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In Uncertain Words: Amelia Crouch – Leeds Arts University

Hello, I am an artist, I teach at Leeds Arts University here in the U.K. My talk is structured around a series of my own artworks.

I will start with a piece that I made in 2013. I will let it play for a bit before I speak about it.

(Ifs & Butts available on vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/73465972>)

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if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
art if ice	but
if	but
if	un but toned
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but
if	but

Ifs & Butts, Digital video, 2013

Central to my work as an artist is an interest in meaning being relational and context dependent.

Words in a sentence only make sense because of the other words around them.
Words in a given language only make sense in relation to their similarity and difference from other words.

As the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure wrote in 1916: "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others." (1916, p.107)

In Ifs and Butts, the words selected are somewhat arbitrary. Chosen only because they contain the shorter words 'if' and 'but.' They flicker on screen in ambiguous combinations that refer to nothing concrete beyond themselves.

There is perhaps just the hint of a meaning or a fleeting evocation, before the words move on.

Language here is presented not as a transparent sign system, clearly conveying information about or access to the world, but as a kind of self-referential game.

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Ifs & Butts, installation images, 2016, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester

Much of my artwork is concerned with indeterminacy or uncertainty of meaning.

'If' and 'but' are words that defer or doubt. Moreover the overall meaning of the work is oblique and open to interpretation.

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Can, will, did, Vinyl lettering – wall text, 2013-16

To give a further example from the same body of work. The words 'can, will and did' provide the title and spines of this vinyl wall text. They are words with conviction. I can do it, I will do it. I did. But the longer words that surround them undermine their resolve.

One aim of my work is to explore how meaning-making happens. I seek to trouble a sometimes presumed simple link between word and world.

I take pleasure in wordplay, in meaning that never rests. And I enjoy the process of working out what I can do within the structures, rules and limitations of the English language.

There is also some political impetus to what I do; aligned with the Brechtian distancing effect. By disrupting habitual patterns of reading I hope to encourage attention to language; attention to how we do things with words.

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would(n't)

Recently, however, when paying attention to political language, I have started to wonder if politicians are beating artists hands down at denaturalising the relationship between words and reality.

Consider Donald Trump stating in July that he didn't see any reason why it would be Russia that had been responsible for apparent tampering in the U.S. election. The next day he corrected his statement and said that he'd meant to say wouldn't. That he didn't see any reason why it wouldn't be Russia. (CNN, 2018)

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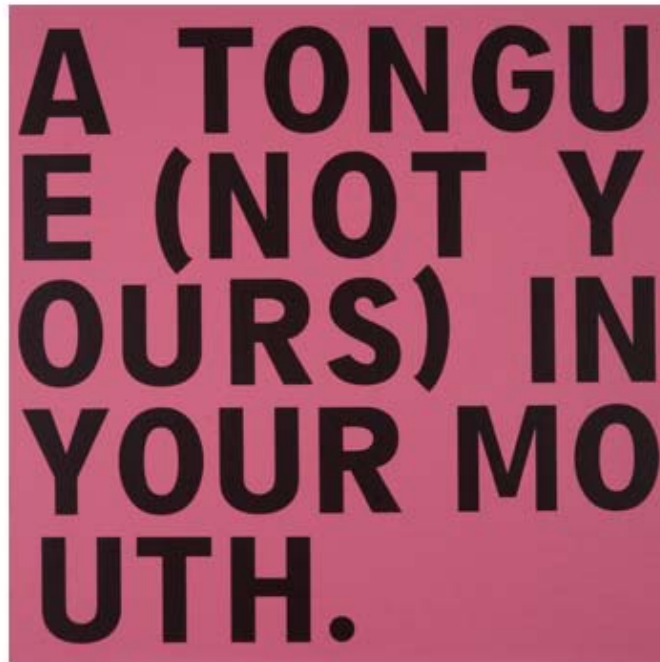
(in)credible

Or think back to the end of September when Trump called Christine Blasey Ford a “very credible witness” (BBC News, 2018) after she testified at a Senate judiciary committee against supreme court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Then just a few days later Trump mocked her testimony during a political rally. (Guardian 2018).

Trump pays less heed to actuality than to what his given audience wants to hear.

And whilst artworks can draw attention to the absurdity of such vacillations; statements such as his make me wonder whether artworks that mimic loose language are enough.

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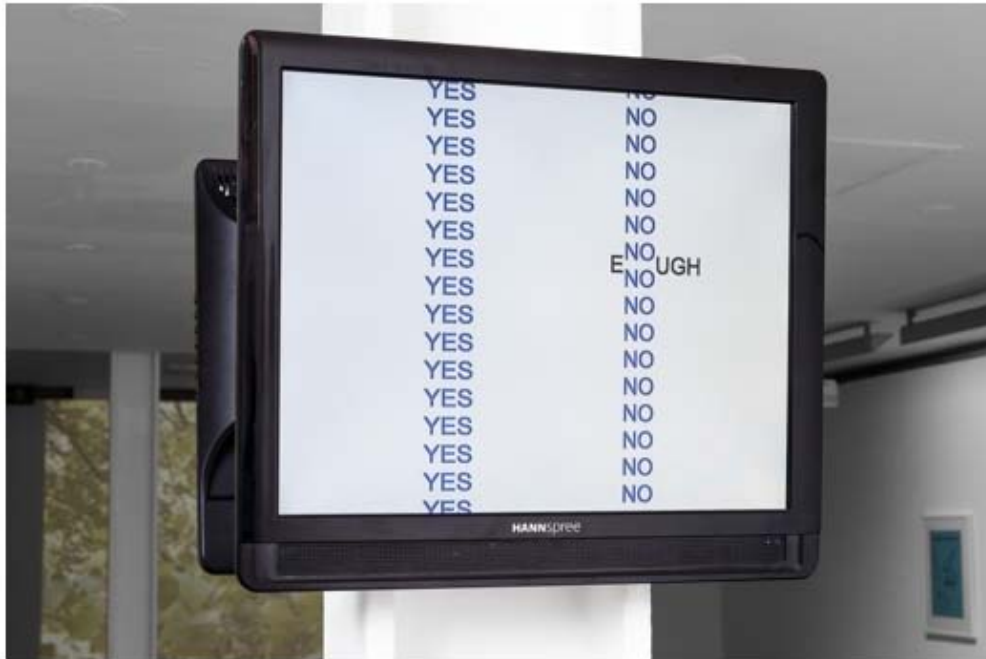
Tongue (someone else's words), Screen print, 2008

In 'a recent episode of the BBC radio 4 programme 'Word of Mouth' guests discussed whether there is a crisis of language in public and political debate. The writer Marina Warner, suggested that there has been a shift from a supposed objective public voice to an affective one, prioritising feeling over fact. (BBC R4, 2018)

Unsubstantiated words delivered with apparent certainty.

The role I choose, in contrast, for my work is to deliver uncertain words but with a rigour or method, coherent within the framework of each particular work.

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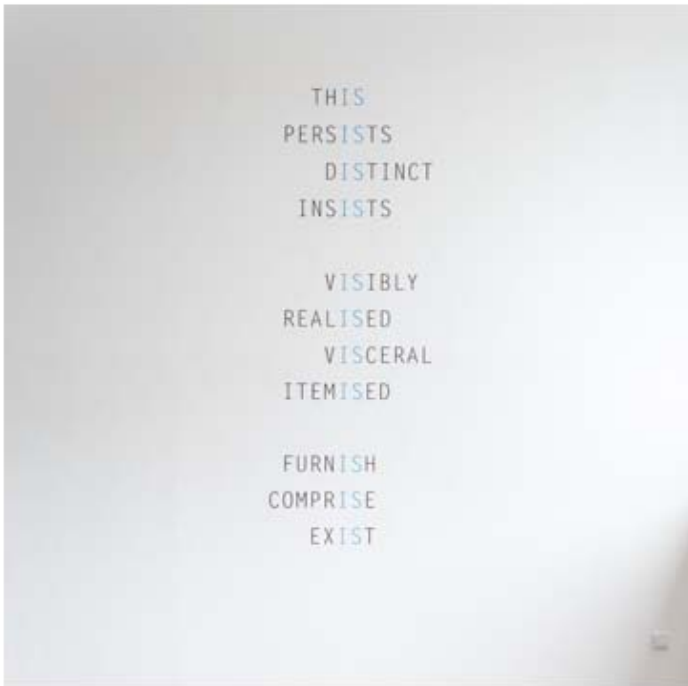
Ayes & Knows, Digital video, 2013

‘Ifs and Butts’ – which we saw at the start – has a partner work ‘Ayes and Knows.’ This pairs longer words containing ‘yes’ with those containing ‘no.’ The works have rules, based on the letter patterns of English language (simply that the longer words must contain the given shorter word – if, but, yes or no).

The word lengths are constrained by the dimensions of the screen and a visual decision that 11 letters ought be the maximum word length. The animation style of each work differs too. Where in ‘ifs and butts’ the words flicker indecisively, in ‘Ayes and Knows,’ words alternate in a binary fashion. A choice going back and forth from one certainty to its opposite.

In regards to the aim of delivering uncertain words with rigour, it is perhaps a grand claim for these fleeting words, but I envisage these works a plea for the worth of uncertainty and as a plea for precision in a political climate that wants for both.

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Is , Vinyl lettering – wall text, 2013-16

Of course there is more to investigate in the relationship between word and world than to settle on the assertion where I began that meaning is mutable and dependent on context.

I've never quite felt satisfied with the structuralist and poststructuralist approach to language that threaded through my Fine Art education – where words are taken to be arbitrary signifiers and treated as if unmoored from things.

Often my work has turned toward the side of language that Saussure bracketed and put aside: individual instances of language use and the physiological and psychological aspects of this.

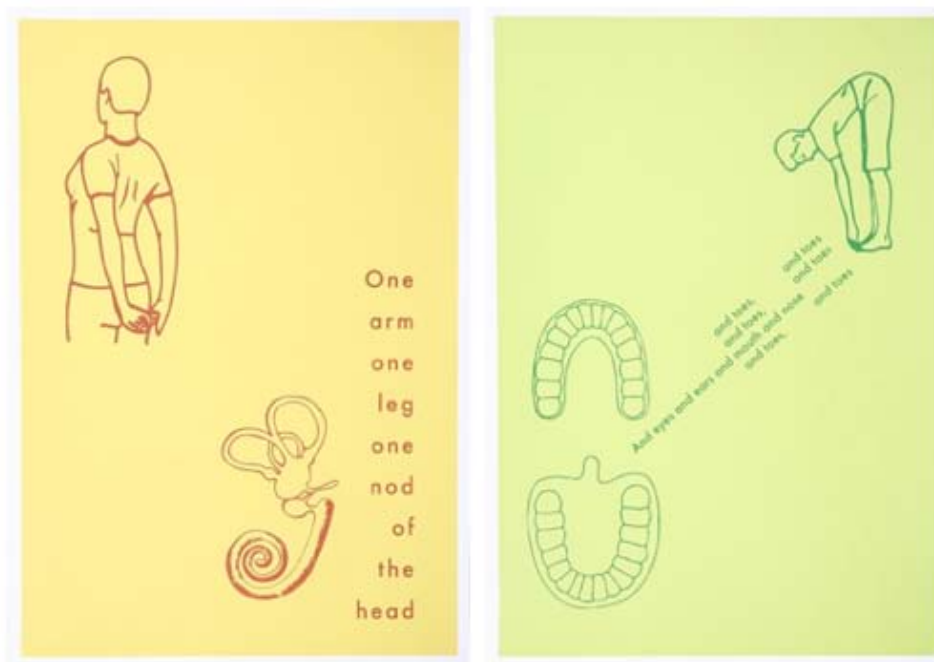


Consider, for example in this series of screen prints words are related not just to other words but to the body – to voice, sound and song.

The prints were inspired – in a round-about manner – by Guy Deutscher’s popular linguistics book ‘Through The Language Glass.’ In it he describes how different languages inconsistently subdivide and name body parts. For instance in English we have a single word ‘neck’ to designate the whole of this tube joining torso to head. In Hebrew – his mother tongue – there are distinct words for its front and its back. (Deutscher, 2011. p.16)

I started thinking about children’s songs as mechanisms that teach and reinforce linguistic and motor skills.

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Sensible Objects, A2 Screenprints, 2015

If I zoom in on a couple of these images you can see the words in both of these prints. They are taken from children's songs that have accompanying actions.

Language use is learnt in interaction with the physical stuff of the world.

Deutscher contends – like Saussure before him – that words are arbitrary, conventional signifiers. But differs when he extends his consideration to the concepts that lie behind language. He sees the way that we delineate objects, parts of objects or concepts not as arbitrary but as a confluence of cultural convention and innate perceptual mechanisms.

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Prepositions, Digital video, 2015

I will show you an extract of a short video I made about spatial language as a way of exploring this.

The work draws upon papers by psychologists Keith Coventry, Simon Garrod and colleagues. My imagery comes from experiments they have done to test use of spatial terms (in, on and over).

Show video extract (available on vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/166955483>)

Language use here is shown to be determined by extra-linguistic spatial and perceptual factors. Plus affordances – understandings about what an object is and how an object should be used.

Coventry, Carmichael and Garrod say: “It is by coming to know what things do that we learn what they are. What they are for is much more than their shape, their size, and their colour, it is above all what they are capable of doing, or what can be done with them.” (1994, p.291)

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Prepositions and Can, will, did, Installation image, 2016, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester

Spatial language involves what Steven Pinker describes as a “compromise between geometry and functionality.” (2007, p.187) It is based both on innate perceptual capacities – such as faculties of vision – and on culturally determined choices about objects and their use.

Pinker draws upon Kantian categories of space, time and causality, asserting: “we can’t think without them.” (Ibid, p.157). Such categories are embedded in our perception of the world and our language reflects them too.

However because language is a poor tool for accuracy (a digital medium mapped onto an analogue world) in the translation from perception to articulation there is significant room for variation.

We rely on shared understanding to fill in the gaps. And by implication it is possible to construe the same situation in multiple ways.

Moving beyond spatial language in particular, Daniel Chandler in his guide to semiotics puts it thus: “One person’s hovel is another person’s home.” (2007, p.62)

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Attention is rarely directed to the space between the leaves, Digital video, 2016

Where some of my artwork – such as ‘Prepositions’ – has focused on language use in a fairly abstract way, “Attention is rarely directed to the space between the leaves.” considers the role of situation construal in different belief systems.

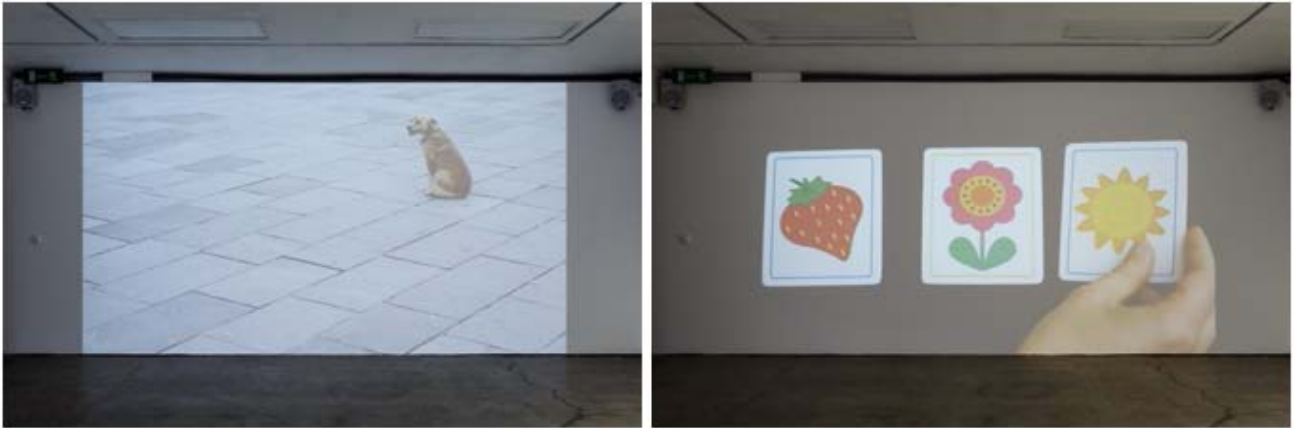
The work was informed by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘Philosophical Investigations’ in which he makes a distinction between ‘seeing’ and ‘seeing as.’ Looking at the image on the top left, you might see only black lines on a white background. Or, you might see it as a duck. Or, if you turn your head to the left, see it as a rabbit – what he calls “the dawning of an aspect” of seeing.

N.R. Hanson in ‘Patterns of Discovery’ expands Wittgenstein’s thesis to consider the idea of ‘seeing that’, whereby observation of x is shaped by prior knowledge of x. (1972, p20-25).

He asks, for example, would astronomers Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe have seen the same thing when watching the sun rise, given that Brahe believed that the sun moved around the earth and Kepler that the earth moved around the sun.

I am not going to show you any footage from the work – which is a video piece – but you can see from these four stills that where ‘Prepositions’ alluded to systematic laboratory-type experiments, ‘Attention’ was collaged together from varied footage.

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Attention is rarely directed to the space between the leaves, Digital video, 2016

Here are a couple of images of the work installed as a projection. (*Available to watch on vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/173752031>*)

In the visual-language of the piece I attempted to signal a shift from focusing on abstract situations to real world language use.

My work is increasingly interested in language not as an abstract, grammatical system but in how words, visual perception and physical encounter intertwine. One reason I think art is a productive arena in which to explore verbal meaning is that it is inherently visual and spatial, so can foreground such aspects of language.

At the moment I am researching how reading relies on visual brain areas and how acts of listening often involve picturing. This will, perhaps provide content for future work.

A second direction that I might take my work is to link ideas about language and situation construal to more overtly social and political themes; drawing on the work of cognitive linguist George Lakoff who considers how metaphor underpins political beliefs.

One of the privileges of being an artist is being a bit of a dilettante!

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OF MAN, HIS AFFECTIONS, & SENCES

Arterie
Apple of the Eye
Arme
Armehole
Ankle
Art
Admiration
Anger
Amity
Affection

Body
Bone
Beard
Breath
Breast
Bosome
Back
Backbone
Belly
Buttock
Braine
Blood
Bowells
Bladder
Black
Browne
Blew
Boldness
Bashfullness
Bitterness
Blushing

Caull
Color
Confidence
Compassion
Cortisie
Civility
Certaintie
Collerbone
Carriage
Cogitation
Consideration
Complex

Dreame
Doubting
Dispaire
Distrust
Desire
Dread
Dypleasure
Discourtesie
Discredit
Discourse

Eare
Eie brow
Eie lid
Elbow
Envie
Error
Ennity
Entrales

ffaich
ffear
ffidelity
ffoolishness
ffavour
ffriendship
ffashion

Gumms
Gullet
Gall
Graie
Greene
Gristle
Gutts
Greife
Gladness

Head
Haire
Hand
Huckle-bone
Hipp
Ham
Heele
Heart
Hearing
Hatred
Hope
Heaviness
Humanity

Iaw
Ioint
Ignorance
Indignent
Ioy
Iollaitie
Ire
Impudence
Imprudence

Irrationality
Infidelity
Idleness
Imagination

Knockle
Knee
Kidneys
Knowledge

Leaness
Lip
Loine
Leg
Lungs
Liver
Laughter
Love
Loathing
Lock of haire

Member
Marrow
Muscle
Mouth
Memory
Mind
Mistakeing
Merry
Malice
Modesty
Manners
Midriff
Meditation
Mirth
Mourning

Nose
Nontrills
Neck
Naille
Navell
Nipple
Opinion.

Poore
Pap
Phemie
Pañence
Prudence
Pleasure
Puddings
Pitty
Passion
Presumption
Physiognomy

Rib
Red
Russet
Rellish
Reason
Remembrance
Rejoycing

Soule
Skin
Sinew
Soot
Spindle
Shoulder
Shoulderblade

Span
Side
Shin
Stomack
Spleene
Sight
Smell
Sweete
Steake
Sower
Sharpe
Sound
Sigh
Sleepe
Snorting
Suspition
Sadness

Shame
Sorrow
Subtilnes
Slumber
Sobing
Speaking
Sole of the foot

Temple
Tooth
Tongue
Throate
Thumb
Thigh
Toe
Tast
Touch
Trust
Talking

Voyce
Veine
Vrin
Visage
Vse

White of the Eye
Wrist
White
Wisdom
Will
Witt
Wrinkle
Wondering
Wan
Wrath
Wish
Waking

Yellow

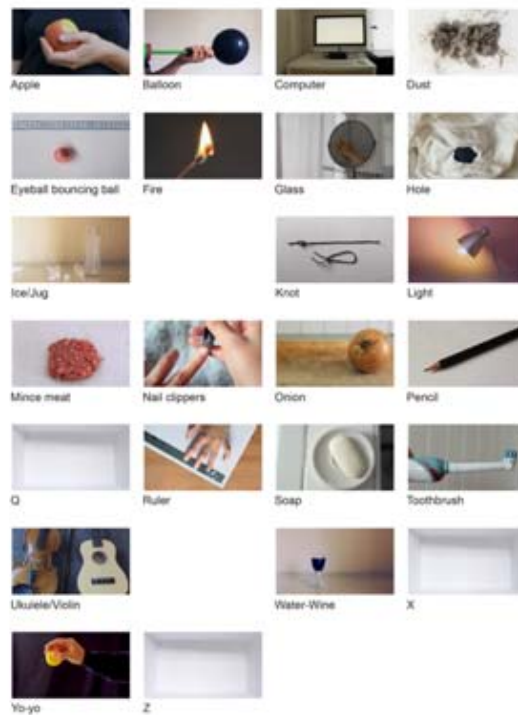
A list by Isaac Newton, 1686, 1687.

But, for today, I will finish with one final example work.

Still in progress, it combines a video piece with two lists. The first list – which provided the starting point for the piece – is this one: ‘Of Man his affections and sences;’ written by Isaac Newton in the mid 1600s.

Newton is an emblematic figure of enlightenment science, representing a period that involved systematic attempts to understand the universe and to subject everything in it to universal laws. Yet to contemporary eyes his list seems strangely illogical, alphabetically juxtaposing physical body parts with emotions and personal qualities.

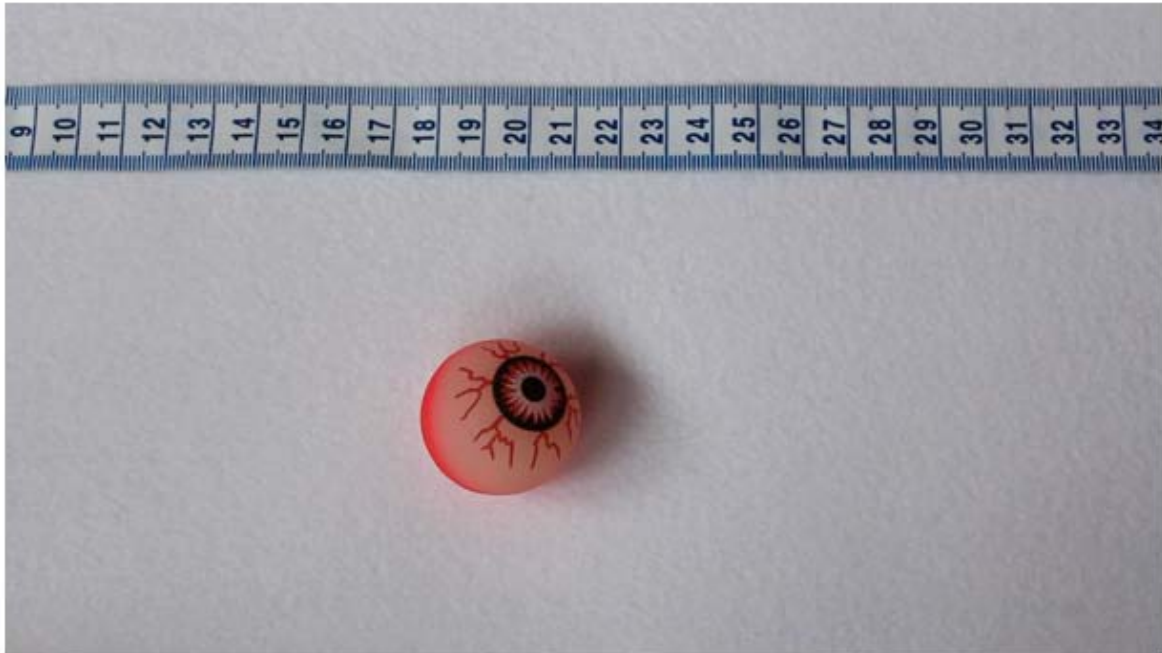
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The image track of the video goes through a series of objects that are ordered alphabetically – Apple, Balloon, Computer, Dust and so on. I wanted to create something quite methodical from everyday objects that are otherwise random and slightly absurd.

A soundtrack monologue considers how our understanding of self has changed historically, influenced by technologies from writing and the alphabet to computing. And it discusses how – during the Enlightenment – there was a shift from pronouncing truth by appeal to authority or common wisdom to relying on evidence and empirical test.

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A Commonplace, Digital video, in progress

I'm just going to play you the section of it that talks about how I recategorized the list.

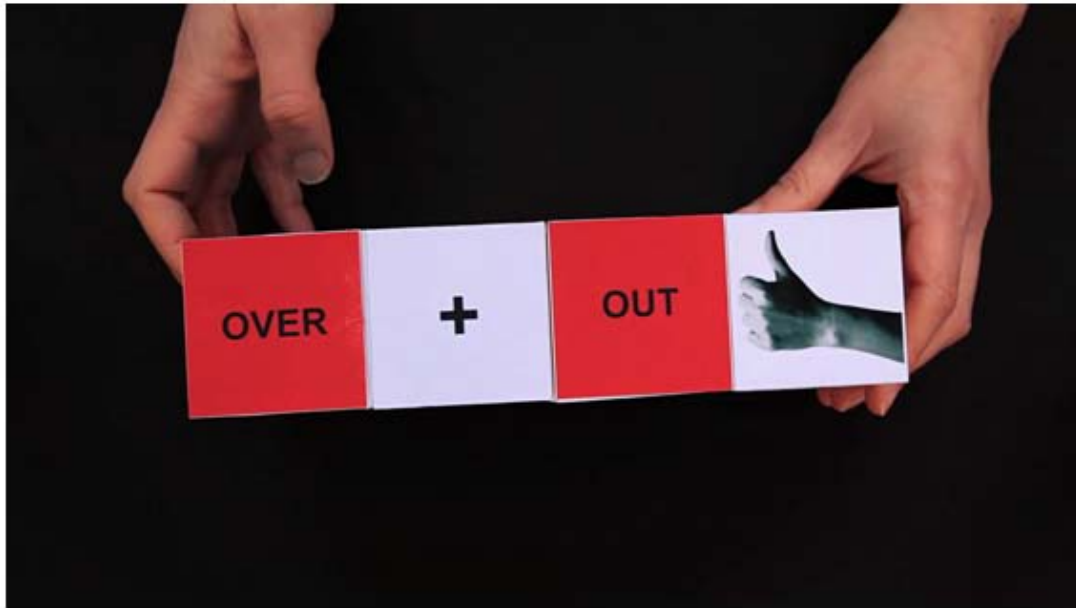
Show video

To sum up:

The starting point for this work is verbal – Newton's list. The act of re-categorising the list is another instance of my interest in the mutable and context-dependent nature of linguistic meaning. Did the list mean the same thing for Newton as for me?

Meaning, moreover, is seen to be imbricated with the physical stuff of the world; our experience of our bodies and our perceptual limitations. Words sit suggestively at the intersection of an individual speaker's cognitive endowment, cultural conventions and a socially agreed system of rules.

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