

'Flying Through' –Poetry/Calligraphy collaborations with Thomas Ingmire

In Summer 2002, Lesley and I were on our way to see the Documenta 11 art festival at Kassel, Germany, when we dropped into a calligraphy exhibition at the Manna Kunsthuis in Bruges. One artists' work transfixed us: we found ourselves asking who had created these waterfalls and soaring windrows of letters, shapes so tactile and dynamic flexing over pictorial space? We were told that these were images created by the American artist, Thomas Ingmire. After our return home, pace all we'd seen at Documenta, those calligraphic images wouldn't let me be. In response I wrote the poem 'Tabula Gratuloria' which help break through a lexical impasse for me:

leaping
 invisible
 lucent nodes
 scintilla
leggy semes

I sent the poem to Thomas and, in reply, he made the most extraordinary one-of-a-kind hand-crafted book; the image below soars out of the line: 'multiple effloresce'.



Though I'd grown up in house-holds alongside visual artists and studied art at UCW with David Tinker, Shelagh Hourahane, Moira Vincentelli amongst others, this was new, exciting ground for me. I'd also been working with students on a range of ekphrastic exercises in writing since the early 1980s. My admiration for David Jones's calligraphy, DADA collages involving letters, Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé's work on Camille Bryen's phonetic poem *Hépérile éclaté* and word-image collaborations with Alan Halsey, Peterjon Skelt, Chalotte and Sean Mannion, Christine Kennedy and Judith Stroud all underpinned this evolving work, but the dynamism and range of Thomas's images opened my eyes to new possibilities.

In 2011, Thomas invited me to make poems in relation to viewing a series of drawings created nine years previously by the fine American artist, Oliver Jackson. I liked the involutions and the 'unsettling inter-tanglement', (as I was to see it), of these images and wrote: 'Nine Starts / for Oliver Jackson's 'Series''. The strong impact which

Jackson's charged marks on paper and his 'power-line in a flash-lit cloud' made on me are evident in the last 'start':

in amongst seismograph jitter

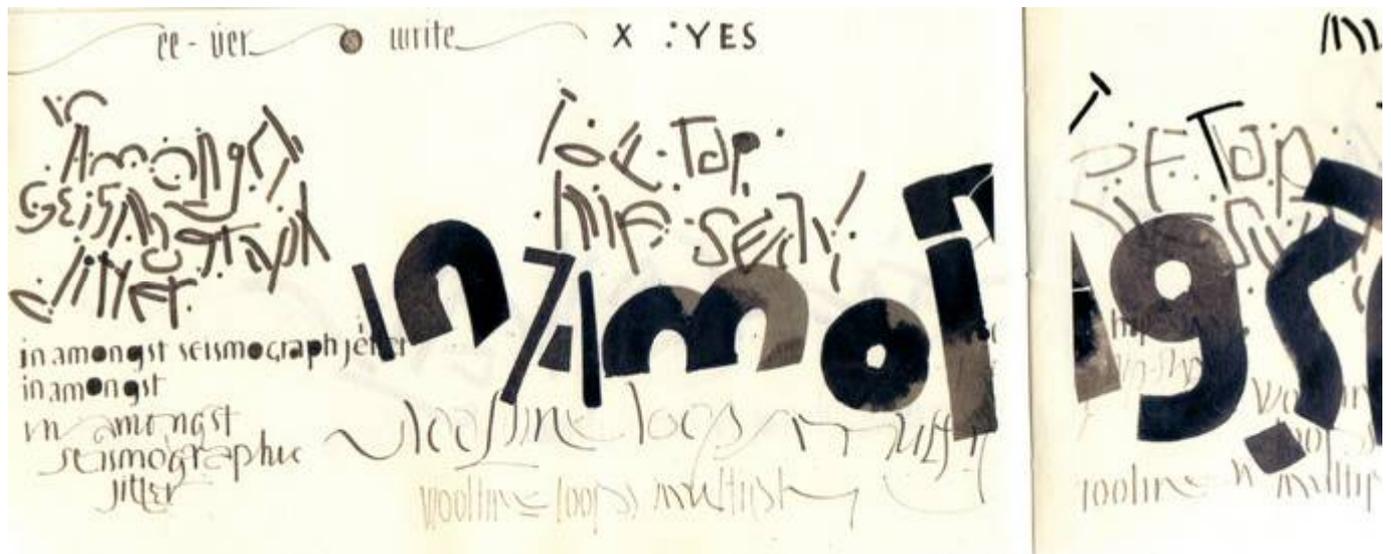
toe-tap, hip-sway, head-sway, hand-blur, shouting
out rageous thicket,
elated

letterbirth

see –
verso
writes:

'X YES'

(I started to notice that one aspect of this work involving spontaneous responses was the way the process split words and flung syntax into new shapes.) Jackson had written the words 'X YES' boldly on the back of one of the drawings, so this, the inversion taken into account, hinted to me of affirmation despite the threat felt in some images: 'SEY X', (the power to answer in the negative), but also seen as an anagram for 'SEXY', recalling the sensuality, and jazz rhythm of some pictures. In the same year, Thomas responded to these poems in a one-of-a-kind 'visual/verbal book', *seismograph jitter* :



In 2010, Ewan Clayton wrote to invite me to be the contributing poet at the University of Sunderland Calligraphy Symposium in summer of the following year and, since Thomas was a course leader, this allowed for a period of more pluralistic approaches involving other artists (and visual artists as writers) as well. In the run-up to this symposium, Thomas and I exchanged numerous e-mails discussing the types of different approaches we and the students could use in working together, in moving 'towards and away from words'.

From my side, I was interested ways in which calligraphers might produce their own words to work with and whether this would be a very different experience from reacting to the words of others. I also wondered if one means of helping calligraphers relax away from any pressure to 'interpret' meaning in a poem might be asking them to respond to 'sound-poems', macaronic poems (such as 'A celuy que pluyt eyme en monde'), in

different languages which were partly occluded in meaning and Janus-faced poems with hidden messages coded into them. As our e-mails crossed and re-crossed, I started to get new insights into Thomas's art and outlook:

'Ah, the text, that is the problem.' These were the simple, yet somehow profound words spoken by Manfredo Massironi at one of our meetings. In my own work, particularly the earlier works, the text has been quite important to me. This included the kind of poetry that I would choose and ideas about how to interpret the words of the poet. I always did try to keep some distance from the text which I think stands in contrast to some other calligraphers. The English tradition is still strongly influenced by Edwards Johnston's words: 'the calligrapher's role is as a servant to the text', (or something close to that).

Even my early works started outside of this premise, and has only continued to move further away. I hate to say it, but in many ways the text for me has become something that is only necessary because I like the visual rhythm that the writing of words gives me (and I even control how that looks by the forms that I create. I tend to find words via accidental processes (simple DADA exercises or John Cage-like directories). Some degree of legibility interests me because I do like the connections that a viewer might make between a discovered word or phrase and the visual impression of a work.

Trying to understand and 'interpret' poetry has become a fairly remote concern for me.

I found such emphasis on unmediated responses fascinating and enjoyed the sense of creative vistas opening out. I also started to see that, in entering this collaboration we were involved in a process moving off in new directions but also making a contribution to a vital, intermittent but often largely unnoticed strain of work by poets and artists, a kind of underground history. This was broached in Thomas's words about his working with Denise Levertov's poetry:

I had worked with her poetry in two different contexts. One was with a printer who was designing a book that involved several of her previously unpublished poems. I was doing a calligraphic title for the book. What I remember is how involved she became in the process with the printer. She participated in the process of determining the typeface, the type size, page size and layout.

I had also worked with one of her poems on my own prior to this and developed at least 8 or 10 different pieces of work. The works were quite painterly with snippets of the poem in each piece. I had learned that Denise taught every winter at Stanford University (down the road from SF) and I sent her an invitation to an exhibition of these works. After sending the note I remember being quite concerned that she might be upset with what I had done...She did write back, apologizing that she would not be able to get to the exhibit, but that she was "delighted that her words had inspired such images," and "send more pictures."

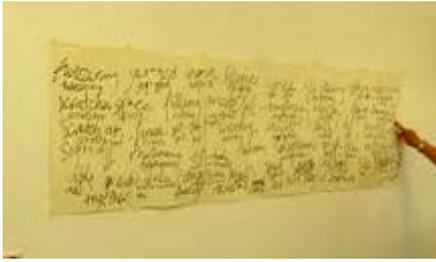
We did meet later and talked some about the differences between the two presentations of her words. The first, she said, obviously was important to her because it was the main guide she could give for how she wanted the poems to be read. The second was something completely different...a visual interpretation by someone else.

In his Sunderland workshop, Thomas firstly played several pieces of music, including 'Cité Tango' by Astor Piazzolla to which the students made marks individually and I wrote words on a sheet of paper laid lengthwise on a table. Of course, I'd written responding to musical stimuli before, but not in a position where groups of delegates could simultaneously look up to see my words while I wrote and then gather round to scrutinise the results. This was surprisingly daunting. Then 'Chakra' by Allain Guassin was played while students, gathered round a long table, made marks collectively, moving round and adding to each other's work. (Guassin himself is also a practising poet and his written pieces sometimes appear with his music, including sections of *Tranes et Lumière* (1976) and *L'attente... L'absolu* (2004).



Next, I read my poem 'Sophie Taeuber Arp came down on the drawings', a section from the volume *Dadadollz*, speeding up as the poem developed and delegates made shapes and letters in response. The final stage of these starters was that Thomas played a new piece of music while the calligraphers made a complex series of flourishes and marks on another long sheet of paper in response. My role was to respond – writing this time straight onto a sheet pinned to the wall - to all three: music, the visual impact of the students moving and the images which they produced.

Despite my years in workshops and classes, I experienced this act of public and spontaneous composition as both risky and exhilarating: prone to producing, I supposed in advance, boring, mundane, embarrassing or repetitive work or, potentially, nothing.



In fact, it did produce some fresh re-jigging and breaking back into the orders of words and lines:

initial
de-initialing rhythm-
ing en-lively

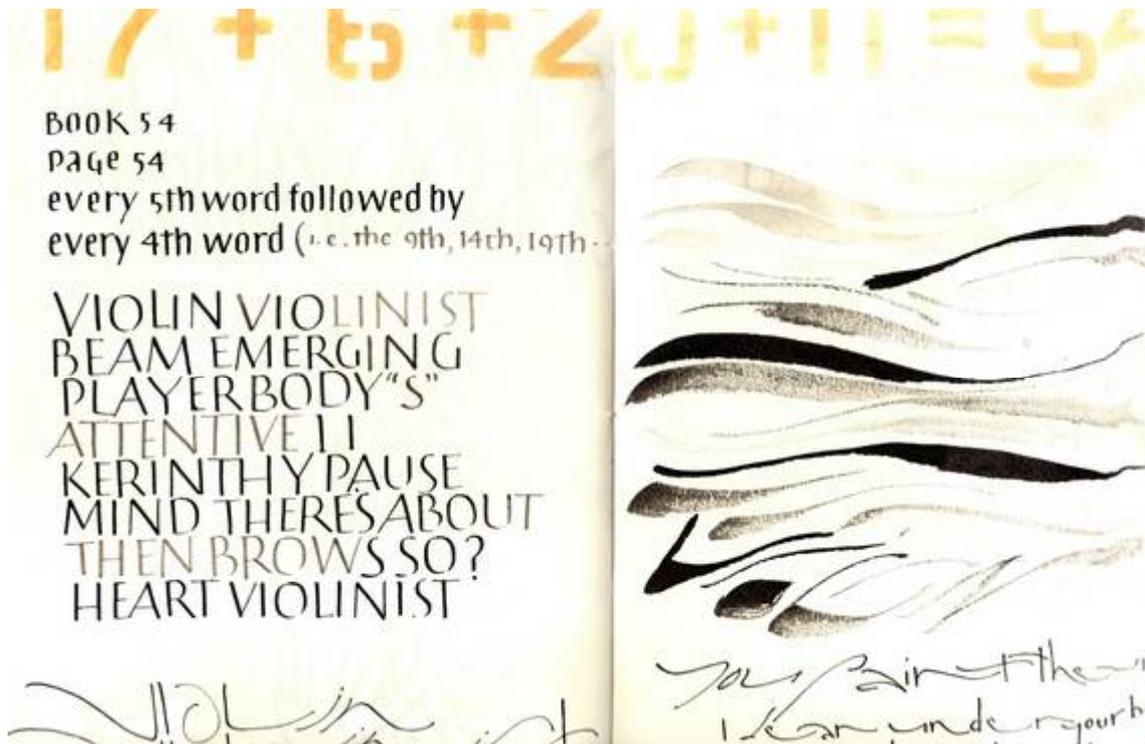
and

water-wader
compassing points
spoors savage
collusions

Spontaneous composition: well known also due to years of watching of freeform jazz impro was as familiar to me as were Charles Olson's ideas on poetry as process. My friendship with Clive Meachen and Jonathan William and conversation with Robert Duncan had also taken my understanding Olsonian ideas in variety of different directions. These notions in relation to trusting to the power of the moment, letting go and trying it without trying might also remind of Paul Klee's definition of art as *Gestaltung*: as form in perpetual process or, as an 'iridescent chaos', as Cézanne once put it.

Thomas subsequently wrote out my resultant poem, cut up the student's artwork and bound them into a presentation book. He also presented me with *1762011, A Visual/Verbal Book*, the product of of an aleatory process whereby on 17.06.11, the artist selected the four books: the 17th, (George Bataille's *Erotism*) the 6th, (Barnard's *Sappho*), 20th (Robert Bly's prose-poems), and 11th volume, (Kenneth Patchen *Hallelujah Anyway*) on his poetry shelves.

He then worked with 17 words from the 17th line of the 17th page inside the 17th book and so on. He convened 'a disconnected/connected text' which emerged 'from a play with the numbers and words of these poets...' Lastly, he added the date numbers together and led him to the 54th book, my own *the spirit/that kiss*.



The poem which Thomas had selected on the 54th page of the 54th book was one written for my close friend, the wonderful Hungarian painter György Gordon, who had died a few years previously and with whom I'd worked on previous poetry/graphic collaborations, such as 'The Echo Ground' (image below).



So lines about György's methods as a painter and creativity had been selected 18 years later for Thomas's calligraphic exploration. I wondered if any of the students murmuring in surprise that procedures involving chance had designated mine from thousands of books understood how remarkable the intermedial connections had been.

Just before the symposium, I had written to Thomas at the end of June 2011:

...somewhere back in our e-mails you also suggested that I might write a few lines in reaction to a few marks by yourself and then you or that other person makes another mark in reaction to that, and then I write a few more lines...I like the risky, fresh sound of this.

As a basis for a short collection/book, (we've not really talked about books and elsewhere I note you highlight that concept). Intriguingly, I haven't heard that this has been done elsewhere before and I like that unpredictability.

In the wake of the conference, and in discussing a number of possibilities for collaboration, we returned to this idea.

By now of course I'd met and worked with the artist in person and so had the benefit of having encountered his warmth, multivalent humour and commitment. I had also seen him creating images and taking a class through the stages of making a book. The first stage of this new collaboration was that Thomas e-mailed me three initial images as attached files from which I chose one, (the first image below). Feeling my way forward, I jotted down the first lines that came quickly. As I was alone in this activity and looking at Thomas's downloaded images, I could have taken as long as I liked over this, but it felt important to keep responding fairly quickly.



Other of the images such as:



also intrigued me, but I stuck to my first choice and wrote:

through valley's comet-tail

dust spreads outwards
seen from above

and

dots for days, weeks exhausted
went east – struck out

east again – by the tall pyramidal
look-out on the plain

Thomas then sent three visual responses to my poem one of which 'is a portion of your poem that is "fit" into the first drawing' and another which 'is a new drawing that is in some way inspired by your poem.'





He continued:

I suspect my next steps would be to push it further....one direction towards more legibility....and conversely to push it further away. I don't see this as a final work. I think I ultimately want to explore solutions that place it in the context of an image (a redrawing of the first image) and to look at opportunities for using color in each.'

He asked:

Given the three ideas above, can you tell me which represents your vision of our explorations and what would you do next? Would you respond with other words or revisions? Or should we look at new beginning images as a basis for new poems?

I feel a sense of there still being a search for our process. Please let me know your thoughts about how this could go forward at this point.

I then sent Thomas further three poems, opening out the area of response, writing:

...I stuck to our original spirit of the collaboration and went back to your first three images you'd produced for my second stage poems...I decided completely to ignore/put out of mind my previous poem and give my immediate, fresh responses to your images. So these three works are all new and exactly written down as they first emerged as I gazed at your images, with perhaps a one word edit/placement change with each poem...

One of these, the first part of which I wrote as follows:

Thomas sent three images in reply and wrote of the first:

After struggles with my first attempts I decided to create a "drawing" without words that is not too dissimilar to the idea of my "music" drawings. To me the drawing sans words gives a better point of inspiration for the third stage poem. I did try a number of solutions using the words, but I could not resolve the idea that by creating a solution with the words of the poem, I would be recreating an image that was similar to the image that inspired your poem in the first place

Regarding one of his other images (below), a response to 'waved thought-forms', he wrote:

These works are essentially calligraphic interpretations of the stage 2 poems. In that sense they are different than how I approached the poem from the first stage, but somehow the poetry made me feel freer to take this direction.



I am quite unresolved with the question of whether it makes sense to create images without words or images with words. I suspect that because the ease of reading is always compromised, the final works (at least to most viewers) appear more as drawings as opposed to written pages where the meaning of the words becomes apparent. But because I know that words form the basis for the images, I do see them differently.

For Thomas, an interesting realization was emerging:

Clearer visions for 'calligraphic' solutions are apparent for me when your poems are inspired by my non-verbal images.

A further startling image, with sinuous and undulant forms, emerged from the process:



Which I responded to in:

basket mesh
creel
of twist

& turn-
ing

column
on & through
itself

glitter & flash
restless...

Thomas provided the spread below to show one track through the collaboration, moving from left to right.

1

through valleys' comet tail
dust spreads outwards
seen from above

long journey we came
about for days, weeks exhausted
went east - struck out

went again - by the tall pyramidal
look out on the plain
memories of plashing

dreams. How many were there
in that contingent
watched by coves and walled?

still came back the
signs we came back to,
traced wall and hidden lips

shaded remembered
villages
under hill-tops
scratches of a
sweet name

liquid profile
looped inside
curved
intersections

A vapour trail

waved thought-forms
spaced through with
spindles

weft of ongoing
script - however we write

it, the cross-drales
waver into wings
fly side-

wire, topple ascend
clicking

strike it out and find it
again - rising
translucent gleam

glindour on the updraft
gliding through images

flippenduz or meadowweet
jumper-stalks flung

discovering
'wee they'

Basket - mesh
creel
of twist

& turn-
ing

column
on & through
itself

glitter & flash
restless

yet gliding
within
wave-backed
following
gently-
constant

Yet, given that both of us had produced more than work at several stages of the project, one needs to remember that this was just one of the ‘paths’ that anyone could take though the materials which we had produced. Another is manifest in a book version of part of this collaboration, *Out of the Air* which Thomas created in 2012, here seen in accordion fold-out:



On the title page (above), Thomas has written:

This book is the record of the artists alternately responding to each other’s work. Ingmire’s initial drawing sets Annwn off running with the words ‘through valley’s comet-tail’. A calligraphic rendering of that poem becomes the picture for Annwn’s second poem. The cycle continued resulting in three spontaneous “out of the air” image poem creations.

From my own perspective, the range of experiences involved in this cycle of collaboration proved very different from those which any extrapolated theoretical understanding might suggest. Though aware of W.J.T. Mitchell and Hans Belting's theories about the dialogic processes of human understanding in general, and the notion that verbalising and visualising faculties are mutually dependant in particular, far from encouraging me to try explain or theorise in general, this collaboration left me wanting to make some distinctions between a range of ekphrastic activities that had taken place.

I realised that, in my experience, the process itself, the risk and excitement of writing, the evolution of images and poems and the book/books which rounded the cycle off seemed the most vital stages of this collaboration for me and any analysis felt after-the-fact. However, I had also long felt that anthologies like Tonya Foster and Kristin Prevaliet's, *Third Mind, Creative Writing through Visual Arts* (2002) and a host of other ekphrastic texts taken as de rigueur in colleges throughout the world only seemed to be scratching the surface. As I thought over Thomas and my collaborations, there were many aspects of this work which seemed to excite further enquiry: the preparatory stages for creation, for example, the discussions of the artists before, after and during the collaboration and the decisions when to concentrate on one successive line of poems/images and when to fan out into other directions. This is without mention of the neurological and motor faculties at play, any relation to further aleatory procedures and resulting changes in envisaging the arts.

Perilous as all jargons are in a sphere involving such spontaneous and instinctive creation, I also wanted to provide some tools (as shorthand) in designating and distinguishing some the practices we had used, (see Appendix table.)

Thomas has given several talks on our work entitled, 'Correlative energies, Word and Images, Poets and Calligraphers: A Collaborative Research.' Whatever titles we use, we know that all such attempts to verbalise these procedures are hazardous assays, approximations at best. My feeling on being involved in such a process of intensive intermedial reciprocation with such a gifted artist as Thomas. who has worked with Kaz Tanahashi and been influenced by Inoue Yuichi and Kyuyo Ishikawa's brushwork was of great privilege and excitement. The synergies are currently renewed in multiple unforeseen directions. In response to Thomas's request that I pass on the names of other poets who would be interested in his visual reactions to their work, Marjorie Evasco, Allen Fisher, Alan Halsey, Christine Kennedy, Geraldine Monk, Robert Sheppard and Angeline Yap's writings have become involved. I know that he has now created or is in the process of creating one-of-a-kind books for most of these poets.

In one of the poems of *Out of the Air*, Thomas's previous images had taken me to the sense of the act of overturning and then restoring 'equi-libria' and from this I ran on from 'libria' to 'out of the lib-rary/ endlessly rocking'. It was a startling and unconscious spin, seemingly coming at me out of the blue, on Whitman's lines in a new context. In his art, Thomas has renewed for me the awareness of visual forms and language as fields of kinetic and unpredictable energies and he has also reminded me that the collaborator's consciousness in such procedures is not that of the impassive observer sitting back and ruminating over the materials, but of a correlative energy swooping and flying through.

David Annwn

1. All e-mails quoted ©Thomas Ingmire & David Annwn, 2009-12. All calligraphic images ©Thomas Ingmire, 2009-12. Image from 'The Echo Ground'© The estate of György Gordon, 1989, 2012. Photographs ©David Annwn & thesocietyofnorthumberlandscribes.blogspot.com/.../writing-2011-tuesd...2011.

Appendix - Towards a glossary of ekphrasis

Lateral ekphrasis	A writer responding with a single text each, to one or a series of images at hand, ('lateral' suggesting 'beside' or 'alongside' at one medial remove).
Successive ekphrasis	A writer making successive texts from the same image.
Reactive, correlative or reciprocal successive ekphrasis	A process by which a writer creates one text in relation to an image, the visual artist then creates a new image in relation to that text, and the writer then makes another text in relation to the second image, and so on, in a chain or path of responses.
Trans-ekphrasis	The creation of texts in simultaneous response to more than one media, ('trans' – 'across') as in writing whilst hearing music, watching students make marks and viewing the resultant images. Successive trans-ekphrasis in two or more media could spread the work in further directions.