

Swinburne University of Technology

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INSTRUCTION / POEM

Abstract:

INSTRUCTION / POEM is a creative work in two parts. The first part of the work is a brief text printed on an index card (which was distributed to all delegates at the 18th annual AAWP Conference along with the conference program and related materials). Within the context of the creative work as a whole, the text printed on the card is presented as the work of the fictional artist 'Paul Allen', although it is signed only with the initials, 'P.A.'.

The second part of the creative work is a brief fiction that takes the form of 'speaking notes' addressing a conference paper by an emerging visual art curator, 'Patrick Alexander'. This second text provides an account of aspects of the work of Paul Allen, with a focus on event scores and instructions. In this piece of writing, the speaker reflects on the process of curating a retrospective exhibition of the work of Paul Allen, and discusses the way in which various texts in the form of poems, event scores or instructions for art works, might be understood as central element within this artist's practice. In contextualising Paul Allen's work, the work also provides a brief introduction to this sub-genre of art writing, and its place in the history of art practice and exhibition making since the 1960s.

Biographical note:

Peter Anderson is an independent writer and curator. He has been actively involved in writing and visual arts practice since the late 1970s, and has published poetry and fiction, arts journalism and criticism, academic papers and numerous exhibition catalogue essays. In 2009 he curated the touring exhibition *The Artist's Books of Robert Jacks*. Current projects include a PhD in creative writing at Swinburne University exploring relationships between writing and visual art, and an exhibition focussed on Brisbane's 'artist-run' scene in the 1980s.

Keywords:

Poetry – Event scores – Art practice – Curatorial studies – The exhibition catalogue – Creative practice as research – The conference paper as creative sub-genre

1)

INSTRUCTION / POEM

write a poem
in memory of the past

read it once

then screw it up
throw it away

PA 1983

2)

Patrick Alexander

INSTRUCTION / POEM – ‘event scores’ and the incomplete works of Paul Allen
AAWP Conference, Canberra (November 2013)

The paper I am presenting today is drawn from the curatorial research I undertook in preparing an exhibition of the work of the Australian artist, Paul Allen. The exhibition was curated as part of my post-graduate work in curatorial studies. Along with staging the exhibition, I also produced a multi-volume exhibition catalogue, a kind of boxed-set of half-a-dozen volumes that drew together a variety of texts written mainly by the artist. Most of these volumes are about specific works or projects, with a volume that includes Paul’s essays about the nature of art practice more generally, and of course, there’s my general introductory catalogue essay. There’s also a slim volume of short texts that operate somewhere between poetry and what might best be called ‘event scores’, and it is this volume that my paper is mainly focused on.

Before I began this project I didn’t really know much about Paul Allen. Despite working as an artist since the late 60s, he has pretty much slipped under the radar, so you may also not have heard of him. In fact, it was only by accident that I came across his work at all, in an old copy of *Aspect: Art & Literature* I picked up in a second hand shop. That was just after I’d finished my undergraduate degree. I actually bought the magazine because it included an article on Robert Jacks. It wasn’t until later that

Paul Allen's piece caught my attention. So really, it was this accidental discovery that led to my curating the retrospective.

One of the things that interested me about Paul Allen was the way his practice had become buried in a kind of mix of textual and ephemeral traces. For example, the piece in *Aspect* read almost like a short story. It was an account of the making of a large ephemeral site specific work that involved lighting the ridge of Mt Wellington, the mountain that provides a backdrop to the city of Hobart. It was all text, without a single illustration. A lot of his work is like this, barely there except for the written traces.

Because so much of Paul's work has been ephemeral, or lost along the way, putting the exhibition together was a bit of a challenge. In fact, the project was only possible with Paul's support and cooperation, although there were lots of gaps and uncertainties, even in Paul's own archives and recollections. For quite a number of years he resisted formally documenting things, and almost nothing has ended up in public collections. In lots of cases all we're left with are the written accounts of works; working notes, proposals, and things written after the fact. Most of the material in the exhibition catalogue was put together on the basis of material drawn from a box of old note books and the contents of a couple of filing cabinets in Paul's studio. It was in going through this material that the works collected under the heading of 'event scores' emerged. In other words, it was through the curatorial process of sifting through the archive, that this particular body of work became clearly visible as a strand within his practice. It wasn't that Paul hadn't consciously produced things in the form of 'event scores' or instruction pieces, it was just that he hadn't ever pulled these works together before.

But perhaps I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here. What I probably need to do is give you a little bit of a sense of Paul's career. Paul Allen was born in Bendigo in 1948. After dropping out of a course in painting at the local Bendigo Technical College, he worked for a number of years mainly as a rural labourer in central and north-western Victoria. During this time he kept up an interest in art with the support of a former teacher, and visits to Melbourne and the various sculpture events held in Mildura during the seventies. In 1976, after completing studies in sculpture at RMIT, he was awarded an artist in residence at the new university in Brisbane, and it was here that he began to really consolidate his practice. After the residency he took up a contract position teaching sculpture and drawing at the art college in Hobart – which is where 'Drawing Mt Wellington' was conceived. In the mid-1980s he returned to Brisbane, and over the next decade worked in a variety of teaching and gallery jobs at various institutions in south-east Queensland. Towards the end of the 1990s he made a move back to central Victoria, and spent most of the next decade supporting his practice by working mainly in vineyards, with just occasional bits of part-time teaching at the local art college. It's fair to say that his practice has remained fairly low key. For example, he's never been represented by a commercial gallery, and has tended to exhibit in more alternative spaces or in non-gallery contexts. There have been occasional reviews, and a few early moments when things looked like they might jump to the next level, but in the end success has eluded him (success, that is, in the way it is usually understood). In this respect, his art practice is probably fairly normal.

When I began working on the exhibition I thought that the issue of ‘normal art practice’ might be the key focus of the project. But in the end, what came to dominate was the complicated relationship between Paul Allen’s art, and its textual traces. There was also the question of his broader involvement in activities that might usually be seen as adjacent to art practice proper, what the artist John Nixon has described as ‘an expanded model of work for the artist’ (Plange 2011), and Terry Smith calls ‘infrastructural activism’ (Smith 2012 pp.98-99). Here the focus is not just on the making of art, but also the artist’s engagement in broader activities, from critical writing and publishing, to initiating gallery and exhibition projects, as well as the broader politics of practice. This is why the exhibition catalogue includes a volume collecting Paul Allen’s writings on art practice issues.

But this aspect of Paul’s work isn’t the focus of the paper I’m presenting here today, although the relationship of the texts I do want to focus on, and what usually counts as a work of art, might be equally problematic. As I’ve already said, the paper is focussed on a collection of texts we have gathered under the general heading of ‘event scores’, or instruction pieces. Some of these pieces were explicitly produced as ‘event scores’, while others have a more uncertain status, ranging from brief notes for possible works, to more poetic pieces where the idea of ‘an instruction’ is perhaps only an obliquely hinted possibility. Perhaps some of these pieces are more simply a form of text based art – or at least notes towards it – like the ‘Truisms’ of Jenny Holzer.

The history of the ‘event score’ and similar text based art is a complicated one, and has its foundations in a range of practices that developed within contemporary art through the 1960s. As demonstrated by recent scholarly accounts of this area, such as Liz Kotz’s *Words to Be Looked at: Language in 1960s Art* (2010) or Lely & Saunders’ *Word Events: perspectives on verbal notation* (2012), the ‘event score’ is not restricted to the visual arts, but can be found across all art forms, particularly music and experimental performance. There’s a lot more on this in the paper proper, but of particular relevance here are the inter-media activities that fall together under the general heading of the Fluxus movement. It is within this broad field that two of the most well-known early collections of ‘event scores’ were produced – George Brecht’s *Water Yam* series (1963), and Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* (1964). While both of these figure directly in the development of Paul Allen’s work in this area, the increasing use of text and instructions for the production of art works across the 60s also played a role. As Graeme Sturgeon notes in his account of the various Mildura Sculpture events - the prizes and triennials - by 1973 ‘artists participated by remote control, simply mailing instructions for the works which were then carried out by other people’ (Sturgeon 1985 p.60). Paul Allen attended a number of these events, and was occasionally peripherally involved in as a kind of labourer / assistant (a result of his former teacher’s connections with exhibiting artists).

While Paul may have picked up on the increasing use of text and instructions for the production of art through this kind of experience and dialogue with artists, or through reading art magazines – *Artforum*, for example – his most focussed encounter with the ‘event score’ occurred around 1971 or 1972 when he recalls being lent a copy of the new edition of Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit*, which was republished in 1970 with a brief

‘introduction’ by John Lennon. So the idea is there quite early on in his career, and there are some notes and type scripts that seem to fit with this kind of work. But the example of Paul’s work that we’ve distributed here at the conference is quite a bit later. It coincides with his first opportunity to look properly at an edition of Brecht’s *Water Yam*, which is published as a set of cards in a box. Perhaps because of this more difficult format, Brecht’s work was not as widely distributed as Ono’s book (in fact, a search of ‘Trove’, the national library database, suggests that there is only one copy of Brecht’s work held in an Australian public library collection – in the collection of music scores at La Trobe University).

The context for Paul Allen’s encounter with Brecht’s work was a performance art workshop run by the artist Mike Parr, in Brisbane in mid-1983. Here Parr used Brecht’s scores as the basis for performance exercises, and the version of the work we’ve distributed was produced in that context as a ‘mail event’. While we’ve followed Brecht’s approach and printed the instruction on a card, Paul’s original work was typed on a single page and mailed anonymously to a number of Australian poets. In preparing the original volume for the exhibition, the published text was drawn from a carbon copy of the original text sent to the poet Cornelis Vleeskens that was in Paul Allen’s archive, although how the poets who were sent the text chose to respond is unknown.

In examining this individual work, it is perhaps significant that the original instruction was sent to poets, and framed as a ‘performance’ or ‘event’ rather than as a self-contained poetic work itself. As I said earlier, there are pieces we collected together under the ‘instruction’ heading that are less explicitly framed in this way, and might tend to fall more into the poem category. There’s more detailed discussion of some of these in the full paper. For me, part of the challenge of dealing with this kind of work is working out where to place it - is it art, poetry or some kind of script or score? The main point here is that, the way the text is framed seems to determine what we might see as ‘the work’, and thus, how we might interpret it.

In presenting this paper here, I’m also interested in how this shifting of the terrain might serve to place the work within different creative disciplines. As I’ve said, the collecting together of Paul Allen’s instruction texts was the result of my curatorial intervention, which might almost be seen as a form of ‘finding works’, or rather turning things that are not quite works into works, seeing the art as the kind of shadow thrown by the text. It takes us back to that move in conceptual art where the need to physically make the work seems to slide away and all we need is the proposal. As Liz Kotz argues, the ‘classic articulation’ of this position is Lawrence Weiner’s ‘Statement of Intent’ included in the exhibition ‘January 5- 31, 1969’ (a group exhibition of works by Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Hubble and Robert Barry, in the form of a photocopied catalogue of text and documentary images, curated by Seth Siegelaub): ‘1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built’ (Kotz 2010 pp.198-199). The same might be said of the work of Yoko Ono, although many of her early pieces seem to oscillate more uncertainly between the registers of instruction and poetry. Although, as Kerstin Skrobanek argues; ‘in contrast to the *haiku* poets, Yoko Ono does not describe scenes that can be reconstructed in the reader’s mind. Instead, she gives directions’

(Skrobanek 2013). Even so, some of these instructions remain beyond execution in anything other than an imaginary or conceptual register.

Importantly, from the point of view of the work of Paul Allen, Ono's *Grapefruit* is not only organised into sections that fall under different media or fields of practice – music, painting, event, poetry, object, film, dance – but also includes a section, 'information', that provides an account of the how some of the pieces have been performed. In this section, the book includes brief descriptions of the execution of the 'scores' (or, at least the 1970 edition does, as some of the enactments of scores described post-date the original 1964 publication). Here one might speculate on the relationship between the process of instruction and description, between the proposal and the report, between the text as a simple framework of possibility and a text that provides an equally basic account of an event, action or (lost) thing. Certainly, in the case of Allen's 'INSTRUCTION / POEM' the outcome of following the 'score', of making the work, is not simply the writing of another poem, but also the process of discarding it. In fact, if the poem is kept, if it is not 'thrown away', then what is made is not Allen's work, but something else.

This is one of the fundamental challenges of dealing with this sort of work. It's the problem that sits at the heart of my paper, and certainly raises some interesting issues in the current context of creative research within the academic context. If I'd had more time, I'd have liked to examine the more recent reprise of instruction based work as it has been explored in the 'Do It' exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist. This international exhibition project which has been underway in various formats since the mid-1990s, offers another interesting point of intersection with Paul Allen's work, in that he participated in one of the first half-dozen iterations of the project in early 1996, at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane. Fundamental to the 'Do It' project is the continual remaking or translating of the works embedded in the original instructions (not to mention the continuing addition of instructions – from around a dozen in the mid-1990s to over 250 now). But I realise I've already gone way over my allotted time, so I'll have to skip that discussion – a pity really, especially since I'd actually expanded this section of the paper in response to one of the referees reports.

So, by way of conclusion, perhaps a few remarks on some of the issues that I think come out of this work. From my own perspective in the context of curatorial studies, one of the fundamental issues I faced was working out the contours of Paul Allen's practice, deciding how to represent ephemeral works, particularly when the only documentation that existed was some sort of written text. In a way, the problem was in deciding if the existence of a text was enough to make a work a work. Was this to be an exhibition mainly of documentation, perhaps even of works or projects that had never got beyond the proposal stage? What exactly is the status of an 'unperformed' score, or an account of a project that might have happened, but perhaps did not? In the context of art history, there seemed to be a case that could be made for the acceptance of these works – made or not – as art. But, and this is why I wanted to present this paper here at this conference, what if we were to look at these texts, not as art works, but as pieces of creative writing, as 'literature'. This is one issue that has sat in my mind since my first encounter with Paul Allen's work in *Aspect*, are we looking at art or literature? How are we to treat these works then, as poems, or fragments of prose?

What is the impact of this shift in genre? Is it also a shift from non-fiction to fiction? And, given the endless focus on ‘research’ within the creative fields over the past decade or so, does a shift in the ‘field’ within which we locate a work change the way we understand how it might work as ‘research’?

List of works cited

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Research Statement

Research background

This creative work – *INSTRUCTION / POEM* - is a performative experiment in the investigation of genres of creative writing research, in that the form and context of presentation of each element of the work is to be treated as significant. It is a fictional work containing two distinct elements; 1) a poem / event score printed on an index card, and 2) a short first person narrative which provides a fictional commentary on this poem / event score. While both parts of the work draw on research into the ‘event score’ as a creative writing sub-genre, part one of the work presents its ‘findings’ by creating an example of such an artefact, and mobilising it within the context of an academic conference. Part two of the work presents its brief (fictional) commentary in a text that draws on the conventions of the academic presentation of research findings, the spoken conference paper presentation.

Research contribution

The objective of this work is not to draw conclusions, but to raise questions about the nature of the creative work, and its position as research within different creative fields. The work operates on two distinct levels, firstly as an investigation into the ‘event score’ as an art/writing sub-genre, and secondly as an ‘enactment’ of the possible tensions between different approaches to research in the creative arts. Initially the text printed on the card operates simply as an example of a poem / event score. However when read in the context of the second text, it is provided with an additional framework for interpretation, all be it a fictional one. The second text thus stages, or enacts, a conventional interpretative research process in relation to the first text. Is this conventional research process undermined by its fictional nature? This exegetical research statement adds a further dimension to the work of the text/s, providing them with a particular interpretative framework. Is this the place to add further elements to the story being built around these texts? Should I point out that an ‘accurate’ account of the first text would note that this five line ‘event score’ *was* written in 1983, in circumstances very similar to those outlined in the fiction? How does a shift in the authorship or truth conditions (a shift from fiction to non-fiction) influence our understanding of the work of the text? Does adding new ‘facts’ change the way this work functions as ‘research’? While these may not be the ‘research questions’ investigated by this work, they are indicative of the instability at the intersection of creative practice and developing norms of research accountability, and provide a context for approaching this work.

Research significance

The research significance of this work is to be found in its unstable play across multiple genres, disciplinary fields, and modes of creative and research practice.