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Kiss My Edit: Experimental art writing pedagogy

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Introduction

This paper argues that “art writing,” which is a core subject taught at UNSW Art & Design as part of the Master of Curating and Creative Leadership, and also as an MFA at Goldsmiths College at the University of London since 2007, has developed away from singular conventions of art history, art theory and art criticism. It is becoming a hybridized mode of writing that engages directly with the artwork but does not state an overt position of authority or expertise. It resists unqualified judgements and instead focuses on sophisticated critique. It resists hyper-subjectivity and instead focuses on accessible, multiple discourse. It is a modality of writing that matches the integrity of the artwork and it exists within the landscape (or ontology) of the art world as an equal and discrete object. Experimental art writing cannot be exhausted by its relations, histories or origins.

The teaching of “art writing,” in this context, requires the subversion and disruption of standardised pedagogy. The scholarship of teaching, in this case of “art writing,” comprises a celebration and continuation of constant experimental writing exercises. The students’ writing muscles are worked-out and trained. There are raised stakes of online publication and an atmosphere of high energy in the classroom, which is intended to trigger high quality writing outcomes. Collaborative teaching is one way to create that high energy in the classroom, with an ultimate goal of developing experimental art writing modalities at the university level.

Background

The field of “art writing” is moving away from purposeful heuristic art-documents that accompany exhibitions or are published in newspapers, towards a more immanent and speculative mode of art communication, that flourishes as an online formulation. This shift in the methodology, voice, structure and language of “art writing” requires a concomitant shift in the teaching of art writing. Creative writing models, under which “art writing” necessarily falls, are gravitating towards questions of research, practice, innovation and a symbiosis between the three. If the art writing form is shifting, it is timely to face the challenge, move with the flux and teach students accordingly.

This paper exhorts the retention of technically proficient textual properties in writing, and conventional skills of literary form, critical analysis and engagement with artworks, alongside a wider understanding of critical theories. Added to these conventions are the concepts of uncertainty, variable outcomes, experimentation and speculation. There are, however, elements of conventional art writing that might be happily left at the gate, such as a detached point of view, an over-authoritative voice and unsupported judgements.

The art writing field

This paper marks a reclamation of writing that contributes to a field of knowledge, rather than functioning as a mere witness. Art writing need not be meaningful nor must it arduously explain the meaning of an artwork. Instead, it is an independent entity, where the entelechy of the artwork is met by an equivalent energy in the writing. It is a piece of work that respects and responds to the integrity of the artwork: a vivid presentation of ideas and form.

From farther shores, recently-retired Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, Adrian Rifkin gave a lecture chaired by his fellow Professor of Art Writing, Michael Newman, and spoke about taking Jacques Ranciere's concept of an "aesthetic regime of art" to explore possibilities of an aesthetic regime of art writing on art, and the consequences of art writing for other practices (Rifkin 2012). In a 2012 article on their art writing MFA at Goldsmiths, Adrian Rifkin, Michael Newman, Maria Fusco and Yve Lomax collectively wrote, 'Art Writing does not take modalities of writing as given, rather it tends to, and experiments with, non-division between practice and theory, criticism and creativity' and that it was 'an anthology of examples.' (Fusco et al, 2011). Goldsmiths academic Jonathon Koestle-Cate wrote about the importance of the singularity of the work of art in order to privilege the agency, but without expanding on implications of the multiplicity of units within a written text (2012):

First, the research discipline of "art writing" needs to be contextualised. In a recent article in *Art Monthly* UK, poet John Millar said, 'The result is that the influence of experimental and avant-garde fiction waxes in the world of art while it wanes in the world of publishing...Equally 'art writing' is now becoming institutionalised through academic acceptance.' He also quipped that, 'Perhaps this tendency is not yet categorised. It remains a mutant form and perhaps that is to be celebrated, but it is hard to see why some of this splurge of words has to have the word 'art' tagged onto it at all. Why is it 'art' writing and not just writing?' (Millar 2011) At the risk of being obvious, art writing is different from general writing because it is a specific object-oriented activity...focusing on art.

Ekphrastic ardour, passionate exultation and assiduous attention are welcome amongst new forms of art writing, but might equally allow cyberpunk language, cryptography and a seemingly arbitrary narrative presence (Negarestani 2011). This complements a small kernel of an idea, whereby the

art writing object is just one thing among other things, free from hierarchies or power play. Art writing must escape its apical position of expertise, its feigning of self-importance and its subjectivity. It is not the last word, shouted out by a small number of supposed experts.

Speculative art writing is the creation of multiplied and variable voices, perhaps collaborations where the author's genius voice is replaced by a cohort or confraternity of voices, both authored and narrated. I am thinking, in this instance, of Punctum Books (*ThinLong Folk2go*, 2014) publication written by The Confraternity of Neoflagellants. This book is an art/theory-fiction book which is formulated with distinct voices and unusual modalities, with alternative narrations within the footnoted entries. Who are the Confraternity? Norman Hogg (Concordia Uni Quebec) and Neil Mulholland (University of Edinburgh). Prof Mulholland is an artist and art theorist who dabbles in fictional art writing. Hogg is a curator and writer too. They began their art-curatorial group in 2009, now they have this para-academic theory-fiction novel, which is ghost written by neo-medievalist narrators. Theory is emergent in this text, narrators are unreliable, art is elusive and the art writing voices are experimental, if not psychotic.

Experimental speculative art writing makes the impossible possible and allows space for risk, mistakes, contingency and experimentation. Heidegger explains, in his tool analysis theory (*Being and Time*, 1962) that equipment hides or withdraws from us, until it is broken, at which time we become conscious of its conspicuous wreckage. I see the broken wheel of "art writing," its bent metal and greasy oil are a sprawling mess across the road. The chaos that is art writing, in magazines, newspapers and upon the university page, are now present-at-hand and therefore demand our attention and our efforts of restoration.

What is experimental art writing?

As I roam across the cliff-tops, waiting for the white owl to soar up from the precipice, I wish for writer's nook, where I can nestle against the cushions and write of the movement of the nocturnal wings. The desire to move beyond the everyday drives us to dream, to imagine, to concoct and to fabulate. This is the heart of writing and it can infiltrate all styles and structures of written work, even the thesis, even the art writing or art critical piece. Gail Jones says, 'Writing or its theorising, must somewhere include the lost woman abolished to shadows, the woman who...carries all her power 'in the promise of the face''(Jones, 1998, 143).

Rather than ask what experimental writing is, might it be better to ask what it can do? Experimental writing is the two-headed monster, the lively creature that lurches and swipes but also fascinates us with its horrifying corpuscular reality, its scaly skin and wielded hammer. It is the use of experiment to make new writing. It is also the effect of disruption, confounding or ecstatic excitement in the reader. Can the reader not be excited by conventional writing? Of course.

However, experimental writing refers to the force being projected both ways, in both directions. The energy is evident in the creation, and it is evident in the experience too.

Experimental art writing must match or act as a counterpart to the work it addresses. If I write about a magical realm of witchcraft and sorcery, for instance in the work of artists Monika Behrens and Rochelle Haley, then I sit and look at their watercolour garden works of hallucinatory herbs and affective plants, where dildos rise up in incandescent colours, fragile yet virile. I hear of the artists' research into witchcraft, witch-hunts and the fifteenth century male fear of witch's powers, their ability to emasculate and self-pleasure (Kramer 1487). This independent agency and repurposing of ancient texts and remedies is a feminist approach, an attitude of socio-political defiance.

How might I have responded to Halen and Behrens' work, with respectful probity? I read Isabelle Stengers' *Capitalist Sorcery* (2011), Michael Taussig's *Magic of the State* (1997) and I pored over Antonin Artaud's strange spells that he sent to various people through the mail. I decided upon a form that suited the work: a series of spells. These were incantatory, meant to be spoken out loud. A prayer for understanding, a wish for others to experience as I did. This was an experimentation with structure, but the speculation might easily refer to narrative thread, multiple voices, fictional and nonfictional dove-tailing or even physical form. Elements of play-writing, poetry, dramaturgy, creative essay, soliloquy, manifesto, science fiction incursion: all of these investigations are encouraged in experimental art writing.

The academic context

A group of spokespeople have assembled. A funeral? A political protest? No, it's a newborn child. Among the universities, there are mushrooming projects, labs and centres. These new births are the Creative Industries projects. These entities are not just research, not just theory, not just practice. They are an absorption of all three. Within these scholarly crucibles, constructive arguments are germinating, regarding practice-led research or research-led practice. Writing is seen as new research and original contributions to knowledge. Processes of writing, practices of art writing, are being written against and for, with academic force and accompanying reflexivity.

Who are these sorcerers, rising up to cast an incantation of hope? Professor Jen Webb of Creative Practice at University of Canberra and Professor Donna Lee Brien of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University are drawing our attention to the concept of creative writing as new research. They define the Platonic origins of, and work against, the notion of creativity as insanity, as opposed to theoretical analysis as reason: 'That "sweet friend," mimesis, could not of course prove her title; the divine madness of poetry's origin means that creative practice cannot finally be admitted to the ideal city...reason must, finally, in this argument, take the premier place' (Webb and

Brien, 2011,190). Associate Professor Hart Cohen, Director of Higher Degree Research at University of Western Sydney (2010) joins the battle to allow heuristic methods, where to essay, to test and to experiment is the only way to discover new knowledge. He says, 'the idea of a heuristic approach to the production of knowledge includes an anticipated endpoint, though unknown pathway of how to arrive there' (Cohen, 2010, 4).

Here we have overwhelming academic, scholarly support for embracing the uncertainty, the experimental and the speculative. This is inquiry rather than didactic expertise: inquiry as the driving force of new discoveries. If we cleave apart the creative and exegetical components of research, we see the horrible taut sinews, the ugly striations of fat and the exuding blood. Better to allow the theoretical and creative elements, in all writing, to interweave and connect.

Finally, how does this shift in perceptions and scholarly outcomes of creative art writing affect students? Associate Professor of Writing at Swinburne University, Dominique Hecq, advocates a model of creative writing and theory without credentials and urges us 'to explore the nature of writing, to help students articulate their bond to writing by experimenting with narratives, structure, character, point of view and voice' (Hecq, 2013, 186). Ultimately, the challenge is to stimulate the classroom environment so that students can engage with new writing, emulate the structures, tones and narrative investigations of immanent art writing experiments and adapt them to their own individual art/academic interests.

Case study

From July 2012 to June 2013, I co-taught "art writing" to UNSW Art & Design students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. With Sebastian Goldspink, I advocated two tiers of syllabus information: consolidation and experimentation. Our motivating aim was to teach students (and ourselves) how best to respectfully write about art, in a manner that matched the integrity of the given artwork. My role was to teach art writing basics such as the history of art criticism and the basics of art aesthetics, as those developments related to equivalent developments in art history. There were also lectures on critical curatorial concepts, artist run spaces and the art thematics emerging from those new disciplinary spaces, along with deep learning of writing techniques and literary elements, and finally editing and re-writing skills. My colleague, Sebastian Goldspink, then led them through the minefield of peer-editing their written work and helped them collaborate to create an on-line journal of their work, in ArtWrite.

Creative art writing needs to engage with the idea of uncertainty, an idea posed by poet John Keats as negative capability (Webb and Brien, 2011, 193) and principles of impossibility. As collaborating teachers, we made the effort to create an unexpected and unpredictable teaching environment. This was intended as a means of disrupting passive habits and to allow space for

force, energy and magnetism to affect writing. At a recent University of Western Sydney post graduate writing retreat, Professor Gail Jones, novelist, scholar and academic in the Writing and Society Research Group at UWS, advocated writing as a form of research which demands rigour and play. She championed a love of language, attention to the world and agony over every sentence.

Can you see the poor students spinning in a dervish dance? Is this delight, horror or ecstasy? To encourage experimentation and risk-taking is to create fear, as well as to allow freedom. However, the overriding motivation is to demand that students and artists approach their writing task as a creative act, whether it be a review, an exegesis or an independent piece of writing. This is not an adjunct, a secondary sub-section, an after-thought. All writing, including art essays, theses and critical tasks are creative acts, which demand research, effort, editing and invention. The writing component requires as much creative/critical attention as the practical component. The possible only emerges from the impossible: art writing is a creative process and a practice of reflexivity. Only in this way can new art writing forms become emergent. This allows room to develop creative ways of writing that directly respond to or reflect the specific artwork being written about.

Punk methodology

As lecturers in art writing, did we undertake multiple piercings, dress in rock clothes and yell abuse at the students as they entered the room? Did we smash up the campus and paint guerilla graffiti slogans on the walls? Did we subvert the system? Just quietly, no we did not. Instead, we subverted the students' expectations. We created unpredictable spaces as part of our teaching, in order to change their attitudes to writing tasks. We borrowed the term 'punk' and adapted it to denote unpredictability, the unexpected, subversion, extremity and anti-authoritarianism. Creative relationships foster creative art writing. One method of creating the forces of imagination is to adapt the framework in the lecture room.

How did we create turbulence and disruption? We separated students, we demanded performative warm-up exercises, we took them outside to work on a collaborative ephemeral installation, we allocated teams for their production of their final art writing blog journal, which was peer-reviewed, peer-edited, peer-marketed, peer-designed. A passive environment was removed. Stakes were raised. Comfort zones were disrupted, by changing the format of the delivery of the knowledge. Taking them out of the classroom to speak independently with them, during class time, created tension and anticipation. Playing regular writing exercise games and performative writing games also created suspense.

The punk methodology was no more than a subversion of student expectation. In an era where students are increasingly clients who have criteria of demands and assumptions regarding their

learning, these tactics are intended to disrupt the sluggishness in the classroom. It was intended to excite them into attending and participating on campus, as well as through online technologies from their homes. This was intended as a learning value-add. There was no anarchy in real terms and, in fact, this process was structured and tightly controlled. Students were allocated greater responsibility and expectations were raised.

Collaboration

Did you see a spectral trail floating through the room? A scent of two teachers, not one? An additional method of achieving a punk lecturing modality was through the dynamics of collaborative teaching. This entailed meeting the students side by side only two or three times over a twelve week course, and otherwise dividing the course into 1. writing skills/experimentation and 2. production of an online blog journal of their work. However, due to the use of the (now extinct) online teaching tool, Omnium, the presence of both teachers was palpable throughout.

The collaboration was extended across the entire course through the installation of a good cop/bad cop routine. There was an imaginative interaction between we two lecturers. We discovered roles to play, characters to perform. We shared the imaginative content, new skills were revealed to each other in a collegiate way, our demands were met and extended by the students. Perhaps the most evident collaborative element was the tension and frisson between us, on the few occasions we appeared to the students together. By adopting roles, our lecturing absorbed performative characteristics. We discovered that creative collaboration between us immediately fostered a higher level of creative work in the students, as a result of creating conditions of high expectation and shared culpability.

Was the grass too green? Had the sun set in a peachy display of perfection? No. There were a few negative outcomes from our collaborative endeavour. Not knowing what the other lecturer was doing was high risk. The mixed ability of the students meant that both the conventional and experimental arm of our course had to be adapted accordingly and maintained as consistently adaptable. With such an undetermined ambience, we had to overcome conventional student assumptions and adverse resistance to our higher expectations. We did expect more for the students. We wanted them to improve and for their written work to function as evidence of that improvement. We wanted them to discover, through mild discomfort and uncertainty, a deeper level of learning and a higher level of critical ability. The force of our higher expectations was felt and anecdotally commented on by the students.

There has been research conducted on the efficacy of collaborative teaching. Faculty staff at University of Delaware undertook recent research (Burriss 2013) on co-teaching and discovered that it benefited both students, in terms of quality time, more exposure to ideas, higher growth and

increased outcomes, but also that the lecturers' experience was more positive. A researcher at Chung-Yuan University in Taiwan researched team-teaching (Jang, 2006) and reported higher academic scores, easier class management and higher reported levels of student enjoyment. Higher expectations from co-teaching was met with higher results of participation and overall achievement.

The experimental outcomes

Any advances in art writing that contribute new research and original contribution to knowledge, require both practical skill and experimentation. In an environment of immaterial virtual spaces and new material responses in art, any form of art writing must shift and become emergent too. If vitality and force are now the driving aesthetic elements of art, then this must be incorporated into the writing too.

Creative writing is a tool for expression; it is not an adjunct task. Theoretical argument within the body of the art writing is not to be discarded. In fact all structural writing skills can be maintained and developed. This is experimentation as a discipline, not a diversion. Problems with experimentation of art writing form can be included in the discourse and the self-reflexive process. This might mean that the wish-list for art writing could be creative, reflexive and responsive approaches, coupled with the critical, the argued, the theoretical. A speculative and emergent art writing might incorporate fictive or fabulist elements. It might allow a strange tangent into science fiction. It might be type-set as an image. The risk with experimentation is that writers lose their grip on basic skills. However if we can develop the pedagogy of the two, simultaneously, we might be able to read some exciting new student "art writing" in years to come.

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