WRITING-
ON- AS-
ABOUT-
ART.

CALUM LOUIS ADAMS

Writing-On-As-About Art

Taking the word "word" from your thesis title and objectifying it

Calum Louis Adams

With 13 Illustrations

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Introduction

This week, a classmate introduced me to Hito Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen* (2013). Noted for being a pioneer of the Video Essay as Artwork, Steyerl is probably best known for this particular film in which she appropriates the *"format of an instructional video"* and a *"disembodied robotic voice"*[1] to discuss the conditions of invisibility, ranging from actualised methods, such as painting yourself green in front of a green screen, to (equally as real) societal constraints, such as being a woman, or being over 50. I dart my eyes between the words on the page: *Robotic, Instructional, Disembodied*. Feels almost like the antithesis to art: *Expressive, Human*.

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[1] The Museum of Modern Art. (n.d.). *Hito Steyerl. How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File. 2013 | MoMA*. [online] Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/181784.

Parallel to this discovery, I had begun thinking of language beyond a tool for communication within the essay format. Looking towards how we can use information as an artform within the landscape of contemporary art. For example, material lists and titles have always played a vital role in the construction of my work, often creating a sense of disillusionment from an instant conclusion on the work's literalness, but I had yet to work with the pure, unaltered, word. This is due to a previous fascination with conceptual work more closely linked to the "founding fathers" of the movement, dating back to the early 60's, whilst distancing myself from ideas linked to post-conceptualism.

This body of writing draws important distinctions in the use of words in art. Throughout the text, I will be engaging with the word *'word'*, taken directly from the title of this text, and explore the way in which I can

form it into an art object, tracing different contexts for their use. As such, this text seeks to explore the interplay between writing on art, and writing as art. To do this, it will engage with various modes of production inherent to the word document to play with the construction of the word *word* for a new artwork, *Word* (2024), the artefact.

(Please note that due to the inclusion of other works in this text, I find it necessary to ensure that the reader is aware that any artwork titled *Word* form <u>one</u> work, with the other works seeking to locate it within a timeline of practice only.)

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Sounding-Out

Although *How Not To Be Seen (2013)* provided an initial foundation to work from, there is a point in which *Word (2024)* will appear to diverge from Steyerl's work. For example, I frequently attend wordplay, as does Steyerl, that is true. However, what we see in Steyerl's work is that we are still encountering image making typical of traditional video work. There is a visual hook which finds us balancing between a moving image, infrequent written captions, and sound. Thinking on how I can create an artwork with similar educational tenancies, what I produce from this text's title will play with how the word is written, and then spoken, omitting the need for a traditional pictorial narrative whilst still engaging with the audience. Playing with how we encounter words written, but also spoken.

'Sounding Out' is a technique employed by teachers to assist students in better understanding a word through the development of its sound. Mostly commonly, this is seen through the word *'map'*. For example, the sounds that make up the word *'map'* are the following;

$$/ \, M \, / \, A \, / \, P \, /$$

The whole word is thus separated to ultimately bring them back together again, to explore their phonic relationship to each other, which in turn, forms our understanding of the written equivalent. That understanding being, how each sound – each movement of the tongue – forms a word.

It is an act, a *doing* word; To sound *something* out. You could also say that to sound out is a colloquial way of gaging someone's motives, or their intent- to know the *'next move'*. Which I guess, upon writing this, is the same definition, applied two different ways.

Diagram depicting the act of *Sounding Out*

Hito Steyerl, *How Not To Be Seen*, 2013

/ Wu / Ur / D /

Calum Louis Adams, *Word (Sounded Out)*, 2024

In a way, Steyerl is engaging with both methods here, of which I am also doing in *Word (2024)*; Navigating the word through the way it is formed, in sound and on paper. So, I wonder, is there a way I can divorce the written word as a constant reference back to the act of exercising sound as a way of understanding – or to ultimately navigating - things, words, even *acts,* themselves? is that really important? Maybe the act of saying, thinking and writing a word are interwoven?

However, here I am more interested in how we really reach *knowing* when sounding out? Timothy Morton's definition of 'knowing' – is to *"grasp a definite concept whose reality can be checked against a definite, given thing"*[2]. So, in a way, we are always in contact with the illusion object. As according to OOO, we'd be unable to experience the real object, which is tucked away

[2] Morton, T. (2013) *Realist Magic Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Open Humanites Press.

behind spatial temporal images and angles. The word "Illusion", for example, is experienced as a full word, not all the parts which make it up as we speak it into existence. An Object Ontologist would, however, still argue that the word itself is no more than a sum of its parts, it's just not in existence *because* of them.

Similarly, Morton says that– *"Objects are unspeakable, yet perfectly available"[3]*. What is meant by this is exactly what is implied; an object is withdrawn behind some illusion, or curtain, yet wholly available through aesthetic considerations. So, really, if you are unable to understand or know an object on account of its aesthetic presentation solely - due to the afore mentioned rift - then the phonetic spelling, although not the same withdrawn object, would be fine nonetheless and would thus not need to be

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[3] Morton, T. (2013) *Realist Magic Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Open Humanites Press.

written differently to be understood, on account of the fact we can never truly *understand*.

But there is a difference, in some ways. Take *Til' I get it right (2005)* by *Ceal Floyer* for example. Floyer presents a blank room, where 4 indiscrete speakers play the sentence 'Till' I get it right' over, and over. The sentence is edited from a particular lyric by Tammy Wynette. Divorced from its original context, Floyer tells us that this is indeed not an empty room, but instead, a complete aesthetic experience. One that utilises the spoken word, unstable and famously unphotographable, as its medium. As opposed to the written one, which would alter the experience entirely. Or, even, the original song context. Again, a different experience altogether.

In a similar vein to Floyer's use of the spoken word, Sartre makes an interesting comment on time. How as soon as it's born, a moment later it's old, then as is with the natural progression of life, it dies. How when

listening to music, each note that hangs in time is overtaken by the next. I like to think of this as a form of eating. A singer's mouth stretches over the vowels, snaps down on one note from the one prior. The moment time is born, it immediately dies. Or, as Sartre recalls, each moment *"destroys itself"*[4]. So, as with the undermining of OOO, we are unable to grasp the word through its sounds, as they are time sensitive; as soon as they are said, they are done. A word verbalised is lost in an instant, so sounding out is inadequate.

This trying to understand *understanding*, is a common troupe in nihilistic literature. Like in the opening line of *A Single Man*, where Isherwood encourages George to think backwards through his day, lingering on how a

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[4] Sartre, J.-P. (1959) *Nausea*.

now is *"always labelled with a date, rendering all past nows obsolete"*[5]

Moreover, Isherwood writes the whole book as if George, but also a fly on the wall; watching as he identifies himself as he, and not it. Describing every mechanical happening which grants the body function; a leg unfolding, a spine stretching, the brain signalling a loo break, all making up this character who is referred to in omnipresence. It is in the act of description, which utilises the common word as its means of realisation, that George becomes *George*. But more on George later.

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[5] Isherwood, C. (2019) *A single man*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Ceal Floyer, *Til' I get it right*, 2005

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Illusion-Dis(illusion)ment

This leads us to a conclusion that what is happening in front of us – particularly in art – couldn't be real but must instead be an illusion thrown up by the objects. The idea that behind an illusion, exists another act which far from being the formers equal, is the intention – or the *"real thing",* make us want to question – *Why bother if it is inaccessible?* Which is exactly the premise of the work of Stanley Brouwn and his fascination with distance.

'The distance between an image and its meaning' is a factor that plays an important role in my work and is something I have become acutely aware of when thinking about how we present ideas in art contexts. For this, I will look at a recent work of mine, *semi object (drive reduction) (2024).* Consisting of a wall which has been custom built for the gallery space to

remove access to one corner of it. Although I will discuss removal in the following chapter, for now though, the journey from initial concept to construction needs interrogating.

When asked to produce a self-portrait for a museum show, Brouwn instead decided to *"list the dimensions of the museum's rooms"* [6]. This, I find, has been a powerful work to refer to when looking at the art value of words when making W*ord* (2024) for its leaning into disappointment when breaking the illusion with a literal fact. How is this done? Well, Brouwn was making work during a great deal of technological development, himself even commenting on the popularity of air travel, beginning to render distances meaningless. By drawing our attention back to the idea of distance itself, he says they are *"recharged again […] regaining [their] meaning"*[7]. This, I feel, is the very

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[6] Herbert, M. (2016). *Tell them I said no*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
[7] Herbert, M. (2016). *Tell them I said no*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

reason I attend my work in this artefact *Word* (2024). A recharging of concept *towards* a disappointing literalism, rather than *away* from it. Distance, Brouwn suggests, can be felt simply by reading it.

It would be valid to assume that there is an element of formalism here; The validity of words as full, considered art objects through their aesthetic qualities. However, I must also recognise that you are able to draw upon those levels which are slightly submerged, whilst avoiding any unnecessary subtext. For example, although some may suggest they are separate, definitions of words could surely also be used as a literal intervention into the *'as it is'* framework I have been developing upon. It should be concluded then that *Word (2024)* is as formal as it is conceptual, turning both the word and its meaning into two, distinct, art objects. Discovering this was a decisive moment, especially when looking back at previous works like *semi object*. Rather than

developing from an initial graph or theorem a new structure, I should have instead cut that layer out completely.

It should be evident that much of my time thinking of words has been through sculpture. And I think it's important to recognise the sculptural importance of text. For example, an important element of Nina Canell's work is the inclusion of the voltages which surge through her work within the title and material lists. This is to draw attention to the *"kinetic"* nature of the work, no matter how *"immobile they might appear"*[8]. This too has become characteristic of my oeuvre as words become an important support structure in ensuring what supports the work (the object) becomes platformed, which in turn, ensures

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[8] Canell, N., Drechsler, W., Lydén, K. and Dieter Roelstraete (2010). *Nina Canell: To Let Stay Projecting as a Bit of Branch on a Log by Not Chopping it Off*. Walther Konig, Cologne.

the title becomes an imperative material construction itself. Without it, the work is obsolete. With it, Electricity, life blood, is all object. A word becomes fluid and changing.

Throughout the development of these words, formulated to reference their position within academic writing, I myself keep referring back to the institution as a space in which this work is to be viewed; be it in a gallery space, conference, or through this university task. This is not by accident, nor a mistake. Typically, much of my work, spanning text, sculpture, and print, are all manufactured for the purpose of being viewed in a fine art, institutional context. And for this, I was thinking back to Daniel Buren who, famously, both rejected and embraced the institute. Buren would frequent (amongst other things) the concept first purported by Roland Barthes, in which we must embrace an authorless aesthetic experience, where

"the projection of the individual is nil"[9]. With Buren specifically, he was working towards work which *"neither artist nor viewer could claim as belonging to him"*[10]. This is achieved within the parameters of traditional art objects. And though this was in direct reference to his relationship with zero painting, it is relevant to mention when considering the division between art words, and words on art. Firstly, Barthes original statement was itself in reference to the authored text, or rather, the divorcing of author from text. It was Buren who accidentally divorced it from this context. We only must look at his seminal text *Death of the Author* to locate a favouring for the universal readership, as opposed to individual authorship[11]. Buren then furthers this by embracing

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[9] Dorothea Von Hantelmann (2010). *How to do things with art : the meaning of art's performativity*. Zurich: Jrp-Ringier.
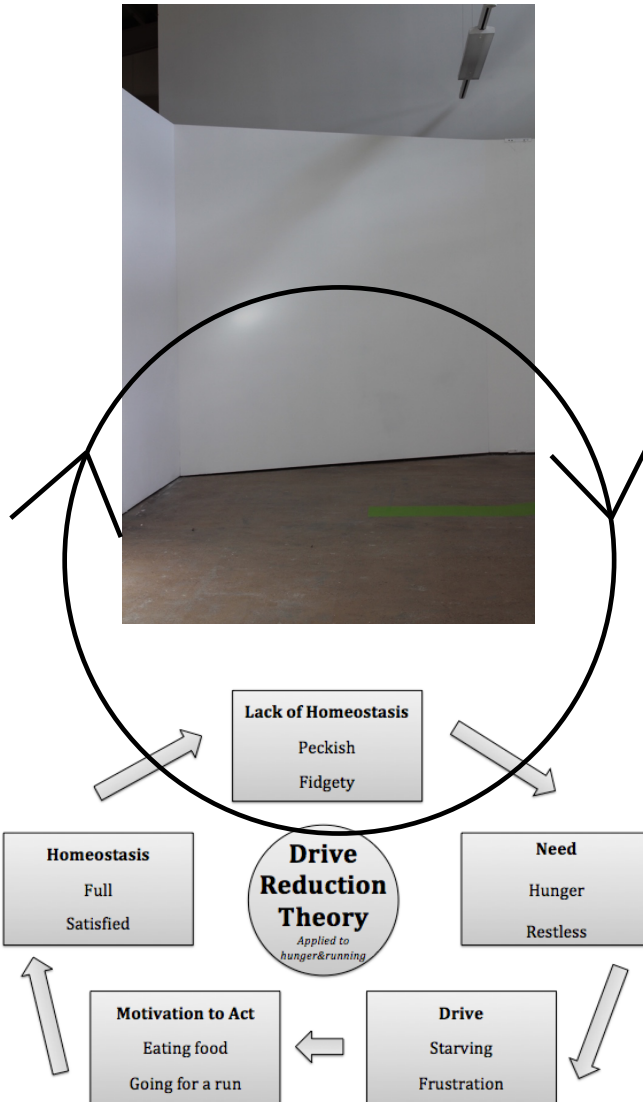
[10] Dorothea Von Hantelmann (2010). *How to do things with art : the meaning of art's performativity*. Zurich: Jrp-Ringier.

[11] Seymour, L. (2018). *Roland Barthes' The death of the author*. London: Routledge.

both form and composition of (art)objecthood, whilst rejecting the notion of personal expression. Here, in the development of *Word (2024),* I could spend hours playing with the various functions-

which lean into the formal qualities of the very words you are reading, and I am writing (see Fig 5), whilst also distancing the 'painterly' hand. Although, this still feels like an illusionary layer which makes the word exciting, meaningful. Both of which I am looking to avoid.
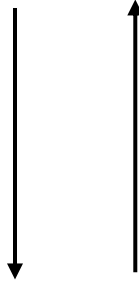
And so, the long-standing history between literacy and certain threads of theory which embark on appropriation of existing texts, or referencing nothing but a universally understood notion of what looks like – and reads like – a sentence, makes words a fertile ground for both a factorial, exploratory text, but also a conceptual, formal, artwork.

Lack of Homeostasis

Peckish

Fidgety

Homeostasis

Full

Satisfied

Drive Reduction Theory

Applied to hunger&running

Need

Hunger

Restless

Motivation to Act

Eating food

Going for a run

Drive

Starving

Frustration

Calum Louis Adams *semi object (drive reduction), Clarke Hull's theory of the same name, 2024*

Word

express (something spoken or written) in particular words

Calum Louis Adams *Word, no distance (for Stanley Brouwn)*, 2024
Calum Louis Adams *Word, literal definition of a verb,* 2024

the total number of my steps in   monaco
the total number of my steps in   mongolia
the total number of my steps in   montserrat
the total number of my steps in   morocco
the total number of my steps in   muscat and oman
the total number of my steps in   nauru
the total number of my steps in   nepal
the total number of my steps in   netherlands
the total number of my steps in   netherlands antilles
the total number of my steps in   new caledonia

Stanley Brouwn *Afghanistan – Zambia*, 1971

Calum Louis Adams *Word, bevelled with drop shadow (2024)*

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Poor-Calum

I've now finished *A Single Man*, the novel referenced earlier. George's untrusting nihilism provided a great backbone to examining both the human as an object, and the human as an aware, sentient, self; the figure pulling his legs off the side of the bed, and once he's configured his surroundings then (and only then) is he *George*. All of which I gathered from within the book's sentences. I noticed as I came to the end of the novel that his character became much more relevant to the formulation of this artefact than I had initially anticipated. The word *Queer* is referenced frequently throughout the text, both to describe an odd situation, and the main characters sexuality as George recognises himself as *'Queer'* when navigating an awkwardness around him upon interacting with others. This is furthered when he then recognises the

relationship between himself and his partner as queer, too.

I had never really considered as to why I reject the expressive, in favour of the literal and conceptual until the point where I followed George's character, parallel to writing this text. Incredibly reserved, George chooses to push people away, even those that are closest to him. It is strongly insinuated through a fear that others will not understand the deep scar left by the loss of his male partner, Jim. Characteristically, his trauma unfurls throughout the novel as an inner monologue in hundreds of pages, yet not even one word can summarise the grief to others outwardly. In concluding the novel, things made sense. My work, in being impersonal, detached, is synthesising itself within a deeply personal, queer, history. William J Simmons reinforces this when talking of Queer Art Objects in *Queer Formalism*. Stating that in queerness we are reminded that there is no such thing as

greatness, how we actually find *"liberation"* in the realisation that *"all moments, all experiences, all of our daily intimacies [are] ... good enough"[12]*. George reflects this in his personal tales of living with Jim, many of which he chooses not to share. Out of choice, but also due to necessity of the time.

In this spirit, I am removing myself as a form of refusal. A refusal which has developed from a desire so deeply intertwined with my own sense of personal history, that it would almost be disingenuous to deny that. I view myself as the othered body, which in turn, opens yourself up to a bout of *"theorizing difference"[13]* that comes from a place of non-understanding, of applying a knowing which is abstract; or rather not real, nor experienced. I ask why, in the face of such unknowing, would I reveal myself to a biased criticism that will never understand me, despite my work output.

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[12] W Simmons, W.J. (2021). *Queer Formalism*.

[13] W Simmons, W.J. (2021). *Queer Formalism*.

When speaking of refusal, we think to the term 'removal'. Such removal, like the word 'omission', is often mistakenly associated purely with a forced denial – *being* removed or *being* omitted. This ignores the tactful, or accidental, removal of yourself by your own means. I have explored this self-omission various times, and not just through the employment of words in place of myself. As mentioned earlier*, semi object, i (drive reduction),* is an example of this.   It's worth noting prior to the conclusion that I was to omit part of the exhibition space; I was working through the idea of omitting myself <u>completely</u>. I have seemingly returned to this via attending the theory behind my previous works solely, rather than my personal expression of them.

Moyra Davey talks of Louis Malle's ideas of image theft; how it has something to do with a similar *"retreat [...] a gradual seeping into a kind-of biographical*

reticence"[14] Images here are a way of rebuking the autobiographical. In taking an image (here, I use the word *image* loosely) as opposed to using an image of myself, I am in a sense continuing this retreat as mentioned earlier. If not even more so when considering the complete visual retreat into words, ideas, concepts.

You'd imagine from the discussions thus far on retreating your own history in favour of the factual word, I am stating that words are truth. In actuality, in assuming the word as truth – or, the most accurate state of description of a 'thing' – I am remarking language as *always* revealing. This, I fear, would be bias. Barthes states *"It is the misfortune of language not to be able to authenticate itself"[15],* which he does so as a comparison to photography which he believes

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[14] Moyra Davey (2020). *Index Cards*. New Directions Publishing Corporation.

[15] Barthes, R. (2020). *Camera lucida*. London: Vintage Classics.

to flow between presentation and retention, of those moments that *"have-been"*[16], not necessarily *"are-there"*. What he means by this, as I can only assume, is that although the image may be posed or artificial, what is in the frame *was* there. An undeniable *fact*. This, of course, was written prior to post-production like we know it today. I guess this is furthered by Morton as discussed earlier, when navigating knowing as a need to check against something which is definite, of which language cannot be guaranteed to be.

And so, in the development of this piece of writing & artefact, I also commissioned a parallel work. A self-portrait, edited by a fashion editor to create a more feminine outcome. He added lashes, longer hair, smoother skin, blush and facial thinning – All through postproduction. Although I was there in the photo, and it may be how I feel, that is not what I *look* like. I am throwing up an illusion, being dishonest. By engaging

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[16] Barthes, R. (2020). *Camera lucida*. London: Vintage Classics.

with such an overt method of bringing the "inside-out",
I experience a similar grief that both Barthes and
George experience; that of loss. Although, in this
sense, I lose what I never had. How is that honest? Or,
a benefit more than removing myself would be?

I find it imperative that in a chapter where I discuss
personal reasons for distancing (my)self from what I
produce, through the lens of queerness, that the
writing shifts from direct, matter of fact, to something
with much more fluidity. If I relate this back to the
artefact emerging both from and alongside this piece
of writing, then experimenting with the implantation of
images of myself, and words which relate to myself, I
can engage with *Sounding Out* as mentioned earlier.
Historicity is not necessary in the formulation of *Word*
(2024), but instead if anything, It shows the great risk
taken when sounding myself out in the work, as every
iteration of the artefact takes directly from the word
count. And literally, my full name is much larger than

the rest of the artefact. There is a lot to lose when chasing your own tail, and much more to gain cutting it off, seemingly.

Calum Louis Adams Calum-Louis Adams, Lipstick Edit *(2024)*

Calum Louis Adams *Word still, but engaging with my name and face (2024)*

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Conclusion

To refer to the beginning in order to end. In Steyerl's noting of how you are made to be invisible, the range of methods span actual/physical, to ephemeral/societal which in turn validates *Word (2024),* whilst leaving it open ended for adaptation. Words can be slippy, imbued with double meanings, both personal and shared. They can be matter of fact, painful or literal. Canonically, art essays fail to embrace that. However, *Word (2024)* and indeed the work I produced leading up to this, has synthesised itself within a tradition which sought to upend and interrogate the word, the essay, and the sentence, as art object. This too is done through the lens of an expanded definition of what an object is, informed by Object-Orientated Ontology and Conceptual Art which could determine visual differences in the word, as still being related in some way to the former. Like my name, being a word just like

the word *'word'*. By responding to this text with art objects drawn from its very sentences, I am testing the format of academic writing as a playground for art making whilst displaying the reflexivity of presentation within art contexts, and how better to play with the institutional framework in which we deliver artworks.

I find it imperative to discuss intention here. As visual artists, it is through intention that we make. In committing to this artefact, I frequently had moments in which I doubted the validity of this project's art-ness. However, the point of this exercises is that writing to declare words as art objects, or 'artefact' – is a valid method of production, like painting to express an emotion, or photographing yourself to show what you look like.

So, as is the case with much of my oeuvre, the work of art (collection of words) and the academic text (collection of words) are one in the same and must be

viewed together. I have been working towards a total, visual, stripping back. So, really, if all that can be said has been said in the act of saying, why not leave it at that?

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