

‘Knowledge is not for knowing, knowledge is for cutting’

In conversation with Helen Pheby

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Helen Pheby is Senior Curator at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Helen Pheby: Thank you very much for taking the time to show me your studio and work in progress. I’m fascinated by your consideration of knowledge as an artistic medium. How did that thinking evolve?

Nicola Dale: Although I don’t remember it myself, my mum told me that, following the Polish tradition (she moved here from Poland in the 1970s), when I was a toddler she gave me three objects to choose from: a book, a coin and a crucifix. This test would determine my future...

When I was at school, I loved both Art and English – particularly English literature. I even started a BA in English at Birmingham University, but realised in the first term that it was a big mistake for me. Words were just not enough. I’d always loved books and reading, but to only focus on language and the written word seemed too constricting. Choosing the Art path has provided me with the freedom to express what I’m thinking beyond just words.

By the time I was on my Interactive Arts BA at Manchester Metropolitan University I was making my own books (e.g. re-ordering Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*). This was a project that took a large chunk of my second year to complete. I set about putting all the words from Kafka’s short story into alphabetical order. I did it by hand, creating a filing system of index cards for each letter of the alphabet and then arranging each section into alphabetical order. I typed up the re-ordered story, leaving the original punctuation in place and then printed and bound it. The need to ‘order’ and arrange has not really left me since.

During my MA in Visual Culture at MIRIAD, I realised I could use existing books as a medium. A *Secret Heliotropism*, after Walter Benjamin was the first one of these. For this piece, I used a hardback book on the history of the twentieth century to create a visual analogy for the way that history is constantly changing, following Benjamin’s idea as laid out in *Illuminations*. I spent a long time cutting each page of the book into a strand of leaves (with each page remaining attached to the central spine). When the book is exhibited, the leaves stretch out as if aiming for the sun (heliotropism), but the work’s ‘secret’ is that it can be folded back within its cover, so that at a glance it resembles an ordinary hardback book. When the time comes for it to be exhibited again, the book is opened and gently tipped, allowing the leaves to stretch out once more. As they never fall in the same way twice, the work changes each time it is displayed.

It was through making altered book works that I realised that my interest was in the status of knowledge itself – no matter what container it is in. As I am aware of knowledge’s ever-quicker mutation into ‘information’ this focus is increasingly important to me.

I’m intrigued about the connotations of knowledge as power and the fact that you’re cutting into the books, is that a political statement?

It’s not overtly political. I’m aware of Foucault’s philosophy – I’m drawn to his idea you mentioned, “knowledge is for cutting” – but I take my cue from notions of responsibility rather than power. I feel a strong sense of responsibility towards what we put into the world, what we do with ‘stuff’, the actions we take as individuals – I suppose it’s power looked at from another angle.

If the nature of power is to ebb and flow as Foucault suggests, I guess I am more interested in the medium it moves through: time. Time’s effect on knowledge is what really gets me going.

On the one hand, the viewer might see the cutting up of a book as an act of aggression, but if that book was destined for the scrap heap (which the books I use are) and if the viewer were made aware of the resulting artwork’s existence as an alternate container of knowledge, hopefully they would change their

mind... I recently read knowledge described as “unforgettingness” in an article in the *London Review of Books*. This chimes with my interest in responsibility and is an interesting counterpoint to the instaneity/single-use/transactional nature of ‘information’ that I find problematic.

My work is always inspired by other people’s thinking because my ideas are sparked by reading. Many of the explanations about my work start with a quote from someone else. To me, that’s knowledge in action, it’s the way creativity works – you learn what other people have said and/or done and you add your little bit to that conversation as it moves through time. This is also a responsibility.

And now you’ve explained to me some of the making of your works, the processes you use are incredibly time consuming and painstaking, is this how you always tend to work?

There’s a phrase I have in my sketchbook that I always return to. It’s from *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco: “In short, I am full of doubts...let us say it is an act of love. Or, if you like, a way of ridding myself of numerous, persistent obsessions...”

I find it difficult to explain why I continually undertake these painstakingly long processes. At the most basic level, I must enjoy them. I find the world that my mind enters whilst undertaking a repetitive manual process is a really special one. I can only poorly describe it as a way of feeling time. I know that sounds faintly ridiculous, but there it is. Perhaps this is because manual processes hark back to a time before machinery; perhaps there is something about the mechanization of the world that has turned me into a bit of machine; perhaps I’m wondering what happens to our world if the power suddenly cuts out. All these considerations are in there and are a mix of worries about past, present and future time.

I often get asked if I use assistants and I don’t. When I’m working with existing mass manufactured objects – for example, the hand-cutting of 12,000 paper feathers - I enjoy the notion of turning those mass produced items into something completely unique. This uniqueness would be weakened by the use of assistants – my studio would become a mini factory akin to where the object originated, so the strength of the idea would be lost. The idea always has to come first. If that means I spend a year or more making a piece, so be it. I realize this is both a luxury and a necessity that I have. If I were to use assistants, I would have to change my ideas to suit this new process. I couldn’t pass it off as simply ‘my’ work anymore. Furthermore, for a work such as *Down*, there was no other way of being true to the idea than to make that work by hand. I wanted each feather to be unique, as they are in nature.

And a work in progress is an embodiment of your understanding of the physical weight of knowledge, particularly the contrast between object-based and digital knowledge.

The piece I am currently working on is *The Weight Between Words*. This started when I finally got round to looking at a box of printers’ type that my neighbour gave me before moving away. The first piece I picked up wasn’t a letter, but a space. Being made of lead, this small rectangle was heavy despite its size and it made me think how, once upon a time, even a gap, a pause, a breath had some actual weight in the production of knowledge... but now even words themselves are weightless when they pass into digital form. Digital knowledge, or rather ‘information’ is inherently paradoxical – it is in many places at once but simultaneously disembodied. Nowhere and everywhere.

We are told that we live in an Information Age, in which knowledge is readily available. But you seem concerned that the weightlessness of digital knowledge means we are increasingly careless with it?

Digital knowledge is extremely handy, but as with any knowledge, you have to know how, when and why to use it. Noam Chomsky’s argument that the internet is not making power more democratic because it shares data and information rather than knowledge, very neatly sums up the problem of digital information. As he said, the individual still needs an education and intelligence to convert that data and information into knowledge.

As far as I understand it, you have to be educated to a point where you can learn what you need to learn. That is when digital knowledge is useful. Otherwise you are merely being given keys to a vast kingdom with no idea of your place in it, no map to show you the way around. You might start walking and find some

interesting stuff, but what will you do with it? And could you find it again? Knowledge is forever, no transaction is implied, whereas information is a one-time deal (with emphasis on the deal). It is easy to think of the internet as democratic because of the power it seemingly offers any individual – Ai Wei Wei’s use of it might be a good example of this – BUT, again, if you focus on responsibility rather than power, you quickly see that all is not what it seems. Power and responsibility are not in equal balance online. I am not for a moment suggesting that the world of books and libraries is wholly democratic, but the underlying transactionary nature of digital information is worrying. The knowledge which seems free online is not free at all, every second spent online is making someone money and ultimately that compromises the democracy of the system. A symptom of this is that lies and misinformation can spread quickly and without redress.

And what works, ideas are in development?

I’m making new pieces that are inspired by the connotations around the full stop. *The End* uses full stops from five texts about the end of the world. I’m thinking about the fact that full stops are seen as marking the end of a thought, but they also mark the start of something new. A few years ago I carved a book out of stone and left it outside to get weathered; long strings of full stops will be incorporated into this stone sculpture.

I’m also continuing to think about the changes to the tree of knowledge and what the internet will one day be superseded by. I read about a piece of code called a ‘forkbomb’ that essentially ties a computer up in knots, so that it can no longer function. There’s a very beautiful looking piece of code by a programmer called Jaromil, which is just made of punctuation marks and so I’m incorporating that into a new piece.