III.

My first encounter with the archive was a surprise. I had walked along the canal almost every day for a year but had never known that it was there. Looking through the window I saw the small house by the bridge, my approach framed by Gray's paintings.

I see photos of the canal in Gray's accountancy-ledger-turned-sketchbook, past and present looping like the snake he drew in pen and Tipp-ex.

Working on *Synthesis* meant going scavenging through piles of folders, Google Drives, and emails. Many of these contained objects from which came strange sounds. Looking through Holly's previous work I heard chattering in tenements. Agnes's manuscripts were accompanied by the clack of a typewriter and the rowdy scrawl of penmanship. Hayley spoke Scots soundscapes into my ears, and Alasdair kept me constantly updated on his whereabouts: 'IS SCOTLAND A POSSIBLE NATION? YES! MAKE IT!'. [17]

When I opened the document to see what Maisie had written, I saw she had begun with a section from my favourite piece of marginalia in the archive.

Sketch by Hayley Jane Dawson

You go into the room and even though you never knew him you are struck by the inescapable feeling that it is *his* room. Across time the room is rebuilt, placed together again through these fragments of a life - wishbones, hollow shells, recycled tin cans, phone books, Tipp-Ex, carved erasers.

You are in the room and you are sitting in the green velvet chair which sinks beneath you more than you expect. You imagine it pulling you down further, until you arrive in the city beneath this one.

From each narrative particular words stand out, strung like a garland, ready for you to cut wherever you like. When isolated in this way the words hold so much power, revealing the depth behind a concept, or the essential image in a winding description. They become bricks - lumps of clay - slats of wood - which you can arrange in any way you see fit.

You hold on to these words, like broken teeth or crushed shells in your palms, and you sit at the desk and you begin to write a letter. You confess to everything, you tell them what you really think, you express feelings too delicate for the spoken word - *I won't go into why I like it but why I don't. [18]*

You are reminded of an artist, from a different time, place, and thought pattern - Robert Filliou - who spoke of 'the eternal network'; a network of artists engaged in continual, repeated, eternal acts of creation. The people involved in this web continually contribute to this eternal practice through correspondence, allowing for communication across time and space. You see little difference between this and the forms of collaboration present right in front of you - communication across mediums, cultures, practices and temporalities - *Synthesis* as one small thread of a network that remains eternal.

You cannot remember how you got here or how to find your way back to the city. You have had many conversations with many people but have barely opened your mouth. You hold on tightly to what you have learnt in this strange place: save the wishbones from every meal.

17. A phrase printed on a piece of paper, from The Alasdair Gray Archive

18. First line of a letter from Gray to Owens in which Gray offers a precise critique of her work, from 10th September 1985, at the Alasdair Gray Archive

This text was commissioned by the Alasdair Gray Archive to accompany the exhibition *Synthesis,* September 2023.

Synthesis: A WORK OF COMMUNAL IMAGINATION

Zohra Iqbal + MAISIE WILLS

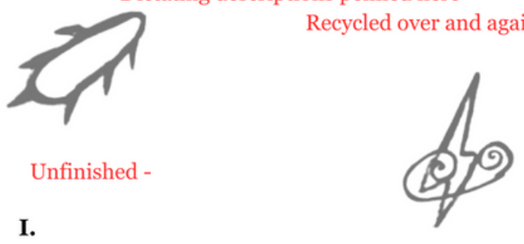
R.D. Laing: How can one ever understand the experience of the other?
Alasdair Gray: By listening to the stories they tell and seeing what they make and do. [1]

A vision of the arts as a public practice, generated through connection, unites the artists and writers whose work makes up *Synthesis*. In the work of Hayley Jane Dawson we see the significance of public art in working-class spaces such as the Wetherby canteen in which Alasdair Gray first practised painting, the office and factory Agnes Owens worked in, and the writing group she later joined. This sense of internal and external, public and domestic in which these categories inform each other is enacted in the work of both Holly Allan and Dawson, who have used the public mediums of a monument (Allan) and a bust (Dawson) in their responses to the work of Gray and Owens respectively. An animating spirit of generosity is present in 'Synthesis', creating what Gray might have called "a work of communal imagination".

Drawings by Maisie Wills

Gray draws a web across the page -
Blanks it out in Tipp-Ex -
And the same lines appear scrawled on Owens' manuscripts -
In margins -

And the lines form words which appear in Allan's installation -
Sculpting in turn the shapes of Dawson's clay -
Dictating descriptions penned here -
Recycled over and again to form something new -



Unfinished -
Reaching across -

I.

Wishbone - food - margin - tippex - web - shell - glasgow - architecture - recycled - lines - shelves - stacks - architecture - skeleton - love - confession - red line - bricks - letters

from Alasdair (you know the one) [2]

When Agnes Owens said that joining her local writing group was an attempt to 'get out of the house', she expressed a class-based counter to Virginia Woolf's statement that in order to write, each woman needs 'A Room of One's Own.' For Owens, who like many working-class children was 'deemed "hopeless" at school', [3] to write meant to do so in community: first through a group that met at her local leisure centre, and later through her participation in the group which would become known as the Kelvingrove Eight.

You
stumble along the winding streets, drunk, or just tired from the relentless chugging of the city.
You
lay brick upon brick again and again in the hopes that soon it will resemble something sturdy, something long lasting, something which shelters you from that cold wind.

A great writer must not love the world [4]

You
repeat these words until they lose meaning, each word crumbling as though the great wind has blown dust from the dried cement.

1. Alasdair Gray's annotations in his copy of R.D Laing's *The Politics of Experience*, at The Alasdair Gray Archive
2. Sign off on a postcard to Agnes, at the alasdair Gray Archive
3. Of Me and Others: Agnes Owens, Nicholas Starkey, 2023
4. Jane Austen quotation written in the margins of Gray's copy of The Conscience of Words and Ear Witness by Elias Cannetti, at the Alasdair Gray Archive

Gray and Owens were adept at constructing from the material shortages in their lives. Owens' novels *Gentlemen of the West* (1984) and *A Working Mother* (1994) semi-autobiographically portray the lives of, in the former, a 'brick-layer called Mac (who Agnes based on her son John) and, in the latter, a wife of an alcoholic (which Agnes once was herself). In the same vein, Gray's visual art and writing was made with what Allan calls 'no hierarchy of materials', which he often scavenged from the streets of Glasgow. [5]

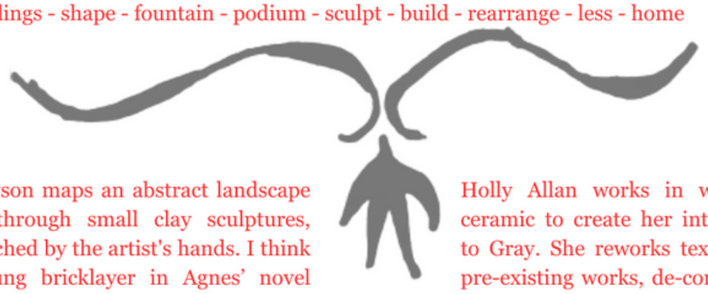
Dawson writes that in working with the Agnes Owens archive, they have found a new way of seeing 'the detritus of everyday life'. [6] The work of Owens, Gray, Allan and Dawson is a type of creative archival practice, inspired by the lives of ordinary, working-class people and affirming that, in Dawson's words, 'this world is for them.' [7]

Hollow shells litter the shelves above the writing desk; white and blue reminding me of sea foam and the froth on a pint of beer.

There is a wishbone, saved from a good meal, sitting next to a battered copy of Yeats. *Began Saturday 18th May 2013 after chicken casserole at 10:45am. [8]*

II.

Ceramic - mould - ornamental - decorative - cut-up - monochrome - marginalia - house - buildings - shape - fountain - podium - sculpt - build - rearrange - less - home



Drawing by Maisie Wills

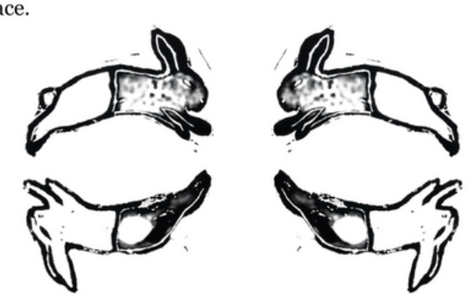
Hayley Jane Dawson maps an abstract landscape of Owens' life through small clay sculptures, moulded and pinched by the artist's hands. I think of Mac, the young bricklayer in Agnes' novel *Gentlemen of the West* - he also shaped buildings with his hands.

Holly Allan works in words, woodwork, and ceramic to create her interdisciplinary response to Gray. She reworks text, taking sections from pre-existing works, de-contextualising them, and placing them in her own work, re-arranged / cut up / transformed, until a new text emerges.

Dawson wrote a series of poems in Scots in response to the Agnes Owens archive. 'Wummin, men an the drink' articulates the determination of the speaker to use the speech of previous generations of kin to 'narrate oor stories an tell oor tales'. The speaker refers to 'The guid scots tongue in ma heid/ Generously giftit tae me (...)'. This sense of speech as a gift is echoed by Allan, who writes of her collaboration with Gray through time as 'going back and checking in with someone'. In taking inspiration and guidance from Owens and Gray, Dawson and Allan add their voices to a conversation which began before they were born.

An architecture of language emerges, the ceramic sculptures of Allan utilising a monochromatic schema to reflect that of a printed publication; the building materials are the same - for text, for sculpture, for world.

Allan writes of her monument, that the word '"Less" really asks what and who we as a society deem worthy of time and space.' [10] The word is elevated upon a plinth, marking it as something deserving of public glorification in the traditional language of the monument. If monuments are what Allan calls public trophies, then hers is subversive of that role. It is composed of repurposed elements, the letters in the suspended 'less' made from 'an old mirror and unwanted furniture', and the pedestal 'adorned wooden panels. [11]' The uncertainty of its physical makeup, translates into a question about the uncertainty of the categories it represents, concepts such as colonialism, history and celebration. The monument is haunted by a sense of rupture, with the crack in its pedestal and the interrogating word 'less' asserting the brokenness of the public space.



Print by Holly Allan

5. Holly Allan's artist statement
6. From an email interview with Hayley Jane Dawson
7. *Ibid*
8. Cover of *Morag's Book of Dreams, at the Alasdair Gray Archive*
9. From an email interview with Holly Allan
10. Holly Allan's artist statement
11. *Ibid*

LESS floats atop the podium

and I imagine a breeze coming through the gallery windows,

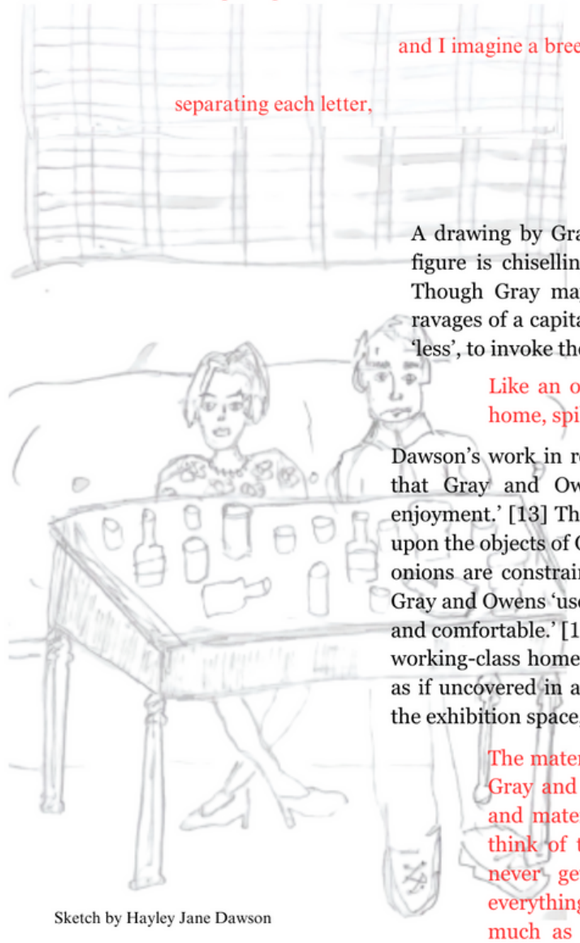
separating each letter,

leaving the podium empty.

A drawing by Gray illustrates an incomplete quote from *Lanark*. A human figure is chiselling 'MAN IS the PIE that BAKES and EATS ITSELF (...)'. Though Gray may have initially written these words as an exposé of the ravages of a capitalist economy, they can also be used, as Allan uses the word 'less', to invoke the desire for *more*.

Like an overflowing glass below a tap, objects and ornaments fill a home, spilling out from windows, doors, and hallways.

Dawson's work in response to Owens revels in this sense of *more*. They write that Gray and Owen's friendship 'was one of collaboration and mutual enjoyment.' [13] This idea of 'enjoyment' manifests in their gaze, which alights upon the objects of Owens' life. Three ducks fly within a swish of orange. Pickled onions are constrained by a glass jar. Dawson writes that they enjoyed when Gray and Owens 'used places like the pub or a home setting as these felt familiar and comfortable.' [14] Their ceramics are reflections of familiar objects found in working-class homes. A pair of blue shoes sits upon a white rug. They are still, as if uncovered in an archeological dig. In bringing such domestic objects into the exhibition space, Dawson contributes to the archiving of Owens.



Sketch by Hayley Jane Dawson

The materiality of Dawson and Allan's work mimics the processes of Gray and Owens - Gray's constant layering and recycling of images and materials, Owen's manuscripts folded, posted and annotated. I think of that arduous scene in *Lanark* where our protagonist can never get the mural quite right, spending days re-arranging everything, erasing and repainting again and again. Taking away as much as is given. *Synthesis* has gone through several structures, resulting in what you see now, but whether this is its final form remains uncertain.

Dawson's bust of Owens brings her into the public space. Whilst contrasting with Allan's sculpture in its use of a more figurative medium, both works address similar concerns. Owens is presented in a contemplative style. Her neck is slightly turned, and her hair, collar and clothing flow to create a sense of movement. The bust asserts itself as a new form of monument which does not seek to intimidate but invites people to relate. It re-directs the public cultural conversation to examine the 'people (...) outside of the margins.' [15]

Allan's second work shows the phrase 'Have sympathy for those less generous than you.' The words spill across tiles, and are nestled in wooden drawers which retain previous writing. This textual layering evokes the materials in the archive, which bear scrawls and notes. The use of Gray's font harkens back to Owen's training as a typist, a career typical to many working-class women of her generation. The words hold an echo of all the words that we can no longer hear today, allowing us to question, as Dawson writes, 'whose voices are heard and referenced within academia and other public spaces.' [16]

Lately I've been thinking of monuments. And I think of Alasdair's wishbone. I think of the receipts in the bottom of my bag and of the letters from friends stuffed under my bed; the spat out pips of an orange, or the cap of a bottle, a washed out jar to hold my pencils, and the shells on my desk.

12. Holly Allan's artist statement
13. From an email interview with Hayley Jane Dawson
14. *Ibid.*
15. From an email interview with Hayley Jane Dawson
16. From Hayley Jane Dawson's artist statement