

On Paper, Lines & Puffs of Language: A Film with Artist Lizzie Ridout

My name's Lizzie Ridout and I'm an artist based in Falmouth in Cornwall. I work predominantly with material manifestations of language, and I'm particularly interested in how we read, how we write, and how we speak, and the forms that all of these take. This year I was awarded an Artist Development Bursary from The Box, Plymouth.

The bursary's been really useful over the summer to continue working on some unfinished ideas and start some new projects, and also to reflect a bit on how all of these works are actually interconnected. Shortly after getting the bursary, I was invited to take part in residency in a shed, which is all organised by George Gendall. That was three weeks on an allotment. We're going to be conservation site and I was exploring these connections between language and nature. I was also simultaneously asked to create content for a presentation at Symposium in Bern in Switzerland. That's been organised by the artist and writer Tina Meltzer, and it was a really exciting opportunity to create written and visual content for her book and Atlas of Aspect Change. It will look at language and perception and shifting meanings in the arts and philosophy.

Because I work so much with ideas around language in the physical forms that it takes, I keep butting up against paper as this backdrop, upon which a lot of our language plays out. But I also find it really interesting as subject in itself. Paper's this democratic medium that we use almost unthinkingly, and yet it's incredible because it also allows us to connect with people across time and space. It encapsulates so many interesting paradoxes it's vulnerable and strong. It's ancient. Yet it's contemporary. It's the original, but it's also copies. And it's a space that records our labour. It controls our time and really significantly, it creates history and memory. I feel like papers this accomplished to human beings. It captures and mimics our behaviours and a bit like our voices that disperse that into the world beyond us. Paper continues ourselves beyond our actual bodies. Sometimes paper just feels almost human.

Sheet of papers, the space of potential. You can liberate it through the possibility of the marks that we make on it, but at the same time, for many it's actually really limiting. It can be really daunting to have a blank sheet of paper in front of you, which you're trying to articulate your thoughts onto in some form.

I became really interested in lines and exercise books. These grids and rules and parameters that dictate how and what form our thinking takes. They contain, they direct they channel. There's so much research that supports the idea that as we get older, we get less creative and some people say that that's in part the fault of writing because as kids we learned to think in a linear fashion informed by reading and writing, and that literally changes the shape of our thoughts.

But of course, reading also allows us to access other peoples dreams and memories and thoughts, so it has this other side to it too. I started making exercise books that could be the opposite of this limiting. I thought about the spaces that make us dream and so for me that's about looking up and looking out. It's about clouds and horizons and space looking into ad space. So I created these books that resemble regular exercise books, but the lines that we'd normally write on add up specific distances, so the total distance of all the lines in one of the books, for example, adds up to the distance that my horizon line is from me. Another one will reach the height of low level cloud formation.

I've also been making a series of drawings where the lines will eventually reach the command line that's 100 kilometres above Earth, means sea level, and this this internationally agreed height at which outer space begins. And I really wanted to draw a line actually that would reach the moon, but I realised that it would take longer than I've got left of my life and also I can't afford the paper use huge amounts of paper.

So there's this theory that a piece of paper folded 103 times as thick as the observable universe. It sounds completely improbable and I guess in many ways it is, but as a concept it's somehow quite appealing. It felt like such a complex idea needed quite simple treatment, so I began making a series of drawings that documented paper and how it responded to different types of fold. So I set things up. I set sheets of paper up like still lives in my studio and very early in the morning I'd get up and draw for an hour each morning before the day began. These drawings became a series that collectively visualised 103 folds.

I've continued considering paper in this way, treating it like a life model in front of me and sort of observing it under particular conditions, particularly this idea of the fold and how the moment you touch a sheet of paper, you inevitably mark it. So in that sense, the parallel with the human body is quite interesting.

I've also been photographing it and starting to work on some animations that will make sheets of paper display certain human behaviours. In particular, I'm interested in breathing. One of the things that I latched onto during the Residency in a Shed was the ancient belief in connections between air and breath and utterance. All of these external demonstrations of the soul I felt like there were parallels I guess, between paper and voice, as these containers of humanness.

There were some really interesting ideas about our disconnection from nature, in part being due to the invention of writing and our utter reliance on it, and belief that language and writing in particular writing is what creates A civilised society.

The idea is that our ancient selves were once closer to air and they recognise that not only as this sort of life giving nourishing source but as the actual psyche. Because I'd already been thinking that I might look at speech when I began the residency, I happened to take it on an old 1973 Beezer annual thinking that I might do something with the speech balloons that shown in it. And in the end, that turned out to be this really fundamental material that I used throughout the three weeks that I was working up there. Cutting up these bits of paper and playing with them and thinking about the parallels between the form of a speech balloon in a comic and this icon that everyone understands as representing speech alongside the thought of clouds in the sky. They're also this visual demonstration of air actually existing: we're aware of the sky because of the clouds that are in it most often.

I focused a lot on spoken words as objects and as vessels and expressions that move beyond ourselves to continue to exist, even if we can't see them.

I think word balloons are quite deceptive. They appear really simple, but actually they're another one of these paradoxes, a bit like the sheet of paper they encompass a range of oppositions and that actually defy easy categorization.

Speech and thought balloons are continually shifting state because we, when we look at them, we see them both as a piece of text, but also as an image and then a sound as well.

So overall, I guess the bursary has been incredibly helpful in that it came just when I needed to carve out time to move forward with all of these things. It's not just that it's been a financial prop. It's actually provided me with some much needed encouragement really. It's been such a tough period for so many people and to be given this kind of support to just get on to research, to make and to think. It's a privilege, really. I spend a lot of time working on my projects alone and so it's been incredibly buoying for me.