James Langdon interviews Gavin Wade

James Langdon
In this book I typeset some of your writing in ‘square span’, Herbert Bayer’s proposed alternative to the orthodoxy of sentences and paragraphs for the visual organisation of text. It seems appropriate for a number of reasons. Your interest in historical remakes and continuities, and your admiration of Bayer — obviously — but also the tendency in your writing towards simple structures and short, direct expressions. (Bayer wrote that ‘text written in logical, short thought groups lends itself best’ to his system.) I find that square span suits your recent writing best. Texts like ‘The five acts of art’, ‘What makes a good home for art?’, and ‘The act of painting’. I suppose you have become more deliberate in your use of these kinds of formulations?

Gavin Wade
I’m using the formulations or structures to instruct me. I often don’t feel in control of my writing. I have accepted that writing is a feral part of me, a response mechanism that I can control to an extent. I sometimes fool myself that I can direct words in a general direction. I hope always that a text is part of learning about myself. Words are a key part of how I relate to what is around me. It is fascinating to me then to see you convert the words and phrasings that I have constructed into something else using Bayer’s square span. They become a new work. I like your use of an existing design system to expand the context and meaning of this book. I think this book might be about using and being used. I want to use

what other people have discovered and I want other people to use what I have discovered. I want that process to be art. I consider many of these texts to have the potential to be art. They can exhibit in many ways and this book then is one of the exhibitions of these works. Your use of square span saves the book from being boring in that sense of nothing happening apart from text. Perhaps Bayer had a sense of that even before Ulises Carrión came up with his statement:

'A book is a sequence of spaces. Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment — a book is also a sequence of moments. A book is not a case of words, nor a bag of words, nor a bearer of words. A writer, contrary to the popular opinion, does not write books. A writer writes texts.'

I want to write a book. I want to learn from Carrión and Bayer. I have never thought of myself as a writer. I always consider myself to be an artist-curator — a self taught profession. So I am not a writer writing texts I am an artist-curator making art.

To learn how to be an artist-curator you need to work with others and learn from others as much as possible. My method might be to collaborate with another artist or a writer or whatever. Or I may need to interview a dead artist as I need more from him or her in order to better use their discoveries.

I think I've become more deliberate with short thought groups over time as I've borrowed and employed tempo and brevity from James Ellroy, Kurt Vonnegut and Buckminster Fuller. I'm not sure I'm really to the point or precise with words. I think I might be reckless. I learned some discipline from writing my

novel *The Interruptors* (2003–2005) and from writing renga for my *100 Verses for Three Estates* project in 2006 with Alec Finlay and Paul Conneally. I'm often struck by the form of words and phrases acting as sculpture or a set of relationships, a reciprocal gravitation of atoms, ideas and symbols. Writing on Twitter over the past five years has also been a useful and enjoyable space to test out words and hone phrasing and artworks using words. Many of the more recent works in this book were rehearsed and prompted by writing as @eprjcts.

The five act structure was developed during *Narrative Show* at Eastside Projects in 2011. The structure emerged during the evolving exhibition process and became a way to perform the development of narratives by using an old system again. I find real meaning in the structure of the five act form. What at first appears to be a set of limitations becomes an open set of generative supports.

James Langdon
This list of voices and approaches represents another important contention in your writing, clearly stated in the title of this book. You have a very confident sense of freedom, liberty — taking liberties with authorship. Your writing is certainly more irreverent than academic. At one point we talked about a possible introduction to the book being a fictional letter from the lawyers of El Lissitzky's estate! Which I know wouldn't be the first such letter you'd have received! I understand this aspect of what you do to be about the useful. You seem to be proposing that artistic and literary canons should function not as territorial markers but as inventories of usable materials.

Gavin Wade
They are usable experiences. Artworks and experiences are experiments for us to learn from and to apply. I really like that phrase — taking liberties — it is full of misinterpretation! Sounds both positive and negative at the same time. I think most forms of legal letters and intellectual property thinking are not about freedom but the opposite. For every freedom there is an equal and opposite force. We have to find common decency between people or just live with disagreements. Outright exploitation is where it goes wrong, and then laws and rules and weapons come into play to force people to act in a more decent way. But I think you can act in a decent way as you upcycle someone else's findings. We have to project the idea that it is an honour to have your work upcycled by somebody else.

James Langdon
How would you define the ethics of upcycling?

Gavin Wade
Even though defining the ethics of an activity is not really something I spend much time thinking about directly, I think my 'Upcycle this text' work does adopt an existing ethical approach to how to exist in any society. I adopt the controversial ethics of Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book* and a movement of people who wanted to act outside of the laws forced upon them by the 'pig empire'. I think many people now in Britain feel this desire to change the ethics of our country. The majority of people that I know disagree with the way our country is organised, how it uses resources and how it is positioned in the world. I was angry when I wrote quite a few of the works in this book. I think I should be angrier

though. I would like to learn how to be very angry and to be able to use that anger for the public good. I want to learn how to change things and improve structures and systems around me. I would like those changes to be art. I wouldn't be doing it alone of course. We would be defining the ethics of upcycling this country through our actions.

It is also important to question here whether art should be contained by the given ethics of any context, or whether it should exist outside of the ethics of the context or the morals of an individual artist or group of collaborators. Is art a moral act? I think it can be but it doesn't have to be. There are times when art will need to be immoral and unethical. I wish I was brave enough to make a truly immoral art.

James Langdon
Let's explore your anger! I'd suggest that your writing has often exhibited a fatalism that I think you are channeling from Kurt Vonnegut. A sense of the world as the untamable product of billions of individuals acting on their inner desires. It's not exactly anarchistic — nor even political — more a reflection of the mental health of the human race, the balance of chemicals in our collective brain. I think these forces are what you refer to when you say that you don't feel in control of your writing. In light of that — if you accept the characterisation — you do indeed seem to be becoming more irritated and more direct, more willing to address specific political situations. Texts like 'Pay me, I'm an artist' and 'City of a thousand artworks' are examples.

There's also the aspect of performance, of speaking to someone or some group. You have performed a number of

the texts, some in quite contentious situations. Your performance style is cryptic, you seem like a man who knows something the audience doesn't! Is this influencing your voice as it appears in the writing?

Gavin Wade
I would definitely admit to the likelihood of channeling Kurt Vonnegut's voice but I think of it as with optimism, not fatalism. I see his insights being about accepting and building on the strengths of what we can achieve and to not let ourselves be caught up in manipulative systems of empowerment which are really just cages and restraints to keep society in line. Previously I have combined this with the optimism and optimisation of R. Buckminster Fuller's writings and actions. They are both heroes of mine, and partly models for artful living and being an artist-curator. They are both driven by anger as well as wonder, both anticipating terrible things, but offering ways out, ways to look after each other, ways to live a life based on common decency and honesty. I find that very attractive. I wouldn't say I base my life on their principles and ideas, but I am interested in using them and misusing them for art and life.

When I'm performing my normal position is that the audience knows things I don't! So it seems funny to reflect upon you saying I come across as knowing something that they don't! When I perform these texts I want there to be no doubt that what I am saying is the true reality. So I must say it forcefully, and then gently, and then quickly and slowly to create a shared space of knowing something together. I performed 'The five acts of art' in Glasgow School of Art last week, and afterwards a student asked me if I believe all of the things I

had just said. I answered that I believe in the usefulness of saying those things. I realise that often I want to keep in a particular line to prompt some moments of doubt, but it is not really the point whether I believe the words or not. I believe they are the right tool at the time of writing them, and that the words and sentences can exist as useful forms in the world. It is worthwhile speaking them whether they are true or false.

I find as I have made works that challenge where art exists, why and how it should exist, this has been perceived in wider political spheres and this has led to more invitations to respond and act within more visible political spheres. I am interested and willing to be part of forming policy and projects that may impact in a very small local way, a city-wide level or a national situation. I consider myself lucky to be invited into any of those opportunities and they are very worthwhile spending energy and working hard to make the most of each space that opens up.

'City of a thousand artworks' is a first attempt as a performance text to address how to make an art city, but it follows my exhibition projects over the last 20 years. Exhibitions such as *In the Midst of Things* in 1999 in Bournville village, Birmingham; or *Let's Get To Work*, 2000–2001 in San Francisco, Harrisburg and Philadelphia; *Support Structure,* with Céline Condorelli from 2003–2009; my Kiosk collaboration with Simon and Tom Bloor, 2005–2008 informed more recent projects that tackle ideas of evolving cities, building cities, artworks as universes, that continue now as part of Eastside Projects.

I am uncertain how I explore anger within the idea of building an art city but my intuition tells me it is important. Be angry about current situations. Be angry about imposed realities that say they are based on justice and freedom but act otherwise. Be angry about your lot in life. But be positive. Be positively angry.

James Langdon
You've been running Eastside Projects for eight years. You've become a fixed position! We have used the idea of observing something from a fixed position in the various ways that we have documented the activity in the gallery over those eight years. Exploiting the fact that if you stay in one place it becomes easier to register movement. It's a strategy used by geologists and climate scientists to understand dynamics that are occurring over a very long duration.

It seems natural that you would seek out a situation like this. You've always exercised a contrary conception of time in relation to art. 'I've been thinking 'bout forever', you wrote, channeling Frank Ocean, in the final act of 'City of a thousand artworks'. Eastside Projects takes its time more like a domestic space than a typical gallery. It's like a kitchen table, or a set of shelves. Some objects appear on a shelf and stay there — for storage, maybe, or for display — while some come and go. Sometimes it is very deliberate and sometimes it's just a mess! That's a more believable, more human, way of experiencing art isn't it? Is this what you mean by artful living?

Gavin Wade
That makes me nervous to think of myself as a fixed position! But it feels balanced by your kitchen table proposition. I feel

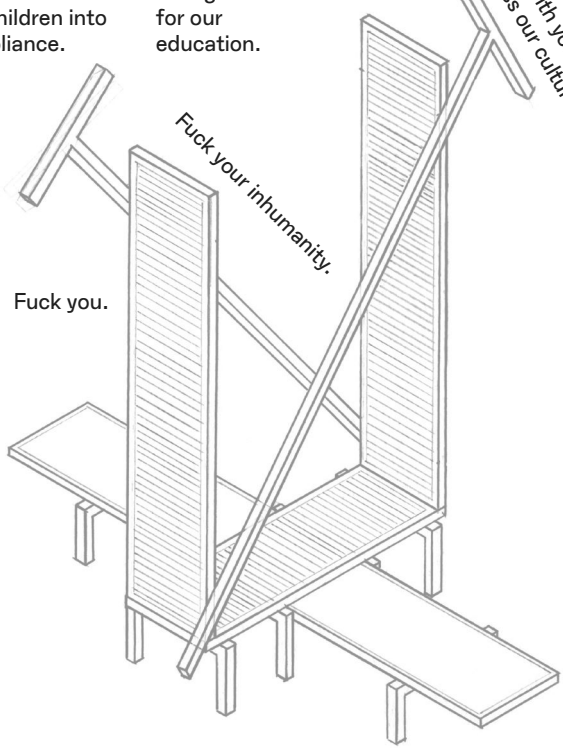
You terrorise
our children into
compliance.

Charge us
for our
education.

Burden us with your greed
and oppress our cultures.

Fuck your inhumanity.

Fuck you.



We will rise up and throttle the filthy,
depraved, so-called life out of your
soulless perfect fucking existences.

OK being the existing conditions, but I don't want to be fixed. Being in one place for a sustained period of time was definitely part of the appeal of creating Eastside Projects, being able to have a test space in which you could notice differences and developments over time. I did write that 'the artist-run space is not a stop gap' in the very first version of the manifesto of the gallery we were imagining. I thought it would be a long-term engagement with a place, and I still hope it will be. It is part of the role of all of the founding directors of Eastside Projects to check that each other aren't becoming a fixed position, or a default position. So I'll take this as a warning!

I like the kitchen table idea very much. I suppose I do tend to think, and file stuff, in what others often call messy piles but I usually know where everything is within those piles, and it leads to unexpected overlaps, crossings and events. I'm interested in support structures and using them to provoke, order and anticipate the future somehow, to make things possible. That's partly what I mean about artful living. Arranging things and thoughts in space and time to make things possible. It can be as simple as painting a wall in a particular way in your home or how you plant things in your garden, how you prepare your food, or from where you adopt the rules of how you live. We're thinking a lot about artist housing at the moment, which feels like a natural development from all our efforts to make a gallery that is a messy, complex part of our lives.

I invest a huge amount of effort and energy into Eastside Projects and I think it gives a lot back — it's a generative machine. It allows for and supports multiple collaborative

events, many of which don't involve me. Ruth Claxton and I have recently been trying to work out a new way to describe what the reality of Eastside Projects is and the word we have come up with is *multiverse* — we are an artist-run multiverse. The idea of multiple realities and existences connects to my use of upcyling, and actually to your ideas of design fiction. For each work there are other versions in our multiverse, and some of them we pull from one reality into another.

You could apply that to my remaking, modifying and extending of Frederick Kiesler's L- and T-Type Display Units from 1924 that I started remaking in 2001. It was leaving that on the kitchen table in my mind that led to me imagining a version of Kiesler's radical display systems being remade using the materials of Adolf Krischanitz's Vienna Secession Mobile Wall System that I had adopted in 2011 for *Narrative Show* and then *Painting Show* at Eastside Projects. It took me four years to make the new *T-Type Display Unit (After Kiesler and Krischanitz)* and that process of drawing and thinking led to me next inventing a *Z-Type Display Unit*. Immediately, of course, this opened up my current work on a complete A–Z Display Unit series and the drawings that run through this book spelling out my message to potential upcyclers. The idea of the A–Z is a set of possibilities that I carry with me waiting to find somewhere each letter could fit.

This is really a useful way of living, having a set of ideas you hope to test out and looking for a place to carry out an experiment. All experiences are experiments, new and reiterated. Any time you speak in public it can be an experiment. Yesterday I performed 'The five acts of art' within my exhibition *Z is for Zoo* at Frans Hals Museum in

Haarlem, and I tested something new out with it. I combined a song by Bonnie 'Prince' Billy called 'Wolf Among Wolves', weaving and singing it inbetween the different acts of my work. This was partly in relation to the set of works that I had curated onto my Z- and T-Type Display Units within the museum as a 'zoological garden', and partly to upcycle my own text with another's artwork. For that moment in time the work became the spaces inbetween those in the room and myself plus the works of Billy, Kiesler and Krischanitz.

When you told me you had been studying and caring for the Penton kitchen designed and built by English designer Norman Potter in 1960–1961, I found that fascinating too. It opened up another conversation in my mind between the three designers. Could there be a productive combining of Potter, Kiesler and Krischanitz's forms and gifts to the world. Could we produce a new K-Type Display Unit as a kitchen? I'm really excited to work on that idea to fit into your reimagined Norman Potter house. That will be an example of artful living to learn from — upcycled, repositioned, ideas used lovingly and with careful consideration. Things don't feel so fixed.

This interview with James Langdon — the designer of this book — was originally going to be the introduction. It reflects something of the potential process of a designer interrogating a text, moulding it into the physical form of a book. We started the interview by email on 12 August 2015, but as the shape of the book changed here and there, it no longer needed to be an introduction. The next perfect position for the interview is right here, so that James's voice naturally follows at the end of 'What is prosaic?', in the same way as it did in the performance in Leipzig where James took over the mic from me.

We thought the interview could tease out some of the ideas and relations between artist-curator and designer, when we both may be performing as editors, curators, art directors and ultimately collaborators. Hopefully it gives some insights into our working processes anyway. We completed the interview on 25 September 2016.