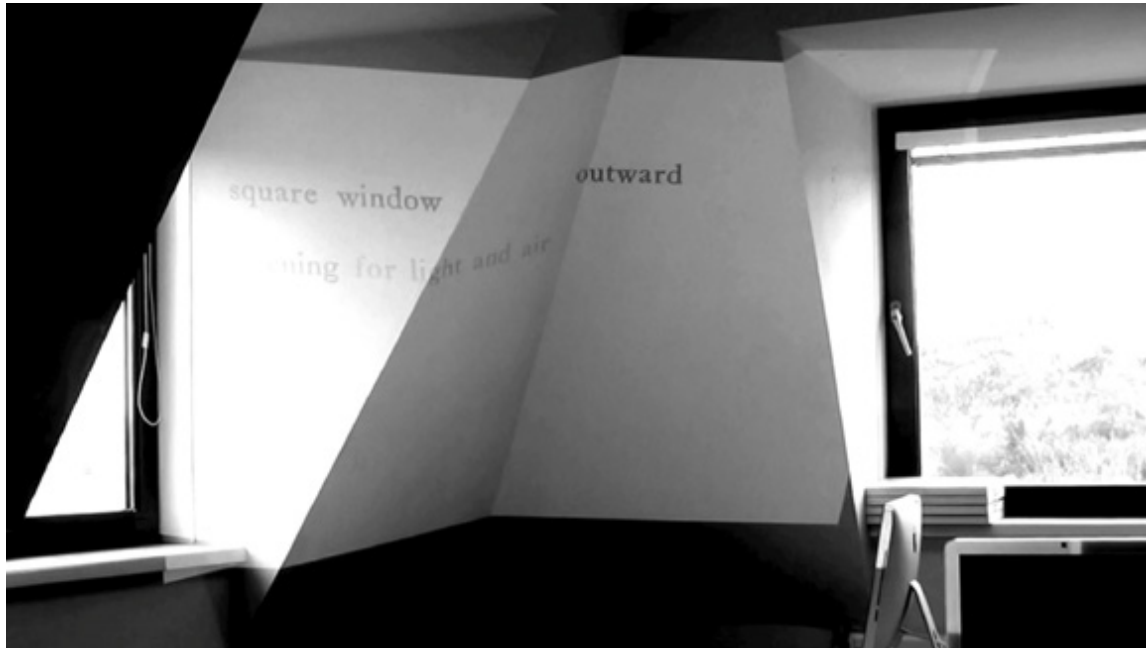# Word Room

Sited Projection

This paper introduces a short sequence of animated text, (http://youtube/2lWEYs46_Rg) drawn from a paragraph in Willa Cather's novel of 1925, *The Professor's House*. Devised as research through practice, the initial intention was to present the animation, looped, as a sited ambient work, without a supporting paper. But as the work progressed, writing and making became an integrated research process and so they are presented here as one work, each part elucidating the other. The purpose was to work experimentally with a text that had been considered in my previous research, in which the *study* had been identified as one of several particular and recurrent images of domestic space found both in visual art and literature. The animated 'deconstruction' of the text is not primarily a literary analysis, but a visual exploration of the 'building' of a space in words.

The choice of this quote was directed by the unusual characteristic of summation of the novel in one paragraph, the simplicity of the language used to express this complexity and the graphic expression of the room on the page.

The animation is shown in three forms and as installed in a possible site. I consider the visual to be work still in progress and it may find a variety of forms as part of my wider practice. In the context of an illustration symposium, book forms in which a sort of concrete poetry has been extracted from this or any novel, as illustrations, becomes an interesting future model also.

The first part of this paper introduces the analysis that led the decision making for the animation, while the second part considers the technical making process.

The novel and the room

Cather's essay of 1922, *The Novel Démeublé* ends in this way:

> The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls. (Cather 1988(1922): 43)

Perched at the boundaries of domesticity, the spare utility of the Professor's study is the location for the essential exchanges of Cather's novel and provided the material used for the animation:

The low ceiling sloped down on three sides, the slant being interrupted on the east by a single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook in the sill. This was the sole opening for light and air. Walls and ceiling alike were covered with a yellow paper which had once been very ugly, but had faded into inoffensive neutrality. The matting on the floor was worn and scratchy. Against the wall stood an old walnut table, with one leaf up, holding piles of orderly papers. Before it was a cane-backed office chair that turned on a screw. (Cather 1981(1925): 16)
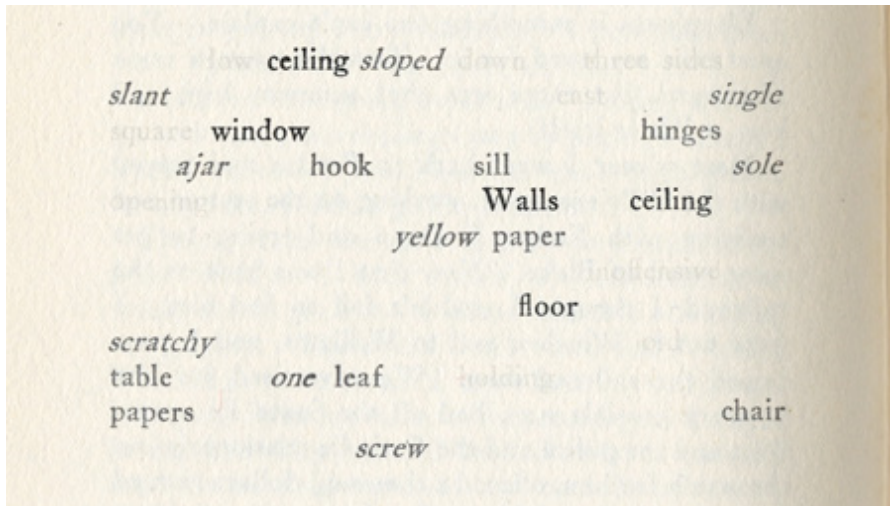
The text in one way provides a simple drawing of the room, but, like a pocket into which the whole can be folded, a sense of the entire novel, it's narratives and structure, is tucked within the meanings and patterns of the words and sentences, within their sounds and shapes. Animating this quote is an attempt to mirror the act of reading, a process both simple and complex, as words offer up individual meanings and reveal further readings in conjunction, and in context.

The low ceiling sloped down drops as we sound it in the internal voice that reads with us, confining and curtailing the attic room, but these sounds are then echoed by *sole opening*, permitting a view from the interior.
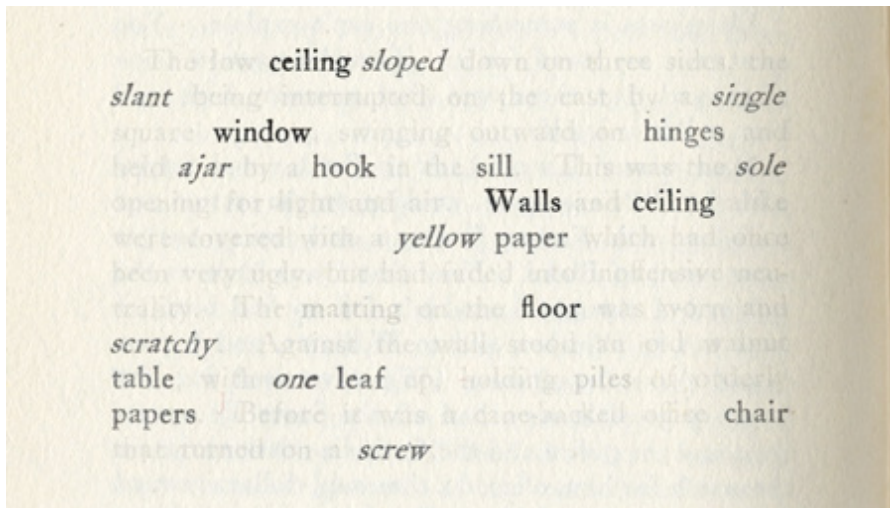
Alliteration hisses awkwardness into *sloped down on three sides, the slant*, while *interrupted on the east*, *matting* and *scratchy* throw up hard *t's* in words that unsettle. *Single, swinging* and *ajar* continue the sense of lop-sidedness, a state of imbalance and indecision, while *square window* supplies completeness, drawing *single* to its side, as *hinges* and *hook* anchor the reader in the solid and material world. *Sill* is sensible enough, as are *walls, floor, ceiling, chair* and *table*, building the room as we read, but its sibilance connects it to the slippery sounds above and offers a threshold, an uncertain place of change from interior to exterior. *Outward* and *light* and *air* see and breathe, wide and far, with good reason in the context of the narrative; if these are lost, all is lost.

The words are their own illustration, the animation a gentle re-choreographing of the word dance on the page, as patterns and sequences appear and sink back into the text. When the main body of the text is removed the words either jostle in the space, filling it with diverse ideas, or when reduced to simple nouns, map out the shape and structure of the room, providing the word/furniture of the page/room. Constellations of a few words float free of the overall meaning or are weighted on

All images on this page - Stills from the *Word Room*

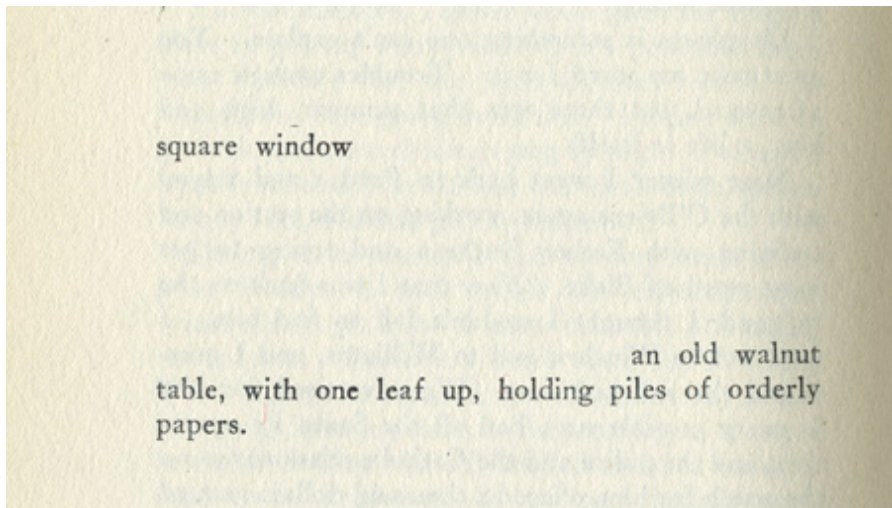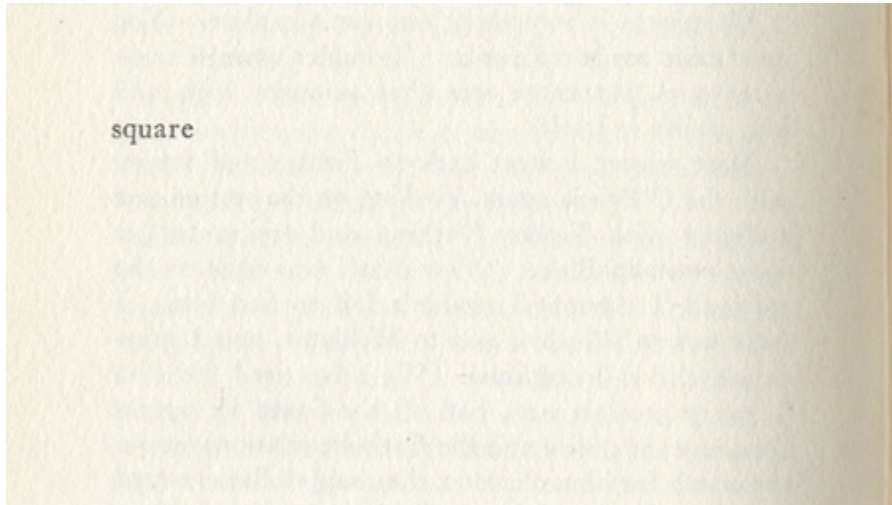the page - *hinges - held - hook* - by shape, sound and meaning.

The piles of *orderly* papers tell us where we are, the Professor's workroom, *orderly* and *office* restoring our belief in 'o', as an indicator of wholeness, echoing *outward* and *opening* in a quiet reverberation across the paragraph. Three words for singularity, *'single - sole - one'*, signal the Professor's solitary state and anticipate his possible desire to leave his life and family.

The novel presents a middle-aged history professor with a wife, two daughters, and two sons-in-law, to whom a recent publishing success has brought money and a new house. The move from the old house is nearly completed, but the Professor stays on in his old study in the attic when the family leave for the summer. His only companion is the occasional visitor, Augusta, the plain German seamstress who shares his workspace. He despairs of life, love and family, and then the danger immanent in the room comes to pass: the faulty stove blows out, the window blows shut and he is overcome by fumes. Just in time Augusta drags him from the room and he lives to face the future.

Cather had expressed her sense of 'the world having broken apart in about 1922' (Lee 1989: 183) and this

square

square window

an old walnut
table, with one leaf up, holding piles of orderly
papers.

All images on this page - Stills from the *Word Room*

feeling in the aftermath of the Great War, with a sense of her own ageing, seems to have created the profound sense of aloneness, division and duality within *The Professor's House*. Hermione Lee's inspection of the novel finds the 'house is made of negatives' (1989:234); a makeshift quality mirrored in the wording of the first few pages:

> The very sentences, long, trailing, as if
> randomly constructed… seem not to have
> been neatly 'fixed'… Even the language is ill-
> at-ease with itself. (Lee 1989: 235)

In contrast, the paragraph selected for this work builds the solid structure of a room, described in relatively short, compact sentences, while the confining, *sloping*, *slanting*, *scratchy* lop-sidedness cuts into and constricts the space around the reassuringly 'square window'. Cather explains that:

> In my book I tried to make Professor St.
> Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy
> with new things; American proprieties,
> clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering
> jealousies - until one got rather stifled. Then
> I wanted to open the square window and let
> in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa.
> (Cather 1988:31,32)

During the long summer, the Professor has a task - to edit the journal of his old student Tom Outland, killed in the war and who, before studying discovered an ancient Native American cliff city. And so *Book Two* of the novel becomes the story within the story, the *nouvelle* within the *roman*, the 'single square window' in the narrative. As Cather describes it:

> Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea. The feeling of the sea one got through those square windows was remarkable… (Cather 1988(1938): 31)

The Professor does not die, he is saved by Augusta, the one person in the end to whom he feels any remaining 'obligation'. Just as the reader turns to the last pages of the book, there is again, as Cather describes: 'The feeling of the sea … through those square windows'(1988(1938): 31), as *outward*, a word from the description of the study

reappears offering hope and possibility, again opening a window in the text.

> There was still Augusta… a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound. (Cather 1981(1925):281)

The concrete poetry of e e cummings provides an interesting parallel for ideas raised in relation to the text and its manipulation. The expression of aloneness found in Cummings' poem *l(a* both echoes and contrasts with Cather's.

> l(a
>
> le
> af
> fa
>
> ll
>
> s)
> one
> l
>
> iness
> (Cummings 1958)

Where Cather presents three solid and simple expressions of the solitary state - *single*, *sole* and *one* - Cummings creates a string - *l*, *one*, *l* and *iness* - with *la* and *le* offering a question of gender if read in French, and the *ll* at the heart of the poem proposing either a double assertion of singleness or pairing of two ls. As with handwriting, the typewriter or word processing programme can confuse the distinctions between 1, l (lowercase L) and I (capital i), and Cummings' arrangements suggests both the path of the falling leaf, as the eye descends down the page, and a bold assertion of 'I', the singular human figure standing on the page. Iain Landles investigates the notion that:

> …Cummings' experimental work, like Mallarmé's, provokes a crisis in language by showing the unstable and undecidable relations between meanings, between meaning and form, and between different grammatical categories.
> (Landles 2001:31-43)

While Cummings' works invite these questions, ones that underpin whole strands of the history of the writing and analysis of poetry, Cather's prose provides contrasting structures, from Lee's fragile, 'trailing' sentences at the start of the novel, to the clear assertion of the Professor's

room-space, built with 102 simple, densely packed 'word-bricks'. The five words of more than two syllables - *interrupted*, *opening*, *inoffensive neutrality* and *orderly* - are the concepts that flow around the concrete simplicity of the expression of the room. As Landles notes of Cummings' poem:

> The falling of a leaf is a concrete act, whilst the word "loneliness" is an abstract concept. (Landles 2001:31-43)

The animation does not destabilise the language, but in excavating the room, removing, examining and replacing the words, it finds the solid foundation. Even when only one or two words from the passage are present they are, alone or in combination metonyms or synecdoches for the domestic, the room and the house.

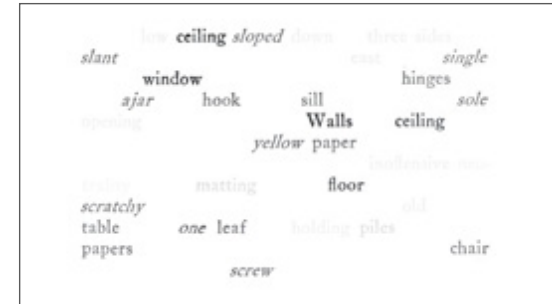Examining Roni Horn's book *Another Water*, Jane Rendell notes:

> …books are public sites accessible to diverse audiences but not usually regarded as physical locations. However, it's important to recognize that these kind of sites have specific formal limits and material qualities, for example the size and layout of words on

a page, and that they are produced through particular spatial practices or habits of use... Horn's work points towards how different texts …can… produce critical spaces through the act of reading... (Rendell 2006:65)
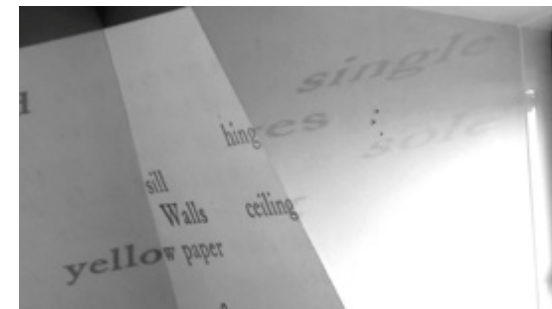
In Horn's work it is the relationship between images as the 'main 'reading material" (Rendell 2006: 64), technical accounts and footnotes in the form of first person comments that create the 'critical space'; in Cather's it might be said that the narrative space is created by the structure of the novel and the word patterns of each page, while the manipulations of the animation attempt to create a further visually analytical space.

The making of

After writing and making my MPhil dissertation constructed through both written and practice-based research, I was left with the problem of what to do with the 'textual illustrations' I had selected. 'Textual illustrations' was a term invented with my supervisor to account for the chunky quotations from various novels, such as the one used for this piece, each describing a room. They felt solid and three dimensional, in addition to being expressed perfectly in the thin space of the words inked on the page. An examiner had asked if they should have been lifted from the written work and placed
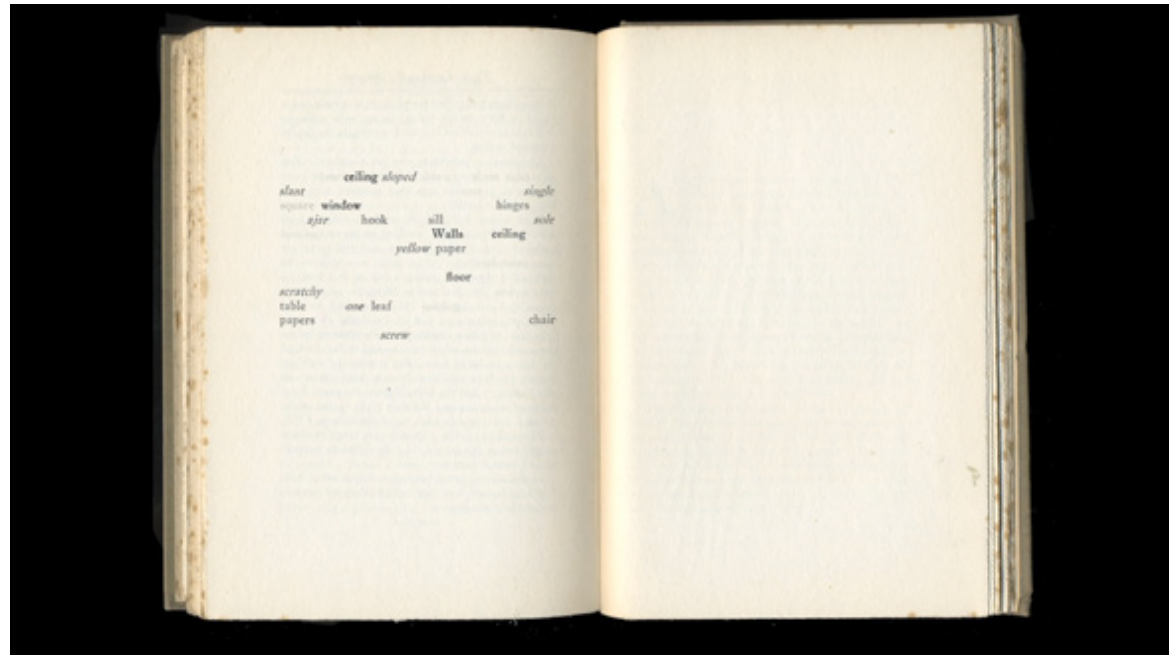

Text only (without page texture layer)

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within the visual work, which was a large-scale, sited installation. We imagined them, shaping them as blocks or bricks as we talked, our hands moulding them in space. At this point translations of the texts into some kind of concrete poetry, whole or in parts, suggested Dadaist 'cut-ups', letterpress prints or the weightier, sited words of Ian Hamilton Finlay. Dissolving the physical into the digital had not been considered.

In his introduction to *Tree of Codes*, a 'translation' of Brono Schulz's novel *The Street of Crocodiles* into a 'book/sculpture' by Jonathan Safran Foer and publishers *Visual Editions*, Olafur Eliasson writes:

> Your body cannot help but chart the shape
> of a building, the time it will take to reach the
> other side of the intersection, spaces and
> gaps… This also happens in books…The
> gaps in-between words and pages - all of the
> book that isn't black ink - resonate.
> (Eliasson 2010: rear cover)

Visual Editions' intention, as publishers is to create 'visually interesting' books or 'visual writing'. Safran Foer's appropriation and disruption of Schulz's novel provided a precedent for experimentation that I found compelling; one that created a desire to understand how

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the physical world and narrative are 'made' or evoked on the page.

Tom Phillips' 'A Humument', an evolving 'treated' novel made from a secondhand book (*A Human Document* by W.H. Mallock, 1892) bought in 1966 and remade over the last 47 years, might be seen as a model also, and in his introduction to the 5th edition Phillips mentions a rule important to his intervention and mine.

> Nor, more importantly for otherwise the whole task would become too casual and easy, is there any but the slightest divergence from the general imperative that Mallock's words should not be shunted around opportunistically: they stay where they are on the page. Where they are joined to make some poetic sense or meaningful continuity, they are linked by the often meandering rivers in the typography as they run, with no short cuts. (Phillips 2012)

Phillips', though, 'spoke of 'mining and undermining' Mallock's text...' in an early introduction to the work. He describes in the 2012 edition how he first approached the book:

> In my eagerness of darting here and there I somehow omitted to read the novel as an ordered story and, though in some sense I almost know the whole of it by heart, I have to this day never read it properly from beginning to end. (Phillips 2012)

It might be said that while Safran Foer intensifies the narrative and meanings of Schulz's novel, Phillips diverts Mallock's anti-Semitism, 'class prejudice and imperialist hauteur' (Phillips 2012) into humour and beauty, a recycling of now unacceptable values into something of worth. Through drawing and collage the hand of the artist has been used to transform the original object, to illuminate the typeset words into new meaning.

It is the play with the orderliness of the typewritten or typeset page that creates part of the intrigue in cummings' poems, the limitations and possibilities of the given typeface, the space bar and carriage return mechanism. As Salvatore Marano writes:

> These early samples, which laid down the foundation of Cummings's future experiments with the pulviscular aspects of visual composition, have in common the exhilarating effect produced by the

mechanical spacing of the typewriter on the poet's compositional habits. Far from being the constrictive prison that its automatic functioning may suggest, the machine helped the author solve his problems with both verbal disposition and synctactical consistency (Marano 2003:123)
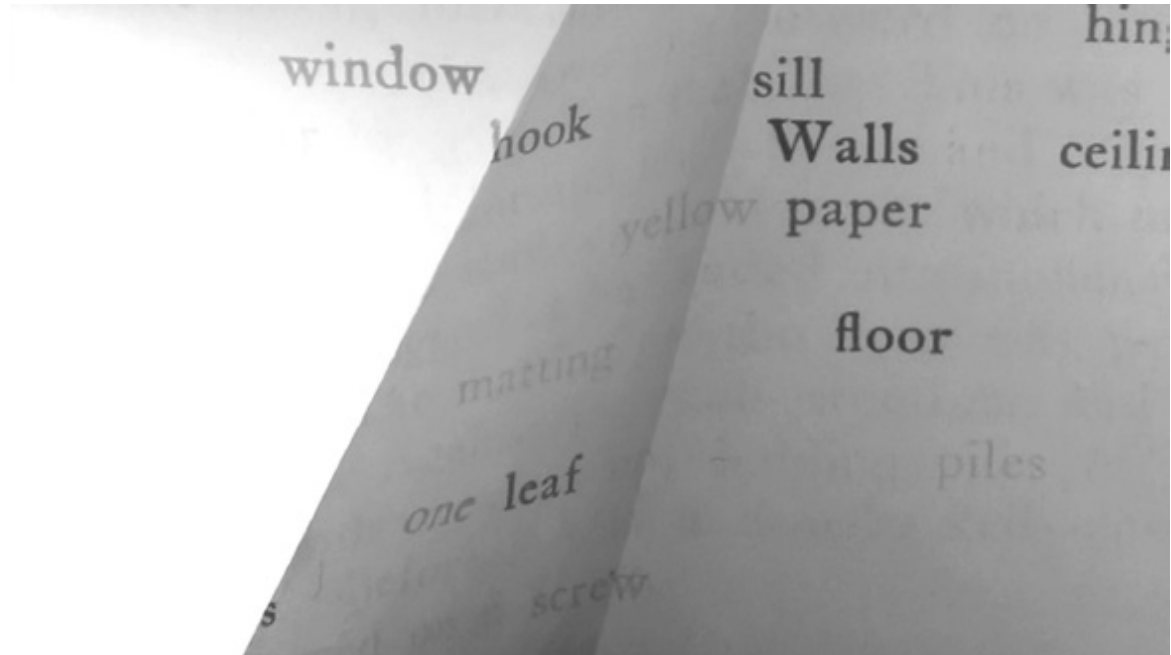
To initiate the project with Cather's text I made a 'sketch' by retyping the words in *Word* and then animating them simply in *PowerPoint*. I liked the idea of utilising programmes that are used in everyday office life, of not meddling with their 'decision making'. *Word* typesets for us everyday and *PowerPoint* has some possibilities for animation. Ultimately these factors were too limiting and did not reference the original, physical presence of the book. Equally I could not ignore the fact that we are in a period in which the relevance of the book form is being questioned by the possibilities offered by the digital and felt the need to reassert the presence of the original printed text.

To create the slide show in Final Cut Pro, the initial cells for the animation were made by scanning the book, a hardback edition from 1925, into Photoshop. The pages on which the chosen paragraph appears were scanned to create a good 'copy' - an image that looked as much like

the page as possible. This image was then manipulated by isolating words and changing the tonal qualities of the text. Problems arose with matching the background around the manipulated or removed words. The text on the pages was then scanned with the colour removed and the contrast heightened. A pair of blank pages were also scanned where the print on the verso was faintly visible and the whole book form visible. All the text cells then existed independently of the blank page base, so that effects could be built up through layering and then dissolving or cross fading the overlaid images in Final Cut, and the sequence shown as pages of a book, or cropped as words only, retaining the page texture or not. The positioning of the words on the page was not altered - each stayed in it's original place when visible.

Eliasson writes that through *Tree of Codes* Safran Foer intensifies the physical experience of the book to create:

> …an extraordinary journey that activates the layers of time and space involved in the handling of a book and its heaps of words. Jonathan Safran Foer deftly deploys sculptural means… welds narrative and materiality, and our reading experience into a book that remembers it actually has a body. (Eliasson 2010: rear cover)
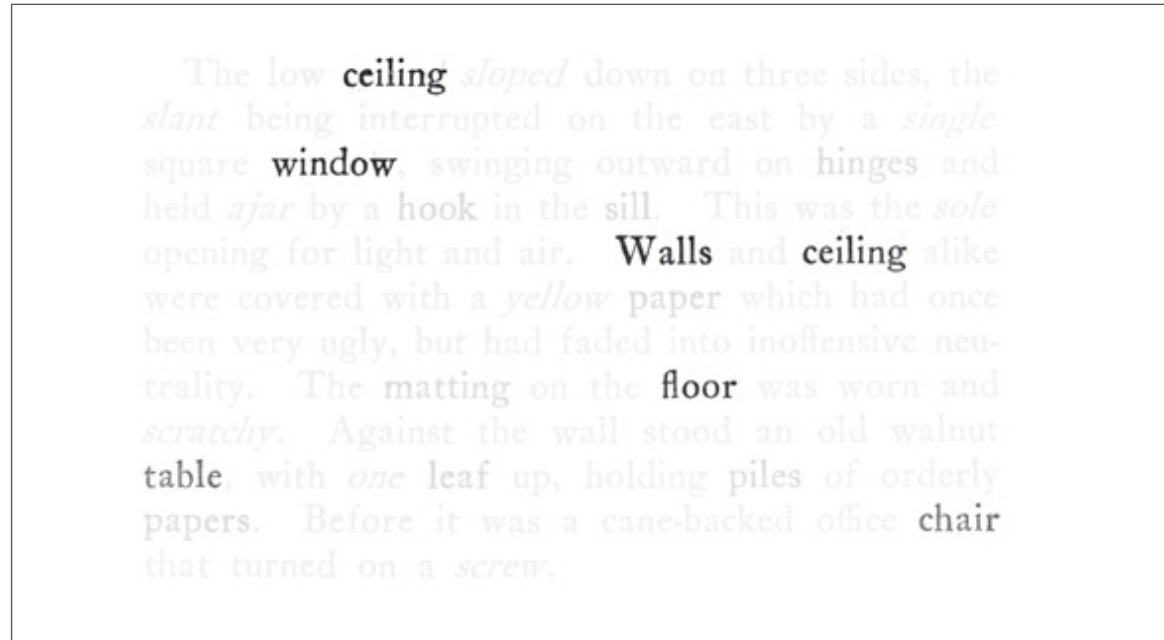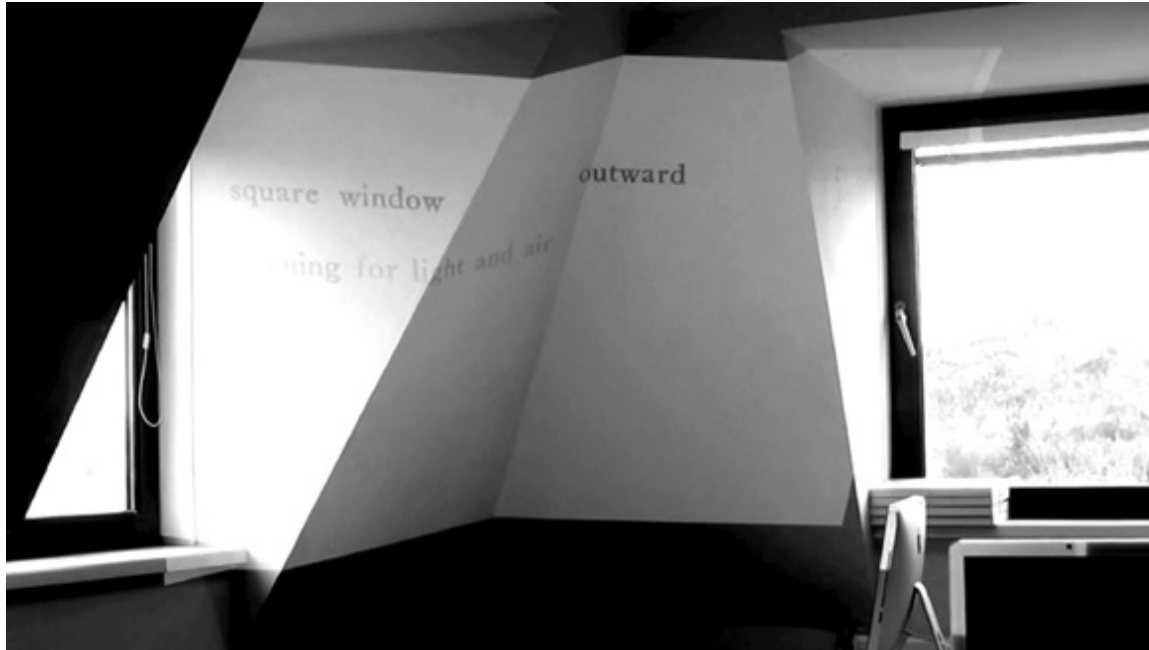
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In making the animation I investigated the exchange between the physical and digital: at first taking the words completely away from the book and retyping them myself, and then lifting them from and returning them to the page to create the cells for the animation. I considered the image of the book as a whole, as an object, and then, cropping to remove the reference to the whole, retained the texture, the reminder of materiality, while focusing on the words and their dance. In one version even the texture of the page is removed to leave only the words. At times, when full black, the reproduced words retain much of the original quality of the print, and yet when the tone is reduced the mid-grey words become unequivocally digital. This representational play came out of experimentation and is indicative of the journey within the work, from the materiality of the original book-object to it's nature as a projected image.

Cather wrote that:

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. (Cather 1988(1922):41)

Text only (without page texture layer)

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I have looked for what has been created; searching in the gaps and spaces between the words for the secrets of this construction, but Cather also wrote that:

> Art is a concrete and personal and rather childish thing after all—no matter what people do to graft it into science and make it sociological and psychological; it is no good at all unless it is let alone to be itself—a game of make-believe, of re-production, very exciting and delightful to people who have an ear for it or an eye for it. (Cather 1988: 125)

I have stumbled into a fictional room and prodded the walls. I have not found a fragile 'set', it has withstood the attention, the words robustly marking out the space on the page even when disrupted by visual deconstruction. I look often look at the cover of my Virago paperback copy of *The Professor's House* and wonder about the picture that is not his study at all, but is an image of *The Artist's Desk* by Vanessa Bell, and I think about the Professor's study, a room that I never fully visualise, but hold as a feeling, a 'place feeling' in my mind, beyond illustration or making in the three dimensional world, and I go back to the words to find my picture.

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