

***if p then q* Three and the Text Festival**

Since its inception in 2005 the chief pre-occupation of the Text Festival has been the investigation into all forms of written, spoken and visual art which uses language or text as its basis; where text is interesting and meaningful. It also considers that there has been a lack of dialogue between the visual and literary arts, their historians, critics and artists, and that this situation arises from either lack of awareness or negligence. One way or another our ability to approach 'text-art' in a rounded way has been impeded; the Text Festival has attempted to rectify this situation and encourage others to think along similar lines.

When the first Text Festival ran it was rare to hear readings of innovative poetry in the North West of England. However, by 2008 a host of entities in Manchester had come into place. As a co-organiser of The Other Room reading series I have placed innovative poets on the same bill as musicians, artists and performers who share language as a concern; the short lived but important series Counting Backwards did likewise. Many important figures have come to the North West for the first time such as Steve McCaffery and Jerome Rothenberg. Short series and one-off readings now take place regularly in the area with the sort of artists that the Text Festival champions. Several publishers of innovative poetry such as Knives Forks and Spoons have also been established, again where there were none, publishing poets from Britain and overseas. Networks and communities that did not exist before have grown regionally and internationally.

In 2009 the Text Festival commissioned my poetry press *if p then q* to make a publication to run alongside the second festival. Part of *if p then q*'s function is to work as a facilitator that asks some similar questions to the Text Festival; the press publishes poetry that is, or is derived from, Language, conceptual and minimalist poetics.

At the time I had released two full author collections – Tom Jenks' *A Priori* and P. Inman's *Ad Finitum* – and two issues of a magazine named after the press. The format of the first two issues of the magazine had been A4 sheets: issue one unbound and issue two bound with staples. These sheets were enclosed in an A4 envelope, which worked as the front and back cover. The first issue has the slogan 'recast' running on the front cover, and the second 'art for the brain'. On both issues the stamp 'This is not a circular' declared the magazine's non-commercial status. There was a box on the front cover that was for the recipient's address. The printed content contained poetry, book reviews and essays. Over the two issues I also included CDs, pens, and postcards labelling them 'gifts', mimicking the tautological phrase 'free gifts' that many glossy magazines use. In fact this détournement was a continuation of a previous idea from my publishing project Matchbox which ran from 2006-8. Limited by financial constraint these first two issues came out in an edition of one hundred copies.

Craig Saper's term 'intimate bureaucracies' is useful in describing such publications. In his book *Networked Art* he states:

An Intimate Bureaucracy makes poetic use of the trappings of large bureaucratic systems and procedures (e.g., logos, stamps) to create intimate aesthetic situations, including the pleasures of sharing a special knowledge or a new language among a small network of (Saper, ix)

The philosophies surrounding innovative poetry belong really to a much larger network: contemporary art. However, innovative poetry is rarely invited to the table. Intimate bureaucracies are just as much essential as they are strategic. Factors such as limited financial resources, limited distribution networks and marketing are the norm for most poetry publishers and this is a situation combatted by intimate bureaucracies. Although many publications that could be defined as Intimate Bureaucracies deliberately use small networks with the ambition of being exclusive or invisible, it has never been if p then q's objective to delimit reader numbers. Conversely, art galleries have far larger resources and audiences by comparison. It is interesting that much of the work that the Text Festival has investigated, and paired together, is very similar in style, and yet where the work is positioned, or positions itself, has huge implications on its exposure and market value; the first festival's comparison of the work of the poet Robert Grenier and the visual artist Lawrence Weiner being a case in point. I wanted to pursue these ideas with issue three of if p then q.

Being commissioned was an opportunity for bigger print runs, larger distribution networks, increased marketing power and a wider choice of materials from which to make the publication. I decided that making posters might be a way to subvert the intimate bureaucracy of the first two issues. Yet, I also wanted to create an issue that was contradictory in how its potential cataloguing.

The budget allowed five artists to be invited: Anne Charnock, Craig Dworkin, Geof Huth, P. Inman and Tom Jenks. These artists had all been involved with the Text Festival and/or if p then q. I asked each artist to produce one A3 colour poster that could be sold in a set of five and housed in a poster tube. Features of mail art were kept: a sticker on the front declared the contents boldly. And the box for the recipient's address was retained. Issue three brought together a mix of people who might define themselves, at different times, as visual artists and poets. Regardless of labels all concerned had a similar agenda: language.

The choice to make posters as opposed to perfect bound books was simple. It's common that people buy mementos or gifts after visiting a gallery or exhibition. This consumption is as much part of the event as is the art displayed. Posters are such mementos, and like tabloid newspapers their readership heavily outweighs their circulation. The major function of a poster sold in a gallery shop is for display

in the house. Consumers buy them as memories of a significant event or as decorative props (because it will look nice above the fireplace). Displaying a poster in the house also intentionally or non-intentionally announces the owner's status and tastes to their audience (*anyone* who spends *any* time in the house). Many in that audience will be like-minded for obvious reasons. Alternatively, household decorations such as a poster are often used as the basis for starting small talk or phatic communion. That owner also advertises the artist and the gallery; one to five of Charnock, Dworkin, Huth, Inman and Jenks and if p then q/the Text Festival.

Purchasing a poster from an exhibition does not of course necessarily mean that you will place that poster on a wall in your home. Alternatively, the consumption of these posters could return us back to Saper's intimate bureaucracies. In a clichéd way, posters, purchased from exhibitions, make their way up to the loft, are found ten years later and then go to in the bin. By defining these posters as the third in a series of assemblings, and a Text Festival curiosity, the posters can also be placed in the context of the book object – the fetishized – and run less chance of being chucked out with the trash.

The issue contained the conceptualism of Craig Dworkin's poster *LET'S MORM!* (a realisation of one (of many) of Darren Wershler's proposed projects in *The Tapeworm Foundry* in which Wershler suggests we might take nouns ending in 'on' and turn them into verbs, in Dworkin's case Mormon). Anne Charnock's *Uncertainty Series No.9* is from a series of Wittgensteinian language games she plays in which alternative propositions are placed next to one another, with one proposition being scored out or struck through, examining, amongst other things, the relationship between planning and drafting, and that which becomes the *de facto* work. Tom Jenks' *Product Information* is an excellent example of his hilarious, dystopian neo-conceptualisms. Geof Huth's *THEspaestfbetwee* continues his investigation into the materiality of the alphabet. And P. Inman's idiosyncratic abstract minimalisms are slightly tweaked for amazing results.

Inman's poster is a good example of what I was trying to do with issue three: immediate impact and compelling writing. The beauty of Inman's poems is in their systematic or near systematic forms and his juxtaposition of semantic against non-semantic words. Fig 1. (from *aengus*) is derived from one page of a four page sequence from his 2008 if p then q collection *Ad Finitum*. What was beautiful on the page has a different impact when enlarged for the poster format; the background changed from white to lush industrial bright red. The graphics of the Inman poster are the contemporary features that savvy typographical design uses: a large and arresting font, a sparsity of words, white space¹. In this

¹ In a talk on posters in 1989 at The Ecole Supérieure the artist and poster maker Lawrence Weiner stated that the "content of a poster lies in the graphics." He also reminded his audience not to "forget that a poster is just advertising" and that posters are an attempt to "attract the attention of the people on the street" (Weiner, 212). Although the posters for the Text Festival weren't used to advertise the festival on the street they advertise the festival and the artists in a historical sense. They are unconventional and a hybrid of poster, artwork and

piece from *aengus* 'ocean' is the only word with an obvious meaning and the only one that also creates a strong visual image. It is isolated from other words by the full stop and then the line below. We are thus stopped twice. A key feature of Inman's work is to slow the reader down, to keep us on the page, to prevent us rushing, to care for a small set of images or materials, to resist the rules of capitalism; this type of symbolic gesture runs throughout Inman's entire oeuvre consistently from 1976 to the present day. If you accept the work, and spend long enough with it, then you will notice that it is the antithesis of the language of consumerism. Meaning is not easy to navigate. There is no standard way of using the structure. Language is not exchanged quickly, if at all.

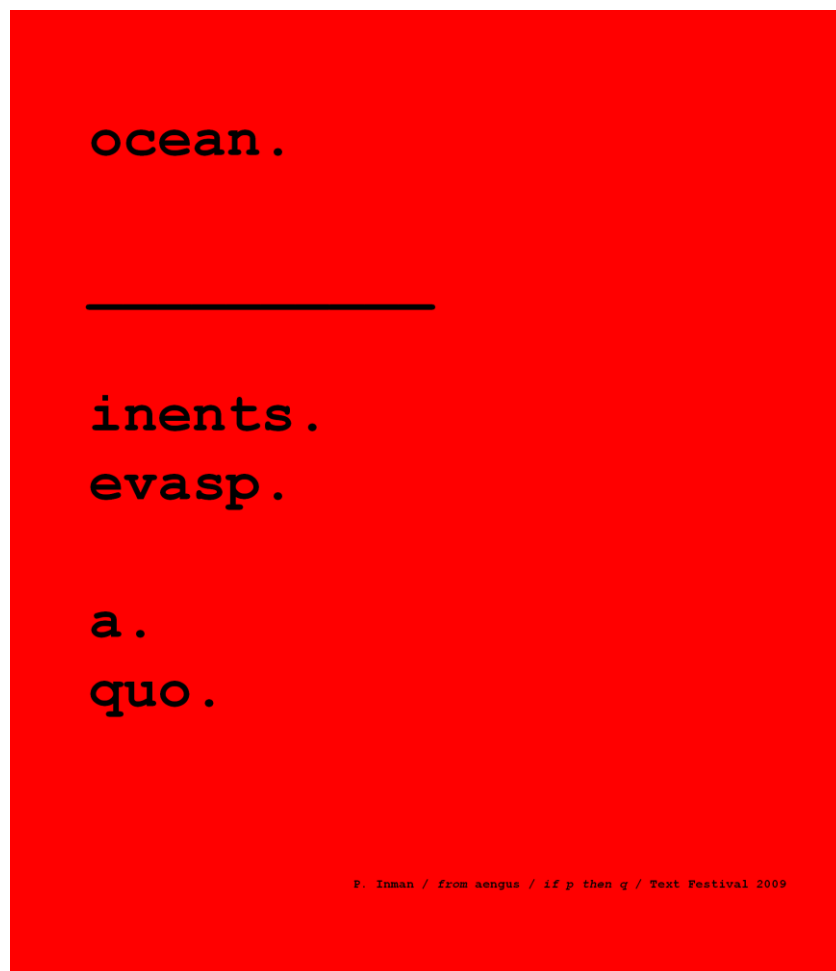


Fig 1. (from *aengus*)

I read *aengus* as a variant on the one-word poem form. Since 'ocean' is the only word that creates an image, and strictly speaking has a referent, the only thing to think about *is* 'ocean'. This could be a particular ocean such as the North Atlantic, a particular part of the ocean, the stretch where you live or have visited, or the concept of *ocean*; what it does, what it is. Looking for contextual meaning

magazine. Aside from the artist's work the only other text on the posters is the name and year of the festival, and the artist's name. Location, dates, times and website details are all excluded so that the normal function of a poster isn't fully realised.

underneath the line doesn't lead us much further forwards. We're slowed down again by the next two words which have no semantic value and are followed by full stops again: 'inents.' and 'evasp.' The use of non-words further highlights the image 'ocean', being the only word that has a strong schema (the reasonable referents which can be applied to a word or set of words); reading from top to bottom the non-semantic helps to ameliorate the semantic. Whilst 'a.' and 'quo.' could add up to mean 'a status quo' it's not easy to permit this morphing². We have five words to play with. One above the line, which is a strong image, and four below the line that do not point to an image, echoing the white space of the poster. So we read: ocean and no nothing else, what could be more beautiful? *aengus* is a visceral experience; a poem permitting us to be free from looking for meaning.

The third issue of if p then q was part of the playing out of the vital argument that the Text Festival raised from the very start: that language-based poets and visual artists should be considered in the same histories. It aimed to show that no language-based art was adjunctive, and that poetry in particular, the most marginalised of all the arts, should not just be a plaything for galleries to wheel out every so often in the tired way that they often do. The posters pressed home the important ideas that are the foundations of the Text Festival.

² This kind of speculative thinking is unfamiliar and uncomfortable if you are not used to it but the work calls for it in a longer reading. If we take these liberties we might for example make 'evasp.' a misspelt abbreviation of a word such as 'evaporate', or 'quo.' as an abbreviation of a word such as 'quota', 'quotidian', 'quote' and so on. The possibilities are endless and intoxicating. For example if we link 'ocean', 'evaporate' and 'status quo' we might think of the effects of climate change. This is but one envisionment (a reasonable picture which a reader might make from a schema). For more discussion of the terms *schema* and *envisionment* see Ron Silliman's essay *Migratory Meaning* in *The New Sentence*.

Works cited

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