

# **PAPERWORK: FILMMAKING AND THE CYBERNETIC METHOD**

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**in collaboration with Glenn Davidson**

## Introduction

What follows is an account of a creative collaboration between cybernetic artists, Artstation, and myself as filmmaker, which resulted in an art installation entitled Paperwork. The multimedia piece included a 10-minute, split-screen video loop and a large-scale paper sculpture. The aim of this article is to follow the narrative of the production process and, in doing so, to note how adopting a cybernetic method impacted upon conventional filmic practices.

## Context

The project was commissioned by Cardiff 2008, as part of the Welsh capital's bid to become a European Capital of Culture. Central to Cardiff 2008's bid was highlighting the city's past, present and future connections with continental Europe. Of all the artworks commissioned as part of the bid, Paperwork was probably the most European-centred, and, according to commissioner Yvette Vaughan-Jones, was Cardiff 2008's flagship

visual art project. It was proposed that Artstation should create an exhibition that would somehow link Cardiff's Old Library with Le Petit Chateau in Brussels - apparently Europe's largest and oldest asylum seekers' reception centre. The exhibition would engage with issues surrounding asylum seeking - namely identity, migration and human rights (some of the biggest challenges that Europe currently faces) - and relay them to a Welsh audience.

Artstation are established international artists with a reputation for making large, architectural-sized, sculptural forms made entirely of paper. Partners Glenn Davidson and Anne Hayes have worked together consistently since their student days at Cardiff Art College in the 1970s, developing a highly distinctive art practice. In their current practice they set up explorative conversations within communities, which in turn become the catalyst from which the artworks grow. The resulting pieces aim to embody, in abstract form, some of the key concerns and aspirations of the host community (1).

To place Artstation's practice in context it is important to refer in particular to a major influence on their work: Artist Placement Group (APG). APG were formed in the mid-1960s with the

specific aim of giving artists the opportunity to actively contribute to society's decision-making processes. With this goal in mind they established the practice of placing artists within non-art environments, such as industry and governmental organisations. An example to consider would be the artist/filmmaker Ian Breakwell, who undertook an APG placement at Broadmoor Special Hospital (Breakwell, 1980). The work he produced amounted to a diary and involvement in a study report, which recommended radical changes to the running of the institution (staffing, patient population and even treatment programmes). Such an art practice, one could argue, represented a significant break with the dominant paradigm of the artist as someone who passively observes from a distance. APG was an opportunity for socially and politically engaged artists to be placed right at the heart of society, to influence directly how organisations operated. Later, clearly inspired by APG's pioneering work, the Arts Council of Great Britain established its Artist-in-Residence scheme, which in fact was far less radical, because it reverted to a more passive model of the artist (sometimes engaged to beautify the surface environment of an organisation, rather than to question its mode of operation). The Paperwork placement was by no means a replica of the APG model, but it would be true to say that it was approached more in the spirit of APG than an Artist-in-Residence placement. The aim of the project, right from the outset, was not

simply to comment upon what was encountered at the asylum seeker reception centre, but also to intervene.

In order for an APG-style placement to take place it is necessary for art curators, along with host institutions, to adopt a certain non-prescriptive approach, i.e. to demonstrate trust and respect to artists by allowing them the freedom to respond to placements as they see fit. APG called this an 'open brief', and insisted upon it for each of their placements. This was deemed necessary because an APG artist's intent was to "operate within an organisation as a 'free' agent, with no guarantee that he will produce any hardware or physical end product. His role may be that of an observer or critic, who contributes to the organisation taking a fresh look at itself." (Breakwell, 1976: 165) The Paperwork project was fortunate to have had this mature, non-prescriptive curatorial approach, from both Yvette Vaughan-Jones, of Cardiff 2008, and Bob Pleysier, the then director of Le Petit Chateau (now head of Belgium's Federal Asylum-Seeker Reception Agency) (2).

Cybernetics

Another major influence on Artstation is cybernetics. It is a term that does not frequently get used in the realm of art and filmmaking, so what exactly is it and what is its significance to Artstation?

To provide a simple, concise definition of cybernetics is notoriously difficult (this article is going to be interspersed with various attempts), not least because it is a generic term that is shared by an extremely wide variety of disciplines. The term derives from the Greek word 'kybernetes', meaning the art of steering, and was first introduced in the late 1940s by American mathematician, Norbert Wiener. Models of organizations, feedback and goals were used to understand the capacity and limits of any system, be it technological or biological.

Understanding the world as a web of interacting systems, each being in dynamic, circular feedback with one another, led to some of the major technological breakthroughs of our age: sending men to the moon, creating self-guiding missile systems and artificial intelligence, to name but a few. What started as the science of observed systems soon grew to include the science of observing systems, i.e. of acknowledging that the observer cannot stand outside the process and is implicated into the complex web of systems. Known as Second Order Cybernetics, this move made

cybernetics more relevant to social systems. Thus cybernetics came to be characterized as both a science and an art, and hence the inherent slipperiness of its definition. It is possible that many readers of this article will automatically connect the term 'cybernetics' with the world of computers and robotics, and be unaware of the extent its ideas and concepts have penetrated not only the social sciences but also the arts. One of the aims of this article is to invite readers to re-visit their understanding of the term and to become aware of how pursuing cybernetic methods can beneficially inform media practices. I would suggest that within the context of the arts an appropriate definition of cybernetics would be that offered by anthropologist (and cybernetician) Dr. Margaret Meade: "Cybernetics is a common language that people who are from different disciplines use to communicate." (Meade, 1968)

Artstation have pursued a cybernetic method of working (within the context of APG-inspired art placements) for many years and in many ways have become an embodiment of cybernetic principles – to such an extent that operating cybernetically has almost become second nature for them. Interestingly, cybernetics was not once discussed during our collaboration on Paperwork. It is only in the process of writing this article that I have managed to

unearth some of the basic principles that underpin their work. In essence I would summarise their approach to art as follows: If a cybernetician understands the world and its complexities by viewing it as a web of interacting systems, then cybernetic artists, such as Artstation, view art as a means of interacting with other systems. Art therefore becomes the communication interface of systems, creating models of organizations, feedback and goals.

#### Pre-placement

I am originally from a Fine Art background, but Paperwork is the first video art installation I have worked on. (It is also, in fact, the first time for Artstation, who had previously used video as a research tool, to include moving image work as part of their output). I had worked in television for some 15 years, mostly making historical drama-documentaries, but my passion throughout lay with art-house cinema. Having become jaded by the inevitable creative compromises of directing for television, I viewed the invitation to work on this project as an opportunity to change direction, to work more experimentally and to return to my roots in the art world. However, it ought to be stated, that I entered into the process very much steeped in the conventions of the world of film and television and almost wholly ignorant of

cybernetics, let alone its impact on art practice. The journey I was about to undertake amounted to having my tried and tested filmmaking methods challenged at almost every turn. This became clear from the initial meeting onwards, when we all agreed that the end product was not to be drama, not documentary and not impenetrable, overly esoteric art. Beyond that Artstation gave me an 'open brief', I was free to pursue my own path: as long as it adhered to cybernetic methods, of course!

The schedule for the project was fairly tight: three weeks planning and pre-production, a week's placement in the Belgian capital, followed by a final couple of weeks' post-production back home (for editing the video and constructing the sculpture), before the installation opened at Cardiff's Old Library in March 2002. The best way to prepare for the placement in my mind was to get the research process underway by both reading about asylum seeking in general and meeting informed individuals who worked in the field. This research gave rise to various creative ideas about the form and content of the video - in particular, the idea of featuring a large sheet of paper as a 'character' that undertook a hazardous journey as a visual metaphor for the asylum seeker's journey. Along the way the paper would be subjected to various environmental trials, for example, burnt by fire, soaked by water,



dried by the sun, blown by the wind and trodden underfoot. Using a large sheet of paper as a metaphor seemed like an appropriate way for the video to form a link between the paper sculpture and the asylum seekers, who we would eventually be filming at Le Petit Chateau.

As the actual placement itself and the post-production period were so tight, it seemed to make sense to film the sheet of paper sequence prior to leaving for Belgium. However, on presenting the paper sequence script to Artstation, I came to realise that I had unwittingly transgressed a cybernetic principle.

If an artwork is viewed as an interface between related systems then it needs to emerge organically through dialogue between the given systems; or, to use a key cybernetic term, it needs to emerge through 'conversation'. During their cybernetics fellowship at Amsterdam University in the 1980s Artstation had collaborated with a cybernetician, the late Prof. Gordon Pask, whose Conversation Theory (Pask, 1975) - in which he attempts to explain the process of learning in both living organisms and machines - had influenced them greatly. In essence, and simply stated, Conversation Theory asserts that learning grows out of

conversation. New knowledge is created when one system interacts with another. This contact with Pask is what led Artstation to incorporate an inter-system conversation into each of their subsequent projects - Paperwork, of course, included. Incidentally, in explaining his theory, Pask created elaborate mathematical models to describe the internal workings of conversations, along with pictures that are reminiscent of digestive systems, which, in turn, inspired Artstation's tube-like, paper structures (3). Adopting a cybernetic approach to filmmaking excludes the role of an unfettered *auteur*. The cybernetic filmmaker, it seems, is required to place their artistic inspiration at the service of intervention within a given system, which can only be meaningful and politically effective if it springs from a conversation with users of the system one intends to influence. This loss of authorship may prove challenging to art-house inspired filmmakers.

## Placement

There were three of us on the placement at Le Petit Chateau: Glenn, Hervé Gouget, a Brussels-based climate physicist, and myself. Anne was based in the Old Library in Cardiff, and prepared the ground for building the paper sculpture. She also

had a crucial role to play in the forthcoming three-way conversation between Cardiff 2008, the Artstation placement and Le Petit Chateau. Almost the very first act of the placement, once a room had been allocated, was to drill a hole through the floor to bring telephone cables into our workroom, to ensure a high-speed Internet connection with Anne at The Old Library. This is yet another example of Artstation operating according to cybernetic principles. Key to cybernetics is acknowledging the importance of standing back and observing the dynamics of an inter-system exchange. In a similar way to how a family therapist is strategically placed to observe and comment upon a marital relationship, Anne was positioned to provide regular feedback on the unfolding dialogue between the placement artists and the asylum system.

The reception centre building, situated in central Brussels, was enormous – an ex-military, fortress-like barracks, housing around 850 immigrants. During the first couple of days we interviewed the centre’s director, Bob Pleysier, various staff and several asylum seekers to learn how the system operated. Despite being surrounded by an imposing 5-meter high wall, there was no barbed wire to detain the residents. It is an open reception centre where asylum seekers are first brought and housed as they

await their cases to be heard by the Belgian authorities. All the asylum seekers we spoke to came from the expected war-torn, conflict-ridden trouble spots of the world - Chechnya, Iran, Nepal, Sierra Leone – some adults had travelled alone, some with families, and some children had arrived by themselves without their families. The authorities had the unenviable task of investigating each individual case to ascertain if they were economic migrants or genuine victims of political persecution. Roughly half the residence of Le Petit Chateau were awaiting their first hearing, while the other half had already been rejected and were appealing against the decision. The appeal process can sometimes last for several years and in some cases, we were horrified to learn, as long as 10 years. Once having had their first plea rejected they are classified as illegal immigrants, and can therefore be forcefully repatriated at any moment, appeal or no appeal. During this time they live in constant fear of the early morning knock from plain clothed police officers who, giving them 15 minutes to gather their belongings, would escort them to a prison-like deportation centre prior to their flight home.

One of the staff members we interviewed was concerned how little MEPs actually knew about the flow of asylum seekers into Europe. As a result he had taken it upon himself to create a

monthly statistical bulletin for circulation within the European Parliament, listing the number of asylum seekers arriving at Europe's borders and those granted refugee status (in Belgium, at the time, an average of 98 per cent of cases were rejected). Astoundingly, this employee's homespun pamphlet turned out to be the only current information on asylum seekers readily available to MEPs.

The interviews with asylum seekers, as one might expect, were truly harrowing experiences for us. It is one thing to read about people's plight second-hand in a newspaper, but entirely another to hear someone's gruesome tale face-to-face. One of the worse ones was with an Iranian family of six – a father, mother and four children. Their case had been turned down once and they were in the process of appealing against the decision. The father, on being asked what he would do if the appeal failed, said it was impossible for such a large family to go into hiding and become illegal residents of the country (as some undoubtedly do), so, rather than face returning home, he claimed he would first kill each member of his family before finally committing suicide himself. As we sat around the table listening to him, absorbing the reaction of his family as he spoke, we had no reason to doubt the conviction of his words.

Another interview that left a strong impression on us was with a young Chechnyan man who told us of how his father handed him his life savings and forced him to flee the country. On discovering that this teenager was determined to study architecture, Glenn instructed him on how to operate Artstation's Computer Assisted Design (CAD) software and encouraged him to experiment with some design ideas (Fig. 1). He talked about how his family home had been bombed and was now basin shaped. They entered this outline into the CAD and rotated it to create the form of a bridge, which eventually inspired the form of the paper sculpture at the Old Library (Fig. 2). There is something about the simple inversion of a basin-shaped bomb crater into the form of a bridge, eloquently transforming a negative into a positive, that encapsulates the driving force of cybernetics. It is the drive to facilitate, to improve, to make systems work more effectively, be they large organisations or individual organisms – in this case an individual human being.

We had pinned a notice on the door of our room at Le Petit Chateau, inviting asylum seekers to come in and share their experiences with us, but at the end of the second day we had decided to take it down. We felt emotionally drained, unable to digest any more tales of human cruelty and suffering. At this

stage we were at a loss as to how best to proceed with the placement and were beginning to feel the pressure of the encroaching delivery deadline. Glenn and Anne, turning towards cybernetic methods for theoretical support, were clear that the project should aim to contribute to the 'user language' of the asylum seeking system. The cybernetic term 'user language' was formulated by another influential figure for Artstation, Prof. Gerard De Zeeuw of Amsterdam University, with whom Artstation had studied during their Amsterdam fellowship. De Zeeuw defines a user language as "...the linguistic constraints (the alphabet plus the grammar) on the interaction between an actor and what the actor is using to ensure that the effects of an action are as intended such that unintended side-effects can be avoided." (Zeeuw, 1995)

Cybernetics, as always, seeks to define, clarify and enhance the fluency of communication between systems. Having spent an intense amount of time in discussion with staff and asylum seekers, and seen first hand the difficulties experienced, were we able to offer something – maybe a word, an image or a metaphor - that the asylum seeking system could utilise, as part of its self-reflexive language, to achieve greater understanding of itself?

Prof. Gordon Pask once poetically described cybernetics as the art

and science of viable metaphors. This is precisely what we now sought: a viable metaphor.

Thankfully, our eureka moment did eventually arrive in the form of the word 'suspension'. An asylum seeker's life is held in suspension. From the moment they enter the reception centre their careers, studies, social status, relationships with relatives and loved ones, their native cultures, along with control of their own destinies, are all held in indefinite suspension. We discussed the suspension metaphor with asylum seekers and staff and it received a positive response. Some asylum seekers elaborated upon the metaphor, explaining how they felt both present in Belgium but absent at the same time – like ghost citizens. Others talked of trying to connect with local people, but failing, as if there were an invisible barrier between them. One asylum seeker, Tonto, insisted on demonstrating this feeling by showing a hand trying desperately to shake another, but kept apart by an invisible force.

The camera was now brought out for the first time during the placement to shoot some test footage. With the aid of asylum seekers we filmed hands trying to connect with each other (Fig.



3). We filmed legs treading water, trying to walk but not touching the ground (Fig. 4). We experimented with various ways of recording people held in suspension, for example getting people to jump and then creating a video loop of the section where they were suspended in mid air (Fig. 5). Whatever material we shot was shown to other asylum seekers and to staff at Le Petit Chateau and used to facilitate further dialogue. This is cybernetic filmmaking in action - the camera employed as a tool for conversation and feedback.

As a way of presenting 'suspension' as a user language for the asylum seeking system a group jump was organised in the courtyard of Le Petit Chateau, under the shadow of the reception centre's landmark, twin-tower gateway (Fig. 6). The aim of this art event was to engage system users in direct participatory action. Many asylum seekers and staff, along with those in sympathy with the plight of asylum seekers, seized upon the opportunity. A photograph of the jump was produced and printed on the front page of Le Petit Chateau's monthly statistical bulletin and distributed to every politician at the European Parliament. In the suspension photo, of about a hundred people, two remain standing with their feet firmly on the ground - a symbol of the 2% of asylum seekers in Belgium (and similarly throughout the

European Union) that gain refugee status, whilst 98% get rejected. The photo revealed the human faces that are at the receiving end of bureaucratic paperwork (and the vitriolic words of tabloid journalists). The photo turned statistics into flesh.

The video, taking its cue from the photo, also became a vehicle for disseminating the suspension metaphor. The moving image allowed me to track the narrative development of an asylum seeker's journey, first fleeing and then arriving at Le Petit Chateau. The moment the main character (performed by a young asylum seeker from Iran – Fig. 7) steps inside the courtyard, his feet are elevated from the ground and he spends the rest of his days within the institution in a state of suspension. The video then expands further upon the metaphor, exploring its various nuances and permutations. The video includes footage of a Nepalese woman writing a letter to support her case for asylum (such laborious paperwork preoccupied an enormous amount of their time), but, with her hand suspended over the page, the text remains unwritten, unseen and unread (Fig. 8). The same motif was explored in the context of an asylum seeker's suspended connection with their native culture. We filmed a Sierra Leone man sitting on the floor of his room; in his mind's eye he imagines playing music upon his native African instrument, but in reality his

hands pound only upon thin air. The narrative draws to a close when the main character is finally released and his feet once more return to solid ground. The ending, however, is an ambiguous one - it is of a hanging, with the shot framed tightly upon lifeless feet suspended above the ground (Fig. 9). The story at this point cuts back to the beginning, where the asylum seeker flees for his life, leaving viewers to ponder if the image of the hanging represents the cause for the initial fleeing, or is it the suicide of an asylum seeker?

The above was scripted and filmed during the second half of the placement week, and performed by volunteer asylum seekers (who, in fear of persecution, all asked to remain anonymous). This time my script received no objection from Artstation; it had been developed in accordance to cybernetic methods.

## Editing

The idea of the video having a split screen had been thought of quite early in the project's history. I had been on a Mike Figgis masterclass, during the period when he had just finished *Timecode* (2000) and was working on *Hotel* (2001), and I had appreciated the innovative use of multiple screens in both these

films. Reading two moving images, set side-by-side, demands a qualitatively different response from the viewer than reading a single moving image. Viewers are unable to blindly immerse themselves in the content, they are obliged to compare and contrast, to consider the juxtaposition of the two images. They are held more at a distance and become more aware that they are observing and participating in a viewing. Presenting a split screen image acknowledges that the observer cannot stand outside the process of generating meaning and is implicated into the complex web of communication. In this way the form of the Paperwork video, in my mind, connects with Second Order Cybernetics. The two screens can be characterized as being 'in conversation' with one another, with the viewer, through participating in 'feedback', actively creating new knowledge.

The video tests that were shot during the research phase of the placement were included in the final edit (Fig. 10). Initially, this was not my intention. Artstation, however, pointed out the importance of their inclusion. This footage was evidence of user participation in developing the concept of suspension as a user language and therefore brought authenticity to the piece. This is a further example, not only of two sensibilities colliding, but, more significantly, of a fundamental conflict between two paradigms of

art practice. My background as a filmmaker had led me to give predominance to product over process, while for Artstation, as present day torchbearers of APG, it is process over product (hence artworks created in perishable paper). As Ian Breakwell reminds us: "In a placement the 'artwork' is not the end product but the whole process." (Breakwell, 1980: 4) And the process, within the parlance of cybernetics, is the process of steering systems towards greater efficiency of understanding and communication.

The sequence of the large paper sheet making its way down river as part of the water cycle, from mountaintop to the sea, was filmed prior to the placement (along the river Taff from its source in the Brecon Beacons to the Severn Estuary) and did, in fact, cut seamlessly with Le Petit Chateau's suspension imagery. In my view the paper sheet metaphor was conceived within the tradition of cinema, i.e. metaphor used in support of character development and theme, while the suspension metaphor was conceived within the tradition of video art, i.e. metaphor used as the central concept of the piece (4). It is hoped that Paperwork's two visual metaphors – the lyrical paper sheet and the utilitarian suspension concept – complement each other. They can be viewed as a testament to the creative conversation that took

place during the course of the project between the two 'systems' of Artstation and Wyn Mason.

## Dissemination

The art installation at Cardiff's Old Library consisted of the video projected, like a river of light, underneath the enormous bridge-like form of the paper sculpture, which, 10 meters in the air and 8 meters in length, filled an entire stairwell (Fig. 12). The show also included a large print of the jump photo, along with various stills of Le Petit Chateau interiors, mounted contextual texts and a project diary website (see the Paperwork section of Artstation's website). Our Cardiff 2008 commissioner, Yvette Vaughan Jones, was pleased, claiming that the project played its part in securing a strong bid (Cardiff, apparently, came close to clinching the European Capital of Culture contest ahead of Liverpool, which eventually won). The experience of being Welsh (and particularly of being a Welsh speaker) can provide one with a sense of one's native culture being marginalized, if not, at times, being almost invisible within mainstream British media. For this reason a piece that deals with the suspension of identity can find a ready audience in Wales.

Later the video was also screened at Le Petit Chateau to an invited audience of asylum seekers, Bob Pleysier, staff and, significantly, MEPs. Until then not a single MEP had placed a foot inside Europe's largest reception centre, which, of course, is practically on The European Parliament's doorstep. Screening Paperwork to MEPs at Le Petit Chateau was important in securing the video's cybernetic credentials, because it provided yet another way for it to disseminate the suspension concept as a user language, in similar fashion to what the jump photo had achieved through publication on the statistical bulletin's front page. The idea of feedback is central to cybernetics. The interaction of systems is nothing more than a series of feedback exchanges, a circularity of motion where information gets relayed from one system to another, processed and then returned, and so forth (Fig. 13). A film, made and distributed according to cybernetic methods, is designed to contribute to a particular, designated 'conversation'. One could almost call it, not so much site-specific, but system-specific artwork. A cybernetic project, taken out of context, is in danger of losing its meaning. In fact, when it was suggested that the Paperwork video should be screened at international film festivals (which is currently happening), Artstation's initial reaction was hostile. A cybernetic film's central definition of success rests upon the extent it has succeeded in

intervening effectively within a given system. To reiterate, the process is what matters not the product.

## Conclusion

It is rare to find a Department of Cybernetics within universities. Cybernetics is not generally accepted as a hard, certifiable science, but its concepts and descriptions have nevertheless stealthily penetrated probably each and every discipline, from robotics to family therapy. My experience of collaborating with Artstation, who have consistently found cybernetics to be a fruitful treasure chest for art practice, proved both highly informative and creatively rewarding (although at times challenging), and led, through processed-based video experimentation, to a distinctive hybrid drama/documentary/art installation end product. It is hoped that this project alerts readers to the potential of further cybernetics inspired research within the field of media practice.

## Notes

1. To see examples of Artstation's work, including more information on the Paperwork project, go to:  
[www.artstation.org.uk](http://www.artstation.org.uk).



2. The Tate now houses a collection of APG's work and documents; for more information go to:  
[www.tate.org.uk/learning/artistsinfocus/apg/overview.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/learning/artistsinfocus/apg/overview.htm).
  
3. For background information on Pask, his conversation theory and cybernetics in general go to: <http://www.pangaro.com>.
  
4. I am thinking here of work by video artists such as Eija-Liisa Ahtila, who won Cardiff's Artes Mundi II prize in 2006. Her three-screen video installation, *The House* (2002), is highly cinematic, but one of the factors that define it as art rather than cinema, one could argue, is that the house metaphor, which represents the main character's deteriorating mental state, takes centre stage above and beyond character.

## References

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Captions for illustrations.

Fig. 1 A young Chechnyan asylum seeker enjoying using the CAD software.

Fig. 2 Computer Aided Design of the bridge-like form of the paper sculpture.

Fig. 3 Hands failing to connect.

Fig. 4 A row of asylum seekers treading water.

Fig. 5 An asylum seeker jumps from a chair and is held in suspension.

Fig. 6 The jump photo.

Fig. 7 Still from the video: the main character was played by a young Iranian asylum seeker.

Fig. 8 Still from the video: a pen is held suspended above the page so the words remain unwritten.

Fig. 9 Still from the video: the shadow of a hanging man's feet are suspended above the ground.

Fig. 10 Still from the video: shots of asylum seekers treading water placed next to suspended office files at Le Petit Chateau.

Fig. 11 Still from the video: shots of the sheet of paper inter-cut with asylum seekers at the reception centre.

Fig. 12 The Paperwork installation at The Old Library: consisting of the large paper sculpture and the projected video.

Fig. 13 The inter-system dimension of the project represented in diagrammatic form.