Friedman is ‘a near perfect expression of the infrahuman’. Ridiculously simple, Friedman has laid flat a single sheet of cheap A4 copy paper on top of a specially made plain white plinth, the edges of the paper aligning precisely with the edges of the plinth. At first glance, the paper has rendered itself invisible, but closer examination and time for reflection brings forth a whole range of thoughts about sculpture, the potentiality of blankness, purity, silent reading and the role of the plinth as aggregator in art gallery methodology. Reversing this process, Martin Creed has transformed another A4 sheet of paper by means of one quick manual action into a crumpled ball then placed it on a plinth. The infrahuman distinction between a text that is thought to be a poem and one that isn’t surfaces in works such as Kate Briggs’s handsome graphic presentation of obsolete paper sizes with evocative names – Grand Eagle, Elephant, Soleil, Flat Cap and the like. An exhibition version of a work by Jo Hamill originally called Words from the gutter of Joyce’s Ulysses, 2012, consists of tiny printed words transferred from the bibliographic ‘gutter’ of an edition of Ulysses to an equivalent corner of the white gallery. This delicate, fragile but satisfying work might easily be overlooked.

Despite its mercurial and literally limy state, Jerome Bennequin’s installation Erased Proust Writing, 2005-15, is probably the most abidingly memorable artwork in the exhibition. Bennequin spent ten years of his life erasing every single word of Proust’s seven volume masterwork with a sequence of ink erasers at a rate of a page per day. While it echoes a thousand other pointless Sisyphean projects performed by artists before and since, notable only for obdurate adherence to the task in hand, Bennequin’s rigorously methodical ‘scriptoclastic ritual’ amounts to more than just that. The carefully preserved heaps of blue-grey powder that represent the outcome of Bennequin’s ‘automatic un-writing’ and the consequent blank but still graphically fascinating erased books (Bennequin refers to them as ‘tombs’) possess a sustained melancholic gravitas.

A tendency towards self-reflexivity is unrestrained within this exhibition. Pavel Büchler’s found educational flashcard, away from its original context, becomes a one-word performative command. As it says on the label: ‘Büchler invites the reader to read the word “read”’. But self-reflexivity is brought to its absolute apogee with Craig Dworkin’s ‘FACT’ series. In this, Dworkin identifies and lists scientifically the exact constituents of the material support on which the text is printed or woven, be it a photocopy or a rug – a sort of transubstantiation of matter into poetry. So Dworkin’s ‘poem’ on the A5 invitation card to the exhibition lists the chemical names and weights of the neurotransmitters that are being activated in your brain as you read that text to yourself.

Over all of this presides the presence of Morris, ignoring us like an impassive classical gud, in monochrome on a screen suspended high up in a corner; 414 still images show Morris restlessly reading an unidentified book, like the photographic documentation of a realisation of a Fluxus performance score. This is not the first time that Bury Art Museum’s curators have evinced a strong interest in venturing into territories where text and art meet. Building on that foundation, this is their most successful foray in that direction so far: carefully selected, rewarding and genuinely absorbing.

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Jo Spence
Stills Edinburgh 29 July to 16 October

In her ‘personal and political’ autobiography of 1986, Putting Myself in the Picture, Jo Spence recounts the disillusionment with commercial high-street photography that led her in 1974 to abandon the studio she had run successfully for seven years. Spence was troubled by her complicity in the creation of normalising images: ‘after years of watching children through the back of the camera, literally socialised and “constructed” for me by a variety of parents into “ideal children”, I felt very definitely on the side of the child.’ What followed was a progressive deconstruction of photographic representational systems, especially the familial stereotypes promulgated by commercial practice, and of Spence’s own agency within those systems. The multiple resulting projects mean that, even in a relatively small space such as the current exhibition at Stills, the impression when viewing her work is of multiple Jo Spences advancing on several fronts simultaneously.

This impression is inevitably strongest in the ‘Physiotherapy’ initiative Spence developed from 1983-84 onwards in collaboration with Rosy Martin, for which they inhabited figures from their pasts that often doubled as social archetypes, fusing the personal and political. In Physiotherapy: My Mother as a Mechanic, 1986-88, Martin assumes the role of photographer/therapist and captures Spence projecting herself into her