# Necessary vulnerability: an interview with Allen Fisher

By Simon Collings

Allen Fisher began work on *Gravity as a consequence of shape* in 1982 and he completed the project in 2007. Individual poems and sections appeared in various publications as they were written, and the work was published in its entirety in three volumes as: *Gravity* (Salt Publishing, 2004), *Entanglement* (The Gig, 2004), and *Leans* (Salt Publishing, 2007.) In 2016 Reality Street published the complete work in a single volume.

Fisher was born in London in 1944 and began writing in the 1960s. He was a member of radical arts group Fluxus and was involved with performance art early in his career. He later became a painter. Fisher was living in Brixton, London, when he conceived and planned *Gravity as a consequence of shape*, having just completed his other major book-length project, *Place*. In 1988 he moved to Hereford, which has been his home ever since. In 1998 he became Head of Art at Roehampton, working in Roehampton four days a week. In 2005 he was appointed Head of Contemporary Arts at Manchester Metropolitan, again working four days a week on campus. Since 2009 he has lived in Hereford full time.

These changes of location are reflected in the work, as is the evolution of Fisher's ideas as a result of formal study and more general reading. He has long been interested in science, in the ethical issues science creates, and in the major questions to which science does not yet have answers – such as the origins of consciousness, and the nature of space and time. *Gravity as a consequence of shape* is Fisher's magnum opus, running to almost 600 pages. This includes 16 pages of 'notes and resources' listing the primary sources upon which the work draws. It is a complex poly-vocal text, impossible to paraphrase or summarise, which engages with a wide range of subjects. It is a materialist and secular vision which proposes a different way of thinking and being in the world, written in opposition to the Enlightenment tradition in which 'reason' is a means for humans to manipulate the natural world and 'improve' it.

This interview was conducted by email between May and August 2017. The text was subject only to minor editing. I'm extremely grateful to Allen for the time he devoted to our conversation and for his patience with my many questions.

**SC:** In the 'Notes and Resources' section to 'Gravity' you list Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, as well as an issue of Semiotext(e) devoted to Nietzsche which included an essay by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.[1,2] There are a number of themes in Nietzsche's work, at least as interpreted by Deleuze, which strike me as possibly relating to the way *Gravity as a consequence of shape* is structured. The first of these is Nietzsche's critique of dialectical thought and his proposing of 'pluralism' as an alternative way of viewing the processes of history, multiple unconnected events happening simultaneously. The second is what Nietzsche says about the dice throw, and the role of chance in determining the course of life. You've long been interested in chance and the use of chance procedures in the making of a work, and I imagine that Nietzsche's ideas resonate with you. The third element is Nietzsche's frequent use of the image of dance as a metaphor for how the 'superman' responds to life. Ordinary mortals build prisons for themselves out of systems of values, denying life and murdering 'God'. The 'Superman' laughs and joins the Dionysian dance. There are parallels here with Blake and the 'mind forged manacles of man.' To what extent have these kinds

[1]F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, composed between 1883 and 1885, and published in four parts between 1883 and 1891.

[2] https://monoskop.org/File:Semiotexte_Vol_3_No_1_Nietzsches_Return.pdf

of concepts influenced the form of the work? Is the multi-vocal text, the collage of diverse discourses, the employment of chance procedures an enactment of the concept of plurality? Can the work be seen in one sense as a kind of Dionysian dance? After all the titles of the poems are names of jazz dances, and there are many references to dance in the text of *Gravity and a consequence of shape*.

**AF:** Very encouraged to read your recognitions from Nietzsche and Deleuze on the critique of dialectic and on their Dionysian attentions particular to dance and chance. I guess I would also add their programme to critique metaphysics. I had read the 1978 *semiotext(e) Nietzsche's Return,* and that had Deleuze's text 'Nomad thought'. I was reading *Anti-Oedipus* in 1979.[3] During the writing of *Gravity as a consequence of shape* you can follow readings of Deleuze's *Kant, Spinoza* and then and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (which has a chapter 'Treatise on Nomadology — The War Machine').[4,5,6] I had also read the important last chapter of that book, 'Concrete Rules and Abstract Machines', before it was in book form (I forget which journal) and then *What is Philosophy?*[7]

You ask to what extent have these kinds of concepts influenced the form of the work? I would say to a tremendous extent, and with this I would need to have on board a necessity to make and break sets. 'I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's.'[8] There is that necessary struggle, but this activity is also open and vulnerable to small disruptions about which decisions are made. In many senses kinds of dance, in that sense highly organised and planned for, with prepared for improvisation or transformations. A developed, albeit modest, Golgonooza.[9] The parallel is that of Jacques Louis David where the decision to act is disrupted by the necessity to hold the larger social or aesthetic benefit.

**SC:** Could you expand on your comment about David?

**AF:** I have been engaged in a small painting project using derivations from some of the work of Jacques-Louis David. There are three aspects of his work that I have worked with. I think my engagement began in the nineties when I taught a few sessions on the works of David, Goya and Blake and their various aesthetic responses to the state of Europe in the 1780s into the early nineteenth century. I derived from David that sense of difficulty for the individual in the position of making a choice between personal and local attentions and a broader social responsibility. The stark decisions made evident in his paintings *Oath of the Horatii* and in *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons.* They appear to me to be about aspects of the Enlightenment that were not fully comprehended, and that lack led to the fraught response from

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[3] G. Deleuze and F. Gauttari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972 (first published in English 1977 by Viking Penguin.)

[4] G. Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, 1983 (first published in English 1984 by Athlone Press).

[5] G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 1970, revised 1981 (first published in English 1988 by City Lights Books.)

[6] G. Deleuze and F. Gauttari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 1980 (first published in English in 1987 by the University of Minnesota.)

[7] G. Deleuze and F. Gauttari, *What is Philosophy?,* 1991 (first published in English in 1994 by the University of Columbia Press.)

[8] From William Blake, *Jerusalem: Emanation of the Giant Albion*, (written 1804-1820, edited 1820-1827 and 1832). The quotation comes from Chapter 1.

[9] The city of the imagination and of art which Los is continuously building in Blake's, *Jerusalem: Emanation of the Giant Albion.*

Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*[10] David was one of the first painters to break with the establishment and set up his studio for public view, he was simultaneously running some of the public events inside of the period. He also provides the basis for a considerable debate regarding measurement and passion, which Schiller articulated in his *Aesthetic Letters*[11] and which get characterised as a debate between Classicism and Romanticism, or in some of my visual work as *Frenzy and Self-Control.*

**SC:** Could you say more about those aspects of the Enlightenment which you feel Horkheimer and Adorno misunderstood? I'm assuming here that there is also a connection with Marcuse's work, for example his highly influential book *One Dimensional Man*.[12] Marcuse was influenced by Schiller's ideas about play and its role in creating the possibility of freedom. This would connect, I assume, with what you said earlier about Blake's ideal city of Golgonooza being in some way a 'model'.

**AF:** Much of my difficulty with the Horkheimer and Adorno text may derive from their terms, like subjectivity, but I will try it. Early in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* we are mediated through the principle of the self, self-preservation is encouraged by a division of labour and then eventually subjectivity is replaced by automatic controls. Subjectivity is put in opposition to logic. Horkheimer and Adorno's 'logic' is to link irrational and totalitarian capitalism, which tends towards the extermination of life on earth, to some kind of hero who escapes from sacrifice and self-sacrifice. They propose civilisation as an introversion of sacrifice, which transforms into subjectivity. Marcuse pitches the individual against the public dimension of coercion and mass domination. He affirms modernist aesthetics and estrangement.

Horkheimer and Adorno turn to the remote past to perform their work on modern mass society. They put the Enlightenment in prehistory or in *The Odyssey.* For them Odysseus is the first bourgeois and the embodiment of the 'enlightenment', that is not mythological. Odysseus' self-sacrifice is substituted for in the practice of human sacrifice to non-existent gods. The term 'enlightenment' becomes vague when it is stretched back to the Greeks. It is misappropriated as a confidence trick played on democracy. Horkheimer and Adorno describe mythically petrified rationality as a dominant figure of the enlightenment.

The modernist project is unfinished and cannot be abandoned. Habermas sees reason as instrumental in the domination of nature which is paid for by the repression of subjectivity. Cartesian *Meditations* and *The Declaration of the Rights of Humankind and the Citizen* posits modern subjectivity as intrinsically related to the developments of reason.[13] This is a complex suture and dialectic process does not always help clarify it. The *Dialectics of Enlightenment* has been a necessary irritant, it is appropriate to note its use-by date.

**SC:** I share your critique of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, and agree with you about the 'use by' date. Jurgen Habermas wrote what I think is an interesting essay on *Dialectics of Enlightenment* in which he says:

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[10] M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1944. A revised version appeared in 1947.

[11] F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 1795.

[12] H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 1964.

[13] Fisher is referring to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1647, and to the declaration of rights passed by France's National Constituent Assembly in August 1789.

'The *Dialectics of Enlightenment* does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity...'[14] Interestingly, Habermas links the ideas of DoE with the revived interest in, and readings of, Nietzsche exemplified by the contributions to the *semiotext(e)* issue we discussed earlier. Habermas is therefore arguing both against *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, and against the positions of thinkers like Deleuze and Derrida. Are Habermas' arguments here something you would identify with? How do you see the work of Nietzsche and Deleuze in relation to Habermas' position?

As an aside to the above, I'm puzzled by your statement 'Habermas sees reason as instrumental in the domination of nature'. I would see Habermas as a critic of Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of 'instrumental reason', counter-posing it with the idea of 'communicative reason'. Habermas is certainly a champion of rationality, but he is critical of 'instrumental reason' and doesn't see it as the only kind of reasoning available to us from the Enlightenment tradition. He is also conscious that his idea of a 'public sphere' of reasoned debate influencing society is severely compromised and threatened in practice, e.g. by media monopolies, the rise of large global corporations etc. Personally I'm not convinced that 'reasoned public debate' can exist in the way Habermas conceives it. The processes are far more complex and chaotic. I'm asking about this because, while I suggested earlier that *Gravity as a consequence of shape* might be seen as a kind of Dionysiac dance, it is also evident from the text that you have a considerable interest in science, including recent advances in neuroscience, and quantum physics. Your work is also socially engaged, e.g. in relation to biodiversity - beavers and badgers.

**AF:** I am somewhat forgetful of or never fully grasped many apsects of Habermas. The book you cite is the one of his that I have used most. My copy is dated 1988 and I have noted quite a few passages, mainly as a feed to my Enlightenment and Post-Modernist Poetry & Art courses, which I ran at Goldsmiths' in the eighties. (I left at the end of 1988.) I only subsequently came to Habermas' book on the public sphere, I guess during the nineties. (I've just checked, it came out in 91, I must have used a library copy.) I had read Deleuze and Guattari's 'Concrete Rules and Abstract Machines' before that in *Substance* 1984, and had time with the 1988 book *A Thousand Plateaus* which Paige Mitchell had a copy of. Because we were both using it, I purchased a second copy for myself in 92. Much of this must compel intrusion into the *Gravity* sequence. (I notice I acknowledge the 1987 US edition in my resource notes, so maybe I had a library access to that.)

I partly came to Nietzsche through subsequent readers like Derrida and Deleuze and partly through August Wiedmann (who I studied with at Goldsmiths'). I am ambivalent with both Derrida and Deleuze, but they have both provided sustenance: Derrida particularly in his critical attention to metaphysics and Deleuze's attention to Dionysos. I have had a long dialogue with myself and others about the efficacy of logic in the line from Plato. In other words ambivalent about that tradition, but got some comprehension through

[14] 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment', published in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987. During the course of this essay Habermas discusses non-instrumental practices within the sciences, 'the universalistic foundations of law', and then goes on: 'I have in mind, finally, the productivity and explosive power of basic aesthetic experiences that a subjectivity liberated from the imperatives of purposive activity and from conventions of quotidian perception gains from its own decentering - experiences that are presented in works of avant-garde art, that are articulated in the discourses of art criticism, and that also achieve a *certain measure* of illuminating effect (or at least contrast effects that are instructive) in the innovatively enriched range of values proper to self-realization.'

Schiller and his complex of the middle disposition.[15] I started a series of painting titled *Frenzy and Self-Control* in 1984-87 and picked up that again in 2013 using paintings by William Blake. (In case you're wondering, I don't remember dates quite as easily as that, but have recently been involved in making a visual catalogue raissoné). I might have misremembered, but I think Nietzsche must have been developing aspects of Schiller's work. I was also very interested in the painters Picasso and Braque who were reading Nietzsche and Bergson before the First World War.

I think Habermas sees reason as instrumental in the domination of nature which is paid for by the repression of subjectivity, but I see that he is critical of this and as you say counter-poses with the idea of 'communicative reason'. I agree with your reading of Habermas and, like you, have been weary or lack expectation for 'reasoned public debate'. As you aptly put it, 'far more complex and chaotic'.

I do have an interest in science, including recent advances in genetic technology and quantum physics, interested as much in their vocabularies and the difficulties they raise in terms of truth-telling and the danger of their enterprises. My work does make socially engaged proposals in that difficulty, in some knowledge of the problems raised as much as attention to what they mean. I find myself in a nervous humour, trying to stand firm in opposition, in a condition of tentative understanding and sometimes frailty. Yet that is a necessary vulnerability to assist response to a variety of situations, or as you put it, in complex and chaotic situations.

**SC:** I relate very much to what you say about 'a condition of tentative understanding and sometimes frailty.' I feel very much that way myself. Adopting a position of 'uncertainty' is challenging in the face of the simplistic black/white narratives of the popular media, a soundbite culture, and pervasive lying. Art perhaps provides a space where alternatives stances become tenable propositions.

It's interesting that you mention Schiller's possible influence on Nietzsche. There are a number of studies which analyse this and the importance of aesthetic theory for Nietzsche's alternative to the repressive, 'life' destroying culture he saw around him.[16] Towards the end of *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche suggests that the true antithesis to the 'ascetic ideal', to a culture of self-denial and death, is art.[17]

Rather than pursue this though, I would like to ask you about the influence of science, and the use of scientific concepts, in your work. You mention the 'difficulties…of truth telling' which are created by recent science. I'm interested in two specific concepts you borrow from quantum physics which I think relate to this question of truth: 'entanglement' and 'decoherence'.

*Gravity as a consequence of shape* consists to a large degree of collaged texts from very diverse sources, which you often also modify. You juxtapose material which generates lots of questions - recent research on the neurophysiology of vision, with phenomenology, with descriptions of events you observe (e.g. in the

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[15] In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* Schiller argues that the fascination with patterns, form and harmony in early humans – i.e. the perception of 'beauty' – led to the emergence of consciousness and the development of abstract reasoning. Schiller saw rationality divorced from an ability to delight in sensual experience as barbarous, and he believed that the development of the aesthetic sensibilities held the key to bridging the divide between reason and the world of the senses. Humans needed, he believed, to be capable of aesthetic appreciation if they were to be truly 'civilised'.

[16] See for example: P. Bishop and R. Stephenson, *Friedrich Nietzsche and Weimar Classicism.* Series: Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture. Camden House: Rochester, NY, 2005.

[17] F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887.

garden). You're interested, I think, in the idea of their being many discourses each with its own 'truth claims' and consequently in the impossibility of creating a single, coherent narrative about anything we experience. The text of individual poems enacts the dislocation and confusion which this way of thinking creates, while also trying to represent the way the brain deals with disparate stimuli moment by moment.

Entanglement, as I understand it, refers to the way quantum particles mirror each other's behaviour (e.g. polarity) even when they are very far apart. You make use of this phenomenon, in part, in structuring *Gravity as a consequence of shape.* For example, the beginning and end sequences mirror each other, the poems having identical form in terms of numbers of lines/stanzas, line lengths, whether verse or prose, and share phrases, though the material is often 'transformed' - it retains the same rhythm and syntax, but words are changed, often through use of synonyms. So 'Wobble' mirrors 'Ballin' the Jack', 'Winging Step' mirrors 'Banda'. The same mirroring can also occur within individual poems – in 'Ballin' the Jack' the second stanza transforms the material in the first stanza, but moving in reverse. This, I think, is 'entanglement' represented in the text. It creates recognisable patterns in the work across distances of many pages.

Decoherence, on the other hand, is what physicists observe when a quantum of energy, a wave, experiences interference from other waves. The position of the original wave form becomes impossible to 'see', though we can detect the direction of its travel. Decoherence is the fuzziness created by the interference. The equivalent of this in your poems, I think, is the noise created by the juxtaposing of disparate material in a way which creates at times very dense and impenetrable text. In the middle of the work, in 'Fish Jet', there is a kind of spiral created by two overlapping Fibonacci sequences where the text is particularly entangled and decoherent. It's as though the work is spinning into a black hole at its center - or perhaps exploding outwards.

I know you have long been interested in the use of number symbolism in Renaissance poets like Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser.[18] Is the use of quantum mechanical concepts in your work a critique of these earlier, Neo-Platonist ideals? Or is my reading wholly missing the point?

**AF:** I find your remarks on *Gravity as a consequence of shape* encouraging. What you respond to regarding truth or truth-telling is very much what I think. Discussing 'entanglement' and 'decoherence' are two viable ways to elaborate on this.

I have understood 'entanglement' as you indicate and use it as a premise to mirror and transform. You're alert in your observation about the elements in *Gravity as a consequence of shape* that take advantage of this and, as you note, particular poems respond to other poems. 'Ballin' the Jack' has its own stanzaic mirroring. This then leads on to engaging with or comprehending how this is sometimes subverted. I'm not sure that my play here is as formal as a critique of Spenser or Sidney, but this might be a way of characterising it. I initially think of it as development and play derived from a celebration of their poetry and poetics, which leads me into a difference in our own experience and necessities in a different context. That is, my work is a positive critique, a recognition that continuity of Neo-Platonic ideals is not viable — it is to understand that we need to develop a new set of conditions, or at least the potentials for new conditions. So your reading really does get this. This kind of composition does risk that these procedures and plays can easily go unnoticed, your recognitions really help my confidence that this can work.

I also very much care for your reading of *Gravity as a consequence of shape* through comprehension of the work's review and disruption of Fibonacci and similar ideals. I would also add what may be my inventive

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[18] See Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, for an analysis of number symbolism in the work of these poets.

comprehension of what 'decoherence' means in terms of a positive response to alternatives to coherence. Given that the latter can be oppressive and over-determined the alternative might be incoherence (my spell check initially turned the word to innocence). I don't accept that — my preference was to find a state for which I have adopted the term 'decoherence'. I also began to discuss this in *Imperfect Fit.*[19] I have taken the opportunity here to copy-across a couple of brief paragraphs, which I think begin to open my interest in using the concept (knowing at the same time that some of my interpretations might be anathema to the quantum physicists).

These come from pages 16 and 18 in my introduction: 'Vision and comprehension are contingent on processes of facture, the simultaneous proprioception and the aesthetic component necessary for cognition. These are factors damaged by their own realisation and expression, damaged by understanding and communication. In a mobile situation, coherence is made vulnerable by the physics of the situation where participants are in danger of lost confidence and are subject to manipulation and exploitation. I have named this situation decoherence, which has been derived from recent theories of quantum mechanics.' (I referenced work by Roland Omnès as an example.)[20]

'In figurative terms, we are in a state of decoherence when we realise with confidence that some aspects of our knowledge are reliant on an interlocutor, a black box between us and the information. In descriptions of the cosmos or of sub-atomic particles, we are unable to use our perception but must rely on the information reaching us through machines that transform the data into a form we can then interpret. We can be confident in the truth of that data, but we are in a state of confidence in lack, that is we can realise what the mathematician Kurt Gödel meant when he proved that truth was not demonstrable.' (Of course, that reading of Gödel may be poetic and not strictly as he may have intended it.)

Yes, my premise is that Platonism and Neo-Platonism have over-restricted our explanatory capacity. This has been overtly obvious in the metaphysics Derrida and others have endeavoured to critique. This has also been obvious for me in the proposals Platonism and Neo-Platonism demand for contradiction and logic, but I divert.

**SC:** I like your characterisation of the relationship with Sidney and Spenser as a 'positive critique', and as 'a celebration of their poetry and poetics'. That's very much the way I read your work – it engages with the tradition but recognises, as you say, the need to develop 'a new set of conditions' which reflect a very different understanding of the universe. I also like your use of the word 'play'.

Staying with the topic of science there is a term 'crowd-out' which appears in the later sections of the book which I'd like to ask about. It connects I think to what you say about 'decoherence'. If I understand correctly 'crowd-out' is a term you coin to describe the way information is processed in the conscious mind, the arrival of each new quantum of data cancelling what has gone before. This happens very quickly – the mind jumping between multiple sources of stimulus. So to give a banal example, we might be talking in a café, people are sitting at neighbouring tables having conversations, a bus goes by outside, our coffees arrive. Fragments of awareness of all this passes through our minds as we continue to talk, our awareness is multi-dimensional.

There is a reference to 'crowd-out' which I find particularly interesting in 'Stroll'. In section 6 of that poem you write:

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[19] A. Fisher, *Imperfect Fit*, University of Alabama Press, 2016.

[20] R. Omnes, *Understanding Quantum Mechanics*, University of Princeton, 1999.

Thought relies on crowd-out and
cancellation, a principle
of representation promotes all co-existence
of meaning and its metonym
trapped
and at once transformed
into innovation

I think you're saying here that the process of thought also involves multiple parallel operations which interfere with each other, associations the mind is making to disparate concepts, past readings, personal memories and so on, and that this is the ground from which new ideas emerge.

There are various points in *Gravity as a consequence of shape,* like the one above, where the text appears to be commenting on its own processes. The poem 'Philly Dog' begins:

This work begins with the self
with multiplicity
moves towards boundary breaks
overlaps the other and others
glued connections
and false promises
therefore does not begin
continues with interruptions inconclusions

The work a multiplicity of works embedded
disparate and without circularity

Later in this same poem you write:

This book an assemblage unattainable and multiplicit
in structure offset by laws it self-invents
by deterritorialization and connect with other multiplicities
of combination rhizomatic determinations magnitudes

The terms 'assemblage', 'deterrotorialization' and 'rhizomatic' used here come from Deleuze and Guattari, and there are references to their work elsewhere in 'Philly Dog'.

In 'Woodpecker' there is a passage which seems to be a description of the moment when you first conceived the work:

Enthusiasm I felt that day its origin in the future
the harmony of mutually divergent things
that kind of muddle
constructed out of experience in the presence of place
a lability of long-term memory at
each recall modified and reconsolidated

Would a reader be correct in viewing these passages as statements about the 'process' of the work?

**AF:** Thank you very much for these analyses. Yes, the comments make a lot of sense. Your sense of 'crowd-out' equates to mine. I think crowd-out can include a shifting, which would anticipate a potential reassembly of part of a process. Cancellation proposes the need for a new process. The combination (crowd-out and/cancellation) in the 'Stroll' passage you quote may come from that difficulty and thus complexity. I think you have it correctly in your sentence on 'multiple parallel operations'. As you subsequently both state and imply the work comments upon itself, on its own processes. The work questions its own statements and, as you note, converses with works by Deleuze and Guatarri. It is as if the work is in dialogue with itself.

**SC:** I like the idea of the text in dialogue with itself, that's a good way to formulate this. In 'Stroll' just before the passage I quoted, there is another very interesting section where you say:

> After his long study
> the content is less evident to his peers
> than the structure

I have been asking a lot of questions about the structuring of material, and about some of the ideas behind the facture of the work. But there is also, of course, a great variety of content to the work, and this develops over time as your reading, engagements with others, events in the external world (the Iraq War, climate change, and so on), 'compel intrusion' as you say on the facturing. Perhaps, therefore we could turn to content.

You said earlier in this conversation that *Gravity as a consequence of shape* makes some 'socially engaged proposals', albeit within the context of acknowledged difficulties of 'truth telling'. I'm interested in exploring this in relation to 'Dog', and the three poems which follow it, 'Ditty Bop Walk', 'Dixieland One Step', and 'Double Shuffle'. These we're written in 1989/1990, just after you moved from Brixton to Hereford, and they relate to a series of paintings, *Views of the City*, which you made at around the same time. The interview with Paige Mitchell and Shamoon Zamir in *Imperfect Fit* includes some discussion of these paintings and their relationship to the poems mentioned above.

'Dog' is a long poem in eight line stanzas which presents us with a kind of overview of early human migration and settlement in Europe. Alongside this are passages about the disappearance of beavers from Britain in the Middle Ages, about hunting, including references to badger baiting drawn from a poem by John Clare. One line referring to beavers reads: 'they haven't been around since colliers took the trees precise.' Later in the poem we have: 'On a November day in Perthshire 6 guns shot 1289 hares.' The final stanza refers to 'the chemical art' and 'common insecticide, the norms of devastation civilised'.

Badgers then feature in 'Ditty Bop Walk', beavers in 'Dixieland One Step', and hares (as well as stags) in 'Double Shuffle'. These poems also include references to the significance of the emergence of the private dwelling, and of the growth of cities. In 'Ditty Bop Walk' you quote fairly extensively from the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, Satre and De Beauvoir are sources for 'Dixieland One Step', and the work of artist Joseph Beuys seems to inform 'Double Shuffle'.

There is a clear concern in these poems about the threat humans represent to other living organisms, and I think they are suggesting this has very deep historical roots. At the same time the animals are also symbolic of certain potentialities or possibilities. 'Badger-play is purposefully *unproductive* and useless/We cancel the repressive and exploitative traits of labour…' your write in 'Ditty Bop Walk', adapting a phrase from Marcuse

quoted by Baudrillard in *The Mirror of Production*.[21] In the interview with Paige and Shamoon you talk about the poems being concerned with 'the theory of civilisation and being civil'. I wonder if you would elaborate on these comments, and on the connection with environmental issues? How might looking at the *View of the City* paintings help inform the readers understanding of the text?

**AF:** When I came to Hereford in January 1989 there was a strong lobby proposing to build a by-pass on the Lugg Meadows, a lammas land on the east of the city. The site is special for its plant life, but more importantly is an indicator for land use such as ancient woodlands elsewhere in Herefordshire. The agencies proposing the road were challenged, taken to court and the road didn't go ahead. This raised my expectation for what was possible. The natural fauna and flora appeared to represent a struggle against environmental damage. I chose to give animals like the badger and beaver and hare metonymic roles, to stand for different kinds of struggle within human activity and I used what in retrospect could be seen as over-simplified ideas about social engagement. One of the young men locally was living in a make-shift house in one of the woods. The authorities had been trying to evict him. A picture in the local rag showed him with an air rifle, trying to protect himself. When I saw him in town, with long thick braids of hair down his back, I thought of a badger, I thought of the local and national campaign to cull badgers. These threads of ideas began to build up and led to the facture of the poems you cite, from 'Dog' into the 'Three Kinds of Perception' and the drawings and then the subsequent paintings that became *Views of the City*. The latter is in three parts. One shows a badger with a rifle, another takes a portrait of Augustine in his study by Vittore Carpaccio and gives Augustine the head of a beaver. In a third a hare runs through the rubbish with a view of the Lugg Mill just beyond the Lugg Meadows. Here's a snap of the paintings hanging in the King's Gallery in York.

A further set included a painting titled *Prelude: Estimates* (1993).

It must have been around this time that I started working on traps (as part of *Tools or Traps & Damage*).

My show in the Hereford Museum & AG had that title in 1994.

*Light Trap* (1997) has a view of the Lugg Meadows with a pile of debris in the foreground.

[21] 'Play is *unproductive* and *useless* precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor…' Marcuse quoted in Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production,* [add date].

**SC:** It's interesting that you say the victory against the planned by-pass led to an expanded sense of possibility. The opening of 'Ditty Bop Walk' is clearly proposing an alternative to the history described in 'Dog', and there is a change in tone I think at the start of 'Ditty Bop Walk'. The poems in the next section 'Fizz' build on ideas in those we've been discussing, and seem to me to have a similar optimism. At the end of 'Fish-Tail' you appear to dream, perhaps half-seriously, of a performance piece in which an 'antlered dancer pulls a golden thread and spins/to protect human kind…'[22]

I'm interested in what you say about using 'what in retrospect could be seen as over-simplified ideas about social engagement' in the facture of 'Three Kinds of Perception'. Are you less optimistic today? Or is it just that you have a different sense of what resistance entails? Clearly, from the paintings, the meadows continue to have an importance for you, and I guess the struggle to protect them goes on. Environmental concerns emerge in the work much more strongly with the move to Hereford. The first section of the book – 'Brixton Fractals' – seems to me more concerned with social inequalities. Do you have that sense?

**AF:** Yes, I think I am less optimistic today and that would partly be contingent on what resistance entails or maybe, more aware of how resistance doesn't necessarily lead to success. Proposals to take over the meadows continue and recent experience of the meadows already has a decline in species, probably to do with agricultural practice adjacent to the River Lugg upstream. Environmental concerns do have a stronger attention in the parts after *Brixton Fractals* and partly be because of the extemporary elements in the work's vocabulary, that is to say that the conditions of facture directly influence the selective process. For example, the work of the Stockholm Resilience Centre in the last few years does make grim reading: http://stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html Work on *No Longer Alone,* a sequence after *Gravity as a consequence of shape,* left me thinking that there was no way out. I have vacillated since.

**SC:** I think this shift towards a more, shall we say, pessimistic outlook is evident in the later sections in *Gravity as a consequence of shape*. If we look at 'Banda' from the opening of the work and 'Winging Step', which mirrors it, we see this fairly clearly. 'Banda' was written when you were living in Brixton in the early 1980s, a time of considerable social tension. The poem makes numerous oblique references to this - the police presence, piled up cars, a fireman calling in 'for the situation report'. Yet despite this the final sections of the poem suggest that a different sort of society might come out of this. I'm thinking particularly of the lines:

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[22] The poems in 'Fizz' include a number of references to the way early humans portrayed themselves in their art in part-animal form. Stanza 21 of 'Dog' refers to 'animal paintings' and 'skilled hunter artists', and stanza 22 includes 'a young man with an elephant's head'. The poems in 'Fizz' pick up on this. 'Grind' begins with 'Parrot-head starts move in Pleistocene spring, and in line three 'Maize Man contrast Bat Man' (presumably an ironic reference to Batman.) There is a link here to Schiller's 'middle disposition' discussed earlier.
'Fish-Tail' suggests the relationship early hunters may have had with their environment has been lost:

> the Hunter scoffs at hints of shrines
> and ritual pits of votive wells and
> sacred precincts from behind
> a screen of artistic and ethical standards
> traditions at once alien and incomprehensible
> more than 2000 years ago
> the Hunter begins to wear heavier boots.

The Hunter here sounds like a modern day developer – the archetypal 'barbarian'. At the same time references to human sacrifice in the poem deflect us from notions of a lost Eden.

> In the distance a man sings
> accompanied by his own hands and feet it
> brings sighs of enjoyment.
> An apple stew secretes into it,
> smells of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

And then a little further on:

> If the rebuilt city is resistant
> it opens to those who strengthens it welcomes
> the travellers on the ways to themselves

'Winging Step' on the other hand begins with a kind of summary of 'Banda', ending with the lines: 'memory of self in the image/trapped in London commerce/with a sense of helplessness.' So the memory of that time in Brixton becomes, retrospectively, one of 'helplessness'. The rest of the poem is concerned, amongst other things, with the culling of badgers, which connects back to 'Dog' and the other poems we were just discussing. The 'riflemen' here seem unstoppable.

As one would expect there are significant entanglements between the two poems. Music features in both poems, so do preoccupations with the nature of perception, they have a 'muller' (Müller yoghurt?) in common. William Blake appears in both, in 'Banda' he is at work on his notebook, but in 'Winging Step' the riflemen 'walk their rounds/binding with briars/Blake's joys and desires'. So there are continuities in the kinds of issues with which the text is contending, but a more sombre tone. Is the work then characterised by a growing disillusionment? Is building a Golgonooza, even a modest one, still an imaginable project? Or is the vacillation between hope and doubt a necessary part of the complexity of engagement? Perhaps this is a question the reader is called on to answer.

**AF:** Again, thank you for focussed attention. At the outset, I think I had better pick up the müller reference.

In 'Banda' the sentence refers to my process of paint-making (I make my own oil paint from pigments and oil. The pigment is put on a sheet of glass and oil is added as tempera and then I use a müller to combine the pigment and oil using a figure of eight motion over the surface of the glass. That figure has also connotations of infinity in mathematical signage. So in 'Banda': 'A figure of eight with a müller to / slurry tempera on the glass.' (24) and thus as you note, in 'Winging Step', a rhyming in: '… ideas of eternity or / the movement of a müller over glass …' (545). (And incidentally in 'Slooing': 'In windless her müller bus / As eternity mirror gas trapped in the rebus pane.' (440)

It is very useful to recognise what you read as 'a growing disillusionment', even if I think that building a modest Golgonooza is still an imaginative, thus I guess 'imaginable project'. The vacillation between hope and doubt is, in the poem's view, a necessary part of the complexity of engagement. Thank you for that. It helps give me some clarity about what happened with the subsequent project after *Gravity as a consequence of shape,* particularly by the time I got to *No Longer Alone* in 2014 or 15.[23]

**SC:** Thanks for the clarification about 'muller' – that makes a lot more sense! It links then with the image at the beginning of 'Banda' of the mathematician David Hilbert cycling in a figure of eight in his garden as he works on a problem. It also connects with the very last poem in *Gravity as a consequence of shape,* 'ZIP', a

[23] Sections of NO LONGER ALONE were published on datableed 1 and 3, and 5 also on the International Times site, in VLAK 2015 and on the x-peri site. Sections 1, 5 and 8 appeared in *TIP REGARD* published by Spanner Editons 2014.

sound file available online, which reworks the text of 'African boog'.[24] Both poems end with: 'Jump on bike, figure of eight around rose beds, to the blackboard.' As you say the figure of eight has connotations of infinity in mathematics.

Your comment on Golgonooza is also very useful. Our discussion of environmental issues led to me think about changes in society. But of course, in Blake, Golgonooza is a city of the imagination. It's also a city which has a three-dimensional geometric shape, marked by regularities and symmetries. Blake was influenced by Neo-Platonist ideas. I hadn't made this connection before, but given what you said earlier about number symbolism in Sydney and Spenser, I assume we can also view *Gravity as a consequence of shape,* as a 'positive critique' of Blake's *Jerusalem.* Blake has clearly been an important figure for you over many years. How would you describe his significance for *Gravity as a consequence of shape?*

**AF:** I think you are right about my attention to Blake. I am still working with the significance of his work through a positive critique, but still haven't read it all.

I have been recently writing a revised talk 'Shifting Liberties and Other Consequences' this week in preparation for a Magna Carta-in-Hereford 1217 celebration in September and have used pages from Blake's *Jerusalem* as well as *Europe a prophecy*. (His image of the Bellman from Milton which Palmer repeats, and the image of the jailer in *Europe* and his subject of the scaled figure of pestilence seen repeated in *The Ghost of a Flea*), and this includes working with Blake's visual work over the last few years, recently his paintings *Newton* and *Ghost of a Flea.* I was using his etching *God Judging Adam* for developments of the *Frenzy and Self-Control* series over the last four years or so. I engaged with much of Blake's Notebook for *Gravity.* Blake's work continues to be important for me.

[24] http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Fisher.php