

# Matthew Kay

## On Diagram Poetry

I've been asked to talk about my practice in terms of my relationship to books and paper but I thought I'd first give you a bit of background: I got my degree in Fine Art Sculpture from Loughborough University about 11 years ago and I completed my MA in sculpture at Wimbledon College of Art 5 years later. So sculpture is my thing. But even when I making work that is basically 2D like the [Diagram Poems](#) I have to show you this evening I still think of it very much in sculptural terms. While I use the term poetry to describe this work I don't however make any claims of being a poet.

Sculpture for me has to do with connections, it's about teasing out meaning from the interplay of objects, images and words or in the relationship between material and form. So I tend to make congregations of sculptures to be exhibited in small clusters. I like how collecting work together in this way allows for new ideas to be found in the conceptual space between individual assemblages. The same concern for connections underpins my practice of producing artist's books. I use them as a structure whereby I can hold together a cluster of ideas, orchestrate connections between them and allow the individual elements to collaborate. A recent example of this is my book of diagram poems, [To Eden](#).

Like sculpture I think a fundamental element of my books' aesthetic (and diagram poems') is their physicality and the physicality of the paper or board that I make them on - that they exist as objects in their own right. On the whole I don't produce prints of my work other than in editions of books. I make my work out of things that have already been used, touched, lived with and worn down. I like the way that human contact invests the materials with a stronger "feeling value." In a recent poem, collaged on an old book cover, part of its meaning comes from the unique scuffs and stains and the history they suggest for the material - the material's memories become part of the narrative of the whole object.

This "poetic" practice began with a book of pie charts that I made for a friend. I'd been making various books, all full of repeated motifs, for a while and this was to be a volume of nonsensical pie charts. I enjoyed the idea of pairing pie charts, which are very clear, precise, diagrammatic representations of *fact*, with more ethereal or ambiguous labels. The connections that started to appear between the words in a single pie chart and between multiple pie charts throughout the book ended up creating something quite poignant... almost like some kind of diagrammatic poetry.

When making diagram poems I flick through a collection of rescued damaged books (most of which come from flea markets, charity shops or gutters) and allow my attention to drift and be caught by

particular words and phrases. I cut these out to be moved around on my desk in an editing process that allows me to sculpt my poems in physical space. Once I'm happy with the rhythm and the flow of ideas I collage them around a piechart or sometimes another type of diagram, usually starting from the top and working round clockwise. In appropriating pie charts as a poetic medium the wedges of the chart suggest different weight or value for simple phrases within the flow of poetry. Rather than statistical devices they become visual cues for reading the poem intuitively.

From their inception my diagram poems have been an exercise in recontextualising readymade text and exploring the new meanings that creates. I prefer words and phrases from very old books because they're so rich, and archaic language is more easily reconfigured beautifully. I bought one book that was just horrendous though and turned it into a series [low brow poems on post-its](#) before putting it in the recycling.

So unpicking language – that's one thing.

On the surface a lot of my diagram poems and books are about human relationships. They explore love and loss and loneliness and justice and forgiveness and grace. At a deeper level they chart the territory between the ordinary and the cosmic. Or “the Transcendent Everyday” as I have come to call it, which is inherent in my coupling of very quotidian phrases: *Sandwiches* with affective qualities: *A Love Song*. I habitually place emotionally charged elements amongst really mundane imagery. So “the Transcendent Everyday” is about ordinary wonder, and the possibility that that-which-we-personify-as-god is lurking amongst the normalcy of life.

My practice as a whole addresses the nature of belief, questions of religious tradition and its effect on our behaviour; and is particularly concerned with probing the boundary between faith and superstition. While [my recent sculptures](#) – which reference talismans, relics and shrines – investigate further the idea that objects might somehow connect us to or reveal the transcendent amidst the everyday, diagram poems allow me to critique the idea of the sacred text and the notion that books hold mystical knowledge. Words in books can make ideas feel really concrete, gospel you might say, and I'm keen to both revere and challenge this at the same time. So I think playing with holy language is a way to renegotiate the authority of the written word and indeed my own beliefs.

Cutting up books and making new poetic objects out of the bits enables me to sift through all these sorts of ideas, find connections between them and remake meaning by essentially sculpting in the abstract.