

Q is a series of interviews, conducted to coincide with the programme

Gasson by Clare

Can you introduce your work and the show at Matt's Gallery?

It is strange talking from June 2021 – *ACT* was at the end of 2019, pre-Covid – everything has shifted. I doubt I would have written this piece without Covid. It is about the show, my work and acknowledging how I got here. All my writing is to be read out.

I have always worked with ideas and a commitment to the word, via writing scripts, using the voice, videos, situations, sculpture, painting, drawing – all involve some kind of performance. I like to keep a situation active. I see the showing space as a whole – the work, the interaction with the audience – everything is sensate.

I work with big concepts – the intensity of being (what it is to be here now), body/voice of a woman and what it takes to be true to yourself, what constitutes a performance and how that resonates – can a performance be private for example? With audio and video, I work in one take – the first take – with its unfiltered energy.

I have used scripts even before art college. Every day I invariably experiment with writing in some way. My work has always explored the live within art. I have only recently realised the importance of this throughout the years.

For the exhibition at Matt's Gallery, the poem *The Circle* was part of the press release. It was in the corridor as you come into the gallery and set the feeling of the show. It was a tatty script falling apart off the wall before you – words distorted. The piece was offering an idea to enter without preconceptions, with a quiet mind, but it also undermined itself by being a tenuous proposition physically and conceptually.

How do you like to work on an exhibition, ideally?

At Matt's Gallery I found the way of working very productive. I work best when I have a long build up with a curator – that we invest in the ideas and talk them out so in a way the material of talking and conversation is part of the work. The exhibition emerges out of the stuff of language, argument and discussion. I come with work and ideas but this is a starting point from where we dive off into what the show can be – it's an organic process. Time is expensive though and it is rare for a curator to have that space to devote to an artist.



When I first met up with Robin [Klassnik, Matt's Gallery Director] to talk about my work, I performed a 1:1 piece in the garden of the gallery at Webster Road. It's a 15-minute on-going performance series. We talk of work, my work, others' work, whatever is around. I take notes on a long scroll of brown wrapping paper. When the time is up, I go – sometimes I don't have time for a coffee. It's awkward often and can be absurd but this work gets to ask questions around what a performance can be. What is happening here – is this an event as a performance or are we just sitting chatting? It's that point of intensity that I like to dwell on. I like the spontaneity of the piece. It is minimal and not rehearsed – whatever happens happens.

You need time for this – time to go back maybe and chat again outside of the performance. Though you'll always be conscious of the first meeting. I did this performance with a critic from New York, and he seemed upset with the boundaries of the work. It is porous and messy – it's not an easy work to perform. The 1:1 has to be complicit as it's about trust within the moment. I may show the scroll one day, we'll see.*

This was the start of a two-year conversation with Robin, towards the exhibition.

What material do you work with?

I like materials that are at hand. They often have an urban feel – industrial or urban nature. I am from big cities – it's where I am most at home. Materials that come to me are the best. As I mentioned, I use or make a nod to the word always. I use standard paper sizes. My posters are A3, drawings on A4 photocopy paper and paintings on reclaimed postcards. It is unusual for me to make an exhibition without the sound of a voice.

Materials for me are also the thought process resulting in words tripping off the tongue, sometimes landing on a page but often kept in audio. Words are material stuff.

Description can also be used as material. Description of a state and of an experience. Often a kind of oral sculpture you can envisage. Around this are scripts and situations.



So, anything can be material?

Not everything – it has to be within my arguments. Stemming from the Matt's Gallery show, found objects are extremely important in my practice. I have boxes of them. If they stand the test of time, they will become props in a film or within sculptures. I prefer the found – somehow making things is too forced. Found pieces are all already there – out there. It is like thinking beyond your current thinking and so finding these objects is a kind of truth, like extended nerve endings. The landscape of the mind is stretched to this other lexicon of materials. You have to be open to accept them as they come. Sometimes it may not be timely to pick up a dirty wet object from the street. But you see it, you recognise it, you then have to act on that opportunity given to you.

Glass (2019) was a found object. Finding this was an event in itself. I was part of London Creative Network Third Edition 2017,

SPACE Studios, Hackney, London. One November night I went to SPACE for a lecture at 5.30pm. I walked out at 9pm into a gale. It was raining and the trees were bending this way and that. Leaves were swirling around. The black tarmac on Mare Street was glistening wet with the colours of oil – blues, reds, greens, yellow and orange – an urban rainbow. Mare Street was still as if it had paused. No one was around. The North/South traffic had stopped at the junction and just as the lights changed a bus slowly got into gear and moved off towards Hackney Central. I was at the edge of the pavement about to cross when I saw the twig. A perfect latent sculpture. It had created itself into an almost oval shape expect that it did not totally meet at one point. That structure had survived a fall from a plane tree way overhead. I saw it and then the bus and took my chance. I ran across the road, bent down for the twig, and just made it to the traffic island.

How does this twig link to *The Circle* poem and circles?

I treasured the twig for two years until I was talking to Robin and Tim [Dixon, Matt's Gallery Deputy Director] about the show. I had wanted Tim to write a piece about a circle for the press release. A circle shape, structure and idea of a circle has been important to my work for decades. Sometimes I use it in a piece of work literally, other times I find it on the streets as I travel about London. I find circles everywhere. I take photographs of them. I write about them. With films I have used a one pan circle to tell a story in one take. With *The River* (South London Gallery, 2011) the performers stood in a circle looking in, then turning out towards the audience. *Nomad* (2001) is a video of starlings circling forever over Eastbourne Pier (Pizza Express Prospects Contemporary Drawing Prize exhibition, 2002). In the piece I made for Goldsmiths College BA Fine Art Degree show *Untitled* (1999), I had a plumbline 'drawing' a circle inches above the ground on a continuous loop in an environment with wall drawings and cinematic sound. Circles are a trope, a theme throughout my work. I would have liked the press release for *ACT* to have been a painting of a circle but we/I exist in words and so I willingly followed the format. I have since made them into a series of posters.

I would like to add here that I look a lot to theatre and so will have been aware of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Brecht, especially the 1997 Theatre de Complicité production. Complicité have inspired me from when I was first aware of them in the early 1990s.

The shape of the twig is oval and I gave it to Tim as a kind of talisman to help him write a piece on the circle. It started its magic and became a talking point between myself and Robin. It became central to the show. This perfect sculpture from the edge of my thinking.

Robin suggested it was put in a Perspex box. I don't usually like this but the twig was vulnerable knocking about the office and gallery and so I thought it was the best place for it. We put the show up and spent time discussing where things should

Matt's Gallery

go. It was a tussle of thoughts. At times we hit difficult spots as Robin was not sure where I might be coming from and I was not sure where he might be going.

So the twig was now a part of the exhibition?

Yes, but it kept worrying myself and Robin. We kept thinking. It was bringing the drawings, the bright white bleached out space, the poster, together. The show was partly on looking and yet as you looked the very space was repelling the act of looking because it was so hard to focus. The space floated. The drawings too demanded the audience move closer to give them time.

The twig seemed like a compass, a guiding force. Near the end of putting up the show I was standing in the gallery and Robin was at the door, and Tim in the corridor. Robin was looking at the twig. I know what it is – yes so do I – I know it's a looking glass – yes! it is totally that. And with that thought the twig, then titled *Glass*, brought the show together. The looking glass – the feminist trope.

And yet this looking glass holds no reflection – it teeters on the edge of vertigo as you look right through it. A space where you expect to see the self, offers nothing. It's just a frame. A strong frame. One that's withstood a storm. It brings up questions of identity and the right to be in the room, literally a body in a room with a voice, with ideas and opinions. If you're there but with no presence what does this mean for society, for oneself? A lot of my work looks to just standing here now and being – running through it is the voice, the body, the experience of a woman in the world.

Do you see your work as feminist?

Yes, it's to do with life and that for me involves being a woman. It is political.

I like to take on the heavy-weights within art histories – by being in the room – by making works such as *Lipstick Line* (1997); *The River* (2011); *October 2013 – obsidian flow piece retitled February 2014* (2014). My *Fast Work/Street Sonnet/Performances* are an on-going series from 2016 looking to Carl Andre's poems – nudging, questioning. I like to disrupt in some way – to worry the waters of what is accepted. *Material stuff/non-stuff echoing after RS* (2009). RS is referring to Robert Smithson. The work is a feminist nod to Smithson's *A Heap of Language* (1966). I wanted to take the Smithson piece on, to re-work it.

In 2003 I made a piece for the Boltanski Fax Project at the *Independence* show, South London Gallery. My piece was one page of A4 that was not faxed. The text read: 'INDEPENDENCE TO NOT PLAY BY THE RULES AND STILL HAVE A VOICE (this page hasn't been faxed).

Lipstick Line (1997) is a work whereby I split a room in half on a diagonal with a single line of lipstick. It looks to the minimalist work of Fred Sandbach and also to artists of the 1970s who use gestures – that a work of art can be very simple. The connecting line on the floor gets messy. It references the body – the mouth. The work was shown in New Contemporaries 1999, and Galerie Nathalie Halgand, Vienna in 2017 (where I showed the third version of the work).

I wanted to claim the space – to disrupt the framework – the System.

My work orbits around me – I think of my body of work as a solar system so *Lipstick Line* (1997) is always close. The date it was made has little relevance. There are layers of time in the works – the A4 drawing series was started in 1999. I work within a different time scale.

You say 'everything is work everything is performance'. Can you expand on this? In a performance lecture earlier in the year I tried to pin-point this:

'I talk about the body through the work, I talk about the body through the mic, through this mic on this phone now. I talk through the breath and through the words. It's all material. It's all a piece of work. It's all performance.'

Lecture, 13 May 2021

The body resonates throughout the work. I feel I cannot talk about this without talking of performance. The body in the breath, the body in the space, the translation of that on a page.

The drawings are the results of private ritual studio performances. I work with different levels of what a performance can be. The A4 drawings are in the space of language and feelings. I first started them in 1998/99. They started as an absurd proposition to hatch out a page used for language by using an architectural representation of material. At the time I thought I was shading a space that was impossible. I stopped this because the drawings were too dense and I thought they were perpetuating a state within me that was unhelpful. I went back to them in 2014. They became something different and instead of being titled by numbers they are called *Equivalentents after AS – from an idea started in 1999*, A.S. refers to Alfred Stieglitz, a photographer who worked on a series of cloud photographs – *Equivalentents*.

The drawings are intense, repetitive and insistent. There is nothing delicate or nice about them. In their way they are quite violent. The insistence of the breath – of daring to be – of being here now. I work on them each time I am in the studio. Sometimes I work on them to get into the studio day sometimes to get out of it – so at a liminal time. Some sessions are quick, some are longer. The idea of the drawings was never to fill the page. It is to document the feelings of the day. I would like to see them all shown together at some point.

So you have a daily practice of drawing?

Yes, each time I am in the studio. With the drawings, I have rules within the page. When I finish one drawing, I immediately start another. I put the title on the back and the date they were started. When they are finished, I sign them off on the back and fill in the final date. Other rules are that I concentrate on the work totally – no phone calls or talking, singing, listening to music or radio. Talking or singing might result in spit marks on the page. Another rule is that I do not go over the marks. When they are finished, they are done and I never go back to them. Any open spaces are left. I like them to breathe a little. Regarding tools, I use small wooden pencils. They are nice to hold and are free from a retailer that sells trade tools and hardware products.

My work has this urban everyday level. The materials are found or at hand. I rarely veer from this – the black oil paint for the postcard paintings is an exception. I am trying to find another natural urban material. The postcard paintings work in a similar way to the drawings – they are private studio ritual performances.

What place do the audience have within your exhibitions?

The audience are complicit performers within the exhibition, and the work only truly exists with them. They breathe into the practice and make it complete.

In *ACT* the audience were invited in to look, to literally peer, into the drawings. To look into and through *Glass* (2019). To find *The Circle* poem and the distorted words. To discover the books on the shelves in the back of the gallery and take time to browse. The show invited time, slowness and care.

So, performing happens within all your work?

Yes, I often experiment with what a performance can be internally within the work to push it as far as possible. When I film or record audio I work with the essence of the first take. I used to work in a theatre a long time ago and I was present at a first reading. It was incredible how effective it was and that is what I work to for any given performance. My work is about intensity, truth, and trust. I am not looking for easy solutions or decorative art. That's not my thing. The work often unnerves people – this is not my intention to do that, necessarily. It just comes out of the landscape of work and thoughts.

What is it about performance that intrigues you?

There is nothing like the live anything – music, sports, anything – especially when related to a spectacle – a mass gathering.

Thinking on my performances – I like the live partly because there is an element of expectation and within that the chance as to whether it goes right or wrong – in real time. Also within this is the chance of change and this is the crux of it that during the change you might very well happen upon the truth. The moment of change might not be what you wanted but it might slip to something better. So, I am looking for and hoping for that rupture.

I recently remembered my interview for Fine Art BA at Goldsmiths College in 1996 – I arrived with, among other things, a plastic bag full of words and phrases. I put these on the top of the chairs so I could shift ideas and meanings throughout the room and the conversation. So, the interviewers (Basil Beattie, Jean Matthee and a student Charlie Errington) moved differently in the space and thought twice about sitting on the chairs. The meanings would have changed. Words are powerful. I seem to remember it was quite confrontational and partly to do with trust.

In 2010 I performed ... *the traveller walking walking walking through ...* at Arnolfini, Bristol (It was part of *A Theatre to Address – a festival of textural form, concrete, material, scripted, performed* curated by Bridget Crone) – I rehearsed that work so much and so when I got to the raked auditorium I felt safe – cocooned by the words and the rhythm. I had never performed a work on stage before. Within the piece I had planned to experiment and have areas of improvisation, but it didn't happen because it was so tightly made. Sometimes this is useful but at the moment I am looking for the points of intensity in the work where I am not in control, where things falter and have the opportunity to twist onto another path of thinking – to open out.

These moments are like a found situation and work like a found object, one you have been thinking of for a long time but have forgotten. It's out there, you're looking for it constantly and you'll know it when you find it, it's in your being and breath – though not consciously. It is that very thing at the edge of your thinking that is necessary. Maybe the time has to be right, and a channel opens up and it finds you. At least for you to recognise it and acknowledge and use the change. I have to keep talking, to keep making, to find the fault-lines, the trip-up in language and other materials.

What are you working on now?

I made a piece earlier in the year – a lecture – a monologue about work. The format was born out of having to lecture on Zoom and not having a good enough internet connection. So I was forced into recording it – I had wanted to lecture live. I recorded the hour-long piece in one take. I talked of my work and experiences in relationship to Time, Materials, Tools and what a piece of Work can be. So, I have taken this on and am working on a shorter piece – in one take. I am trying to perform and make the work at the same time, unrehearsed. The script will be in reverse – it will come after the piece is made. I am also working on shorter oral sculpture street performance pieces that are around 20 seconds long, inspired by Pallavi Paul's *Share Your Quiet* (2021).

You are not on social media, why? I would have thought it would suit your work. I don't like the whole politics of Social Media and the way people communicate. From the beginning I was put off Facebook – daily negativity seemed to be amplified online. Boundaries are very important to me. I don't like the culture of baring everything and revealing your every thought. This doesn't help me get chances and shows as everyone is doing it and my website is hidden away, and internally the information is more an exploration than explanation. I have a body of work that no one knows about. It's a worry, because it could so easily be lost.

* In 2008 for Clare Gasson at Gimpel Fils Gallery I stated in the press release that I was available to read my scripts on a 1:1 with the audience. The idea was to meet in one of the parks near the gallery 30, Davies Street W1. To meet perhaps in Grosvenor Square next to the US Embassy where, at the time, surveillance and listening would be part of everyday life. So, a heightened self-consciousness was part of that work.

Clare Gasson June 2021

Published November 2021 after Clare Gasson, *ACT*
Matt's Gallery, 92 Webster Road, London, SE16 4DF
7–15 December 2019

Designed by Phil Baines

Matt's Gallery is a registered charity, number 1169683

Generously supported by Arts Council England and Ron Henocq Fine Art



Supported using public funding by
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