

# THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART

RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK 2014

Where shall we put the  
azalea, darling? Over  
there in the corner,  
under the triangle of  
light poster and next to  
the window?

*An essay in Wood, Death and Architecture: New  
Work by Alex Gross*

Submitted by John Calcutt



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### BOOKS



Wood Death Architecture  
Alex Gross

£10.00

*Wood Death Architecture* documents Alex Gross' recent work made as a result of his residency at Tramway after he completed his Master of Fine Art at The Glasgow School of Art in 2006.

Gross' work is complemented by three provocative essays by John Calcutt, Jim Colquhoun and Charles Blanc. The book contains numerous drawings and installation images of Gross' unusual architectural structures (indoors and outdoors), including new work he has since made for the Transmission Gallery 'members show' 2007 in Glasgow and NEUBAU, Galeri Box, Akureyi in Iceland.

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**Artists** Alex Gross  
**Authors** John Calcutt, Jim Colquhoun, Charles Blanc  
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# OUTPUT

## Title

Where shall we put the azalea, darling? Over there in the corners,  
under the triangle of light poster and next to the window?

## Submission No.

2

## Authors/Creators

John Calcutt

An essay in the form of a short story that dramatizes and gives narrative form to ideas concerning possible relations between sculpture, architecture and nature in a non Euclidian universe. The story has a sad ending.

# CONTEXT

My research consistently addresses a set of interlinked questions. Beneath the superficial dissimilarity of my various outputs, these questions remain constant, persistent, structural.

Each output, however, may issue from a differing of their hierarchical arrangement. The outputs may also appear to differ insofar as – crudely speaking - some attempt to address these questions primarily through form, whereas in others they are engaged with on the level of content.

These questions are presented in outline form below:

# CONTEXT

***Ekphrasis: What is the nature of the relation between visual art and language?***

This is a longstanding question within the traditions of western philosophical thought, extending back at least to Horace's dictum, *ut pictura poesis*, and continuing through Lessing to more recent thinkers and writers such as Mallarme, Lyotard, and W J T Mitchell. As Mitchell suggests, the territorial border between these two provinces is always under dispute, constantly shifting, historically volatile and, finally, ideological. This, then, begs my next question:

***How is the relation between visual art and writing about visual art to be reconfigured under specifically contemporary conditions?***

First, I would argue, one must attempt to come to an understanding of the contemporary by means of historical investigation. As a researcher I would consider myself first and foremost an historian, rather than a would-be literary stylist.

# CONTEXT

***When writing addresses itself to an external object such as a work of art, must it necessarily assume a second order status in relation to that external object?*** In other words, what is the nature of the identity and status of such writing: is it fundamentally supplementary, parergonal, or incidental? A key concept in my methodological approach is provided by Derrida's reflections on the parergon.

# CONTEXT

***To what extent should writing aspire to transparency, and to what extent should it insist upon its intractable materiality?***

Writing is the medium through which much of my research is conducted, and through which it is always expressed. The relation between form and content in such writing about art thus becomes a central issue. It is widely agreed that art in the modern period (i.e. since c.1850) has been characterized by an insistence upon a foregrounding of the means of (re)presentation. The techniques of naturalism and illusionism have been systematically challenged and dismantled in order to better serve the demands of historically changing notions of realism. The writing that has attempted to address this art has, by contrast, remained relatively undisturbed by such innovation. In many instances my writing attempts to assert a quasi-autonomy in relation to its objects of enquiry, whilst situating the reader as a co-producer of meaning, an active mediator between quasi-autonomous 'texts'.

This question is of particular relevance to the present Output. In attempting to create a fictional world located in some unspecified time before 'modern' understandings of time, space, fixity and unified identity (in a word, reality) came into existence, the intention is to suggest that such ideas are constructs, and thus subject to historical forces and historical change.

Certain fundamental ideas informing these thought processes were provided by Roberto Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (Vintage, 1994) and Octavio Paz's *Convergences* (Bloomsbury, 1990). In particular, I was struck by these writers' thoughts on the rise of language and the death of metamorphosis as a credible phenomenon.

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# CONTEXT

***What is the nature of historical investigation?***

Siding with theorists such as Hayden White and Mark Poster (among many others), I would claim that the work of the historian consists of various textual operations: it is inescapably inter-textual (i.e. all historical artefacts may be thought of as texts of one kind or another). Put simply: history is a mode of writing. This claim triggers my next research question:

***Does history – as a form of writing – have any special claim upon truth?***

How is it to be distinguished from fiction? In the light of these inevitable questions my research attempts to explore relations between truth and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, within the written text.

# CONTEXT

The following examples of some of my earlier work are intended to demonstrate that my current Outputs (especially Outputs 1, 2 and 3) are to be understood in the context of a line of enquiry and a methodological approach that stretches back to the mid-1990s.



# CONTEXT

Catalogue essay for *Full Fathom Five*, exhibition in Ohio State University by members of GSA SoFA staff, 1996.

The essay comprises short paragraphs interspersed with lines from The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus*.

Several narrative threads are woven through the paragraphs: a sea journey by a figure named Cristoforo; the imagined thoughts of Trismegistus, an ancient Mage immersed in numerology; a striptease show.

All of the imagery in the essay is inspired by the work of the five artists.

Some of the thematic concerns of the essay are also a response to the nature of the event itself (an exhibition of works by five UK artists held in Columbus, Ohio).

*Mister city p'liceman sitting pretty little p'licemen in a row*

Hot gets hotter as the now unfastened waistcoat slips from glistening shoulders, along down-covered arms and onto soft Atrixo™ fingers, which then drop it limp to the floor. Passion executes a double-take, however, with the simultaneous revelation of a streak of scarlet sculpted Lurex™ hell bent on holding the breasts in place and barely under cover. Embraceable You.

*See how they fly like Lucy in the sky, see how they run.*

*I'm crying*

More interesting, possibly, to think of five as a kind of sign or omen. Perhaps Trismegistus found in the sign of five the number of religion, it being the number of God united to that of woman. With religion comes faith, and faith does not consist of the affirmation of this sign or that, but of a genuine and constant aspiration towards the truths which are veiled by all symbolisms. Eliphas nodded in silent assent.

*Yellow matter custard, dripping from a dead dog's eye.*

Supple undulations of pelvis and thighs accompany the removal of cut-down Levis™, which inch their way down LadyShaved™ legs to the ground where they remain, as meaningless as least season's model. Heartbeats quicken, chests tighten, pupils dilate. It's Witchcraft.

*Crabalocker fishwife.*

*Pornographic priestess*

The virus, she said, would affect brain patterns and bodily functions in ways that we could scarcely imagine. We might age overnight, for example; or wake up one morning rejuvenated. Our sexual organs might mutate in such ways as to render obsolete our cherished discrimination between male and female. We might find ourselves unaccountably attracted to trees, or to certain insects. According to her magazine we might end up having no control over our bodily temperature (recent scientific research, she said, suggested that those rare cases of spontaneous human combustion already provided evidence of the existence of the virus).

# CONTEXT

Catalogue essay for *Alison Watt: Fold. New Paintings 1996-97*. Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh, 1997.

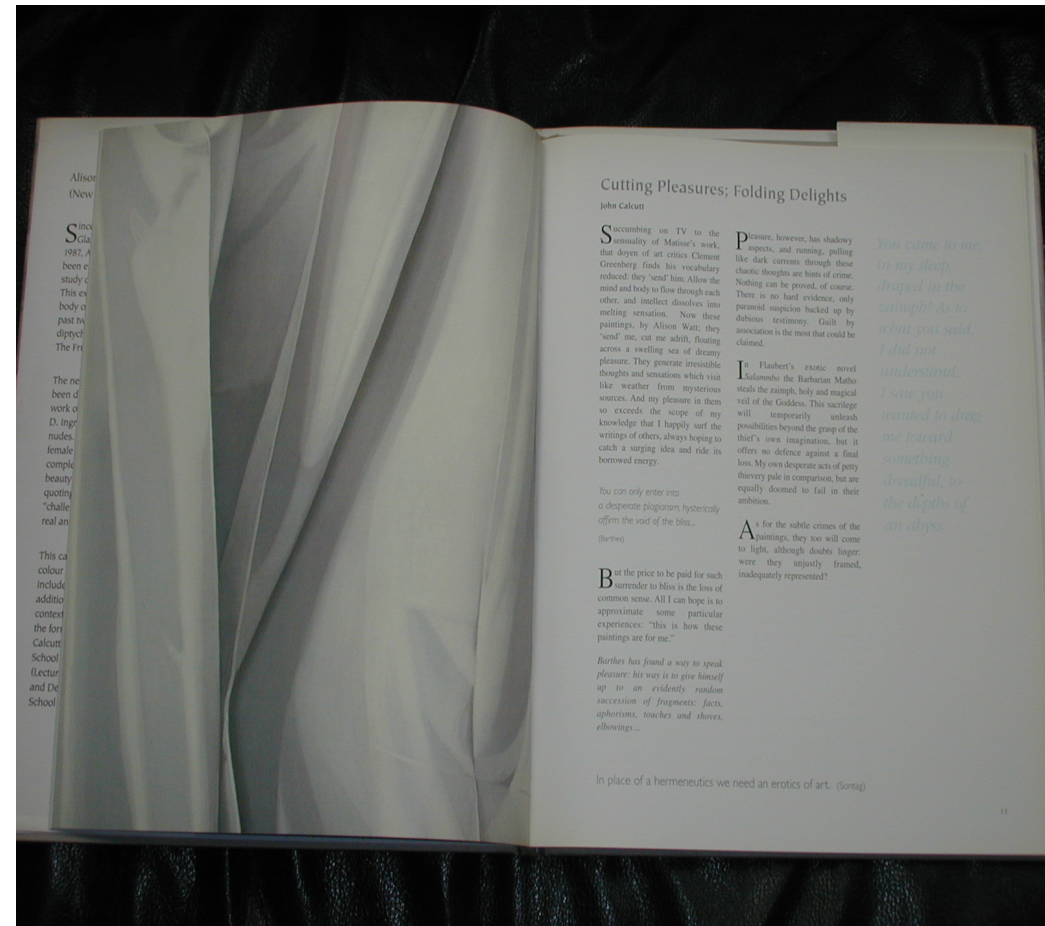
The essay has a montage structure.

The essay is typographically varied, employing a range of typefaces, font sizes and colours.

The thematic currents flowing through the essay are addressed to questions of folding, cutting and sexuality.

The contents and appearance of the essay were determined by an interpretation of the artist's work in which imagery of folded fabric and pictorial techniques of 'slicing' were foregrounded.

The essay employed ideas from a range of thinkers, including Derrida, Deleuze, Barthes and Lacan, whilst its typographic format is indebted to the example of Derrida's *Glas* (1974).



# CONTEXT

*Views of the West of Scotland.*

Essay on the work of Sans Façon, 2001

The essay comprises 9 paragraphs.

Between each paragraph data are interspersed.

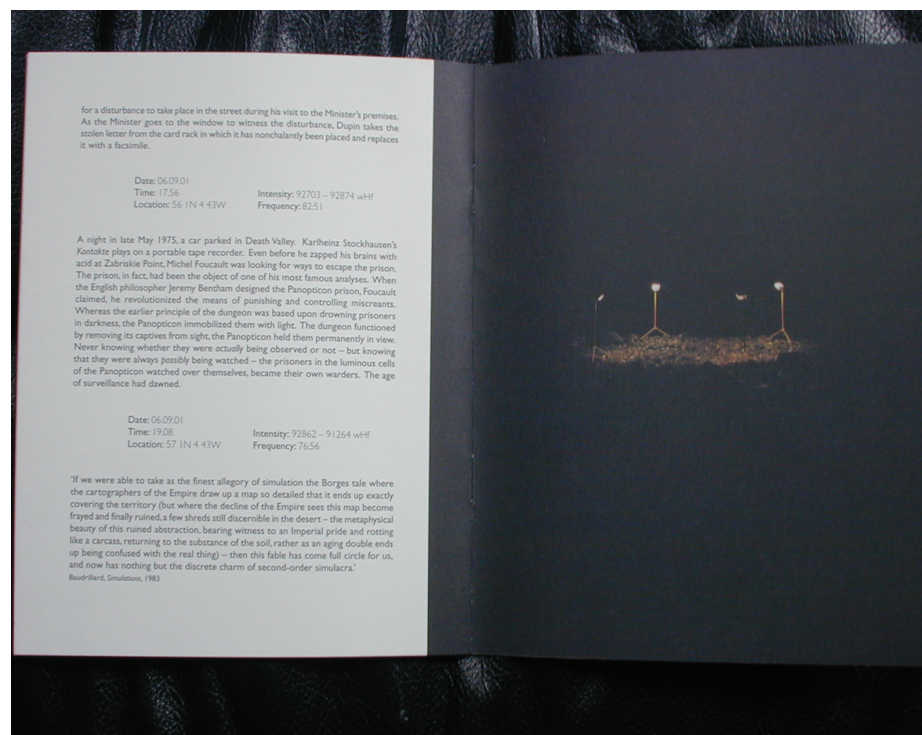
Each paragraph addresses a different idea.

The essay, in its totality, addresses questions of visibility, surveillance, illusion, and paranoia.

The work of Sans Façon was a response to the various covert signs of military presence in the area surrounding Cove Park, the location of the artist's residency that gave rise to this project.

The essay is a response to these works by Sans Façon.

The essay derives some of its ideas from Heidegger, Lacan, Foucault and Plato.





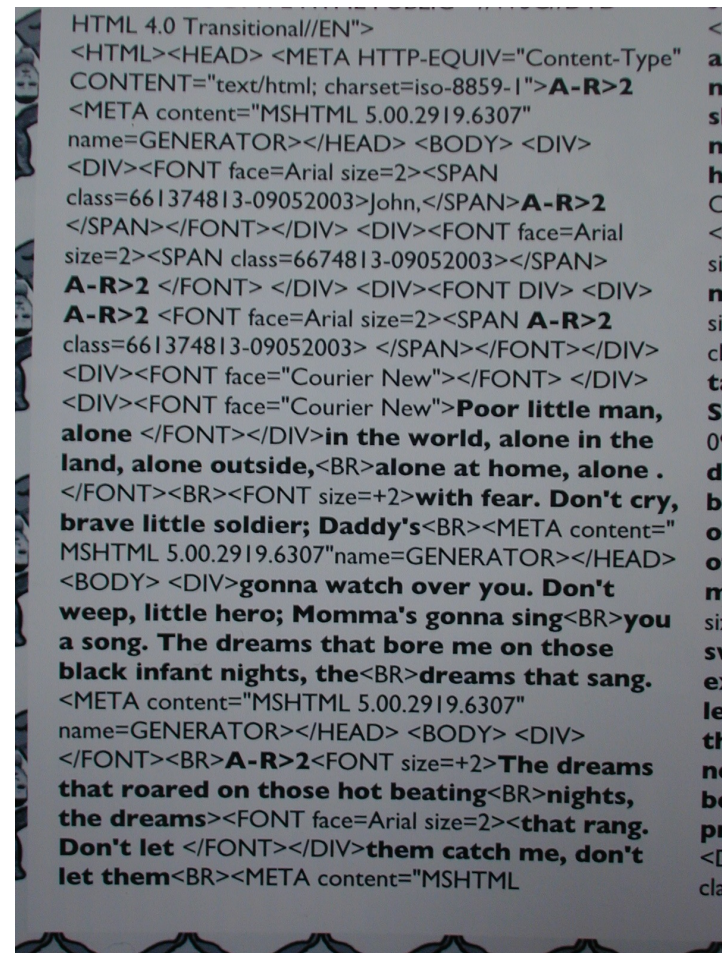
# CONTEXT

Excerpt *Where Are You? Story of the Eye*  
(A monograph on Portuguese video artist  
Antonio Rego. Written 2003, published  
2011.

This is a short extract from a full-length (c.80,000 word)  
monograph on the artist's work.

The textual extract here refers to one of the artist's videos (*A-R>2*)  
in which a voice-over, accompanied by relentless drumming, recounts  
a traumatic childhood memory of violence in war stricken Angola.

This is an example of an attempt to explore the materiality and visuality  
the printed word in order to create an emotive effect.

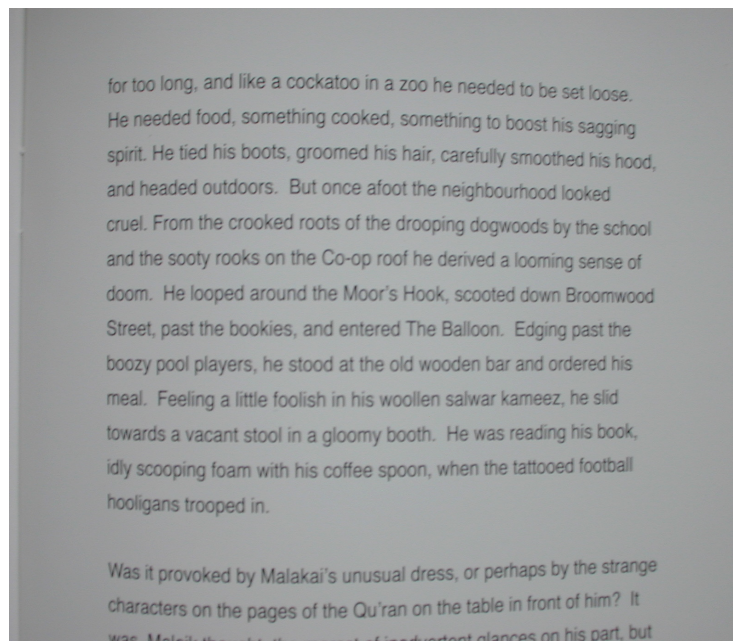


# CONTEXT

Essay in *You Do Voodoo*. Group exhibition catalogue, 2007.

The exhibition featured “13 artists whose work involves aspects of magic, ritual and supernature.”

The essay appeared as two columns on the page, the right-hand column offering comment upon the left-hand. The commentary (see below) was supposedly written by Sir David Nixon after Calcutt's death.



*Critical opinion is divided on this section. Some claim that Calcutt's wordplay is "an annoying mannerism" [Shaw, 1983], or "mere self-indulgence - an unfortunate characteristic of much of his later work " [Crooks, 1996]. Choudhry [1989] is more forgiving, detecting in the obsessive use of words containing "oo" a faint and distant echo of Perec's "La Disparition" [1969] in which the author dispensed entirely with the letter e. In this insistent use of the "oo" form, McLeod [1996: b] detects Calcutt's extension by typographic means of the theme of looking, the "oo" form being visually suggestive of a pair of eyes. Thereby, McLeod suggests, the text appears to 'look 'back at the reader. Developing McLeod 's thesis, Kuehne and Klein [1998] draw upon the work of Octavio Paz and Vilém Flusser to propose a theory of the magical properties of the text-as-image. Although not actually appearing in Calcutt's brief story, the word Voodoo is, they argue, "the absent presence that lies at its heart and secretly animates all those other instances of the "oo" formation that are included." [78]. From Fujii's study [2001] of his surviving notes it appears that Calcutt was keen to include reference to Douglas Adams' Hoolooovoo at some point in his story. The Hoolooovoo, as conceived by Adams in The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, is a superintelligent shade of the colour blue, a fact that would have allowed Calcutt to augment this chromatic sub-theme in his text. Furthermore, its inclusion would have satisfied the various demands: for the "oo" typographic structure, for lexicographical obscurity, and for appropriate assonantal value. Modern readers should perhaps be relieved that Calcutt abandoned this ill-conceived attempt.*



# CONTEXT

Essay on the work of Nicolas Party, *Map No. 25*, Summer 2011.

A collaboration in which the artists designed the magazine pages in response to the text.

Another attempt to explore relations between image and text, but adopting a different strategy insofar as:

- i. This is a collaboration with the artist in which the artist "has the last word".
- ii. Writing is not used to approximate the image, but is 'overwritten' by it.
- iii. Image and text are simultaneously present. Looking and reading are brought into a closer relationship.



# CONTEXT

Among the contemporary writers on art with whom my work (as exemplified by Outputs 1, 2 and 3) may share certain coincidental similarities are:

Duncan McLaren (especially those art reviews collected in *Personal Delivery*, Quartet Books, 1998.)

Maria Fusco (and the writers associated with *The Happy Hypocrite*)

Neil Mulholland

Fiona Jardine

Specific models, however, were provided by the following:

"The impossible object: towards a sociology of the sublime".  
Dick Hebdige, *New Formations*, 1 (1987) pp. 47-76.

*Blasted Allegories*. Brian Wallis (ed). MIT Press, 1989

*Silence Please. Stories after the works of Juan Munoz*.  
Louise Neri (ed). Scalo, 1996.

*La Belle Captive*, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Rene Magritte.  
University of California Press, 1996.

# CONTEXT

The general methodological approach adopted for this output is similar to that described in Output 1. The artist is someone with whom I had developed a professional relationship since 2004, having published an essay on his work in 2008. Rather than offering an analysis of specific work(s) by the artist, this output takes as its starting point the artist's interest in failure and in the potential interrelations between sculpture, architecture and nature.

“The Art of Spectacular Failure”. Essay on Alex Gross, *Map* magazine, Issue 15, Winter 2008.



# CONTEXT

Works by Alex Gross that indicate his interest in relations between sculpture, architecture and nature.



*Cabbage Head*, 2007, steel, plastic, oilclay,  
400 x 210 x 200 cm, GSS-Gallery, Glasgow



*GasStation*. Birch trees, vinyl, aluminium,  
660x400x450cm, Tramway Museum, Glasgow. 2006.

# CONTEXT

The decision to construct the essay in the form of a fiction was intended to create a linguistic space in which conceptual speculation and imaginative free-play conspire to produce the conditions of possibility suggested by the artist's work. In other words, the story imagines a mythical time in which sculpture, architecture and nature were inseparable.

Key intellectual ingredients of this conceit were provided by: Heidegger's writings on building and dwelling; Bernard Cache's *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories* (which was itself informed by Deleuze's writings of *The Fold*); and Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*.

Other relevant models were provided by Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Belle Captive* (in which his fiction 'collaborates' with Magritte's paintings), and *Silence Please. Stories After the Works of Juan Munoz* (edited by Louise Neri, 1996).