

Daniel Pilkington, *Binding Cyphers*
Conversation with Sandie Bridie, 8 October 2021

Sandie Bridie: So, Daniel, your background is in writing and literature, and this is your first exhibition. What made you decide to create work that uses your background as a writer in a visual art form?

DP: Yes, so I am doing a PhD in Poetry that is looking at the influence of magic in contemporary poetry, and in my explorations of magic I am attempting to apply magical processes, like spellcraft and ritual, to creative writing. I found myself giving more and more attention to the materiality of language and to objects that might carry text. This led me to study concrete poetry, visual poetry, and text-based art. This project came out of some experimentation with the idea of cyphers. There is a history of magicians receiving alphabets with which to receive coded messages. For example, there is this famous magician, John Dee, who received messages apparently from angels with a language called Enochian. There is this idea that only certain messages can be received or written in a particular alphabet. That was an inspiration on the project. As was the use of sigils in spellcraft, which is where you take you take an intention or a statement in text and you reduce it to its letter components, and then you create an automatic drawing out of the letter parts, and then arrange them into some kind of icon. The idea is that you then invest the energy of that message into this unconsciously created icon and that becomes a magical object that is half a drawing, half a piece of text. That idea was influencing me, and I guess I was just fiddling with paperclips, which is something that I used to do back in school, and by breaking paperclips and forming them in certain directions, I discovered the possibility that there might be an alphabet hidden in them.

SB: Okay, so is your interest in it and the magic merely from curiosity or are you hoping to enact some kind of magic with these paperclip writings?

DP: Well, the Cluster piece and the batten pieces are both coded messages, so I think of them as spells. Whether or not I believe that they have any power doesn't matter to me. It's more the idea of translating it into an object through the idea that it might have magical powers.

SB: And I guess the paperclip is one of the most banal objects, it is something that you have lots of, you often have too many of them or can't find them when you need them. They don't have any kind of romance attached to them in the least. Is that kind of banality the sort of anti-mystical presence of them of interest to you?

DP: Yes, definitely. There is a history of poets writing manifestos – I think Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* is a famous one, where they draw a contrast between poetry and utility, or utilitarianism. And it's all about this recognition that modernity is disenchanting the world. The poets then take on the mantle of being these heroic magicians who will re-enchant the world, which relates to the typical idea of a romantic artist, of course, but they do draw this contrast between utilitarianism and poetry, and there is no object more utilitarian than the paperclip. That's an object that came about through bureaucratisation. It emerged with the need to keep paper records, a need which increased dramatically with the rationalising processes of modernity. There was a dramatic increase in the amount of bureaucracy and the need to keep paper records. The paperclip emerged in response to this need. And as it is also a mass-produced object, a cheap object, and one that we easily break and throw away, it also strongly contrasts with the ideal of an art object or a magical object.

SB: And it may soon become obsolete as well, it may be on its way to obsolescence.

DP: It has become a symbol of bureaucratic order, as well as mundanity. So, it represents the loss of enchantment. To then find a potentially magical alphabet in such an object is to turn it on its head. And, yes, it is also becoming obsolete, because of digitisation. Most of our records are now kept digitally, so there is less need for the paperclip. So, I think it is also interesting that at this moment in time, when this object is becoming obsolete, it is also, here, in this project, becoming both poetic and magical.

SB: And I wonder whether you found through working with them an enchantment in the actual design of it, or the materiality of it, because often getting very close and familiar with a material or object or artist, as in working on an homage to an artist or copying them, a poetic emerges with the model or the material just through acquaintance with it. Did you experience that, do you have a heightened regard for the paperclip? Yours was a generic design of paperclip too.

DP: I studied the history of paperclips.

SB: I am sure you did!

DP: This is the most popular design and I think it is called the 'gem' paperclip. What's interesting is that at the time the paperclip was becoming a necessary object there were dozens of different designs with people patenting them and the one that ended up becoming the most popular doesn't seem to have a specific originator. It seems to have evolved naturally, amongst all these people experimenting with different paperclip designs.

SB: So, no one owns it?

DP: No, I don't think so.

SB: With the text that you wrote, without disclosing the content of that and revealing it and losing its magic, was the theme or what you were conveying to yourself at least related to the function of the paperclip, or was it something much more esoteric?

DP: It is just a very simple message of intention. It is not some obscure, esoteric message, and it is not specifically related to the paperclip. If I was going to do a much larger work, I was thinking about translating some of the initial advertising and production descriptions into the cypher itself.

SB: So that it is beholden to itself.

DP: Yeah, so it's not just an alphabet that has emerged from within the material, but it is then starting to speak about itself. I didn't do that with these, due to spatial limitations. With these I just made a simple message, as you would when composing a spell, a message that is in accordance with Shelley's vision of poetry as inherently opposed to utilitarianism. Each of them is making a simple statement about how there is magic, even here, in the mundane.

SB: How did you find the process of presenting an artwork versus writing? You have published poetry, so I am wondering what the difference is between the two processes of presentation, or what similarities you have found between the two?

DP: With the publishing of a poem, you consider the journal, its style, how the poem will look on the page or the screen, but you have less control with the framing of the work. With visual work, or installation pieces, like these, I had to think very specifically about the space, and the relationship between the pieces. It is unfortunate that we couldn't show them in the gallery space, due to Covid, as

the pieces were designed to speak with each other, and to be experienced in a particular sequence. The work is still in a stage of progress, though, and would look different in a different space.

SB: Did you have any issues with converting *Binding Cyphers* to a virtual exhibition? What did you find difficult in this conversion?

DP: The most difficult thing was COVID, which I am sure we don't really want to talk about, not being able to go out and get material. I have had to order everything online which often added long delays between considering an idea and actually working on it.

SB: And did you have disappointments when things arrived?

DP: Yeah, I ordered certain magnets that I thought would hold the paperclip or be able to interact with the other material and it didn't. I have a whole bunch of extra magnets lying over.

SB: Welcome to the world of being an artist. It is all those surplus pieces of stuff you collect. It is like making anything, it is trial and error and you must bear with the process. It would have been very interesting for you to experience the installation of the work in the gallery space, or experience the installation process, all the spacing, height of the work, the way it reads across space.

And so, I was wondering if you would talk about the actual making of the alphabet, the manual figuring of each letter, or indeed if each paperclip functions rather as a word – like a character. How did this come about? You said you played with paperclips when you were at school, but you weren't making letters, I presume, at school. The fiddling with paperclips links back, I guess, to a biographical moment with you. Could talk about that, how it came about that you started making letters and linked it back to your teenage year and then moved it forwards into an exhibition?

DP: Yes, so the teenage experience I am talking about is just sitting in class, in high school, fiddling with paperclips, which normally involved unfolding them into a line, or bending them back and forward until they break. So, it was kind of an expression of frustration.

SB: Quiet destruction.

DP: Frustration and boredom. Which I think is also appropriate to the object, given it represents bureaucracy and mundanity. That is probably where my interest in the object comes from, autobiographically. It is something I would fiddle with in class as a teenager. So, it had an existing relationship to my hand. The alphabet emerged about a year ago when I was studying these magicians who worked with sigils or cyphers, and I must have just had a paperclip around at the same time, and the two things came together, the fiddling and the study of magic. The process of actually discovering the alphabet, though, came out of providing myself with a rule for the bending. Rather than it being random or destructive, I decided to only bend the thing in accordance with certain rules, and then it became a study of these permutations. So, the rule I set myself was that I could only bend the paperclip ninety degrees or one hundred and eighty degrees from either end. And then I looked at all the possible combinations that could be made out of bending the paperclip in this way. I laid all of them out and removed the repetitions and there was the alphabet staring back at me. It almost immediately arranged itself into twenty-six combinations. And thus, a cypher for the Latin alphabet.

SB: Okay, great! And what kind of a state would you be in while you were making the letters, was it a kind of meditative state, or were you forcing something on the paperclips so it felt like a struggle, or you had expectations for how it should turn out?

DP: It never felt like they were struggling against me. If I am making an array of them, it is meditative, but because I have to pay attention to what I am doing, if I make a mistake I will have ruined that letter, it is not exactly a meditative process. If I make a mistake, it often won't bend back.

SB: So, did you have any broken paperclips?

DP: Oh, hundreds.

SB: Hundreds, okay, that's a good use of them, I guess to push them beyond what they can do. Formally, how would this work relate to other concrete poetry that you have written?

DP: The other concrete poetry I have been making is very different. Some are embossed works that are exploring how language can refer to itself, so it's about iconicity. It's about trying to create a hieroglyph that has self-reflexivity built into the letter or sign. That's why I chose embossing, because, as it is lettering without ink, it is becoming the paper. It is about saying, 'here I am, as a symbol'. The other visual poetry I have done is some pattern poetry, which was inspired by Dick Higgin's book on Pattern Poetry. This is about arranging text, usually two dimensionally, often in matrices, and it tends to play upon the relationship between text and textiles. So that metaphoric relationship between text and textiles. It is one of the major themes of pattern poetry. I have created these patterns based on palindromes as well, to represent that you can go in multiple directions. The palindrome also connects back up with magic because palindromes are often used in spells, and spellcraft often involves an exploration of the hidden coincidences in language.

SB: From this work, as your first exhibited piece, what do you see coming out of this experience?

DP: My hope is that it leads to further exhibitions and installations. The text-based art and visual poetry I have been working on, in parallel to this paperclip cypher, is almost ready to be shown in a gallery space. My other hope was to use this experience to learn about the process of holding a gallery show and installing sculptural pieces of text-art.

SB: And from this series, what would be the next work that would emanate from it?

DP: Do you mean specifically with the paperclips?

SB: No, as far as, if you are thinking of another exhibition then what connection would it have with this work? What is this work engendering, or is there further to explore within the paperclip alphabet?

DP: I think there is more potential for manifesting different texts that use this paperclip cypher. There is more visual potential and installation potential in it, but I am not sure how to answer the previous question.

SB: I guess it is difficult in this stalled environment where things are only made possible very, very slowly and in a second-degree manner, as we were saying, with the online presentation versus an actual experience of an exhibition and ordering materials online, which means very slow delivery and often requiring a return of items.

DP: I think I am preparing myself to put together a gallery show that is based upon the iconic potential of language in different forms.

SB: That sounds like it would be a larger scale project and one that incorporates all your other interests in language, and all the different types of work you have been producing to date. Another question was: what were the options for the displaying of the arrangements for the exhibition? Did you have a multitude of versions of the show?

DP: I had a few different ideas about how to present the alphabet as a text, as opposed to a cypher. But, first and foremost, I wanted to show it as a cypher, which is what you get with the framed alphabet. I think that alone is a miraculous event. That you can see the alphabet in the paperclips is a miraculous event. And then I wanted to show it as a text, which is how you get the linear options, and to show it in various ways that reveal the materiality of it. So, the presentation on the battens is about showing the letters in a linear order, like text, and then the other options, in this case the clusters, where you lose the linearity and it becomes obscure again, turns in on itself, that was to reveal the 'wiry' nature of the material, and to look at the shadows created on the wall.

SB: How would a cluster function apart from an aesthetic obfuscation of whatever it was intended to say? Is it just a pile of letters or is it doing some magic on itself with the magnets?

DP: The clusters are about linking writing with drawing and mark making. As well as asemic writing. When you take the linearity away it looks like it has lost its meaning and been returned to a series of expressive gestures. I am interested in how writing can look like drawing. It isn't actually asemic though, because the clusters retain an order, and each is a letter translating a magical thought. The pieces on the battens and the cypher in the frame are suspended with magnets. This is a way of concealing the support structure. I also see a relationship to magic, because, as an invisible force, magnetism was often considered magical.

SB: In that sense then, it is well played out, the different options that you offer in the online exhibition. They would have been played out in a similar sequence in the gallery space, as well, and you talked about positioning them in terms of order, how you might experience them in a gallery. So, I am wondering if there is anything further you would like to say about the exhibition before we finish?

DP: I think we have touched on most of the main things. I wanted to mention the influence of magical cyphers and sigils, the visual relationship to asemic writing (even though it is not asemic writing), the history of the paperclip, its relationship to modernity and the disenchantment of the world. And the personal story of fiddling with paperclips, the fact that they relate to my body, that the bending of them was an act of adolescent frustration. And the turning of that frustration into a magical act. That is an act of sublimation, I think.