Charlie Godet Thomas: A Method for Writing / A Method for Making
BALTIC 39 / Figure 2

Blank Pages
Mel Francis

'The white surface within the frame will yet again be experienced as a neutral ground that quietly awaited whatever marks were made on it before the marks were captured for prosperity by a sheet of glass…. Paper has been sacrificed to this fetishistic effect. It disappears.'[1]

I sat down this morning and started writing in my diary. Typical chatter, the general thread being how I had spent the past twenty-four hours feeling a little foggy and unsure where to begin. A day off work had turned into, as usual, a lazy day, spent, a little in the park, a little in the café, catching up with friends… I digress. Point being, the thing I was supposed to be doing, the one thing I was meant to be working on, wasn't happening. When I eventually sat down to start writing (a good exercise when no writing is happening is to write just about anything until something meaningful happens), I began to think about what the setback could be, and why, when I had been asked to write about writing, to explore the blank page, to put together some ideas and perhaps some interesting references to artists who've used this as their subject, I was struggling to make a start. Then I realised that of course, I was living the subject all over again. I was the subject. I had written the following:

I'm so not used now to reading and writing on paper that it's hard to know where to start.

So that's exactly how it starts (or doesn't). After years of typing, experiments with all kinds of software, a near-obsessive fascination with applications designed to improve 'productivity', a nerdy ability to fritter away more hours online, reflecting on how computers are so brilliant at helping us organise our ideas, helping us structure our lives and be the best versions of ourselves, than time actually spent writing, once again I'm faced with some printed pages with some scribbled corrections on, some badly printed images (low resolution), and on my screen as usual, a blank page.[2]

Charlie Godet Thomas works with this phenomenon in a bid to contribute to the dialogue for strategies for writing (and, like me, for not-writing, which many artists and writers will agree is at least as significant as writing and very much a contingent of it). Employing text in A Method for Understanding (Distress), an emotional yet playful elaboration on the synonyms for the word 'distress' (after Samuel Beckett's claim to be 'interested in notions of human distress') produces a fragmented yet poignant narrative. And arguably, so too does Watch Me Eat, Without Appetite, à la Carte, where upon a black bench sits a copy of the Financial Times as 'painted from memory'. All of the usual effects of stripping something familiar of its content are here, including an apprehensive partial recognition and a querying of what we see when we look at the original (which is more transparent? The printed newspaper or its neutralised icon?) But there is also a material question. Félix Gonzalez-Torrez's paper 'stacks' use paper in what might be seen as an essentialist manner. Nicolas Bourriaud would have it that 'the austerity of the 'stacks' is offset by their fragile precariousness', and to an extent this seems true, in terms of the combination of density and the peculiar sense of balance that I think only a form as thin as paper makes manifest. With these works, perhaps there really is 'never the slightest excess, or stress on effect' and so 'everything about it is implicit, discreet

and fluid'.[3] This makes me think of Mallarmé's comparison of the book with the newspaper. 'The foldings of a book', he said, 'in comparison with the large-sized, open newspaper, have an almost religious significance. But an even greater significance lies in their thickness when they are piled together; for then they form a tomb in miniature for our souls.'[4] 'Were it not for the folding of the paper and the depths thereby established', he says, 'that darkness scattered about in the forms of black characters could not rise and issue forth in gleams of mystery from the page to which we are about to turn.'[5] I read Mallarmé's statement as a general one that is applicable to not only the distinction between book and newspaper, but to two and three-dimensional forms in general, and specifically to this prominent conflict in contemporary representation: three-dimensional paper against its virtual 'other'. How does paper complicate notions of the three-dimensional? Does it have to be stacked – can it only be three-dimensional in multiple forms? What of the 'tomb' that is, well, all screen media?

I suppose the real question, as has been asked since the invention of the interface nearly half a century ago, is what place remains for absolute manual 'work' with the ever more sophisticated 'tools' in place to make writing easier, to take the writing out of writing? I look around the so-called blank page of my screen and all I can see are devices that are meant to reassure me that however taxing the process of writing might be, I have all of these tricks at my fingertips to make the process a little less overwhelming. I can edit multiple pages at the same time (who can do that without a computer?), cut and paste, count words, set goals, insert comments, use 'keywords', I can even switch my view to 'full screen' and black out everything but the 'page'. I can change the appearance of the text in thousands of ways (you can read a lot into names - Optima brings positive thinking, Liberation Serif for a political argument… you can see how a day can be easily spent choosing a typeface). And sometimes I try and go back to writing. I have this wonderful fountain pen that was given to me. At times of complete standstill, when all of the sleeping or weeping in the world couldn't get me to put words onto paper or screen, I'll use the pen. It leaves a reassuring black mark on my middle finger in the process, which motivates me further until the ink fades. Technology has made it even harder for us to know where the start is. But the technology is also resulting in new and exciting forms of writing. All the pixels and the fonts and the skins and the media…

Two branches lead me to (a slightly more) decisive position on these very different blank pages. One describes the digital interface as a blockage, since the entire concept of the interface is to disguise a real process – the electronic function – with two illusory ones, such as the dragging of the cursor and the inputting of text and its translation into a flowing movement on screen. The second is more optimistic, and, I hope, the one that will dominate this project. Whereas in the first we would be right to claim that with regard to technology there is no true line or marking, which equates to something like a desensitisation (part of the 'becomingness' of writing is lost), the second option evolves from photography, where interfaces – so-called 'agents of passage' or 'filters of translation between humans and machines',[6] retain their positions as such, but continue to help us develop new methods for writing and methods for making. Art is not a wholly separate discipline to poetry, and we must continue to remind ourselves that much exists in-between. Hopefully this forum for visual poetry will help us to create all manner of forms out of that 'clean slate'.

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·Mark Wigley, 'Paper, Scissors, Blur', in Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley, The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architecture from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond, (in connection with Another City for Another Life: Constant's New Babylon, at the Drawing Center, New York, 2 November – 30 December 1999). The Drawing Centre, New York and MIT, 2001, 29

·Actually it would've been my 'desktop' background, which has a motivational, handwritten, message written by Debbie Millman, a fellow sufferer of the dreaded BLOCK. Her 10 steps to overcome THE BLOCK include 'Get enough sleep!', 'WEEP. And then weep some more', and, not so agreeably, 'colour code your library', though I can see how being around your books without a serious agenda might lead towards some sort of creative stimulus.

·Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Les Presses du Réel, Paris, 2002, 63

·Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book: A Spiritual Instrument', Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, & Letters, trans. Bradford Cook, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956, 25

·Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book: A Spiritual Instrument', Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, & Letters, trans. Bradford Cook, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956, 26

·Louise Poissant, 'The Passage from Material to Interface', in Oliver Grau (ed.), MediaArtHistories, MIT, 2007, p.240