

# Creative Review - The House of Words

<http://www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2009/august1/the-house-of-words>

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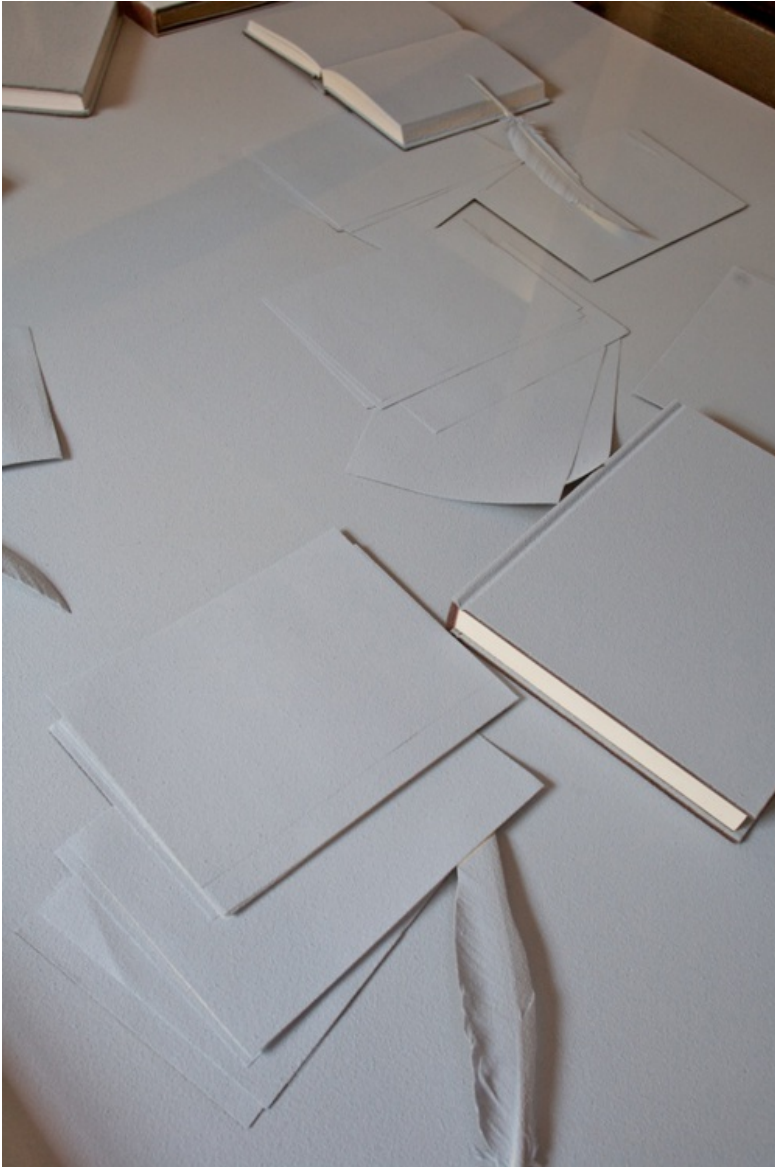
*by Chris Kenny*

In celebration of the 300 anniversary of the birth of Samuel Johnson, [Dr Johnson's House](#) has invited contemporary artists to show work in the house for the first time...

Dr Johnson's House, which is found at 17 Gough Square, is one of 17 houses in London that Samuel Johnson is believed to have lived in during his nearly 50 years in the city, yet it is the only one that remains standing. And it is in its garret room that Johnson worked for nine years to complete his most celebrated work, the Dictionary of the English Language.



by Jane Prophet



by Clare Twomey

Seven artists have been commissioned to create new works for the space, and, according to the curators Tessa Peters and Janice West, were chosen for their ability “to introduce a different kind of experiential dimension within the house”. Exhibitions of this kind are not always easy to pull off, with the artists’ work often overshadowed by the history of the exhibition space, and the need for the artworks to relate specifically to the place they are being shown. Consequentially, references to the Dictionary abound, from Jane Prophet’s delicate paper sculptures created from laser-cut old dictionaries, to Clare Twomey’s atmospheric installation in the garret room, which pays homage to the six amanuenses who supported Johnson in his work on the Dictionary. A number of books, feather quills and sheaves of paper displayed, all of which are covered in a thick layer of blue dust, created from Wedgwood blue Jasper clay.

by Jason Cleverly

Also in the garret is an interactive work by Jason Cleverly, where visitors are encouraged to contribute new words they have created to a dictionary, or describe their own definitions of old words. The results are displayed on a screen within the space and also online at [drjohnsonsgarret.net](http://drjohnsonsgarret.net). Recent entries include Furliner, a term of an endearment for a cat, and Garretiste, for an artist who lives in a garret, appropriately enough.

by Caroline Broadhead

by Robert Dawson

Evidence of Johnson’s life in the house also formed an inspiration for some of the artists. Caroline Broadhead has recreated a chair, which is thought to be the chair Johnson used when visiting The Old Cock Tavern. Broadhead’s versions include a 3D drawing of the chair, as well





as renderings made from memory, which aim to reflect the small changes that occur in language over time. Robert Dawson also draws on Johnson's domestic life by reflecting his enthusiasm for tea and entertaining in the creation of an impressive blue-and-white tiled table that is displayed in the parlour.

*by Eva Vati*

Elsewhere, other artists reflect some of the many characters who lived in or frequented Dr Johnson's House. Eva Vati has created a video installation that features projections of two members of the household – Dr Levett, a quack doctor who practiced among London's poor, and Frank Barber, a freed slave from the Jamaican sugar plantations who lived with Johnson from the age of 10, later becoming his aide and the principal beneficiary of his will. Finally, Chris Kenny's works here reflect the wide circle of friends Johnson entertained as well as his love of witty wordplay. Kenny has displayed a number of small books around the house (one shown top), as well as presenting collages created using found texts.

The House of Words is a subtle and respectful intervention into Dr Johnson's House, and offers an opportunity to view this fascinating historical residence in a new light. It will be on display until August 29, more info on visiting is at [drjohnsonshouse.org](http://drjohnsonshouse.org).

