* is a snapshot of a machine in progress and an echo of incipient experiments with computation. It brings to mind early computers

connected to typewriters such as the Friden Flexowriter, which had the ability to deliver input into computer and render its output on cards, paper roll or typing paper, or the IBM DisplayWriter which made possible, to quote Peter Straub, 'writing on a television screen'.<sup>8</sup>

When confronted with Goldsmith's piece at Bury then, what we read is not the text of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, but a process of writing, of language becoming text, continuously transformed as a result of ongoing technological change. This is language in the process of constant becoming, fluid, changing, not yet the 'thing', aspiring to but at the same time resisting the complete fixity of the printed page. The act of remediation is a means of drawing attention to the interplay between text, context and the familiar medium of the page. And although absent from Goldsmith's piece, a page plays an important role in the show (see, among others, Kate Briggs' *Paper Sizes Poems* (2014), Eugen Gomringer's *A blank piece of paper* (2011) or Tom Friedman's *A piece of paper (English edition)* (2016)). To move away from the page to the screen is to transform *Seven American Deaths* into what N. Katherine Hayles describes as a technotext, bringing into view 'the machinery that gives [its] verbal construction [its] material reality'.<sup>9</sup> 'To change a material artefact,' Hayles writes, 'is to transform the context and circumstances for interacting with the words, which imperceptibly changes the meaning of the words as well'.<sup>10</sup> This preoccupation with the material qualities of the writing process emerges here as a central theme of Morris' show, foregrounded as a precondition for the exploration of processes of reading – conditions in which reading can occur – and a subsequent reconceptualisation of reading as art.

Morris' contribution to the show, the eponymous *Reading as Art*, juxtaposed with Goldsmith's piece, makes this dynamic explicitly visible. In *Reading as Art*, 414 still images of Simon Morris reading a book form a continuous stream of photographs, looping on a slideshow. Morris here is seen turning the pages, shifting in the chair, reading silently. With the book placed in front of him, flat down on the table, the text is clearly present but never seen on the screen. It is impossible here to follow the text on the page with Morris, to engage with or respond to the text that he's working his way through. It is possible, however, to participate in the process of reading, watching Morris reading and tracing his progress based on the volume of pages on either side of the book, i.e. on the purely material qualities of the book and the physical manifestations of the reading experience. Here, reading becomes a performance; a physical manipulation of the body in space and time. But the text Morris relies on is not performed in line with familiar conventions; it is not read out loud. Instead, it is employed in a manner evocative of a Fluxus-style score for performance, rarely read aloud but employed to guide the performer through the pre-scripted act. In *Reading as Art* Morris performs the acts of reading, turning the pages, looking at text, asking the audience to look at

rather than listen to a text being read. In this invitation to a peculiar form of bookish voyeurism, the reading process becomes part of looking.

Language in *Reading as Art* – when it is present at all – transforms into what Hito Steyerl describes as ‘the language of things’.<sup>11</sup> As Steyerl suggests, ‘it is not about representation at all, but about actualising whatever the things have to say in the present’; not about the representation of reading, of the book as a material object, but about making visible the very conditions for these processes and objects to emerge. The interest in language here is characterised by a move away from earlier concerns with language as text, discourse or sign and towards those material conditions of language mentioned above. The text that Morris reads, for example, is not significant here as a source of information, knowledge or narrative; it is not presented to be ‘read’, contemplated or interpreted. Instead, we are invited here to experience the material of reading. In that sense, *Reading as Art* and the exhibition more broadly propose not an investigation of reading but rather an exploration of the material conditions in which reading can occur. If seen as such, the show is evocative of the contemporary turn towards objects or things particularly notable in recent theoretical writing. This material sensibility is considered a simultaneous turn away from an earlier linguistic turn of the 1970s and 1980s, associated with structuralism, poststructuralism and the popular sense of the failings of semiotic approaches. To engage with materials means to pose a critique of logocentrism and to challenge the dominance of the written language as a tool of meaning and communication. In Morris’ show, participating in the process of reading suggests participating in the material of reading. As such, the engagement with text and language differs significantly here from artistic manifestation of the linguistic turn. While an interest in the material qualities of language was prominent in language-based works proliferating in the mid-twentieth century, these were characterised by a commitment to systems of signification and grounded in the poststructuralist interest in language. Morris, in contrast, does not engage here with art as linguistic proposition. But, importantly, the text in *Reading as Art* is not without expression. It is a timely invitation to participate in the material of the book and of the reading process, as they are transformed in the context of the contemporary debates on the object-oriented ontologies.

This dynamic is evoked in Jérémie Bennequin’s *Erased Proust Writing* (2005-15). Where Morris’ piece focuses on a somewhat passive engagement with a complete, finite text, Bennequin turns attention to what could be described as an active reading process. In Bennequin’s hands text is moulded and transformed in and through a hyperbolised process of reading. In *Erased Proust Writing*, the artist erases Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time, 1913), one page a day, using an ink eraser and a copy of

Proust's book from Collection Blanche – an edition, as Bennequin explained, printed on a paper 'of just the right thickness for a sanding on both sides' (see Bennequin's essay in this volume, pp. xx–xx). The material qualities of the book are of paramount importance here as they determine the dynamics of Bennequin's reading process. Bennequin's Proust then, can be seen as a project committed to documenting processes of the material transformation of a book in the process of reading, interrogating the nature of the materiality of the book through destruction, removal and erasure.

As Petra Lange-Berndt suggests, 'to understand the languages that emanate from materials or the atmospheres connected to them one especially needs to consider what happens after the work of the artist is done, once materials are submitted to the forces of time, gravity or the elements'.<sup>12</sup> *Erasing Proust* is evocative of that very understanding of materiality as an exploration of malleable substances. As such, Bennequin's laborious and hyperbolised reading process engages with what Georges Bataille describes as base material. For Bataille, base materials are synonymous with relics, ruins, decay and decomposition which destabilise all foundations – materials characteristically antithetical to processes of production, antigerative yet still material. Eraser shavings, typically discarded in a disorderly fashion, are not only retained here but meticulously collected to form heaps of erased language. But unlike Robert Smithson's *A Heap of Language* (1966) – a drawing and a mission statement at the same time, presented in an unorthodox but readable format – Bennequin's is a heap of removed language, a pile of traces, perhaps, of language which is and at the same time is not present on the pages of Proust's novel. And it is this transformation of material qualities that matters most here: from the book to the erased 'rubber dust', as Bennequin calls it, and from legible language to traces of language. It marks a move away from the familiar form which encourages traditional practices of reading and towards the book as an object to be looked at, transforming writing into sculpture, reading into a visual experience.

The sculptural nature of Bennequin's work is important and can be seen as an echo of Smithson's practice. In interview, Robert Smithson described his approach to writing: 'I thought of writing more as material to sort of put together than a kind of analytic searchlight [...] I would construct my articles in the way I would construct a work'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Bennequin's piece is constructed. The process of erasure here is confined to a single copy of Proust's text. Working on the book itself singles out one specific volume. The project then, is a study in the fetishisation of an object. Here, to borrow from Bill Brown, an object – one of many copies of Proust's novel published in the Collection Blanche series – transforms into a thing – the single, unique copy of Bennequin's Proust. This shift foregrounds the material qualities of the book. Bennequin's Proust is no longer a novel to be read but a book object

concerned with its own materiality – an object to be looked at. The copy of the erased *In Search of Lost Time* (Erased Proust Writing) invites an interrogation of the process of making the work, the method and the medium of production (foregrounded in the meticulous manual accompanying the work), but not the page as a signifying system, designed to be read and interpreted. Bennequin is here concerned with the nature of the thing of reading, the ‘bookness’ of the book, the ‘textness’ of text. This transformation of the volume is revealing and indicative of Morris’ broader concern in the exhibition. The process of erasure is a process of meaning-making, which draws attention to processes of making meaning. We don’t pay enough attention to the page, Morris seems to be suggesting, but the page itself carries a lot information in both a metaphoric and figurative sense. The information is here made material, turned into heaps of erased language. In fact, Morris is less interested in text, in words on the page, than in the page itself. To work with language, for Morris, means to work with objects and materials – palpable, tactile and material. Morris recognises that the physical properties of media structure our interactions with them. Moving beyond thinking about a page as a unit of reading, Morris engages with some of the less obvious conventions, including the opacity of paper, its dimensions, weight and substance (see also works by Kate Briggs, Martin Creed, Eugen Gomringer and Tom Friedman’s *A Piece of Paper*). To change the physical form of the medium, Morris seems to be suggesting, is not simply to interfere in the act of reading. It is, instead, ‘profoundly to transform the metaphoric network structuring the relation of word to world’.<sup>14</sup>

Characteristically, processes of change and transformation are, as Lange-Berndt points out, features of materiality. ‘The term “material”,’ Lange-Berndt explains, describes not prime matter but substances that are always subject to change, be it through handling [similarly to Creed’s *Work No. 88* (1995) or Bennequin’s *Erased Proust Writing*], integration with their surroundings [Jo Hamil’s *Gutter Words* (2012)], or the dynamic life of their chemical reaction’,<sup>15</sup> the latter explicitly evoked in Craig Dworkin’s *Fact*. Included in *Reading as Art* are 13 pieces from Dworkin’s *Fact* series, objects on which poems are inscribed. Each medium in the series is different and these range from the more obvious pieces of paper, through LCD display monitors, to a carpet woven in Nepal using traditional methods and materials. Each poem is a list of constituent components of the objects used as carriers of text. In *Fact*, Dworkin generates a series of texts from the properties of materials, where text is evocative of only the chemical qualities of that very object on the surface of which it is readable. An interesting parallel can be drawn between Dworkin’s *Fact* and Derrida’s understanding of the concept of *physis*. *Fact* engages with matter understood as nature, as *physis*, which tends to be viewed as implicitly opposed to culture (and making the notion of material culture problematic). In *Fact* however, this contradiction is revoked. Dworkin

engages with *physis* and through his ‘readings’ of chemical qualities of a range of unorthodox media, he transforms matter into poetic text, posing a challenge to the notion of material culture itself.

For Dworkin, then, materials are neither objects nor things. To borrow from Lange-Berndt again, ‘if one considers a broom, for instance, the broom is the thing while the material might be wood or plastic’.<sup>16</sup> In *Fact*, the thing and the material become one. In this self-referential act Dworkin restricts himself to words that only refer to the platforms on which they can be read, the space of the ‘page’ alone, however unconventional that page might be. Here Dworkin invites acts of mattering of matter, with materials acting not only as conduits but also as sources of meaning. Seen as such, language is treated as a kind of information, always attached to its concrete, material condition, to its space of inscription; language as information as material. Here materials become complicit as a tool in both art practice and criticism.

Implicit in *Fact* is an understanding that any attempt at focusing on the materiality of text, writing and related media requires a consideration of the processes of making at the base level. Dworkin’s piece, then, can be seen as a playful and highly literal take on contemporary notions of materiality – a conscious nod towards the contemporary object-oriented ontologies – and, hence, a focal point of the show. In its evocation of the debates on materiality, *Fact* draws attention to the key preoccupation of *Reading as Art* and its focus on materials of the book rather than a book as an object to be read. By including *Fact* Morris explores materials – substances that artists employ – in order to, in turn, interrogate the nature of the thing they produce – to explore the ‘bookness’ of the book and, hence, the reading experience it invites. The show, then, can be seen as an exercise in what Gottfried Semper described as practical aesthetics, defined from the point of view of techniques, uses and materials, proposing a set of tools for reading the process of writing itself; it creates a situation for reading to emerge. For Morris, then, similarly to Smithson, ‘the sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas – i.e. printed matter.’ Language, here, Morris seems to be repeating, after Smithson, ‘is built, not written’.<sup>17</sup>

The material qualities of a textual object are valued and aestheticised in and of themselves in *Reading as Art*. Text in Morris’ show is understood as an expanded concept, which includes writing itself but also, perhaps more importantly, the media and methods associated with processes of engaging with textual material. Through this approach, Morris transforms text into a speculative tool for artists working with language to be looked at, and not to be read. By doing so, he explores in a timely manner discourses and critical approaches through which



contemporary text-based practices can be interpreted, speaking to our post-digital fetishisation of print, and responding to the charged debates about the changing dynamics of creative production in the contemporary context. Morris here acts both as a curator and a collector of books and book works while the Bury Art Museum oscillates somewhere between a rather non-traditional reading room and an installation space. This ambiguous status of both the space itself and those involved in arranging it points to a tension between practices of reading and a space for art, and in particular the ambivalent quality of contemporary experimental practices, which engage with text in a range of forms, genres and disciplinary contexts. A renewed interest in engaging with experimental writing, innovative poetics, book art and text-based art in gallery or museum spaces can currently be observed: *The Perverse Library* (2010) curated by Simon Morris at Shandy Hall, Coxwold, North Yorkshire, *Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art* (2013) organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver and exhibited at MCA Denver, the Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University and The Power Plant in Toronto, the *Conceptual Poetics* (2016) exhibition at the Southbank Centre's Poetry Library in London, and an experimental writing series (2015-16) at Carroll/Fletcher Gallery in London, are just a few representative examples. But *Reading as Art* escapes straightforward categorisation; it presents neither contemporary experimental writing nor text-based art. By thinking about text in an expanded field the show shifts the focus so dominant in those recent projects from writing to materials of writing, from text to textual matter. In *Reading as Art* then, materials of textual production are presented as both objects of critique and a mode of that very critique. In Morris' vocabulary there is no opposition in the book between meaning and matter. Instead, these are presented as always intertwined, always at play; corresponding but nevertheless distinct. The power of the word here lies, to return to Smithson, 'in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved tensions of dispartes'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, 'The First Writing Machines: from my unpublished autobiography', in *The Writings of Mark Twain*, vol. 24 (New York and London: Harper and Brothers 1917), p.227.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, 'New Fangled Writing Machine', in *New Letters of Note: Correspondence De-serving Wider Audience*, Shaun Usher (ed.) (London: Canongate Unbound, 2015), p.136.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Olson (1950). 'Projective Verse', Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69406>, 13 October 2009, accessed 1 June 2016.

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith (n.d.). 'I look to theory only when I realize that somebody has dedicated their entire life to a question I have only fleetingly considered (a work in progress)', Electronic Poetry Centre, <http://epc.buffalo.edu>, accessed 10 June 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, Afterword to *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Books, 2013), p.173.

<sup>7</sup> John Updike, 'Where Money and Energy Gather: A Writer's View of a Computer Laboratory,' in *Research Directions in Computer Science: An MIT Perspective*, Albert R. Meyer et al. (eds.) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Straub, interview by Matthew Kirchenbaum, 10 May 2012, quoted in Matthew G. Kirchenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), p.120.

<sup>9</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p.27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>11</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'The Language of Things', eipcp: european institute for progressive cultural policies, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en>, June 2006, accessed 20 June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, 'How to Be Complicit with Materials', in *Materiality*, Petra Lange-Berndt (ed.) (Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2015), p.17.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Smithson, interview by Paul Cummings, 14 and 19 July 1972, available via Archives of American Art, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-smithson-12013>, accessed 10 June 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Hayles, *op.cit.*, p.22.

<sup>15</sup> Lange-Berndt, *op.cit.*, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Smithson, 'Language to Be Looked at And/Or Things to Be Read', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.61.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*