Allen Fisher Interview

Edited Transcript

The Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK, 2008

Extract 1

Steve: I looked at the etymology of interview, and an online etymology dictionary describes it as a ‘face-to-face meeting, formal conference’ so I wanted to try and draw some kind of map between the face-to-face meeting, two bodies colliding, the idea of being between sights and being between physical sites, as well as this final idea that the original interview is generally the 'joint product of some humbug of a hack politician and another humbug of a hack newspaper reporter'. When you put an image, an idea, between sites/sights and reporting... I know that's massively broad...

Allen: So the site is the body is at this moment? Because we're one site in one way.

Steve: In that we're physically positioned.

Allen: Yes.

Steve: So how does the physical positioning in different sites relate to the fact that I'm perceiving you now, through perception? Through the other notion of sights.

Allen: It's really quite an interesting question, quite a difficult question too, but it's worth it. Let's just talk about response to poetry and visual arts. If you imagine that I've just read something and you've just responded to it, in another hour it might be quite different for you due to all sorts of circumstantial differences, not just to do with the weather or whether you're warm or hot or who you're with or the ambience of the place. As you extend that, there's a whole range of potentials and that's why I eventually - I’m sort of going off at a tangent at the moment but I'll come back - realised along with others that there's a factoring process in which you make a piece of work which others have received, but in fact the actual production takes place in the receiving, whether that happens to be you re-reading it or you reading it or hearing it. So the actual production of the art process is continuous or rather it happens continually at different times. Continually is perhaps not right - it happens again and again,

and potentially differently each time and potentially not necessarily very different. So the context is very important in that regard, and it's very important to recognise that if we talk about a time difference it's one thing, if we talk about a space difference it's another, and I've always thought that's actually a false separation. I rather teasingly always talk about spacetime, because although that's a term out of 20th century physics it actually does make some sense in the particularity of, you never meet somebody at a certain time you always meet them at a certain time in a particular place, otherwise how would you know where to meet them? So on and vice versa, on that banal level. So, I think that different spacetimes are important and on a mundane level it produces different contexts. But there's an undercurrent through all of this which leads to something more complex and interesting and that is that as I'm talking to you there's already a multiple spacetime potential. So while I'm saying something to you out in my 'front head' there's actually something in my 'back head' I'm not quite saying, or you're hearing this but there's also something you're wondering at the same time - or a bus goes by - and there's another bit of perception going on at the same time as this bit of perception, so there's already a multiple spacetime in the spacetime you're in, so to speak.

Steve: And that seems to be hinting at something which I haven't actually read in the criticism, but it is in your work, the actual poetry of the work, which is the notion of sound, and that interacting with spacetime in that, in the interview it's the voice that you're hearing, and the fact that it could be a different voice erupting from a different time.

Allen: I use time a lot, because it is quite evident that you hear a dog bark whilst I'm talking to you and you come in and out of oral perception of it, and a bus goes by and so on. But actually I think it is as broad as we've got senses and we involve ourselves proprioceptively in our physicality.

Alex: So do you think we choose the precedent or hierarchy of these, so we decide - you decide - that what Steve is saying to you is more important than what is going on in the back of your head.

Allen: I don't know if I decide it in the sense of I've *just* decided it, but you do yes, and I also think that it's intermittent as well, so as I'm talking that paper flicks in my ear, and so on, and it's just like being attentive and focussing or deciding entirely not to focus, and it's actually to do with response, and in a rather cheap trick it moves into responsibility. But you can take it into a whole range of levels. In Situationist ideas there's no longer an observer - if you're around then you're participating, and if you're participating by deciding not to take part, that is a participation politically, it's a decision to be separate from what's going on. Or, you participate in a way that will change it and that also comes from physics in another sense - a where there's parallels going at the same time - this idea, which has come out in the late nineteenth century, that the observer actually interferes with what they're looking at.

Alex: Like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle?

Allen: Yes. So your observation's interfering with what you're looking at, and as you're trying to measure something your measurement of it is changing it. It leads on to more recent physics where you've got people like Bell working at the CERN laboratory in Geneva talking about measurement and how we need to talk about the unspeakable and the unmeasurable, and how to do that, and how do we articulate that, and how do you do that actually without vocabulary, without philosophy actually, and, to some extent, unfortunately for me and many others, how do you do it without algebra? But I think you can and I think you have to.

Extract 2

Allen: I've had a train of thought for some time now using words that on the surface seem to be unenthusiastic or negative. I find that a positive word like 'damage' is one that isn't quickly taken on as a positive, or a word like ‘trap’. Just in the same way that we can shift 'tools' into something which is quite murderous. I'm quite interested in the way that you can experience vocabulary differently, by difficulty in the sense we've just spoken about. I'm not interested in being obscure however, so I'm on an edge here.

Alex: There's no sense that you're trying to test the reader.

Allen: That’s right, but there is a moment when you put yourself at risk for that reason, as a writer.

✂

Steve: It's interesting you use the word 'damage', because it troubles me. We managed to get hold of Scott Thurston's interview with you at Roehampton, and in that you talk a lot about incidents and creating incidents. It doesn't trouble me wholly - incident is interesting in that it implies accident - incidental - and something happening as well. But it also implies this notion of ‘damage’, the idea that you might see an incident - for example, a paramedic would respond to an incident. There is a link between your positive use of damage and the notion of real physical pain. In the interview when you’re talking about crushing the cylinder, one of the metaphors you use is for the moon landings when they crushed the lunar lander to test whether the human bodies inside would get crushed. It's a violent image, and it's not purely aesthetic, and there's a link between real incident and textual incident, which I'm interested in.

Allen: Okay, I'm not sure where to go from there.

Steve: I'm not sure either!

Allen: I think the reason that the word 'damage' works for me is because of that danger, because it is on the edge of being... a word

you shouldn't play around with too much. When I did research into damage, one of the things that quickly dawned on me was that we are losing brain cells day by day, generally speaking, if we're older than 20, 22. We're not going to get them back, so that's damage to some extent, but there's a sense in which if you didn't do that, if that didn't happen, you would probably be overcrowded, you'd completely pass out.

Alex: That ties in to ideas of the body, DNA constantly repairing, being constantly broken and reformed, then through that occurs mutation, which leads to evolution and so on.

Allen: So in a sense you might say why use the vocabulary 'damage', why not think of something more positive like 'replenishing'.

Steve: It's necessary damage.

Allen: That's right. I think I use 'damage' because of its energy, I think it makes you listen, just twice.

Steve: I wasn't linking it to real physical balance in order to make it sound like you shouldn't be using the word. 'Damage', real physical damage, should be written about in poetry, it exists. I was just wondering to what extent the aesthetics of using it is brought into a practical consideration of it.

Allen: It crops up so much in the work that I've really enjoyed, and therefore I've also used it in my own work, like tearing, tearing through a text. I enjoy a lot of - not everything - but a lot of what Burroughs did in the late 50s and early 60s with texts, and I've enjoyed other texts that have done what you might call 'damage' and reproduced/produced different texts as a consequence. I think I've found it - it's the physicality of it - much more energetic and interesting in visual art, for instance, or in music. If you think of it in either of those two things, you get almost a disruption as a consequence that is uplifting - but at the same time if you analysed it

and thought about it that's come about because of something quite violent.

✂

Allen: ...just to undermine what I'm saying, that isn't to say I don't enjoy calm work. It's a matter of how we define where we are when we're saying it - that is the difficulty of this. Because clearly if you're watching a flat area of water and you drop a small pebble, then that damage is not violent in a big sense but it would be quite a nice thing to watch.

Steve: Your attention level is piqued.

Allen: Yes. I don't necessarily think of violence in the violent sense. It might just be a change of level.

Alex: I have a sense that it's not the text or the event caused by the text that the energy comes from, it's from within the reader, and the process of reading the text.

Allen: But that needs stimulating, or it needs producing, or it needs encouraging, and so I think that's what I've tried to do, and I think it makes some of the work difficult as a consequence.

Alex: So how do you reconcile ‘damage’ with scientific and mathematical structures, that - in the way that they're explained at least, in abstract terms - are very rigid.

Allen: Make it less general.

Alex: For example, going back to the cylinder again [with] the Fibonacci sequence [printed on it] how do you reconcile the deformation or damage of that very rigid sequence with the actual energy present in the work? Is the rigid structure of the science and maths in your work a source of energy?

Allen: On one level at least, what it does for me - and it doesn't need to do this for the reader at all - is it gives me something to hold on to

in order to bring about a change. I don’t think you can bring about a change if you don't know where you are. It's finding a process which pulls from you what you already know but didn't know you knew, and so what that arithmetic system does - it's done it actually always in poetry, really, and I'll come back to what I mean by that - is that it puts certain parameters, certain expectations on the process that you're involved in. You've got to find the right things to fit, otherwise it doesn't work, in order for the disruption to then occur, and what that does is it pulls from you an experience or a set of selections that you wouldn't have otherwise made, or might not have otherwise made. If you think of the old systems of writing sonnets in rhyming verse or something of that kind, rigid on one level, those artists or those poets are having to use particular words because they rhyme and can't use other words because they don't, and quite often they'd have the struggle of trying to find a word that'll rhyme, and they will therefore find words that they wouldn't have otherwise found. That's a simplistic level of what I'm trying to get at.

Alex: It's a constraint for you so you can work through your own writing.

Allen: Yes, in the best sense though. Constraint in the sense of, otherwise why, why take any care over anything?

Extract 3

Steve: It might be interesting to phrase this question from Paige in relation to what we've been talking about.

Alex: ‘You are Professor of Poetry and Art at Manchester Metropolitan University, and as a mature student trained formally as an artist. You began making visual work long before then, from the beginning of your career as an artist-printer. But your artwork is rarely seen and is probably only accessible as illustrations in or covers for books by other poets. Can you tell us a little about the relationships between your written and visual work, especially with reference to the concepts 'facture' and ‘collage’? What are the aesthetic links, if any, between your conceptual art, such as 'Printing Days', visual publications such as 'Amnesic Instant' and more recent work, such as the big painting series, 'Views of the City', and works on paper such as the 'Meditation Traps' and the 'Scattered Studies'? Who are the artists who have most influenced your aesthetic development?’

Allen: First of all talking about the relationship between writing and visual work is quite hard and [there’s] a wide range of questions that need to be asked. One is a sort of day to day energetic question. What I find is that at certain times I feel in a better mood to write than to paint or vice versa, and that is to do with energy. I can actually be too exhausted to write, but I can stand up and paint, because the physicality is quite different. Even though the mental activity might be similar, there's a physical difference which is important. That's one of the relationships that I find important.

Alex: Do you literally mean in terms of your body position?

Allen: Yeah, it's to do with posture and muscles.

✂

Allen: Then there's another relationship which is to do with... which is hard for me to articulate - it needs others to help me. I've got a whole series of paintings that relate to Gravity, and then all of a

sudden you go 'just a minute I've used vocabularies that crop up in the writing' and there must be a relationship here that I haven't analysed.

✂

Steve: I've been working with a musician recently, and he talks a lot about non-verbal concepts. As a poet that's incredibly hard for me to get my head around. Is that the level you work at with your painting?

Allen: Yeah, I do. However, because I'm a poet I still maintain it is verbalising - although I wouldn't use a terrible word like that again. But it's not in a way that you first of all expect, not as an explanation or as an event of that kind, it might just be a parallel experience, but in writing. It's difficult. Just trying to grab up this question - one of things Paige mentions here is 'Printing Days'. That's not easily reproducible. It's a set of, let's say, A2 sheets. Every time I finished printing on a letter press, which was late 60s, early 70s, I rolled out the roller, cleaned up what I'd done so the roller was clean, and I got attracted to that movement - the roller creates this sort of mark as the ink's running out. So every time I did it I dated it, and just had a whole set of them, and it was contemporary with or just after I'd seen work by Barnett Newman, called 'Cantos', which is a series of prints that have a similar shape to them... probably don't look anything like them - but I sort of don't remember whether they do or not. That answers two parts. I was influenced by people who do things in series, and I quite enjoy that. It's not the only way I've been influenced by art, but I enjoy the way Jasper Johns uses series... other examples - there must be hundreds.

Steve: There's book arts as well, like Ed Ruscha.

Allen: I'm quite keen on series of paintings. The term might be 'project-ing'. I think that's where my best work is, always, it's organised that way, planned as a series. [*Goes back to the question*] The relationship between the written and the visual, concepts of 'facture' and 'collage'... I think we've touched collage pretty well, so let's not reiterate that unless you think we should.

Alex: Give us something about 'facture'.

Allen: Facture came out of a discussion with constructivists, not that I was having them - I wasn't born! - and they'd understood a difficulty with using words like 'make' and 'produce'. It was partly to do with the fact that they didn't want the religious association with making, and they didn't want those god-like feelings about it, and they were trying to prevent that politically. And the idea of production, for me at least, meant completion, it meant the end of it: that's it. I think I said earlier that I'm really quite keen to recognise that you and I, when we're looking at a piece of work, are producing it. Therefore that's part of the production, therefore how can the artist be the producer: full stop? And so the terminology cropped up by using the word manufacture. The word ‘facture’ cropped up as meaning you're the person involved in facilitating the process that brings about production.

✂

Allen: 'Amnesic Instant' is a publication I put out from Spanner which was taking off from something Charles Olson said. He was at [*inaudible*] lecture and he talks about the universe being like a rubber band, so I've taken his rubber bands and enlarged them on photocopies and it starts to fragment. Oh, look at this.

[*At this point a group of protesters walked past the Cornerhouse, carrying placards deriding news coverage and perception of China. In particular, the BBC were singled out.*]

Steve: It's a pro-China protest.

Allen: 'Stop the media distortion. So that's why it's Oxford Road, it's the BBC.’

Extract 4

[*This extract begins with a close reading of Allen's poem 'Tensor'.*]

Allen: Tensor: that's an unusual spelling from a book by a physicist on a kind of geometry that you expect to mean intense, or in tension, but it doesn't mean that at all, it's a much larger spatial idea. I was completely fascinated by the book.

Alex: Who wrote it?

Allen: Poston his name is, he's not particularly well known, I can't remember his first name, probably Tom Poston, but that might be wrong. 'Calcium waves carry understanding' - what I've got is some notions going around in my head that calcium is involved in memory and in the brain and it takes part in some of the interaction, some of the brain function that allows me to remember things. Then at the same time I've got a kind of mundane humour about calcium being crushed chalk.

Steve: But, chalk - as soon as you said about calcium being crushed, does that not relate to bone as well?

Allen: Yes. So there's a stack of things. '...we call cerebral / time mobilised messengers crunched through chaos functions / mediated by diffusable transport' - chaos functions in the sense of, it has a model effect, has a small and large effect, potentially. Chaos also functions on the mundane level of it being chaotic. 'mediated by diffusable transport' - so there's a moment here where I'm recalling some science that I learnt to do with membranes and the way passages between cells occur and how that's a process and not a simple barrier. I'm interested in that diffusion in the same way that I'm interested in tea bags becoming tea in a cup - it's not just osmosis, it's something more interesting going on.

Steve: And while we're on the subject of cells, you talk a lot about collage in parts of your work and quite often I'm aware, when I'm reading 'Gravity', this is a rewritten passage of [Walter] Benjamin, and I can sometimes identify the sources of the collage. I was wondering at what cell level are the collages rewritten, is it on the level of the word or the level of the paragraph or is it nothing to do with line length, is it just the idea?

Allen: This isn't meant to be a cheap answer, but actually it's all of those in different times, in different moments. And quite often I take off on the word because I'm moving into a sort of rhyming situation or a linking situation and in that sense you transform the word, but if it's from Benjamin it's likely to be that I'm much more interested in a concept of some sort, either reintroducing the concept for myself or re-translating it or misunderstanding it for myself... misunderstanding is not the right word.

Alex: Does that tie in at all with the term you use, 'renarration'?

Allen: It's partly to do with this context idea. If Benjamin's talking about something, then I'm using his vocabulary to talk about something, then I'm not in the same situation, so it's a renarration in that sense. Even if all I'm doing is reading his text, I'm renarrating it because I'm not Benjamin. So there's nothing particularly special about that in one sense, it doesn't put me in an any more special sense than it would be for you reading Benjamin. None of us are Benjamin, so when we're reading it we're renarrating it, in the sense that we've got our own narration as part of our own complex.

Steve: That's the term I found hardest, in ‘renarration’, the term ‘narration’. For some reason it seemed quite incongruous in relation to your work. I guess it implied objective stance perhaps, though you can have dubious narrators and it also implies a kind of teleology does it not? And you know, someone like Benjamin -

Allen: Beginning and end -

Steve: Time doesn't really work like that.

Allen: I do recognise some complexities to do with the arrow of time. We're still really not experiencing the future at this moment, in a way that we understand, or actually in a way we'll ever understand, potentially. By definition, therefore, narration is going in that direction rather than the other one, although quite clearly, as we say, we recognise as we pull in through our narration thoughts or memories and texts from previous narrations, so that that moment, it's a complex, it's not a singularity, it's not a single path. Renarration, I can't remember the context for that -

Alex: Not specifically about Benjamin, it's in general taking a collage of sources and then... renarrating, basically.

Allen: Well there's another element there, because the word collage I'm very particular about in the sense that it's used quite loosely in the art fields and sometimes, I think, poorly, because eventually it's no longer a tool worth using, all it means is glueing together. And you think no, actually, there's a history here that's much more interesting than that, and of course you know Valentine cards are glued together in the 19th century and you see them in books of how to make collages and you think no, this isn't [collage], really. What I decided at one moment, not as a person but I think decided from my research, was what Max Ernst did in 1919, 1918. His definition of collage is much clearer. Now, we've moved on since then, but his definition is clearly saying that he brings together two space-times or he brings together two realities, and the surrealists picked that up as being an inner reality and an external, descriptive reality. Putting the two together, they seemed to mismatch one moment, like a lion's head on a woman's body. That's a rather corny version but you see what I mean.

Steve: There's a real paradox which I feel very tricky to get my head around in collage, in the sense that you've brought two disperse things together to form something new, or it's creating something new in the positioning on the page or the concept of the positioning, where at that point they lose their original identities. But at the same

time, they can only become something new in relation to these old, absent identities.

Allen: There's a sense of that, although there's a sense that you lose some of the old identities as well. There's another element here which will help elaborate something, and that is to take a collage that you wouldn't particularly think of as a collage, because it's not disruptive in a way that is more 'traditionally' thought of in the surrealist sense. If you think of the way that what was typically called Cubism or Picasso Cubism, 1914, 1912 or something, the artist is actually involved in multiple spacetime collages in the sense that although he's looking at let's just say two cups, a glass, a microphone and a table, he takes a break, he goes off for coffee and come back, he fills the cup up again, he comes back. So the spacetime has changed, the light's changed, his circumstance has changed, how he feels has changed, in front of what appears to be the same piece. So that, in fact, is a multiple spacetime, a collage of experiences in the process of a day, even though it's not 'surreal'. It's other than surreal, and gets labelled Cubism, which doesn't help anybody of course, except those that don't like it - I mean typically it doesn't help people to understand what is going on. What actually is going on is the artist is having an experience here which is changing but actually there's a pivot for it, you might say, or a group of pivots, which is two cups, a glass, a microphone and a table, and what that pivot does is give him an idea of his manners, his circumstance, his society, his being. Because of this he can use it as a contemplative means, as a means to contemplate, to think about his existence, or your existence, or anybody's existence, engaging with this. And so that's why this idea of space-time and collage are linked for me in a very special way and that's why I think collage is very important, and it gets cheapened, really.

Steve: In terms of its formal elements it's already being recuperated. Advertising is great at doing that, but it's ended up reinvesting it with something, and I guess we've been talking about situations but of course you're a writer and a poet and those kind of things they're not represented on the page, they're re-enacted in some way. But that's for you and it's also for the reader. We've talked about it before, we

have different experiences, they're implicitly different, and although you wouldn't ever put pressure or put too many guidance controls on what my experience could be when I confront the text, it completely changes the meaning - your collage set-up and my experience of that collage set-up.

Allen: You needn't say completely changes but you could say there's a whole range of tonal changes.

Steve: And are they considered in the writing?

Allen: Yes. But they're considered at a banal level as well as at a level I can't always articulate. Let's think of three examples. One example is, typically the work is written in English, so I consider that most people who are reading this are reading English. And I'm not being silly, but there are quite often horizontal lines, quite often a margin, and so on and so forth. So those sorts of things are because you want to make it readily available, or if you disrupt that you don't. And on a second level you could say that when I use a vocabulary that gets deliberately tricky - I'm putting in specialist vocabularies or arcane vocabularies - I'm then putting myself and the reader at risk of not getting it, or not bothering to get it. But that's likely to be the case whether you're reading a straightforward novel by Joseph Conrad or reading more difficult texts, because it's a matter or whether the reader wants to bother to go any further than just looking at it. So what I try to do - I don't always do it - but what I try to do if I'm reading and don't get something, is look it up. But I might look it up in the wrong place, and so on and so forth. The third level is where I've invented the word, so I know you won't be able to look it up, but if you do you've got something completely different from what I had, and I do that sometimes. Because I use something that is almost like a jazz improvisation technique, so that 'glass', becomes 'everlasting' because it sort of rhymes and it's sort of internal, and then all of a sudden you go...

Steve: 'Glacier'.

Allen: Yes -

Steve: But you're too close.

Allen: You come to a word which doesn't exist, almost an invented word that rhymes with or sounds like. And you leave it there. And it's kind of because you're involved in the rhythm of doing it. Now the reader of course is involved in a difficulty at that moment and that difficulty would be different depending on their experience and their capabilities and so on. So just to give you an example, when I was reading Ezra Pound at school, and I wasn't taught how to read it... I read it and I can't get most of it when I first read it, because it's in Chinese or Greek or Latin or something that I'm not typically reading. And I've got choices at that moment to try and find it out or just to get on with it, and I do both really, a bit of both. And I'm relieved when somebody can give me all the bits, but actually then I don't bother with all the bits sometimes, because there's just too much of it, you think 'I'm ending up re-writing this bloody thing'. So there are moments when there's something else which is larger than the word-by-word text in the work that somehow carries as much importance, in some sense.

Appendix (additional material)

Steve: It's a very broad question, but do artistic paradigms ever have a bearing on science. Do they affect science?

Allen: It's difficult to articulate fully. If you take the visual arts they affect science quite a lot because science is not only trying to promote what it's doing to itself and to others, it's also sometimes trying to understand through visual means. It happens a lot, for instance, in astronomy. When they're looking at star systems, quite often they need to articulate it visually. They've got it articulated through radio maps and mathematic maps and there's a moment where they make a visual map which is more humanly coherent, I think. In order to do that they have to engage with, in a loose term, art. Choices about colour are quite important. And how those choices are made can be quite important, though they are not always implicit, or rather they're not intrinsic. For instance, [NASA] sent probes to Jupiter, I forget what the date was, and they went past Jupiter and sent photographs back to Earth. When those photographs came back they didn't come back as hard copy photographs, they came back in the form of digital data, which NASA then had to turn into pictures. When they put them on the news, NASA had to massage the picture because the picture looked like complete fuzz. So they had to massage parts of it to give emphasis. There are two pictures, and you can see one's derived from the other but you can see one is coherent and will get used in Scientific American and on the news, and the other is used by the scientists when they're actually intricately involved in analysis. So that's an artistic activity, you might say.

✂

Steve: [*Reading a question from Mike Weller*] 'Here's a question for Allen then: is there a poetics of place? If so, do poems of place impact on communities of place and futures of locality? Would I be wrong in arguing that social networking sites are personalizing, localizing, as well as globalizing networks in tandem with suburbs of real-time London growing far more cosmopolitan in the last dozen or so years? Proposed 2010 infrastructural East London line extension

from West Croydon to Dalston may bury neo-romantic 20th century pyschogeography under its tracks.' I see it as two questions, one about the internet and virtual spaces rebounding against physical spaces, and the interaction between them. A tricky question. He was saying apparently in the seventies there was quite a lot of debate as to whether local place names and roads should be named in poetry and fiction at all, and apparently this was quite an issue in the Scribblers reading sessions. In Place there is very physical naming of rivers and old rivers and sewer systems.

Allen: But you wouldn't necessarily need to know them all in order to be able to read it.

Steve: No.

Allen: Look at paintings by Bert Irvin. They all have a street name, [but] you don't know that, it doesn't give the word 'street', it just gives you the name. He puts that on after he's made the painting because he doesn't like the word 'untitled'. And it's an arbitrary use of it, so there are two extremes here - one is not arbitrary at all, it's historic and it's either historic or contemporary depending on where you're standing, and the other is actually much more arbitrary in a sense - it is arbitrary, but not entirely abitrary. It raises the question that was raised at another moment about how much do you need to know in order to read books.

✂

Steve: In 'Place' there are diagrams, straight lines, between different textual clumps. You get the impression the localities actually end up having a kind of structural translation on to the page. I guess you don't need to know the reason why one place name is above another one, but I guess there is a reason for that, a choice.

Allen: Yes there is.

Alex: Two questions going on in my head: the first one is, how does that works in terms of online sites where the naming of the site brings it into existence - you could stumble across somewhere just

walking around a place and come across a road that has a name, but in order to interact with the internet there is no chance of randomly stumbling across anything without having to name it first. You have to make a decision to type that name in.

Allen: I'm not sure how to answer that.

Steve: It certainly affecting the poetry scene I think, in terms of how you find texts.

Allen: There are some significant difficulties still current with the internet because it will open up and expand in certain trails and not at all in others. I was just thinking of one of the sites I'm interested in at the moment, which also is on YouTube and on MySpace, it is Frederick [inaudible] site. Fred is a performance artist that used to be with a group called Pants twenty years ago or thirty years ago, and he's currently got a blog running in which he walks around on a daily basis with a mobile phone camera at arm's length, so he's talking to himself or he's talking to the camera, and it's philosophical and it's a long debate. But what he does is to continually walk and do this in the same space, so you recognise the same tree. Every time it looks different, but it's actually the same tree, just with different weather or different lighting, so that he creates a kind of locality for you - even though you don't know where that is, you know he's walking somewhere there's a tree. It could be in Scotland or it could be in Buffalo. So there's a moment then when what's significant about that place isn't that it's in Buffalo or it's in Manchester, it's that it's the same place.

Steve: My mind made an analogy which maybe is not what you intended for the internet. Geographically, when you're on the internet, you're dispersed in terms of where the information of the space you're located in, is in. And that can either be incredibly limiting in the sense that you lock yourself into habitual patterns on the internet in terms of what you type in, what you search. Or it could be a way of, perhaps, fostering some notion of community. You don't know whether I'm in Buffalo or in a server being hosted in Hackney, it could

be a sense where these habitual patterns could bring these dispersed sites into some kind of locality.

✂

Alex: Going back to where we began with spacetimes and multiple spacetimes, where do you see the body or the spacetime created when say I'm sitting at a computer looking at my Facebook profile? Is the focus of my spacetime in that online place or is it my body at the computer, or is it all of it?

Allen: There's a very complex, interesting question developing at the moment. In the first instance I think there's a kind of... once removed from your own picture on the screen, or your own experience of yourself on the screen - you feel as if it's other to some extent, so that's a different relationship from other kinds of relationship. I do think that there's a new articulation coming about where it's possible to talk about you sitting in front of the screen in a haptic experience with what's going on in front of you, which is almost contradictory, it almost feels like it can't be true, but I think it might be, and I think there's a new sensibility coming about as a consequence. I think there's been a moment - I don't know when it was - when this and that, there's been a divorce between the two, and I think now the familiarity with the technology is such that the two have come much closer together in a way which, for me, is quite unexpected. I'm not sure that I experience it but I think others do.

Alex: When you say familiarity do you mean transparency, to look through the screen.

Allen: Sort of. I mean something more physiologically palpable really. That sounds very alien, almost mysterious, but I think there's something more palpable happening.

Steve: It used to be the internet utopian's dream that we could download our body on to the computer and be disembodied, but I don't think that's necessarily what the internet's actually doing. Is that what you're trying to get at, that there's a crossover between them?

Allen: I'm, for instance, much more readily able to write a poem on screen. It's not like a typewriter - I'm actually trying to organise the space on the screen and decide on the text and the font and the particular font in a way actually which I find quite surprising really.

Alex: So you actually find that's changing? Because I get [a different] sense from a lot of people. On Openned.com, for instance, we published an Anthology online and not in print, and the one request we had was - 'let's have a printed version'. I didn't think there would be a wholly positive response to it being a completely online work, but there was a definite wish for something physical.

Allen: There are some problems that have been raised and let me give you two of them. One is that, without naming people, I've actually recommended that particular things are in a particular font and there's a whole range of differences, and when some people translate it they arbitrarily made them all one font. I thought it was so interesting to use all these different fonts and they've just like formatted it in Arial or something, and you think, 'that's failed, that's visually rubbish really'. I was talking to Tony Lopez yesterday about this. He was complaining that people have been republishing his work using the wrong line lengths and the wrong line breaks, because they've been translating it across from sites that have damaged the texts or distorted the text, and he feels really weird about that. You get the work and that's not the work that you first wrote. I'm not very worried about it, but I can see why it's an interesting debate. It's inevitable. I noticed it with Spanner. There's about four or five Spanner sites different people have been putting up for me - they're now all out of date. What can you do? There's nothing you can do, because you're not in control of sites that aren't yours. So I think, well, so be it, that's it, let's not worry about it.

✂

Steve: Well that's a good place to...