

## Assignment 4

What is the place of Text in Art?



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## Assignment 4 – Critical Review

### What is the place of text in art?

#### Introduction

Typography in contemporary art is nothing new whether used as a title or caption, a statement providing insight into the artist's thinking or more obscure text adding another layer of meaning to conceptual work. Text incorporated into the artwork or comprising the artwork itself may need further research to fully comprehend. This essay seeks to explore text in art and asks the question, ***'What is the place of text in art?'*** or even ***'Can text in its own right, be taken seriously as art?'***

There are numerous definitions of art, words like creativity, skill and imagination are consistently used. Some suggest that art should stimulate the visual senses, such as painting, drawing or sculpture, whilst there is a school of thought that says art cannot be defined at all. Swiss born, British writer and philosopher, Alain de Bottom is of the opinion that the purpose of art *'is to help us to live and die well'* (de Bottom, 2015) whilst Leo Tolstoy defined art as *'the activity by which a person, having experienced an emotion, intentionally transmits it to others '* (Tolstoy, cited in Ibrahim, A, 2019). Whilst we are encouraged not to make excessive use of the free encyclopaedia, Wikipedia as it is not an authenticated source, the introductory quote from its definition seems to be a good catch all:

*'Art is a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performing artefacts, expressing the author's imaginative, conceptual ideas or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power'* (Wikipedia, 2019).

Some of these definitions will be considered later as benchmarks by which to answer the question posed.

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### Text used to reinforce (or change) the meaning of work

Much of **Karen Knorr's** early black and white work includes a sentence or two of text under



The Europeans will get  
no more free lunch;  
either they spend more  
on defence or accept  
American tutelage.

Figure 1

*and return to re-evaluate the image in light of what we have read'. (Knorr, 2008) Is the intention that we try to read what might be in the subject's mind? Almost 40 years on from when this work was made one may draw parallels with the current political climate in the United Kingdom and specifically the Brexit negotiations.*

Nothing of Knorr's work is left to chance and certainly not the font. In the Belgravia series, Century Schoolbook is used to add what might be considered a juvenile comment on the attitudes and ideas of the English upper classes of this time. It could be argued that it is the space between the photograph and the text that is the art as it is this thought or idea that people will ponder over.

the images and one might ask how this serves to illustrate the photographs; in fact, it does not. In her Belgravia series (1979 – 1981), which according to Knorr, *'describe(s) class and power amongst the international and wealthy during the beginning of Thatcherism in London during 1979'* (Knorr, 2014), the space between the image and the text introduces a third meaning which according to Knorr must be determined by the viewer and *'slows down the viewing process as we study the text*

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### Text incorporated into the Art

Tacita Dean's use of text is well known. Hand scribbled across vast chalk on blackboard drawings provide a 'storyboard' effect reminiscent of black and white film. 'The Roaring



Figure 2

Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days' (1997), is a prime example of this. The Roaring Forties in an area in the South Atlantic, known for its gale force winds and the storyboard, presented in seven large square panels prepared with blackboard paint' depicts a ship at full sail amid stormy seas, muscly men hauling ropes or rowing a skiff, thunderous skies, the black of the night.

The narrative unfolds

further with the inclusion of directional notes; 'Action – out on the yard', 'Aerial view', 'Tuesday – she's still afloat (just)', 'listing badly', and 'end!' 'last scene, 1 of men, full sun, calm sea, land ahoy'. (Dean, 1997). Dean builds into her work an extra layer of intrigue through her use of hand written text.

'The Russian Ending', (2001) differs from 'The Roaring Forties' in that, rather than a work of chalk on blackboard drawings, this series began as a pile of old post cards found by Dean on her frequent visits to flea-markets across Europe. Twenty of these post cards were developed into black and white photogravures and most depict either accidents or disasters. In the early years of the Danish film industry, it became custom to produce two

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endings for films, a happy ending for the UK or US market and a tragic ending for the Russian market and this is where Dean's influence for this series came from. Each image, complete with hand written directional notes, stands as the final frame of a fictional film.



Figure 3

In 'Beautiful Sheffield', the film is meant to be 'a nostalgic film about the loss of pastoral England'. (Dean, 2002, cited in Taylor, 2004), and notes include direction that the final scene should be accompanied by

a local choir singing Jerusalem. In this series, perhaps more so than 'The Roaring Forties', the viewer is left to imagine the story leading up to this dismal ending, thus the viewer becomes part of the creative process.

### Text as Art

More contentious is where text become the artwork itself although arguably poetry, literature and song lyrics are all recognised as art.

**Jenny Holzer**, like many of her contemporaries in the 1970s and 1980s began creating artworks from text. She developed about 300 phrases, or 'truisms' as the series became known; deliberately challenging aphorisms which started off being displayed on posters, post cards, tee shirts, stickers and even condoms but were later projected around public spaces in New York or Venice, London, even Churchill's birthplace, Blenheim Palace.

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These 'truisms', all of which have a grain of truth but are also provocative in that they present political or contradictory opinions, were intended to '*sharpen people's awareness of the 'usual baloney they are fed' in daily life*' (Holzer, 2000). According to the artist, these writings were triggered by '*A combination of reading and events in the world and whatever is going on in my life*' (Holzer, cited in Morley, 2003, p181)

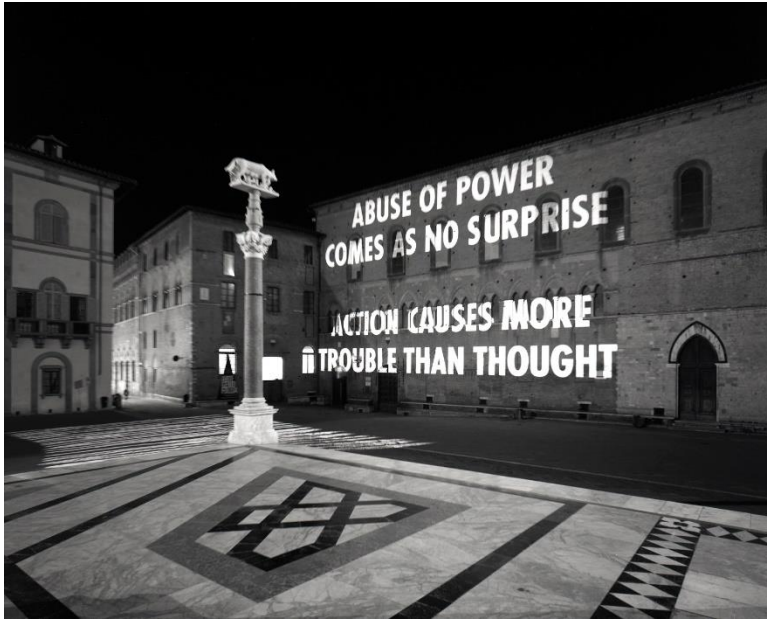


Figure 4

Holzer's use of topography enables her to get her message across to the masses rather than only those who would visit a gallery. '*Moving the political into the street, away from the walls of the conventional gallery, Holzer and Burgin demand public participation through the work's location*' (ibid)

Jenny Holzer saw herself as '*a printer of sorts*' (Holzer, cited in Morley, 2003, p181) and is thus concerned with the practical issues of presenting her work; typeface, size, location of the displays and that her message was communicated in such a way that it fitted seamlessly alongside advertising

Niamh Coghlan, writing in *Aesthetica Magazine*, likens Jenny Holzer to Victor Burgin, who's iconic 'Possessions' (1975) was fly-posted all over Newcastle-upon-Tyne, asking the question '*What do possessions mean to you?*' with the reply, '*7% of our population own 84% of the wealth.*' (Coghlan, 2017)

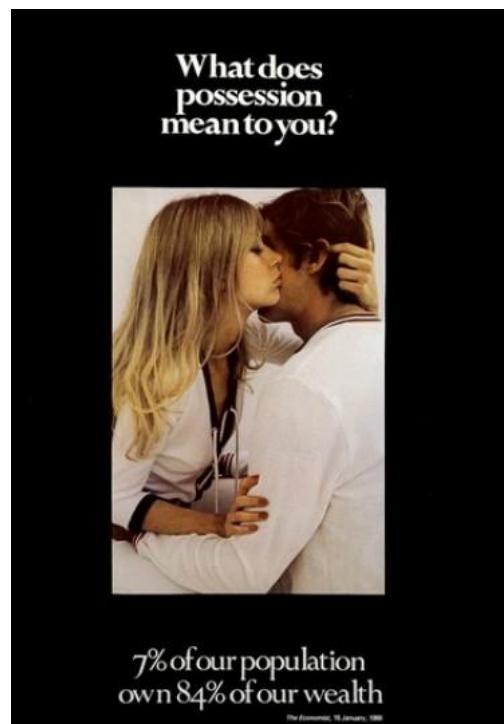


Figure 5

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and other public notices. One might question the difference between projecting political messages across large buildings and scrawling similar sentiments across the top of motorway bridges in which case it would be dubbed as graffiti and therefore vandalism. But then, Holzer herself admits to being something of *'a left-over street artists'* (Holzer cited in Coghlan 2017) In recent years, Jenny Holzer's work has centred around conflict and despite the title, *'Softer'*, this was the focus of her work at Blenheim Palace in 2017. A multi-disciplinary installation which included paintings, documents, LEDs and even human bones, Holzer sought to represent the voices of soldiers, civilians and veterans through her art. *'In this collection of things, something like the truth resides'* (Holzer, 2017)

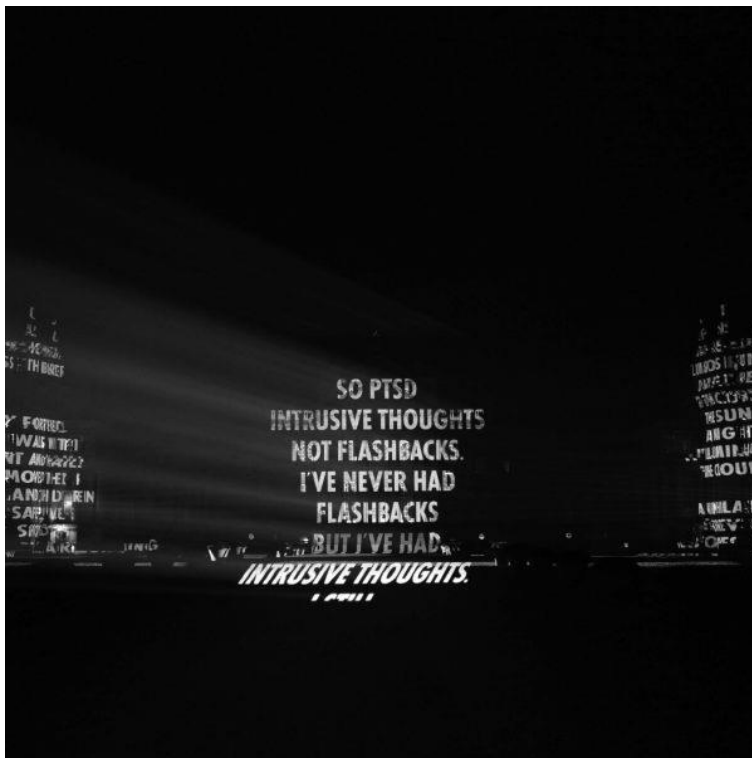


Figure 6

The large-scale projections, moulding themselves around the external architecture was for Holzer the *'main event'* (ibid) and whilst the *'messages were difficult'*, Holzer's view was that the presentation was *'lyrical, lovely and soothing'* (ibid). In contrast, Skye Sherwin writing in the Guardian described the installation as having *'transformed Blenheim Palace into a house of horrors as creepy as an old Hammer movie'* but that you have to *'wait for*

*darkness to fall to appreciate how Holzer has brought the notion of "soft power" out in the open. On War, a work in which damning words are beamed across the gravel and up the ornamented facades in crisp white lines, is coldly magnificent and brutal, like being caught inside the credits from the original Star Wars movies, or the searchlights of helicopters or prisons'*, (Sherwin, 2017) so perhaps not quite as soft or lyrical and Holzer had intended.

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Nick Barley, writing in 'The List' described Scottish artist **Douglas Gordon** as '*one of the most interesting artists working anywhere in the world*'. (Barley, 2006) He is intrigued by the way that Gordon works with threats, ambiguities and opposites; dark and light, good and evil, often rendering the familiar anything but. Influenced by music, literature, poetry and film and in the case of '30 Second Text', an actual experiment carried out by a French doctor in 1905, to see whether and for how long, a decapitated head continued to respond after it was severed. The answer, 30 seconds, just enough time to read Gordon's text. When this work was displayed, a light bulb was hung just above the work. It was lit for 30 seconds, then switched off for the same length of time plunging the viewer into complete darkness leaving them disorientated and looking for the exit. By all accounts this is reminiscent of Douglas Gordon's fear of the dark as a young boy.

In 2009, Douglas Gordon was commissioned to create a site-specific work at Tate Britain,



Figure 7

resulting in a body of work of over eighty text pieces entitled 'Pretty much every word written, spoken, heard, overheard from 1989... 2010'. Wide ranging statements drawn from personal beliefs or experiences or the Bible or popular music or..., which according to the Tate website, '*utilise(d) and animate(d) the architecture itself with a complex yet cohesive installation*' (Tate, 2010)

Douglas Gordon's fascination with language and its ambiguity is evident throughout his practice, he reflects on his work thus:

*'I always liked the idea that words, which are supposed to be concrete, when spoken by a*



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*different person at a different time can have a completely different meaning'* (Gordon, date unknown)

According to Katrina Brown, author of DG, (2004), Gordon's main aim is to create '*dialogue between the artist and the viewer*' (Brown, 2004 p. 7). His text is personal and often confrontational. Gordon's '*Letters*' series which he started in 1991, are usually addressed personally to someone associated with the gallery where his work is being exhibited. '*Dear Katrina*' and are all signed off with a friendly '*Yours, Gordon*'. The content however, often carries a slightly threatening tone; '*I am aware of what you have done*'.

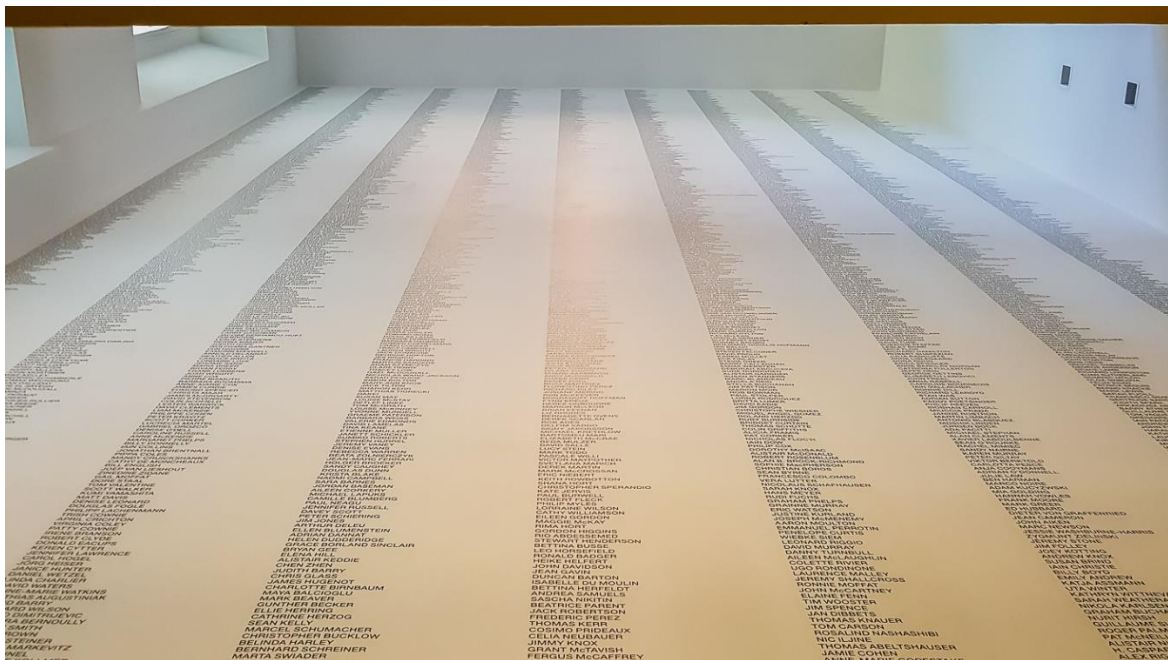


Figure 8

*List of Names (Random)*, (1990 – ongoing), on permanent display at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, is very personal to Gordon, though could easily be mistaken for a roll of honour of some sort; column upon column of names stretching from the ground right up to the second floor. It is simply a list of the names of all the people that Gordon could remember meeting in his life, 1400 when he started the work in 1990, 3270 when it was installed in the Scottish National Gallery in 2002, swelling to 4710 by 2014. It continues to be updated with new names whenever Douglas visits the galleries where the work is exhibited. Katrina Brown recalls the first time she saw this work and discovered to

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her surprise, having met Gordon a few months before, that she was in it. In her book, DG (2004), Brown talks about the strange affect this work has on the audiences who view it, searching for their own name or assuming that a name they recognise is the same person they happen to know. Whether a simple list of names could or should be considered to be 'art' is debatable, one thing is certain though, it is imposing and provokes discussion which, according to Gordon is the main purpose of his work.

The art produced by **Richard Long** and **Hamish Fulton** all originate from walks they have undertaken but whilst Long describes himself as a 'land artist', this description is refuted by Fulton who insists he is a walking artist because in his practice, unlike Long, nothing is moved or removed from the land during his walks, his mantra being '*Leave no Trace*'. In Fulton's opinion, the act of '*walking is an artform in its own right*' (Fulton, 2012, p6) and his output, whether it be photographs or walk texts is his way of recording his art and allowing us, the viewer to engage with his practice. Hamish Fulton is a man of few words. In his book, '*Walking in relation to Everything*', he describes himself as '*a contemporary artist, not a writer*', he '*thinks in statements, not continuous sentences*'. (Ibid) This may go some way to explaining the rather stilted text and strange use of capitals in parts of words that he feels important, '*WALKing*' for example. He also seems to have a fascination with the number seven, frequently pointing out seven letter words in the text, such as '*slowalk*' or '*animist*' or '*numbers*'. This makes reading the book quite awkward and hard to follow, a little like Fulton's art, or perhaps this book should be seen as one of Fulton's artworks in its own right. This point is made in the forward to '*Walking in Relation to Everything*' which also stands as the catalogue for a collaborative exhibition between the Turner Contemporary in Margate and the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 2012. According to the directors of the two galleries, publication is important to Fulton who uses his text works to subtly get his message across about respecting the planet, '*Fulton does not pursue a heavy handed ecological didacticism, which would jar with his practice of 'leave no trace', but instead with a kind of poetry, he encourages others to follow his example*'. (Victoria Pomery and Jonathan Watkins, 2012) Reviewing Fulton's book was not an intentional part of this essay however, having the contextual writing alongside the images or text pieces as presented in the book does help with the understanding of Hamish Fulton's work.

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Some of Fulton's photographs include text underneath the image, much as Karen Knorr's does whilst others have text across the surface of the photograph. Sometimes one can relate the text to the photograph and sometimes it appears quite contradictory. This point was raised by Jesse Alexander in his interview with Fulton for the Spring 2019 edition of Source magazine. Fulton explains this by alluding to the passage of time when one is walking and how the relationship between words and images can be used in different ways. So, for example there may not be geese in a landscape photograph bearing the caption 'geese' but that does not mean that there were not geese on the walk or it may be that he could hear the geese but not see them. The actual experience of Fulton's walks come across more strongly on his website, where as well as the text art scrolling over the screen, birdsong and boots tramping over the land can be heard.

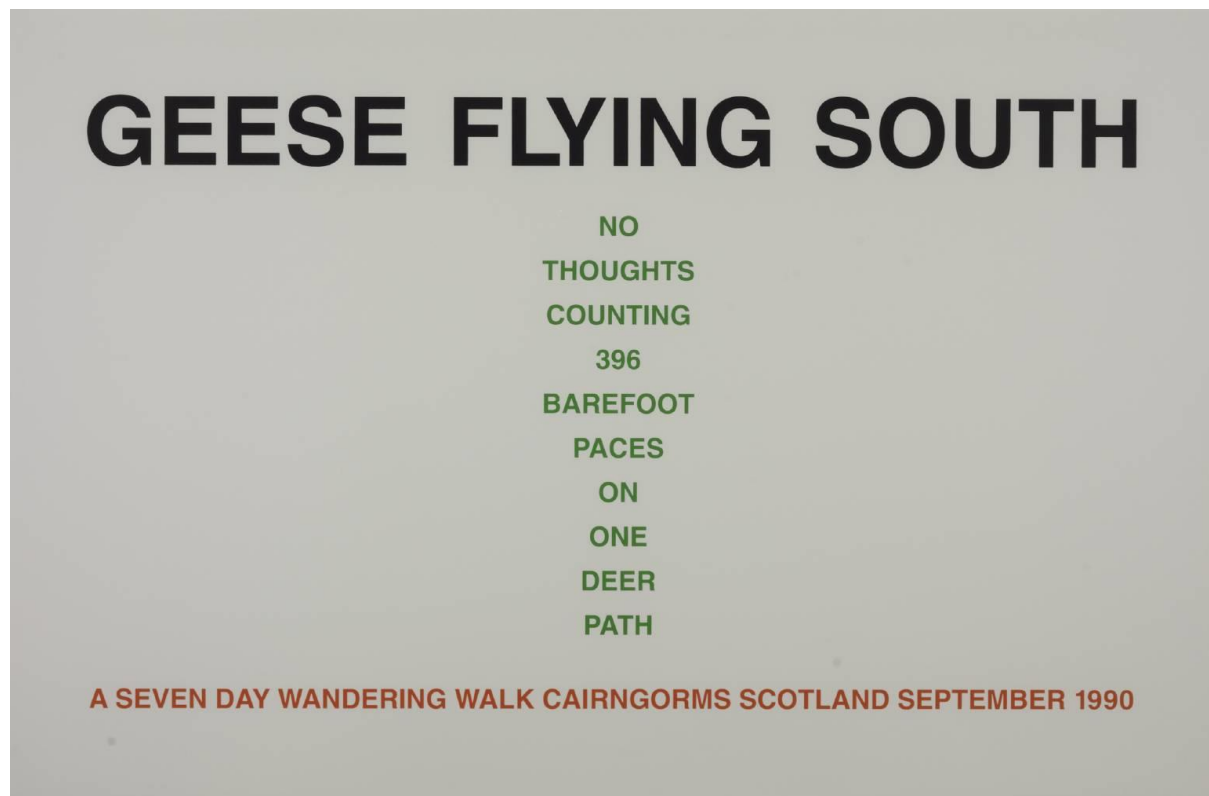


Figure 9

Works consisting only of text, seemingly random information about walks completed that means nothing to anyone but the artists themselves, is the most difficult to follow and recognise as art. According to Fulton, it is the walk itself that is the art and these text

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pieces are just evidence of that experience. And if measured against Alaine de Bottom's definition, Fulton's walks undoubtedly enable him to *'live and die well'*.

### Conclusions

To go back to the original question, *'What is the place of text in art?'* or even *'whether text can be taken seriously as art at all'*, it would appear considering the artworks discussed and the definitions at the start of the essay, that text does have a legitimate place. Whether inspired by the creativity, imagination and technical skill demonstrated by Karen Knorr or Tacita Dean, affected emotionally by the powerful messages expressed in Jenny Holzer's work or just confused by Hamish Fulton's text pieces one thing is certain, to quote Douglas Gordon, it is always a good *'excuse for a conversation'*. (Gordon, date unknown, cited in Brown, 2004 p 7)

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Illustrations:

Front cover: Bryson, A. (2018) *HM Prison, Gloucester* [Photograph] in possession of: The author: Gloucester

Figure 1. Knorr, K. (1979 – 1981) *Belgravia* [Photograph] At: <https://karenknorr.com/photography/belgravia/> (Accessed 13 August 2019)

Figure 2. Dean, T. (1997) *The Roaring Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days* [14 works on blackboard, chalk] At: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dean-the-roaring-forties-seven-boards-in-seven-days-t07613> (Accessed 13 August 2019)

Figure 3. Dean, T. (2001) *Beautiful Sheffield – Part of The Russian Ending* [Photo-etching on paper] At: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dean-beautiful-sheffield-p20264> (Accessed 13 August 2019)

Figure 4. Holzer, J. (2009) *Truisms* [Projection] At: [http://myartguides.com/posts/jenny-holzer-gets-solo-show-at-blenheim-palace/attachment/7n11\\_113\\_09/](http://myartguides.com/posts/jenny-holzer-gets-solo-show-at-blenheim-palace/attachment/7n11_113_09/) (Accessed 13 August 2019)

Figure 5. Holzer, J. (2017) *Blenheim Palace* [Projection] At: <https://blenheimartfoundation.org.uk/exhibitions/jenny-holzer/> (Accessed 26 August 2019)

Figure 5. Burgin, V. (1996) *Possessions* [Duotone Lithograph] in possession of: Public domain At: <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/everything-must-go-art-and-the-market-2015/object/possession-burgin-1976-public-domain-p31561>

Figure 6. Gordon, D. (2009) Installation shot from '*Pretty much every word written spoken heard overheard from 1989 2010*' At: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/douglas-gordon>

Figure 8. Bryson, A (2019) *List of Names, Random* [Photograph] in position of: The author: Gloucester

Figure 9. Fulton, H. (1990) *Geese Flying South – Part of Ten Toes towards the Rainbow*, [Screen-print on paper] At: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/fulton-geese-flying-south-p77620> (Accessed 13 August, 2019)

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