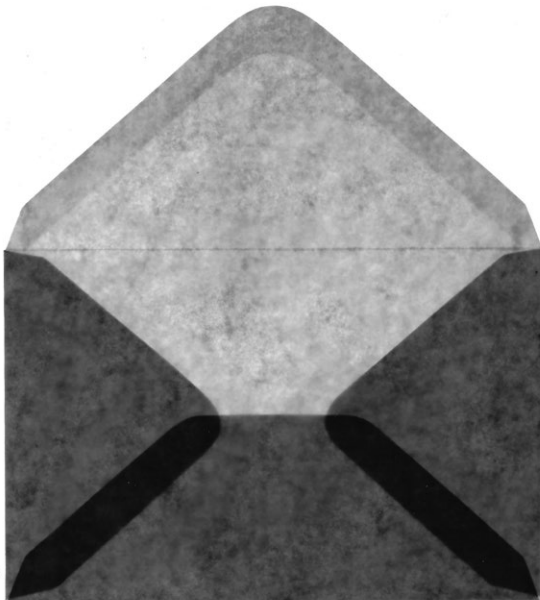
Becky Beasley

Claire Scanlon



i got another letter today. i immediately put it in the box
with all the others. my excitement grows with the pile of
unopened possibilities.

#3 Becky Beasley in conversation with Claire Scanlon

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CLAIRE SCANLON: The first question I have for you came about because the last time we spoke you used this word, superpowers. You said that you were recovering your superpowers and I wondered what you meant by that. I thought about John Cage rewriting the responsibility of the artist as 'response-ability', and whether this had something to do with your superpowers. One of my favourite quotes from Walter Benjamin is about this idea. He puts it brilliantly of course: 'Presence of mind is an extract of the future' [*One-Way Street*, 1928]. I take this to mean that the only superpower you need is not to be a fortune-teller, but simply to try and be fully present in the moment. Might that be one aspect of your superpowers or understanding of what an artist must do?

BECKY BEASLEY: Certainly, but it's more that I am interested in all aspects of life as they relate to practice. My recent comments about superpowers are mainly to do with the aftermath of having had a child and perinatal depression. Let's read the next question and then we can elaborate.

SCANLON: It's quite formally written. 'Anyone who practices over a long period of time will have a sense that involves a number of constants.' You know, what Victor Burgin refers to as 'components of a practice'. How would you describe these

at the moment and have you found or lost any along the way?

BEASLEY: In the context of those two questions then, I am thinking about a feeling of a usefulness and urgency around this text that we are working on. In a bigger sense I was thinking about framing this dialogue around themes of time, fragments, and limitations. Specifically, for me, my constants of practice would relate to mental health, parenthood, teaching, space and time, money, all of these personal issues. They come ahead of all the other specificities.

In response to the questions, I think there's a specific issue around happiness. Maternally, they relate to the post-birth and early years: the initial hormonal support from the oxytocin, my experience of my brain, of a different understanding of speed, and also of love and powerlessness. Finally, depression and a slow movement towards some kind of relationship to happiness through work, changing the work at key personal moments, and always asking some new questions of my work and my relationship to photography. Making art has been my lifeline and constant ambition on a daily basis.

So, I'm interested here in questions around adversity and difficulty. Anybody

can relate to them. People have always responded strongly when I've talked publicly about limitations in relation to specific works. These are always the questions that return. So I've written down here: 'Superpowers relate to optimism, fought out of chaos'. [Laughs]

SCANLON: [Laughs] Right.

BEASLEY: 'Components of practice' … So, my components of practice are: depression, time, space, money, reading, and a fascination with images as a result of these. Earlier on, films were also very important, and live performance, dance, and experimental theatre. And then in my notes I added pacing and diary. I've learnt to be very practical!

SCANLON: That's surprising. I wouldn't have identified half of what you've suggested are the components of your practice.

BEASLEY: Well, your questions got me thinking about it, so I'm talking about a really muddy, core base of where a practice comes from in relation to time, fragments, and limitations. The actual conditions out of which art emerges are always interesting to me.

SCANLON: Putting those things together makes for quite an interesting equation, doesn't it?

BEASLEY: I think they relate very specifically to both questions and I think they're fundamentally useful things.

SCANLON: What? Limitations?

BEASLEY: Yes, as a base from which our conversation can stem. I think they include everything, as far as I understand, that we might want to talk about.

SCANLON: Shall we talk about limitations then?

BEASLEY: Parenthood, I think, is interesting in relation to time, experience, and the force of possibilities. Mental health is about ongoing restrictions, an additional mountainous terrain, but also the gift of all of these things. It's all shared territory, so long as you don't die, of course. That's very final. I've managed to survive so far, but there have been multiple occasions when I almost didn't.

SCANLON: That is hard to hear. Is that why knowing your limitations is a crucial point of departure?

BEASLEY: So you can throw yourself over them, in a fashion, and ask questions in relation to them. Certainly becoming more aware over time of where the line is has been a part of growing up with depression.

These days I am eminently able, apart from when I get overtired and then I come under fire. Then I don't have much defence. That's a very vulnerable moment for me – it is dangerous in fact – so I try my best to avoid that. The only thing I can really do about that is to rest when I can. So I try not to get overtired.

This is the main reason why the years since we had our son have been so tough. Time for rest vanished, so as a result I've been constantly extremely vulnerable. I know that many women experience the same in their own way. I didn't give up work, because I couldn't. I'm finally resting again now, in part as the result of receiving the Paul Hamlyn Award.

SCANLON: Well, see, where you would throw yourself over limitations, I would breathe my way through them. Though I agree, sometimes the only way is to throw yourself over them, or into them.

BEASLEY: I think that's how it happens for me. That's the superpower, that's the force.

SCANLON: I think the way out of it, for me, was to find someone else to play with. Through collaboration you share your weaknesses and your strengths and find ways of overcoming the things that you perceive as deficits in yourself. My

particular weakness is the incapacity to act quickly. I have to mull things over, but my partner Paul [Grivell] is very good at seizing the day, so we complement each other's modus operandi beautifully.

Even if you work on your own it's necessary to recognise your weaknesses, don't you think? Because that's where you find your edges and a point of resistance. And resistance is fertile, as they say, because that's where you know you need to do the work.

BEASLEY: Indeed, knowing where to do the work is a great way to put it. Earlier, for me it was all very destructive, from not understanding depression and from drink, but now it is more creative in terms of being on the side of life. It's more generous and I have had the chance at my own version of happiness.

SCANLON: With the same degree of momentum?

BEASLEY: Yes. You make an impossible proposal to yourself and then you go out, you get on and find out how to do it. It all happens in relation to economic possibilities. The restraints produce a necessity to think imaginatively.

SCANLON: A proposal does suppose an order of things, doesn't it? For me, it begins with a gesture which creates momentum.

In making a gesture, you are then bound to follow it.

BEASLEY: What's the gesture for you?

SCANLON: I'm thinking about it in relation to drawing. Funnily enough, I've just been reading Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Pleasure in Drawing* [2013]. Do you know it? It's an extraordinary book. The last chapter is called 'The Line's Desire' and it's very much about the energy that is in that first mark which is without intention. He's not talking about intentionality, he's simply talking about the gesture of making a mark.

You talk about throwing yourself over the limitation, whereas I think in terms of being able to make that first mark, being able to make that gesture without knowing where it will lead. But you're suggesting that you've made a proposition to yourself and then you have to find a way of realising it. How formed is the proposition in your mind?

BEASLEY: It's not about anything formed. It's about knowing that if the force of that wildness doesn't go behind whatever it is you're going to do next, it'll at best be ok, or it won't happen, or at worst, it'll be average. I'm being quite abstract in that I'm talking about trying to do and make something that, for you, is the best you can do against

the odds, in that space of resistance you described earlier.

SCANLON: Against the odds?

BEASLEY: The odds of depression are a constant component of practice. You are producing energy despite the condition of a force that wants you not to be doing anything ambitious. I've harnessed that strange energy all my working life, my adult life, rather than not doing anything with it. Not that almost anybody really understands that. I think people only see the output, rather than that it always comes out of the question of how you even begin. And the beginning's already being sucked away, being sucked down, out of you. How do you then turn that into this huge force necessary to, for example, make a show, or get out of bed in the morning?

SCANLON: What you seem to be describing is an extraordinary willpower or commitment to the proposal. If you were to understand the idea of depression literally, as being in a hole (I remember now that's something that you've written about), it makes me think of the sheer effort required to climb your way to the edge before you can even get out and run.

BEASLEY: Yes, that is a very good image. Someone once described it to me as 'the opposite of effort'. It's not necessarily

willpower. Superpowers fit better here, perhaps.

SCANLON: I know that — certainly in the last few years — the question of mental health has become very critical in art schools. I'm encountering more and more students with mental health issues. It's curious, because if it's self-declared, there is an expectation that the activity that they've come to learn about is a therapeutic one.

BEASLEY: Urgh. Really?

SCANLON: Well, in that it's recognised as something that they're doing in order to manage mental health. Unfortunately, often, it's put forward as a way of not doing the thing that they've come to do, rather than the opposite — that making work may be a way through depression.

BEASLEY: Getting to that point is amazing to me. I guess there's an opposite end of the spectrum — some kind of romantic appreciation of the melancholic artist — to the point where going to art school with depression is about therapy, not about pure creativity. That doesn't seem helpful to me. It's certainly not how I approach my students who are struggling. Mental health issues set one apart from others and that is, eventually, empowering — at least in my own version of this. Survival sets one apart.

SCANLON: I think there's ultimately a misalignment of expectations. Perhaps the mental health problems may not be depression as you describe it. More a form of anxiety, which is also isolating.

BEASLEY: Right.

SCANLON: So do you agree that making art is a way of managing? From day to day.

BEASLEY: There's a practical side to it; a set of tools. There is also the fight and the societal aspect. In twenty-five plus years, I've not seen any change of how people respond to me when I'm not well. I think people still want to stay away from depression. So they do something to push it away when there's something wrong. It's the same with death and dying.

SCANLON: Yes. We're very bad at that, aren't we?

BEASLEY: People often are. I grew up with a nurse and a doctor as parents so I had a formative experience to do with what work is for. My mum is most happy caring for someone who's dying. There is a Thomas Bernhard novel, *Wittgenstein's Nephew* [1982], in which the narrator describes not going to see his friend and why in the end it was ok not to go, because it was death and he didn't want

to. I had a friend who was dying of emphysema and I used to go often; it was hard, I was living abroad at the time so it was all part of the complexity of travelling and time. But I just always went, I always went. And then I remember this one time when I got to London and went and sat in a café and read my Thomas Bernhard instead of going to see him.

And then he died. So this was the last time I would have gone to see him. It was a very strange coincidence and it sounds almost too good to be true, but I was reading Bernhard at the time and it explained to me why I hadn't gone, despite the fact that it wasn't easy to go. I never questioned that I would go. It was kind of disgusting there, at this place. It actually made me physically sick, the environment he was living in, but I never thought not to go. And this one time I didn't. It never occurred to me that that's what people do.

SCANLON: But you got half way.

BEASLEY: Yeah, that's true.

SCANLON: Wisdom takes courage. What you're describing is that people are not courageous, they are cowards and cowardice deprives us of response-ability.

BEASLEY: It depends on your own sense of responsibility to others, really. Everyone

has their own formative experience. Survivors are always courageous though, in my experience. I’m only really interested in speaking to those who understand themselves from an excluded position.

SCANLON: Yes. But in that state where you’re needing support, and what you see is other people’s weakness, that’s their problem, in a sense. And because you’re vulnerable, you’re also seeing them as inadequate.

BEASLEY: Well, that’s the journey: to get to the point where that’s ok. It’s an ethical decision, really, isn’t it? What kind of person do I want to be, and, given the choices I make, can I live with them? I’m only slowly, slowly coming to terms with those things. You’re seeing the wake of what you have done and you’ve done some things you’re really proud of. The main one being having managed it at all. But it’s a very long journey.

SCANLON: Despite being able to recognise your achievements and taking comfort in them, nothing touches that issue of depression, does it?

BEASLEY: No, no. It’s like reading, nobody else understands it either, and no one will believe you, because you went to art school and then you were able to follow through, and it wasn’t therapy. [Laughs]

SCANLON: It was for real.

BEASLEY: It was your life, and it was what kept you going, in fact.

SCANLON: I brought my copy of Maurice Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day* [1973], translated by Lydia Davis. I thought it would remind us of our beginnings.

BEASLEY: 'I have known joy.' You introducing me to Blanchot at college in 1995 was so vital. When I was working on my book, *Thomas Bernard Malamud* [2009], my former gallerist Laura Bartlett gave me a copy of a short essay by Lydia Davis on the problems of summarising Blanchot. Davis was asked to write the blurb for the back of one of her translations. The essay [in Lydia Davis, *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*, 2007] is her working through of the problem of writing the blurb for the back of a Blanchot book. Essentially she is saying that to do this one would have to print the Blanchot text itself, at a one to one scale, so to speak. This difficulty is one of the fundamental aspects in my relationship to Blanchot. It's the correlation between absolute clarity or precision and essential ambiguity.

I had the idea in bed one morning while working on my book that I wanted to republish Davis's essay right in the middle of my book, without really

referring to it. It was completely exciting at that time, to make contact with a hero. And, with some patience, I got to do it, via Lydia Davis's agent and about a hundred dollars or something. I love knowing that at some moment Davis said yes.

During that time, all excited about Lydia Davis, I found myself in the middle of a website reading an interview with her and I noticed that there was an agenda. They were asking her about her micro-fiction, this extreme short-form writing, and whether it had any connection to being a parent, and being a single mother. It was in fact a single mother's website. She answered that of course it did. She would have little moments of time, sitting on a bench, tiny pockets of time, and she just found a way to use them. That was the genesis of her micro-fiction. I always remembered that, and I often mentioned it, over the years, to friends when they were having their babies, thinking it was inspiring to female artists.

In the last years I've had my own baby, so I've been able to think about it for myself: the issue around pockets of time, fragments of time, and form. And from there spanning out from specific reasons for why one's time might be restricted, fragmented, limited; from specific reasons through to the way that life is always

going on and is also the force behind the limitations.

In the last ten years I have had experiences of having lots of time; limited money but abundant time and space, say in Berlin. But privately I experienced a lot of restrictions in being quite unhappy and kind of lost. My work had what it needed, more or less, but it wasn't underpinned by happiness, a community. That's when I started relying more on my literary mob, as it has become, for company. Then, later, I encountered more restrictions around time and space but was really happy. I found that very difficult. I found happiness had a very soporific effect on me and I found it hard to concentrate.

SCANLON: Yes, that relationship between happiness, unhappiness, creativity, and time is quite paradoxical, like you say. Both Blanchot and Davis work in an epigrammatic form in their writing, which seems symptomatic of those paradoxes. As the character in *The Madness of the Day* says: 'I saw that even on the worst days, when I thought I was utterly and completely miserable, I was nevertheless, and nearly all the time, extremely happy'.

On a personal level, when Paul and I fell in love, we were highly creative. The idea that if you're happy you're not creatively productive because your desire

is satiated suggests only unhappiness is creative, but when you're in a heightened state it can also be a very productive time.

BEASLEY: When it happened to me a few years ago, when I fell in love, I understood this state as something that I'd known from deep, deep in my past, and I can't even remember where it would have come from, for me. There's a line I remember reading when I was young from some piece of existentialism that *happiness isn't creative* … [Laughs]. It's probably from Camus.

Rebecca Solnit wrote quite recently in *The Mother of All Questions* [2017] about the specificity of what really constitutes individual happiness. To put an end to endless questions about why she didn't have children, she wrote a response. Firstly she notes that men don't get asked this question and then she goes on to write that for her, happiness in life was to write, to travel, and to meet lots of people along the way.

SCANLON: I think that the idea of pockets of time — that you're referring to through Lydia Davis — is really a way to mitigate against the grand narratives of existentialism.

The other thing that is limiting is fear. A little while ago somebody put out

a call to a university drawing research group that I’m involved in to act in solidarity with refugees. I found myself two weeks later with an incredible sense of impotence, not knowing how to respond. On reflection, I realise that this slowness to respond makes critical reflection possible and allows an opportunity to think of the ‘response-ability’ of the artists as an ethics, so that impotence becomes productive — critical impotence, if you like.

BEASLEY: Let’s plot this back to Blanchot. He was famously against Jean-Paul Sartre’s political face. He said that you can’t do both, you can’t write and be a politician. This is to do with disinterestedness, but for me it’s a belief in the implicit politics of a work, or the fact of the work at all.

I have tended to gravitate towards certain works or figures who lean towards this kind of spiritual passivity. In various ways they are silent rather than silenced subjects, as a form of resistance to power structures. In his work on the Orpheus myth, Blanchot wants to gaze at Eurydice in the night. It’s a dark gaze, pre-linguistic, an attempt to experience things as things, as Francis Ponge described it. This is to do with not killing things with words, with naming and language.

I think this is why I've found myself naming rather than titling at times. A figure is simply proposed. So, for example, I made a sculpture titled *Glen Herbert Gold* [2009] – Glenn Gould's real name – and another titled *Flora, A Life* [2013], and I titled a book *Thomas Bernard Malamud* – a hinging together of the two authors Thomas Bernhard and Bernard Malamud. Most recently this happened in my exhibition *Depressive Alcoholic Mother*, at Galeria Plan B in Berlin in 2018. This 'figure' literally becomes a ground on entering, as the words are cut into a circle in linoleum in the entrance room of the gallery. This is the first gesture – relating to both expectations and to the body – though from there on in, the visitor is, so to speak, on their own.

Improper Names

Thomas Bernard Malamud is a made-up name, made by hinging together the names of two existing 20th century writers, Thomas Bernhard (1931–89) and Bernard Malamud (1914–86). The hinging together of two authors' names – one a seemingly modest Jewish-American from Brooklyn, the other a controversial second-generation Austrian – produced a way of thinking about flexible joints, found objects and broken connections, but ones in which connecting forces were neither assumed nor necessarily sought. What would it be to hinge two things together without then providing any defense or coherent argument for the marriage? Where would that gesture leave the reader? Unhinged? Happily adrift? Free?

A hinge is a flexible joint, as on a door or the spine of a book, but it is also a choice made at a crossroad, where the thought of the path not taken lingers as one continues on in the other direction. It is the closing scene of Jim Jarmusch's film, *Down By Law* (1986), where two escaped convicts, in reality the musicians John Lurie and Tom Waits, must each choose a path at a magnificent middle-American fork in the dust road. One wants to go East, the other West – mainly out of a desire to be rid of each other – but they have no way of knowing which fork leads East and which West. In Thomas Bernhard's play, *Histrionics* (*Der Theatermacher*, 1984), an actor must nightly make a choice of either Liver Dumpling Soup or Fried Crepe Soup. In Bernhard, these everyday choices are proposed in the same spirit as matters of life and death. Suicide can always be contemplated over seemingly tiny details.

– B.B.

Extract from Becky Beasley, 'Improper Names', in *Thomas Bernard Malamud*, 2009

SCANLON: Passivity can be an effective form of resistance, as with Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* [1853] and his particular inaction in the face of authority. In my case, I found silence difficult to justify and in the end I responded to the call out by simply admitting to my predicament, which opened up a conversation in which we worked out how to respond collectively with what we had to offer.

Your reference to the implicit politics of an artist's work puts me in mind of Virginia Woolf's edict, 'Thinking is my fighting' [*A Room of One's Own*, 1929], when grappling with similar feelings of personal inadequacy in the face of tragic world events. Recognising that making art is political may save us from making political art!

BEASLEY: I believe in culture. Bartleby has been an important figure for me, or a formula designed to deflate authority with his refrain, 'I would prefer not to.'

I'm currently reading Édouard Glissant's *Poetic Relations* [1997] and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* [2013] as a way of reconnecting with my own original moment as a young artist – *young, gifted and black!* – but in the context of my being in my forties. I've found it to be a wonderful time personally, a huge

relief in a very real way as a result of the MeToo movement gaining so much real ground. This is also because in the last years I have come into contact with some extraordinary young artists through my teaching.

To Be Young, Gifted and Black is a song by Nina Simone released in 1969 but covered many times by others, including Elton John in his youth. I've always identified with its self-empowerment from a feminist position. It was written in memory of a female friend of Simone's who had died aged thirty-four, so it's also to do with mourning. I am a depressive alcoholic mother and this places me in a very powerful position in relation to society and the law. This is what I am harnessing in who I am as an artist.

SCANLON: Going back to the notions of passivity and resistance, what is evident is that we do need a conversation so that people aren't isolated in their impotence. Thinking about ways of being in solidarity with refugees, it strikes me as tragic that many asylum seekers, such as those held until recently in the detention camp on Christmas Island, are driven to lip-stitching in desperation. This form of protest is now understood as an expanded conception of agency, an agency which is a refusal. It makes our community-based 'day of action' seem rather inadequate. However, we did what

we could with what we had — which was mostly to give time to listen and reflect on the conditions in the camps, draw together and raise some money for a local refugee charity. That said, it must be acknowledged that there are limits to discourse for those whose voices are excluded.

This brings us back to *Bartleby* and the question of refusal. How long ago were you thinking about that book?

BEASLEY: Since 2008.

SCANLON: This became a work that involved a screen?

BEASLEY: Yes, but not at the time. I actually didn't want to work with the screen, a green screen, because a high, green, folding screen figures in the novella, albeit peripherally. I didn't make that work until a bit later, because I wasn't trying to illustrate *Bartleby*. It was about inhabiting space in a certain way and also thinking about a kind of work-space. This became *Literary Green* [2009].

But at the time of the exhibition at Laura Bartlett Gallery, *Three Notable American Novellas* [2007], what came out was a work called *Malcontenta*. I had photographed a blank screen structure and then painted it up with matt black and

gloss black paint into this deep-space imaginary shelving system. The gloss becomes a kind of deeper space. I painted matt black bars across it, bands that look like shelves.

The most obvious thing to come out of reading *Bartleby* was an essay I wrote, 'The Man Without References' [*Bedeutung*, issue 2, 2008, originally written for *Reference Book,* Royal College of Art, 2007]. That was the most coherent. This sort of writing is as much a personal statement for one's practice as it is the thing one is writing about. I had produced an earlier text about inhabitable, inhospitable spaces which I realised functioned like a personal statement about my practice at a certain moment around 2002 [published later as 'Of Other Potentialities: The Inhabitable Inhospitable Object', *Material Press*, issue 1, 2008], and then 'The Man Without References' on *Bartleby*, space, and photography some years later.

Both were on invitation, in fact, from small press projects. These invitations over the years have been so helpful in both producing a deadline for writing, and a theme to respond to.

SCANLON: I'm curious about the role of writing. Having kept the archive of things that you've sent me over the years and looked at them recently, I was struck

by the way you were experimenting early on with writing. It's obvious that it's a very core practice for you. But like the sculptures or objects, it operates in different registers. Sometimes the writing seems to be fictional, sometimes it's commentary, and sometimes it weaves between the two.

BEASLEY: When you first mentioned Blanchot to me, I read his fiction and then his other writing in tandem, not distinguishing between the two. It didn't feel like there was any difference between them in terms of ways of writing and making things. They just sat perfectly together. In fact I now understand I was reading the fiction philosophically and the theory as literature.

The point was the dark gaze that the ambiguity of this kind of reading offered me. For me, the dark gaze is an opacity, offering an oblique negative space through which to think and act. Poet and theologian Kevin Hart wrote a book titled *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred (Religion and Postmodernism)* [2004] in which he understands Blanchot to be a post-humanist thinker devoted to the possibilities of a spiritual and ethical life in the absence of God.

SCANLON: When you say that you're not distinguishing between the two, do you mean between the making and the writing …

BEASLEY: … and reading … The different types of writing; they read perfectly alongside each other. I also learned more about one through reading the other. There didn't have to be a distinction in terms of how I could write. I could write and then did end up, I think, through my college work, writing some quite opaque stuff.

SCANLON: I've found some of your writing among the letters you sent me, actually. Some really interesting things that I'd like us to revisit.

BEASLEY: [Laughs]

SCANLON: Two letters in particular weren't attached to the writing that you explicitly made into little stories. It was in these that you were really exploring language itself. [Pause] Do you remember them?

BEASLEY: Not specifically.

SCANLON: Mostly, the letters have the format of a short story, yet the story-telling is very abstract and woven into itself. What struck me as interesting in relation to your practice is the slippage between subject and object and how the objects become subjects. If that makes sense. The objects – rather like the writing – shift their register. So sometimes, like you say, you'll play

around with the object being something that resembles a piece of furniture and other times the object is much more opaque, like the generic ‘artefact’, like books.

BEASLEY: The book as an object is repeated across various of my wood works. That size — a small paperback that you can hold in your hand — was a starting point for a type and a scale of object that produces a kind of small sculpture. It speaks about other things in terms of the space of reading and interiority. The incommensurability of the book as object is such a powerful thing in terms of imagination, journey, intimacy, and also imagelessness. It is the nature of my relation and response to this incommensurable object that has always been central to my practice.

SCANLON: There are letters in this little archive of mine that show you out of art college and in a situation where you’re economically poor but time rich to the extent that you only had a typewriter and it was of necessity, it was no longer an aesthetic choice to use an obsolete device, it was your only means. In that limited situation, it is important to be opportunistic with what one has to hand, and that includes one’s state of mind.

When I couldn’t afford to keep a studio, I knew that I couldn’t continue to be a painter, because painting is a very

situated practice. Actually, I thought, it's ok, you can write, you can draw, you can use a computer and make video, and so you diversify, don't you? The idea of the versatile practitioner fits with the so-called post-medium condition – though I've returned to drawing recently as my 'first love'.

BEASLEY: In lots of ways that's fine, but only when it's on one's own terms – however constrained – as a refusal to give in, perhaps?

SCANLON: Bartleby refuses the future that is being chosen for him. He refuses to leave the building. The gesture is a refusal – however constrained – to engage with the terms of discourse that are available or set by institutional structures. It is the potential in refusal that *is* the space of possibility.

BEASLEY: You were talking about an ability to respond. It's similar to the condition of depression. There's something that's within restrictions that one can find a way to. If we were shipwrecked on a desert island, we would find a way to do things. We're interested in different media, and you'd find a way with your new media.

SCANLON: That begs a question for me. What's the difference between gardening and painting? I'd be very happy on

a desert island, because I'd garden. But there is a difference, isn't there?

BEASLEY: If I said to you at twenty, 'do you want to be painting or gardening?', I have no doubts what you would say to me.

SCANLON: [Laughs] Yeah …

BEASLEY: Are you pondering that?

SCANLON: I am, because I don't think I was a natural painter, actually. When I was at art school there seemed to be a fairly restricted choice of medium; and that becomes your skill set. I don't know that I was that good at it, really. I was happier drawing.

BEASLEY: Metaphorically – and I can't even remember where this comes from, but I got it from Hannah Collins who I worked for part-time after my Masters – you're either a hunter or a gardener. Artists are either hunters or gardeners. So then I'd say yes, you're a gardener, for sure.

SCANLON: Are you a hunter?

BEASLEY: I don't think so. The energy I was talking about earlier sounds like hunting, but it's not. I've always found this image useful but never quite understood how it relates to me. I think you need a bit of both to make things happen. I see hunting as more of an

outbound kind of energy. For me
the ongoing tending to all aspects
of a creative life is the bigger picture.
Only one part of this manifests publicly.

SCANLON: I think you could equate reading with hunting in some respects.

BEASLEY: When I did a conversation with John Slyce at the Stanley Picker Gallery in Kingston in 2011, we opened by talking about reading and gardening in the context of my exhibition and research into Eadweard Muybridge and the end of his life. Muybridge spent his last years in Kingston, England, where he was born. He had given up photography and was reading and gardening.

SCANLON: Tending his garden. It’s certainly true what you say about the young. If you think about Voltaire’s tale *Candide* [1759]: you must have at least attempted to get to El Dorado before you can go ‘cultivate our garden’, don’t you?

Do you choose the medium? Or does it choose you? There are artists that seem to have an affinity with their media and it’s not really a speculative thing, whereas I think I was always …

BEASLEY: … pondering?

SCANLON: [Laughs] Well yes, more philosophically maybe, about what things

could do or might be, and, therefore, when I was painting I was probably abusing it as a medium, forcing it through intention, rather than being in dialogue with it. I was working towards what you might call pictorial conundrums.

I’ve noticed you’ve got a Jorge Luis Borges book on your table here. I wrote my undergrad dissertation on Borges and his short stories. My painting at the time was trying to tackle philosophical ideas through visual means, such as illusionism. I’ve returned to these concerns through drawing in my recent research into the ‘imagethought’ and diagrammatics. I’ve been looking into François Laruelle’s ‘non-philosophy’ and his concept of ‘philo-fiction’ as a speculative new genre.

Non-philosophy can be understood as an expansion of the post-continental paradigm of philosophy, rather like the relation of non-Euclidean or hyberbolic geometry to planar Euclidean geometry. The former expands the capacities of the latter to model space-time. In non-philosophy, philosophy is simply matter like rocks or string, which partake of the real. Philo-fiction, like sci-fi, takes philosophical ideas as raw material to speculate creatively about alternate worlds.

In my recent drawings, I have attempted to re-calibrate the diagrammatic

apparatus of the formal logic square to include other, incommensurate thought forms such as the digressive or erotic, as a way to democratise thought, as John Ó Maoilearca has proposed in his book on Laruelle, *All Thoughts Are Equal* [2015]. In these thought experiments I also want to foreground human visuality as a contributing factor in our meaning-making capacities. I am exploring to what extent I can involve the viewer by inviting them to alter their habitual modes of seeing, and in so doing perform the image as thought or 'imagethought' for themselves. So, the imagethought is performative in that it collapses the space of commentary between the thought and its representational expression as image — so countering the paradigm of Western philosophy as the image *of* thought.

As you can see with this attempt at verbal explanation, returning things to linear language can undo this work! And what is more there is the matter of whose language you are speaking and who is setting the terms of the discourse.

BEASLEY: That's where photography got me: in terms of making an image on a philosophical level. I was endlessly fascinated by it and satisfied by its ongoing live relationship with my demands on it and its possibilities.

SCANLON: Paul always says that photography forces you out into the world. I know that's not of necessity. You could take your camera and move around your cave with it like Francesca Woodman did, but it's also a medium that forces encounters. I always think about John Berger and his idea of the minimal message of photography [*Understanding a Photograph*, 2013]: a photographer points to something and indicates that it's worth looking at, so it's a very economical way of proposing something in the world.

But then you turn that on its head, because you would say, 'here, look at this' but then 'I'm not going to show it to you'.

BEASLEY: [Laughs]

SCANLON: I'm thinking of your early photographic works.

BEASLEY: The covered objects. I just call them the feral works … [Laughs]

SCANLON: Right, right. Why were they feral? They seem very tame, tamed in the sense of controlled.

BEASLEY: There was the rubber mat that I found in the street. This office mat that was furry on one side and smooth rubber on the other, and the titles of

the coverings were *The Burrow*, and *Hide* [both 2004]. The spaces that I was interested in were invisible, interior, animal-related. Some of the photographs of the mat on a table looked like an animal; one of them I called *Stud* [2004].

It was what you were talking about: not showing. Those particularly, through the titles as well, were proposing invisible, interior spaces, the idea of a burrow. It was after an English title of one of Franz Kafka's short stories, *The Burrow*. From the perspective of photography and Berger's minimal message, Walker Evans is one of my first great loves. I've learnt so much from his work in all its manifestations. However, for me, 'indicating' that something is worth looking at through photography, as you said, was never ok for me. That *thing* was always someone else's, not mine. From a purely documentary point of view, this history of photography is helpful and wonderful. But this is not what I am interested in contributing to: pointing at things.

SCANLON: Quite recently there was a man who was doing something quite strange. He was trying to live like a badger, and he took his son with him. What a mad but interesting project. What he was simply trying to do was to connect with what a badger's world might be, in terms of being an animal.

What you say about the animal is really interesting in relation to the notion of responsibility/response-ability, the idea of re-invigorating our sensory capacities through a leap of the imagination.

BEASLEY: And a kind of blindness of moles. And also foraging. I guess I'm like a forager. Those objects were all just stuff I'd come across — a very restricted three or four things that I'd found in the street and dragged in. Then I made quite a big series of works just from changing these things around.

SCANLON: So not so much the hunter but the gatherer.

BEASLEY: Ultimately, I understand my methodology as burrowing. I'm not excavating. I have no interest in bringing something into the light. I'm interested in retaining an essential opacity.

SCANLON: That's what makes the potential of the studio, isn't it. Having gathered your resources, they are to hand for the making of some proposition.

BEASLEY: Yes. But some of those things are just a trigger, a kind of response, just stuff you find, junk shop stuff, or odd books. It's not necessarily that you want to use them in any direct way or

photograph them, it's just about having things around you that you're not quite sure about or that you had half a thought about.

SCANLON: Yes. They pique your curiosity. I always liked that expression about things catching the eye. You know, they sort of hook you. They also embed you in your environment, in your location. In terms of things you find in junk shops, geographically in Hastings you are in a particularly rich area for that type of …

BEASLEY: … squirrelling …

SCANLON: … for objects that might have had a previous life, that have a story to tell. Presumably that would have been different, say, when you were living in Berlin. Were you also squirrelling in junk shops there?

BEASLEY: At flea markets. I enjoyed those for a bit, in the beginning. But no, those four years when I was away I withdrew quite a lot from things. I remember I stopped gathering things.

SCANLON: You made *German Soup* [2009] in Berlin, didn't you? *German Soup* was both the name of your exhibition at Laura Bartlett Gallery and the title of a work within the show. This work consists of two photographs, one of a bowl of Fried Crepe Soup (*Frittatensuppe*), the other

of a bowl of Liver Dumpling Soup (*Leberknödelsuppe*), after the nightly culinary choice (and existential proposition) put to the protagonist of Thomas Bernhard's Histrionics.

BEASLEY: Yes. That was in Berlin, and in Thomas Bernhard. Very deep in both. I didn't speak German but had other languages, so I knew what I was missing out on, and slowly started to realise that I really understood a lot about the culture, even without the language. How much of the embeddedness of, for example, German culture I understood. Particularly when I left Germany and was in other places, I spotted it. I was aware that I understood what was going on in a different way, despite not speaking the language.

SCANLON: Being a stranger in that context gives you a particular perspective. It throws you back on your own resources, your senses.

BEASLEY: Yes. That was where I had an abundance of space and time and a bicycle and Berlin and no friends and no money, in the beginning. I was absolutely overwhelmed by that, realising that I had spent years in London dreaming that particular kind of dream, but that it wasn't for me. That was overwhelming.

SCANLON: The dislocation?

BEASLEY: The abundance of the city. I was isolated as well, so that probably compounded it, but more in terms of inhabiting somewhere. I then moved to Antwerp for a couple of years and I felt much more comfortable in the more domestic scale of life – the village. I loved Berlin and my memory of that urban space is really amazing. I'd probably be fine there now, but not at the time, for personal reasons. Finally, I had a dream of being able to have a studio in a domestic space. To work in a house I didn't live in, wanting to inhabit some rooms and not go to a damp, cold studio.

SCANLON: The idea of the warehouse-type studio is a very modernist model of practice. Just a vast, cavernous, featureless, generally industrial space.

BEASLEY: My last two studios were like that. When I first moved to Hastings I had quite a lot of space, but it was damp and cold, and I was always worrying about my books and dealing with paper. I wasn't quite sure how to make a move in order to have a different option until I was forced to. And then I turned it into something good. I work in a house I don't live in now. I have rooms.

SCANLON: So does this space, here, now feel like your rooms, as you called them? Things have already, finally got a place, haven't they?

BEASLEY: It feels good. I mean I could always do with an extra room … [Laughs] I'd rather be here with the slightly restricted scale of, say, the room we're in now and work out what to do with it, than be somewhere I didn't want to be, and not want to go there. I also want to finally find out what happens to my work when I'm where I always wanted to be. Before, I just wanted to be at home if I didn't need to be in the studio.

SCANLON: I think I've done both. I've had the industrial type space, which seemed to be appropriate at the time because it was used as artists' studios, so there were others around. I wasn't isolated. Then I worked in a converted garage at the bottom of the garden. That was disastrous, really, because I just wanted to garden rather than paint. Not entirely, I made some work, but it was also the period of time when my daughter Georgia was little. At that point kids just want to follow you around all the time, so working was difficult.

What you recognise is that practice doesn't happen in isolation. It happens in a feedback loop or system with everything; the components of practice are the contingencies of time and place, so where you are situated is going to play a part. The idea that you're waiting to see what happens as a result of being in this house now is really interesting.

BEASLEY: It's about incorporating all of that into the components of practice and not thinking that it's going to be something else, somewhere else. I underline that with the fact that I've been very lucky in terms of being able to have opportunities to find out what too much space and time in Berlin feel like. I'm extremely grateful for that experience. There is a massive space in me that will always be there. It's the image of me on a bicycle in a vast Berlin. There's so much space, there's so few people in relation to the space. It was me on a bicycle in Berlin, in Germany, on planet Earth, in the universe … so tiny. It was that overwhelming feeling.

SCANLON: That's a salutary lesson, isn't it – a sense of your own proportion.

BEASLEY: But then I moved to a big, open, industrial space in Antwerp. It was a huge garage on the back of a building. Every week it would spring a hole in a different place in the ceiling. I was so anxious the whole time and out of language again because I didn't speak Dutch, although I did learn baby-Dutch, in the end. When I got there, I realised that this was the last thing in the world that I wanted. I thought this would be great, but what I wanted was some rooms.

SCANLON: After I moved to London, I worked in a studio in Haringey – it was actually

an old carpet warehouse, a single-storey building – with two other artists, Emma Withers and Neil Cummings. And because the roof leaked so much the floor would turn to mud. I was trying to paint, but everything I made just went mouldy. It was like a Tarkovsky set, honestly. It had enormous balloons of polythene trying to hold the elements at bay. It was an impossible space to work in. Sometime later, I had the perfect purpose-built studio unit in Forest Hill, with its own kitchen and mezzanine floor … but somehow, everything I made in that space was a failure, including the photos I took to document the work. It was not a happy time.

BEASLEY: When I go to exhibitions, I think a lot about the precise moment that these works were made. It's dignified, in a way, because I never presume that they didn't come out of a huge battle with the elements.

SCANLON: I think I learnt to construct my own world through play. That's something that lots of artists recognise. It sounds pathetic, but actually it's very positive: you absolutely become self-sufficient. You learn to be a world-builder.

BEASLEY: I understand my practice as a form of den-building, as ideas of spaces which one can somehow inhabit mentally. I always most liked to build dens as a child. For me it was their

hybrid capacity as sanctuaries or spaces for reading, for playing alone or with others, which drew me in.

SCANLON: Yes, I also did this. I'm sure that has something to do with becoming an artist: the quality of your play, or opportunities for play. People lose sight of that.

I've just bought Alva Noë's book, *Strange Tools. Art and Human Nature* [2015]. He's a neuroscientist and philosopher. His book is proposing something about the way works of art work on us. The book starts with the transaction that we learn through breastfeeding. He argues for *enactivist* theories of being, distributed consciousness. Having talked about being very in your head, this is the idea that, obviously, we're not in our heads, but rather the head is out in the world, so to speak, and that our consciousness is out there, and amongst things.

Noë writes about how human beings are very inefficient feeders. You would assume that breastfeeding was an innate, natural thing that you didn't have to learn. But, of course, the mother is always watching and helping the child latch on just as the child gets distracted, or falls asleep. The mother needs to wake it up in order to make sure that it's had enough nourishment. So, this idea of

taking turns is built in right at the start of becoming human with others.

We know about oxytocin as the hormone that helps us to bond. Apart from the chemical level there's a social aspect of our consciousness being embedded in that transaction. Noë goes on to say that our transactions in the world are about our innate capacity for organisation and design. According to him, art is a way of reorganising our experience of the ideas we have about the way things are ordered.

BEASLEY: Robert Gober talks about his practice maternally. Where he doesn't feel society quite fits him he just remakes it so it feels like it fits him better. He also talks about 'nursing an image'. If it doesn't go away, he takes it into sculpture to explore it further.

SCANLON: That brings us back to the components of a practice and the idea of different things that we organise according to different aspects of our experience. They all then come together in concert. I think that's really true of your practice in regard to the relationship between the media, the object, the image, and the space in between. The transactional space, which at a certain moment became interestingly animated, literally animated. I hadn't thought about it before but there is a performative aspect to your work:

things rotating and moving in relation to other things.

BEASLEY: This very much comes out of a process of aging and becoming connected to cycles, family, and life, seasonality, intergenerationality, and a response to how platonic and sexual relations sit side by side within extended family structures. It relates specifically to the idea of adulthood, in contrast to childhood or old age. It was the 'carnival' and uncertainty of adulthood which I was after with the body of work titled *Spring Rain* [2013]. Around this time I made the first of the revolving mobiles. This led later to the series of mobiles, *Bearings* [2014]. These were serial photographic works which explored things panoramically. Mihnea Mircan has since looked at these movements in my practice in more depth in his curation of my exhibition *Depressive Alcoholic Mother* and in his related essay [2018].

SCANLON: I find interesting how you weave together the literary and documentary with the autobiographical. I thought this intra-textual structure was particularly finely interlaced in your recent bookwork, *Two Plants in Dip* [2018].

BEASLEY: These parallel tracks run alongside, and then start to interweave. I think of them more as a soup than a weave. For me, they're all equally

important. I learn from all of them, in terms of what their relevance to the practice is. There's not a hierarchy. Some things look quite clearly like research, but during the timeframe of a project I am as focused on what is happening in general in life as I am on the more intentional questions. If *Spring Rain* was a sculptural exploration of spring, my question was how I would maintain the gravity. With my exhibition *Fall* [Francesca Minini Gallery, 2014], my proposition to myself was autumn as a sculptural exploration, and my question, how would I maintain the lightness?

My initial image for *Fall*, which I 'nursed', was that of Italian walnuts falling and hitting the pavement. I anticipated the show being about the floor and sculpture on the floor. Over the twelve-month gestation period of this project I became pregnant and the scale of the photographic prints grew with me and my concept came to include 'fall' in terms of animals dropping their young. Time in the work also became about a suspended moment – classic within photography but a first for me in this respect, a moment of exploring this cliché. So the upturned photographs hold the objects in a state of anticipation and potential. I've also long been fascinated by Bas Jan Ader's series of 'falling' works. These fragile concerns of a body in suspension were

on my mind as a response across the *Fall* exhibition.

I installed that show in late July, heavily pregnant – at the last moment I was allowed to fly – and it waited through August for its September opening at which time I was not present, as this coincided with the birth of our son. Francesca and I planned this right from the start. We agreed that the pregnancy due date was not a reason to change the early autumn opening date.

SCANLON: I'm really interested in the idea of art practice being a form of reasoning, or a form of knowing. And then, in terms of an academic remit, there is a need to articulate that knowing and reasoning within practice-based research. Somebody recently described it to me as 'weird sisters' – in that the academic articulation is a kind of odd sibling to the practice. Whereas I think you've managed to engage the idea of research in practice through different registers in your writing. And yet none of them stands outside as a kind of commentary on the practice. Isn't this what we wanted from this conversation, to resist the idea of it as a commentary?

BEASLEY: No commentary. Yes. I think that's the whole problem with this culture of research as practice. My formative experiences with reading

Blanchot in an undifferentiated way — as we discussed earlier — have always remained with me, so I've never felt there was any essential space or need for commentary. Reference is different. That's about mixing. It's interior to the work.

SCANLON: We have chosen two distinct methods to navigate the institutional relation. Who's setting the agenda and whose future is decided by that agenda have been questions we have both explored in different ways, within and outside of the academic.

BEASLEY: When I briefly embarked on an MPhil, I experienced the most palpable sensation of separation and remoteness from all aspects of what I then saw as my practice. I thought I was having a breakdown. I just didn't believe in it in the way it is dealt with academically. Although I'd probably be able to negotiate that fine now on my own terms.

SCANLON: That does seem ironic, that you should have experienced academia as so alienating, when so many artists see it as a way to mitigate the alienating conditions of the contemporary art market — not that there is any clear divide between the two anymore.

BEASLEY: I thought it was going to be the greatest. It wasn't. It goes back to

Blanchot and the literary-philosophical text, the writing, the fiction, and wanting for it, needing for it to be part of the same thing so that there's not a separate commentary. This kind of writing is able to provide its own discourse within. To write by yourself, rather than through others: that was also a real ambition that came off the back of touching in the academic context.

SCANLON: What do you mean by that?

BEASLEY: I just write the thing rather than saying 'Hegel says spirit is a bone'. He just writes it, rather than writing through an endless assault course of references. It was something the artist Olivier Richon said to me once and I thought, yes, I want to write by myself, so I go directly to the thing. I don't mean this literally; it's more a movement towards one's own work, towards the point where one has made a real contribution, to knowledge, to others.

SCANLON: My response in that situation was, of course, that we have to embrace the sibling. That we're all played by institutional bureaucracy and these are realities. What constitutes research has admittedly become so very instrumentalised, but the aim is always to resist that managerialist agenda.

BEASLEY: It’s an academic model, which was what I disliked. I guess someone might say ‘she’s just saying she didn’t like academia’.

SCANLON: Well, you wouldn’t be alone in that respect!

BEASLEY: I actually have a strong affinity towards academics — specific experts with whom there is no need for small talk — but I have come to see those conversations as relevant independently, through my larger projects. I am and have been in conversation with Muybridge scholars, Malamud’s biographer, Linnaeus experts, and currently a Manet specialist. So far, they have always been responsive to my specific questions.

SCANLON: I’ve decided that you can make use of the academic model but not necessarily go along with its more arcane requirements. I recently received my Masters in Research and made use of my thesis presentation to reject the idea of ‘defending’ a thesis as just the kind of patriarchal tone-jam that still persists in academia, particularly around the idea of the researcher as a singular producer of ‘truth’ claims.

Despite that, I’ve certainly developed the skills necessary for publishing in that context. Perhaps ironically, my practice-based research took me away from

just the kind of academic meta-position you describe and towards a more performative ‘posture’. In other words, it seems to me that you can work through these points of reference and frameworks quite productively even as a dissident.

That brings me back to reading. I’ve discovered that I am quite an inefficient reader.

BEASLEY: What do you mean by that? I read very little.

SCANLON: I read very slowly and in quite a fragmented way, and I have more than one text on the go. I’ve tried to be more disciplined in studying. I think you’re quite disciplined, aren’t you?

BEASLEY: I just get locked on to certain things, and really go into them. I become fascinated. But it’s not encyclopaedic. It’s very limited. I’ve come to understand that my own relation as an artist to research is to become my own world expert in my fashion. So I pick out some things I feel drawn to read and understand in my own way and produce work from this relation. And so I feel very happy about my own world expertise on Laurence Sterne, Eadweard Muybridge, Marcel Duchamp, and Thomas Bernhard, for example. In my seriousness and foolishness, I’d comfortably speak on any panel on

these subjects as I know what it is
I have to contribute.

It’s also about confidence through experience. The idea of learning about something ‘in my fashion’ was a vital moment of understanding for me: that expertise is not necessarily encyclopaedic. It just needs to become my thing, as an artist, and this becomes my contribution to knowledge.

SCANLON: I think of reading as hunting and gathering. There’s always the sense that sometimes you have to make do with the quarry and other times you’ve got a real prize on your hands, and it fills you up for a long time.

BEASLEY: That’s a nice analogy. Getting very full up. When I was feeling quite isolated in Berlin I began to create my own allies or groups of mainly dead men — I used to call them my bad mentors. My mob that was an ongoing part of my inner way of thinking about doing things, whom I asked my questions to, and found the answers. That was all about feeling very isolated and creating my own community without having to make do with whoever happened to be in the department you ended up being accepted for. [Laughs] I picked my own department.

SCANLON: You picked your own department, I see.

BEASLEY: But I'm serious when I say that. It isn't some kind of metaphor. It's real. They're my company, most of the time. These are my conversations, and where I go to when I'm not sure what to do or how to solve something.

SCANLON: But it's a one-way conversation.

BEASLEY: Not at all. Not even remotely.

SCANLON: I always thought that was the thing about the reader. It is a virtual conversation, I admit. You are taking on board someone else's thoughts, but when you're asking a question of them, you are essentially asking yourself. I recently developed this idea in an article for the journal *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice* ['Diagramming in the Margins of Philosophy', vol. 3, issue 1, 2018]. I was exploring marginalia as a kind of diagrammatic thinking, in which the (student) reader constructs an intra-text, as a way of breaking with the authority of the text.

BEASLEY: Through another work.

SCANLON: Yes, exactly.

I wanted to ask you about your company of men.

BEASLEY: They're not all men! In fact in the last years they have been all women.

Lisa Halliday, Olivia Laing, Deborah Levy, more Rebecca Solnit, less Lydia Davis, Maggie Nelson, Anne Tyler, Lucia Berlin, Elizabeth Hardwick, to name a few. The zeitgeist worked well on me. I've recently been reading much younger British women also, Rosie Howard, Ella Frears, and Olivia Sudjic.

SCANLON: You also seemed to take a journey earlier on, a transatlantic shift. We talked about Blanchot as being a starting point, a European foundation, if you like. Was it a conscious decision to suddenly look at, or be in the company of North American writers, North American literature?

BEASLEY: Yeah, I was really interested.

SCANLON: How did that happen?

BEASLEY: That began with William Faulkner, with *As I Lay Dying* [1930] specifically; as a way back to my early love of Georges Bataille, and then Melville, and as an extension of my relationship to Blanchot. But when I learned that Lydia Davis was Paul Auster's first wife I jumped ship, so to speak, to her.

SCANLON: Right. She simply took you across the water.

BEASLEY: Herman Melville opened up a whole field at that moment. Modernity,

and magazines, and photography, and travel. Reading *Bartleby, the Scrivener* opened up all of the territory that then became a fertile ground around the idea of beginning. Wood was really important as well, the American walnut that gets darker with age. The *wahl* or *foreign* nut, which I loved, and loved conceptually. This black American walnut kept me going that way, to find out a bit more, to see if it was useful, interesting. Then there was the American letter, the paper size. Odd, obsolete, but still in full use.

I was interested in the equation of those kinds of things: bureaucracy, paper, and fiction, movie. Before, for me, there was a lot of interesting nineteenth- and twentieth-century European existential and new wave literature with all of its ideas around time. I often turned to Harold Pinter via Samuel Beckett as well when I was younger, and then John Cassavetes's films along that same journey.

SCANLON: In the way of new territory and particularly in relation to the idea of North America, was there seemingly a sense of liberation?

BEASLEY: Yeah, maybe. I think it was also about humour and dilemma, Woody Allen — my first love —, and Jewish American literature. I read bits of and really enjoyed the humour in Saul Bellow and

Phillip Roth. Bernard Malamud and his writing became an ongoing special subject for me over the last ten years. *Spring Rain* [1942] is an early short story by Malamud. It was published posthumously. I've done a lot of work on that story, which resulted most recently in the exhibition *A Gentle Man* [80 Washington Square East, New York, 2017]. Malamud is a bit like Robert Bresson, a sort of spiritual figure. I liked, as I returned to Malamud's stories, that there are street corners and buildings throughout his stories in which you feel like it's all the same place. You're just starting to get to know it better across different stories. I quite like that feeling of a growing sense of a place and a time. It's an essential ambiguity.

I've also always subscribed to *Bookforum* and for some years now to *n+1,* so I follow what younger intellectuals are writing about.

SCANLON: I've tried and failed to read Phillip Roth. But then there's Lydia Davis, of course.

BEASLEY: Yes, who connects it all: from France and Blanchot, and the early-70s translations to the height of her powers as an author … Do you know why she called her 2014 book *Can't and Won't*?

SCANLON: No, remind me.

BEASLEY: Some reviewer said, ‘Lydia Davis uses abbreviations such as “can’t and won’t” far too much, she’s lazy.’ She called her next book *Can’t and Won’t.* [Laughs]

I slowly understood that the people who were working on Blanchot – all the thinkers, the important ones – were translators, really, or poets. When I realised that I felt like I understood so much more about how brilliant he was. How he cared about work. I think that’s why I wanted to talk about this ground: it’s all about how you care for things. Your work is a really important part of that, but how do we care? What is it to care for your work?

SCANLON: Do you mean care for your work in the sense of the idea of the *métier*? That the job of being an artist is socially valuable?

BEASLEY: Oh no. I mean *taking* care. Like looking after someone. Or tending to something. Is that what you mean?

SCANLON: So you need to take care of it?

BEASLEY: Yes. What kind of human being do you want to be? It’s all the same thing. It’s all at stake in everything. From first thing this morning, to finishing a show, to what happens after a show, to

how to treat others, or respond to the treatment of others. [Laughs]

SCANLON: You're putting me in mind of Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil [*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1963]. If you don't take care then what you are is careless. The things that are done that are evil are often the result of carelessness. That comes back to an idea of responsibility, doesn't it? You have to be alert to things in order to know to care about them.

Inevitably there are some odd contradictions about the gesture of responsibility, though. About needing to do things without being burdened by the idea that they might mean something, or that they might become something. Perhaps you have to be carefree as opposed to careless.

BEASLEY: I think that's where the madness comes in. As an analogy to that gesture: it's being free, or being beside oneself, or having nothing to lose. This could go different ways, productively or destructively. It's a fine line, generally. The moment to be most attentive to is when surviving becomes thriving. That's the miracle we have to make happen individually and look out for in others.

SCANLON: Language is strange here. Talking about translation: often what we read in literature is in translation. I was struck in Nancy's *The Pleasure in Drawing* by the fact that the translator has often maintained the original French in brackets. It's all about how those words connote in both languages, particularly around the idea of drawing. The draught and the trait, and the breath and the inscription, and so on. Translation is such an art form, isn't it? Why aren't more texts more hybrid between the work in the original language and their translation? I suppose it's a question of coherence.

BEASLEY: A text then becomes the work of the translator. This is the profound art of translation. Lydia Davis's essays are basically her running notes — specifically the one about translating Flaubert. She'll have whole index boxes on the specific words and terms: it's about the translators making their choices.

SCANLON: I like the way the translation of Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day* starts: 'I am not learned; I am not ignorant. I have known joys.'

BEASLEY: I like every word in that first paragraph. That's everything that needs to be said.

SCANLON: 'That is saying too little.'

BEASLEY: It's everything. I know it has heavily influenced my relationship to objects and spaces and subjects and things. My own experiences of the darkness, and his description of dusk, when the colour drains out of things. These kinds of images, and the experience of the edges of things softening and blurring. Object and space. The edges get blurred between the two along with your own presence as a subject. Everything just caves in. The feeling of it all just collapsing into each other.

Whenever I found that in Blanchot, I thought, there it is, that's my experience. It's like finding a friend. That identification. That then informed the writing. There are different kinds of writing that it satisfied: the studious, rational, hot, intellectual side, and then the very other, wild and mad, collapsing kind of interior. I had the DTs [delirium tremens] when I did my interview at the Royal College of Art. I got in. [Laughs] It was insane.

SCANLON: I told them.

BEASLEY: Did you?

SCANLON: I mean in the reference. I wrote: 'You need to take this person … she may not come across very well at interview. [Laughs] But don't be fooled!'

BEASLEY: I couldn't even hear what they were saying! All I heard was 'uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh uhhhhhhhh uhhhhhh.' That's all I could hear myself saying to them. I've no idea what they heard me say. I knew what I was trying to say. But I couldn't hear it.

SCANLON: In a way, that undifferentiated state is interesting when we talk about the ground as well as about Alva Noë and the way that art reorganises experience. Maybe it's also about pulling out from that undifferentiated ground some things which you can distinguish, finding some edges. If we accept that much of what we think we know is contingent on our visual ecology, whether that be our human optics or the way we calibrate our apparatus and our interpretive frameworks, then it follows that we construct the world we know.

This is not a subjectivist position, rather I align with Karen Barad's theory of Agential Realism [*Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 2007], in which she argues via the affordances of quantum physics for the *intra*-action of matter and discourse – a philosophy-physics where there is no distinction between ontology and epistemology. This has profound implications for identity politics and ethics. The undifferentiated ground is

simply the world prior to our attention which creates the exclusionary cut in what is thought and not thought. Making art is just another way of making the cut.

BEASLEY: I think it’s about being able to make that manifest within the work. The works have life because people are able to recognise it. My work is open and it’s closed. It was closed for a long time. It was hermetic. And people who knew me liked it, but I remember some of them saying: how can it live without you? At a certain point, when I was solving a couple of things around objects, it opened. But once you got in, through the opening, the closed aspect was still there, so that you could find it yourself.

SCANLON: Was that through making objects rather than photographs?

BEASLEY: I think it came out of a very dark paper bag photo that I made. Finally, this sort of still life was inhabitable, like an imaginary den. I hand-wrote a note to the artist Brian Catling when we were doing the postal mail out for my first solo show at Whitechapel Project Space [*Thru darkly night*, 2003]. I didn’t know him. I was surprised to get a call from Maria K. who ran the space to tell me he was coming to see the show out of hours and could I be there to meet him. It was a thrilling moment for me. He talked about that paper bag photo most, that it

reminded him of London smog, of walking with Iain Sinclair, and that it made him feel like he could put his hand into it.

Later I started to make objects, the first woodworks and the glass panels, the black glass. The work was open finally — due in a way to the reflective black glass — but it was profoundly closed once you entered it mentally or emotionally. People were drawn to them. The dimensions had something very hospitable about them, and familiar, and human. Then, when you got there, there you were. The possibility of doing that is what I want. That's what art is for. For me it is an ethical question. It's about being able to actually communicate with each other about this thing that we can't share. That's all I want. Getting in the den.

SCANLON: Along with Beckett, and Blanchot.

BEASLEY: The books get me in the den. I don't see them as dead texts. You were looking at me slightly strangely earlier when you were talking about this one-way conversation with my literary gang. I don't see them as dead texts. I don't see *Bartleby* as a dead text. Right in this very moment they can speak about so much. They're really vital.

SCANLON: No, I'm not suggesting they're dead.

BEASLEY: Through the historical, there's a contemporary moment around the texts that I myself wanted to explore and manifest. The self-understanding or realisation becomes the work, or connected within the central force work. But since studying at Goldsmiths in the late nineties I haven't spent much time sitting around with a group of people, talking about art. I've created my own imaginary group, some of whose members are real, others through relationships with texts and artworks I love.

SCANLON: I think I've done that to excess, possibly.

BEASLEY: Oh, I've always preferred one-to-one anyway. I know that now. Encounters with a lot of new people. Well, we're here today because of this publication. We wouldn't be here otherwise. You'd be gardening and I'd probably be asleep. [Laughs] But what the editors are making – some kind of proposal around our work – is then also for me, and for as long as I can remember, part of what it's about. Spending some time with someone else, and talking. These become my points of conversation, really.

SCANLON: It sounds obvious to say that it's about conversation, doesn't it? But actually it's the most problematic thing.

BEASLEY: Communication?

SCANLON: Yes, the intended reciprocity of understanding that conversation seeks, but so often fails to achieve. As tutor and student we connected via the interim space that literature provided — as we have here in extending that conversation in reference to so many other voices, but we are only here today because you kept faith with that connection, and kept sending me your writing after you graduated. I didn't reply, because I was inexperienced and worried about the impact on both of us of extending my role as tutor, misjudging how friendship can overcome these institutional asymmetries.

As time passed, it just became too difficult to breach the gap, with many of the time limitations of parenthood you have mentioned playing their part at that time in my life. Looking back now, I can see it differently, that in suspending my side of the conversation, I had become the reader to your writer. As you know, this asymmetry in the inter-subjective space between reader and writer has always fascinated me and certainly informed the *Desultory Object* postcard series [1990–present] that I'm still working on intermittently. As I said earlier, working with drawing is for me a way to circumscribe the problems we face communicating with words.

BEASLEY: I felt such a relief about returning to England after two years in

German, two years in Flemish – I've kind of forgotten it now, but for the first couple of years I was acutely aware of it all the time – the absolute pleasure and armchair comfort of speaking in your mother tongue with someone else, sharing the nuances and the references. And not feeling that you're putting someone else out if they're speaking in their second language for you. These were the rewards of returning after being somewhere else, after the internal difficulty and the stress and compromised feeling. I speak French and Spanish so I understood profoundly what I was missing.

Actually I think this relates to a short story by Bernard Malamud. In the story, *A German Refugee* – who I always think of as being Walter Benjamin, – the protagonist has come to America. He was a top academic in his country, a high intellectual, and then he was struck dumb, because he didn't speak American English. There's a description of his tongue in his mouth, limp. I identified with this sensation when I lived in Berlin without German. I was so silent there, and profoundly lonely. 'I was nevertheless, and nearly all the time, extremely happy.'

#3 Becky Beasley in conversation with
Claire Scanlon

“ ”

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Images p. 1: Claire Scanlon and Paul
Grivell, envelope, 2009; Becky Beasley,
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#3

Around 1999, artist Becky Beasley began writing to her former tutor, Claire Scanlon, who kept her letters but never replied. Years later, in 2016, the two began to intermittently record their conversations, now as friends. Here they discuss their 'components of practice', which are as mundane as they are existential: space, time, literature, resistance, clarity, ambiguity, burrowing, parenthood, depression, and German Soup.

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