Potter’s Lexikon

James Langdon





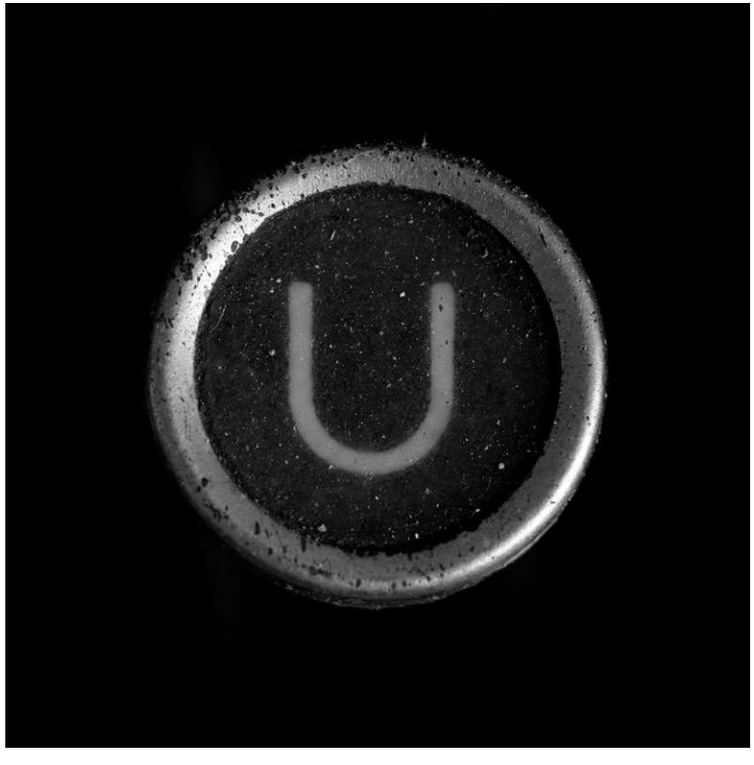



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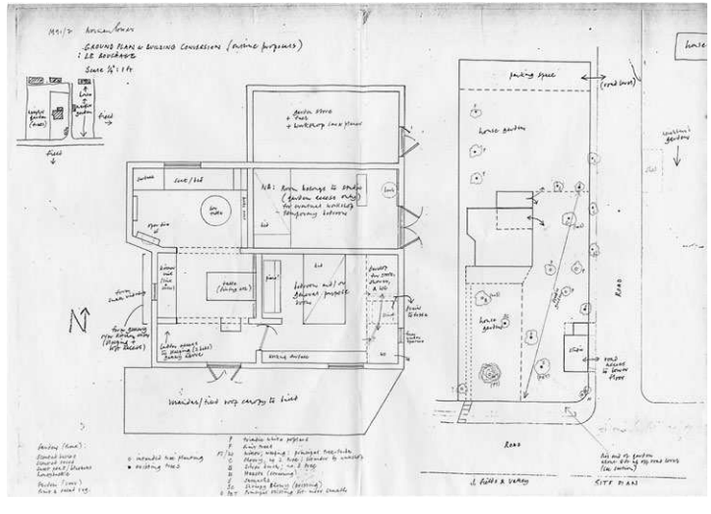



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Le Bouchage is a small settlement in the Poitou-Charentes region of southwestern France. Potter owned a basic, single storey house with an outbuilding here, on a narrow plot of land. He bought the property in 1991, and prepared drawings for its renovation before his death in 1995. The house was broken into shortly afterward, and the inertia of French inheritance law has left it unoccupied since. I visit at the invitation of Potter's family, who are looking to find a buyer for the house. They have cleared the house of original papers and anything of value.

The house's disrepair is likely irreversible. Its ceramic bricks are crumbling, rot is consuming its roof timbers. A dense tangle of trees and thorny bushes, some of them planted by Potter, have overgrown the land, obscuring any view of the house from the road and displaying no point of entry. Inside, three tight spaces, lined by stacks of building materials and belongings spilling out of decomposing cardboard boxes. A rack for tools and fixings, a minimal set of kitchen utensils, books and records, firewood and an unopened bottle of wine. Leaning against walls and clamped to beams are simple material exercises. Hooks, handles and switches embedded in lengths of timber. The situation makes an unresolved portrait. These objects are believable as the remains of Potter's presence here, but their disarray is confounding, impossible to reconcile with his ergonomic precision as a designer of interior spaces.

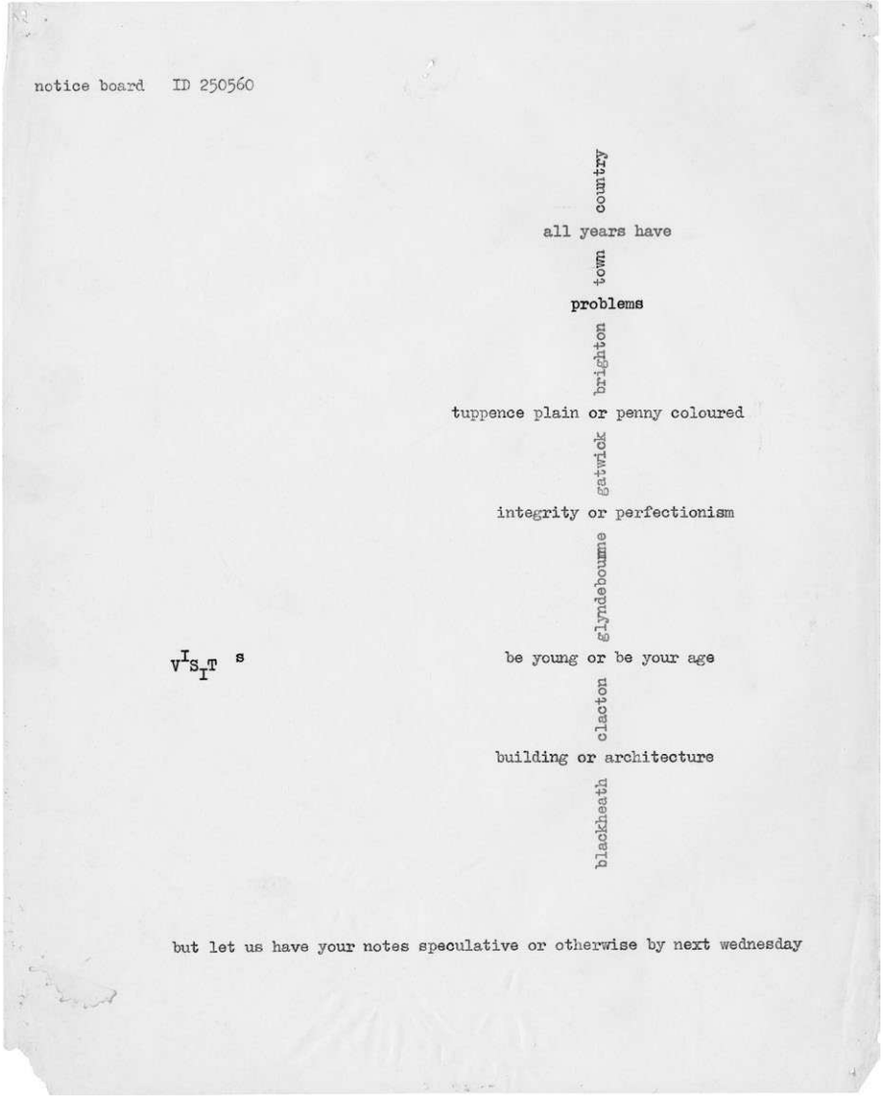


Photocopy of drawing by Norman Potter for renovation of house at Le Bouchage, dated 1991/1992

In the smallest room – labeled 'bedroom and/or general purpose room' on Potter's drawings – I set aside a pile of overalls and reveal the typewriter. An Olivetti Lexikon 80. It is a hefty machine, fitted with an oversized platen for working on large-format architectural plans. I struggle to lift it from the floor onto a well-lit surface.

In his teaching briefs Potter often repeated this maxim: 'All designers – architects, furniture designers, included – are practising graphic artists for most of their working lives. It is very easy to overlook this obvious fact.'[1] He meant that the daily occupation of design typically involves more time spent in the production of drawings and specifications than directly in the production of actual artefacts. It was a demand for care and attention in these activities – 'graphic scruple' he called it – from his students. But more than this, it exemplified Potter's insistence on appreciating the entirety of any design process. To resist privileging the definitive appeal of finished works, and acknowledge other, often non-visual activities, such as surveying and report-writing, as equally decisive moments in a design process. To me this explains why the typewriter was such a critical tool in Potter's work as a designer, writer, and teacher. The typewriter belongs to a manual culture of machines, limiting but knowable, unlike the inscrutable operation of current computers. Potter became a master manipulator of the machine, describing it as his substitute for the piano. The portable Olivetti Lettera 22 was his preferred machine, a design that he admired and owned a number of examples of.

Hundreds of pages of Potter's typed documents exist. Letters, reports on design jobs in progress, and lecture notes are stored at his daughter Sally Potter's residence in France. An incomplete archive of teaching briefs and course schedules from the Construction School is in the care of his publisher Robin Kinross in London. Many other examples are dispersed among former students and colleagues. Potter's typed pages are legible, structured, yet alert to the potential for improvising a graphic language from the typewriter's limited set of characters. Without the freedom to change typeface and type size, he made inventive use of tabbing to produce spatial hierarchies in his typography,


notice board ID 250560

country

all years have

town

problems

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gatwick

integrity or perfectionism

glyndebourne

V I S I T s

be young or be your age

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building or architecture

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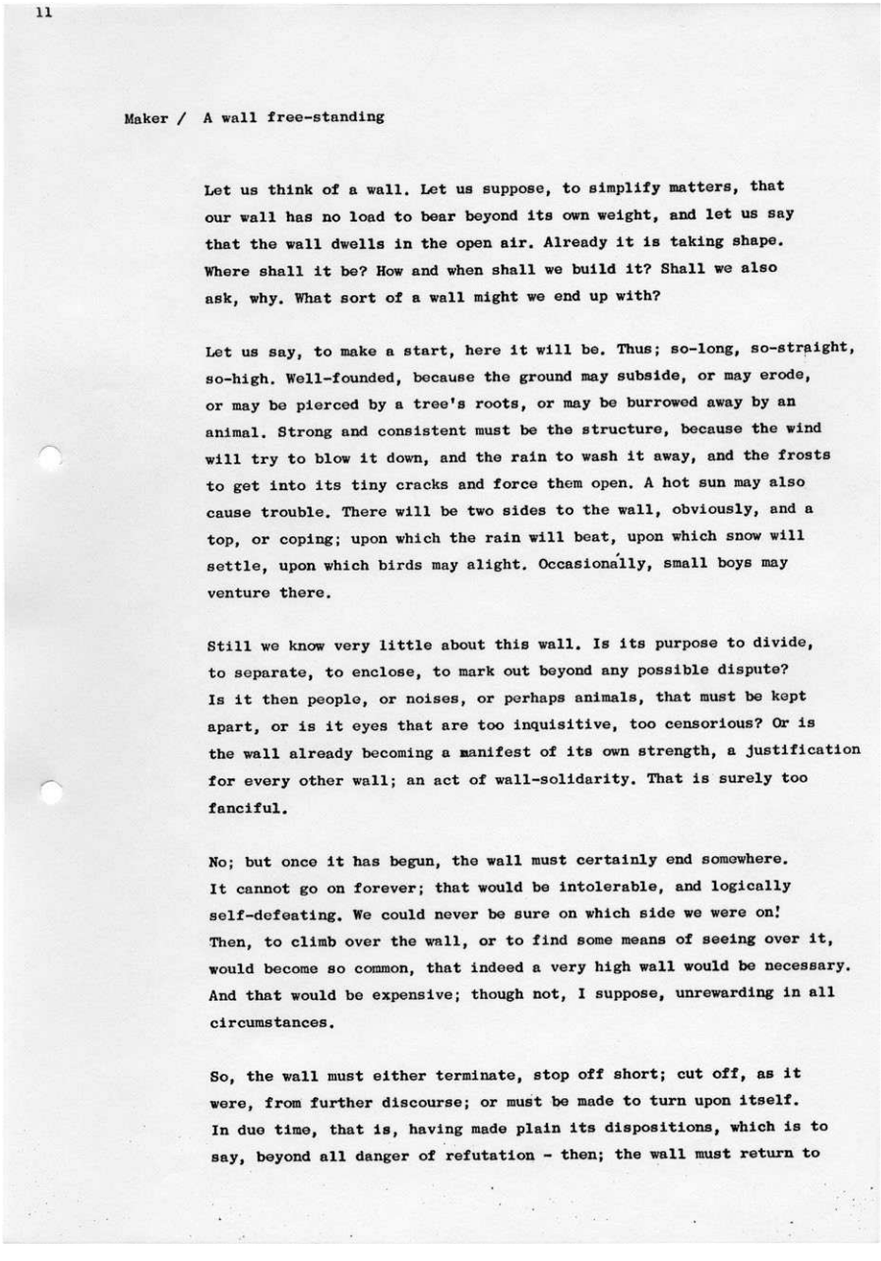
but let us have your notes speculative or otherwise by next wednesday

Typed notice, Royal College of Art, c.1960

repeated punctuation to achieve line and form, and exploited the matrix of the machine's platen movement to draw simple diagrams. A typed notice for Royal College of Art students resembles a concrete poem in its sparse stacking of words. Its message is an everyday request for students to submit notes from a series of visits, and its layout charts these journeys. A list of successive destinations is angled and interspersed along an axis of cryptic commentaries on tensions between 'town' and 'country'. The paper itself has been rotated and fed through the machine twice to achieve its precisely registered red and black typography.

At Le Bouchage I find boxes containing more of Potter's papers, including sketches, lists of materials and tasks, and technical drawings for the renovation of the property. Among these disintegrating documents are poems which Potter was probably working on at the typewriter during one of his stays. These are from a series adapting the Greek myth of Icarus that he began in the 1970s. They were published as a script and given to the audience at the first performance of Potter's play – or staged poetry reading – 'In:quest of Icarus' in 1974, and were repeatedly reworked during the following two decades. In 1982, he wrote to a London gallerist who had expressed an interest in staging a performance of the work, describing one of these texts as 'a long… poem which I had been chiselling away at (like a hollow sculpture) for many years.'[2] He was evidently preoccupied with these writings.

'In:quest of Icarus' is not as exceptional at it may seem in Potter's output. While it is his only significant piece of published poetry, it reflects intimately on his experience as a teacher, and is itself highly designed, proposing an intricate unity of script and stage, graphic and spatial. Potter found in the Icarus myth a parallel with the student protests that he had been closely involved with at Hornsey and Bristol in 1968. 'In:quest of Icarus' is his portrait of the spirit and corruptibility of students, at once tender and resentful, and marks the end of the period of his life in which his time was fully committed to education. In 2012 and 2013 I organised two performances of 'In:quest of Icarus', at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and at Spike Island in Bristol. The latter



11

Maker / A wall free-standing

Let us think of a wall. Let us suppose, to simplify matters, that our wall has no load to bear beyond its own weight, and let us say that the wall dwells in the open air. Already it is taking shape. Where shall it be? How and when shall we build it? Shall we also ask, why. What sort of a wall might we end up with?

Let us say, to make a start, here it will be. Thus; so-long, so-straight, so-high. Well-founded, because the ground may subside, or may erode, or may be pierced by a tree's roots, or may be burrowed away by an animal. Strong and consistent must be the structure, because the wind will try to blow it down, and the rain to wash it away, and the frosts to get into its tiny cracks and force them open. A hot sun may also cause trouble. There will be two sides to the wall, obviously, and a top, or coping; upon which the rain will beat, upon which snow will settle, upon which birds may alight. Occasionally, small boys may venture there.

Still we know very little about this wall. Is its purpose to divide, to separate, to enclose, to mark out beyond any possible dispute? Is it then people, or noises, or perhaps animals, that must be kept apart, or is it eyes that are too inquisitive, too censorious? Or is the wall already becoming a manifest of its own strength, a justification for every other wall; an act of wall-solidarity. That is surely too fanciful.

No; but once it has begun, the wall must certainly end somewhere. It cannot go on forever; that would be intolerable, and logically self-defeating. We could never be sure on which side we were on! Then, to climb over the wall, or to find some means of seeing over it, would become so common, that indeed a very high wall would be necessary. And that would be expensive; though not, I suppose, unrewarding in all circumstances.

So, the wall must either terminate, stop off short; cut off, as it were, from further discourse; or must be made to turn upon itself. In due time, that is, having made plain its dispositions, which is to say, beyond all danger of refutation - then; the wall must return to

Typed page from 'In:Quest of Icarus', 1974

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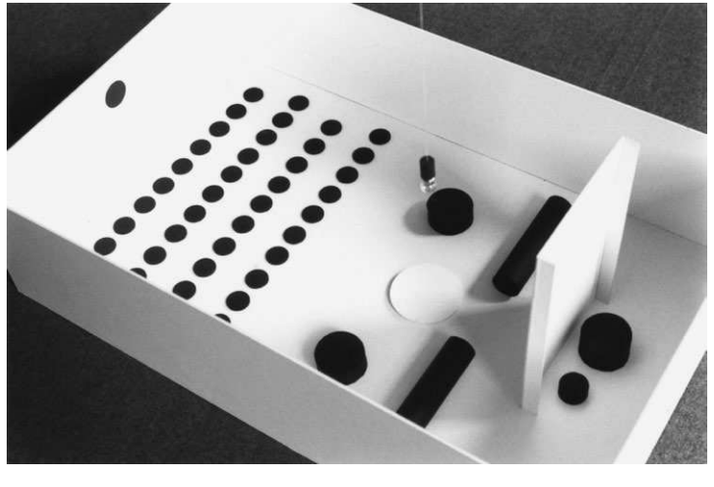
Icarus / the fall

a little before my time
the doors opened
and I dropped
past caring
loving
sweet as nothing
the bright still air
is breaking
: woken

Typed page from 'In:Quest of Icarus', 1974

venue is less than a mile from the Bower Ashton campus where the work was first performed by Potter and his students at the Construction School in December 1974 – its only presentation during Potter's life. In preparation for these performances I worked with student designers from the Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem, Netherlands and the University of the West of England in Bristol to build sets, rehearse and read the poems, and provide the musical and visual accompaniments, all according to Potter's detailed instructions. We studied closely the appearance of the texts on the typed pages of the script. Each poem tells the reader how it should be read, not through the rhythm of its syllables, or the positioning of its line-endings, but with a single visual proposition – as an image. The reading 'A wall free-standing' introduces the labyrinth in paragraphs of monospaced prose, three pages that are solid and even – wall-like. By contrast, in the poem 'the fall', Icarus's final moments of consciousness find a swaying, dissolving form, fading out across the page in slight trails.

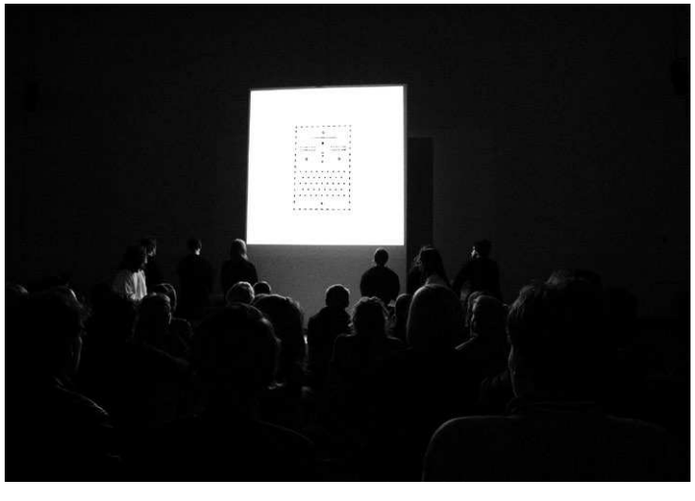
Potter designed a hall for 'In:quest of Icarus'. According to the script – which gives complete instructions for recreating the space – the construction of the hall by the student performers took place over four days prior to the original reading, and this labour was to be considered part of the performance. The hall is an expression of the two essential themes of the work.



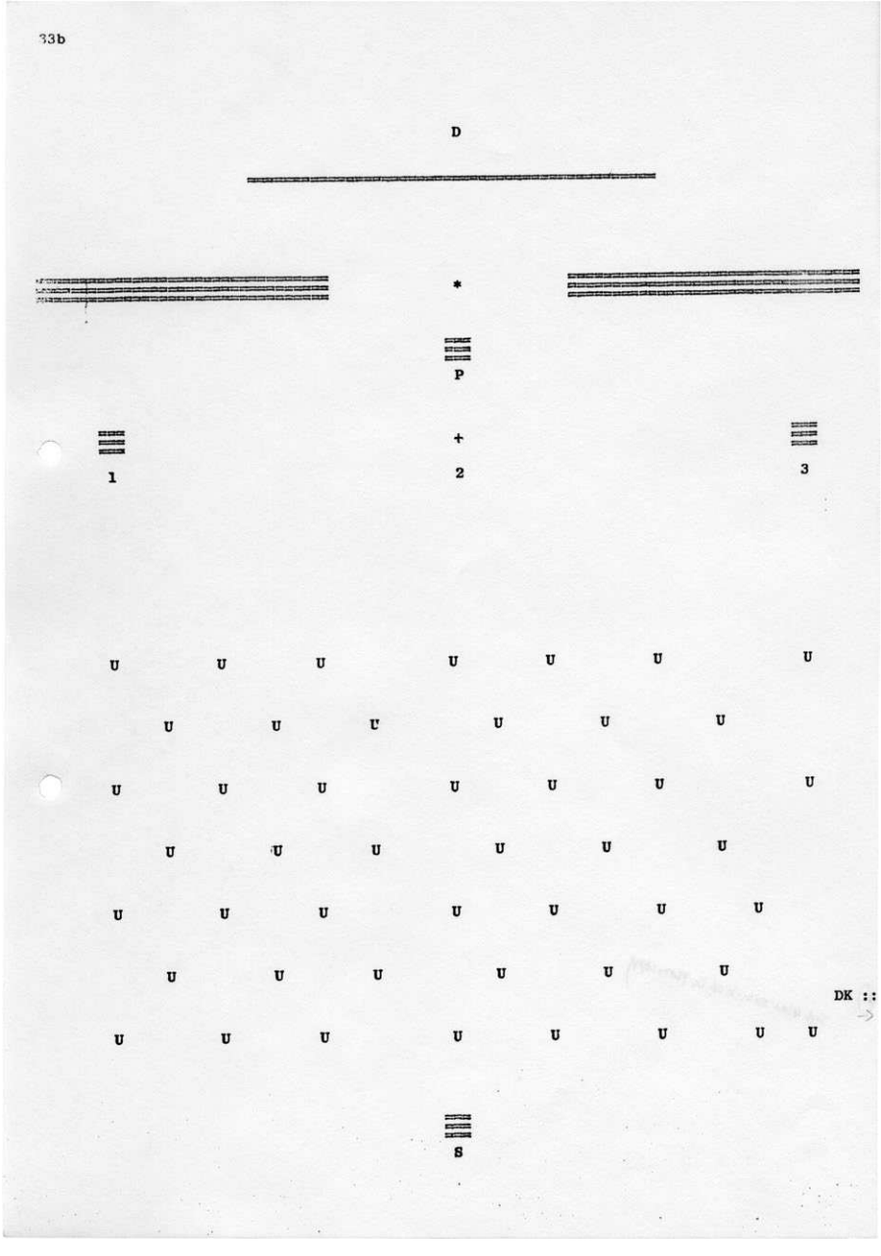
Model of 'In:Quest of Icarus' hall, made by Oliver Brookes, 1989

First, enclosing the performers and the audience with 8 ft high walls, the hall is the labyrinth, where, in the Greek myth, King Minos has Icarus imprisoned with his father Daedalus and the Minotaur. Daedalus, an inventor, improvises wings from wax and feathers, with which he and Icarus escape the labyrinth and the deadly beast. Suspended above Potter's hall, a single, intense 750-watt light bulb is the searing sun that burns the over-exuberant Icarus's wings and sends him falling to his death.

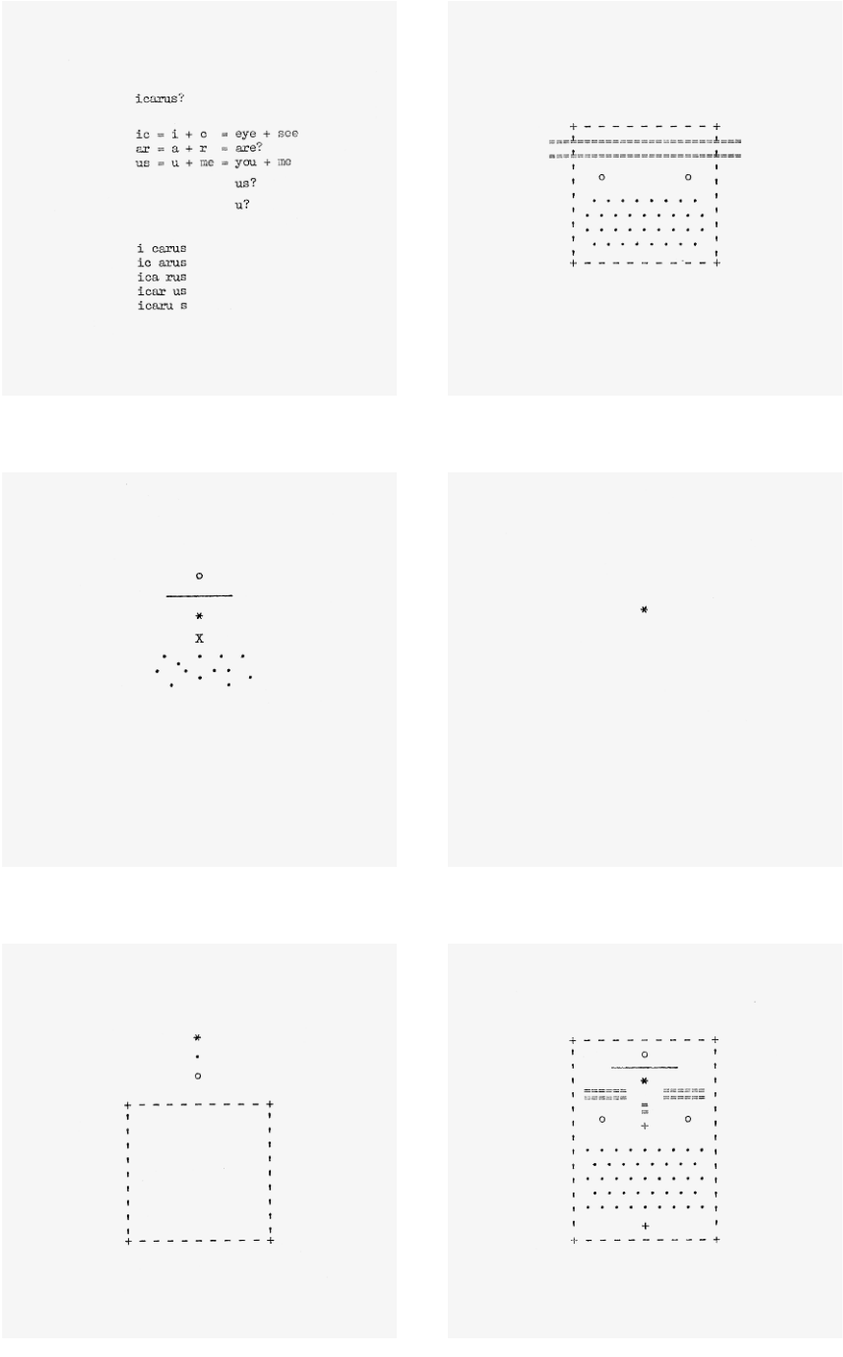
Second, the hall is a simplified plan view of the typewriter at which Potter typed the script. A projection screen is the paper, the principal readers are seated on the spools and reels, and the audience occupy the keys. This design is shown extensively in the script – and projected onto the screen during the performance – as a series of diagrams, made with and representing the typewriter. The audience – you – appear as rows of the uppercase U. This reflexive image was what Potter called an 'isomorph', a term he borrowed from mathematics. In that field the word describes an elegant relation between two phenomena, that can be said to be isomorphic by 'being of identical or similar form, shape, or structure'.[3] Potter's representation of the typewriter seems at first to be a post-structuralist explication of the audience's role – seated on the keys – as agents for the meaning



Norman Potter's 'In:quest of Icarus' restaged at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2012)



Typed page from 'In:Quest of Icarus', 1975



Extracts from typed slide sequence for 'In:Quest of Icarus', 1975

of the work. He briefly acknowledges this interpretation in the script. But he devotes more attention, in his 'Performance notes', to the notion that the typewriter should be visualised because it is the 'means of production'.

> The abstract slides can be seen as a progressive concept-diagram for the design decisions required by the performance; adding up to the kit of parts and deciding their nature, discovering how best to strengthen signals by cutting out adventitious noise, and noting the isomorphic relations available to this end.[4]

As I understand it, Potter saw in isomorphism a means of displaying the way in which the characteristics of a tool can condition and guide what it produces. His use of the term also reveals a resistance to artfulness, a need to bring determinism to his decision-making. It is interesting that these tendencies should manifest in his poetry, particularly in his attempts to design and stage his writing. In conceptualising the hall, he was perhaps motivated by a lack of confidence in the poems, or a need for familiar processes to support the work and enable him to resolve it, in his own estimation. The typewriter's code of constraints is clearly essential to Potter's methodology for designing the space of the hall. But my sense is that, even looking down on our recreation of the hall from a mezzanine space at the Stedelijk Museum, it is an icon of a typewriter more than a true isomorph. It is a laboured image, arrived at by many other unrelated processes in construction that distract from it as a truly isomorphic reflection of the logic of the machine.

Immediately following the work's original performance at Bristol, Potter led a seminar on the relations between poetry and design, which took place in the typewriter hall. A cassette recording of these proceedings exists. During some opening remarks, Potter addressed what he presumably anticipated would be a confused response to his union of these two activities:

> For years I had a block against poetry. Word poetry, that is. I chose to work as a craftsman and designer with my own workshop. How did I feel about it then? To write seemed not

> to do. To be somehow supplementary to what was done or, in that sense acted out. I felt that the act of making something was to have immediacy and concreteness. That it was treason to follow and to be wise after the event, to comment upon experience in the way that poetry seemed to me to do.

He goes on to account for his reconciliation with poetry:

> Once you see that poetry is not something you do in church, or try to avoid doing in school, but is in fact the intensification of ordinary speech, and an effort to use words as tools to extend our humanity, then the barrier – we might say the wall – is breached.[5]

Placed on a pile of timber next to a window at Le Bouchage, I see that Potter's typewriter is a ruin. When new, the Lexikon 80's sculpted steel body – styled to partially expose its inner workings – had a gleaming smooth paint finish. By now the paint has blistered and cracked, and the apertured casing offered little resistance to creeping damp. A deposit of oil congealed on the underside has soaked up dust and dirt and formed a crust. The machine is inert, its mechanisms seized by rust. I poke at several keys, at first cautiously, then firmly. They are unyielding. My companion on the trip, artist Stuart Whipps, photographs the machine, and I replace it on the concrete, exactly where I found it.

1. This exact formulation is from a typed document prepared for students at the Construction School, titled 'Notes for lecture: Graphic tools & media', dated 30 September 1964.

2. Typed copy of letter addressed to 'Chrissie', dated 1 April 1982.

3. Merriam-Webster online dictionary definition.

4. Norman Potter, *Models & Constructs*, (1990), 282.

5. Transcribed by the author from cassette recording.