

Engaged encounters

Fiction as art writing – a practical investigation of the borders of art criticism

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Abstract

The thesis project *Engaged Encounters* has been a multi-part investigation into art criticism. Its main components are one of practice and one of theory: a fiction text – *Transatlantic Journeys* – which I am publishing as a small book in an edition of 200 and exhibiting at Konstfack’s Spring Show, and the present reflective essay.

In the essay, I identify the central elements of the current «crisis of art criticism» and ask what impact experimental writing modes can have on the practice and its alleged crisis. I give an account of fields of contemporary writing where the text is *acting with or through*, rather than *being about*, art. I find that a common view is that the crisis, real as it might be, can serve as a possibility to re-envision art writing.

The fiction text, a two-part short story, is a critical response to my one month internship at Henie Onstad Art Centre. A character is extracted from a chosen artwork of the then current exhibition and “cast” in the narrative opposite the history of the art institution.

In the fiction as well as in the essay, I treat the «engaged encounter», the face to face meeting with the other. This is the aspect of art criticism I at present find to be most pertinent: criticism as an encounter between work and viewer, a reciprocal addressing analogous to the risky business of face-to-face human relations. The Norwegian word *henvendelsen* (approximately *approach, address*) is the key term used to denote this relation. The insights of the linguist Benveniste and the philosopher Levinas are important references.

Appendix 2:

An overview of the activities constituting the Master Thesis *Engaged Encounters* May 2008 – May 2009

	Researching and writing the fiction text <i>Transatlantic Journeys</i>
	Researching and writing the reflective essay <i>Engaged Encounters</i>
<i>October '08</i>	Organizing and carrying out a one month internship with curator Tone Hansen, Henie Onstad Art Centre, Norway
<i>January – May '09</i>	Producing a publication holding the fiction text. Commissioning and collaborating with graphic design team.
<i>November '08; March '09</i>	Organizing and attending writing workshops with members of my reference group (an editor, critical theorist and artist, respectively), Oslo
<i>May '09</i>	Co-producing the graduate exhibition, Konstfack's Spring Show
<i>September '08</i>	Study trip to London to meet Goldsmith's <i>Art Writing</i> director, the writer and editor Maria Fusco
<i>February '09</i>	Study trip to Berlin for two weeks of writing
<i>May '09</i>	Submitting excerpt from <i>Transatlantic Journeys</i> to the art magazine <i>Cold War</i> (commissioned by editor Marco Bruzzone)
<i>October '08</i>	Publishing an essay on art criticism as a foreword to critic Erlend Hammer's <i>Samlede Kunstkritikker</i> , an anthology of reviews (Ctrl+Z Publishing 2008)
<i>May '09</i>	Submitting excerpt from <i>Transatlantic Journeys</i> to the journal <i>The Happy Hypocrite</i>
<i>May 23th & 24th '09</i>	Two readings from <i>Transatlantic Journeys</i> during the Spring Show

Engaged encounters

Fiction as art writing – a practical investigation of the borders of art criticism

«There is much writing about art these days
(...) but one thing that seems tantalizingly
absent from much of this tremendous
outpouring of scripture is speculation – an
imaginative writing based on the capricious art
of conjecture. (...) Writing for writing's sake»

–*Ann Demeester, Will Holder and
Dieter Roelstraete*ⁱ

«The story [of art criticism] is up for grabs»

–*George Baker*ⁱⁱ

«So maybe it's okay now to say goodbye to the
critic (...) It could be that the real fun begins
here»

–*John Kelsey*ⁱⁱⁱ

Introduction

What might emerge when words are *acting with* or *through*, rather than *being about*, art? In the MA thesis project *Engaged Encounters* I have been interrogating the practice of art criticism as an engaged encounter between work and viewer, a reciprocal addressing analogous to the risky business of face-to-face human relations, drawing on linguistic as well as ethical-philosophical theories. Essential elements of the multi-part investigation have been a curatorial internship; the fiction text *Transatlantic Journeys* and the present reflective essay (see Appendix 2 for a full overview).

Regarding the present alleged crisis in art criticism - the once influential critic losing out to the curator - as emancipatory rather than a threat, my critical response after a one month visit at a Norwegian art centre was embodied in the fiction text: a character, a man from Oklahoma, was extracted from a chosen artwork of the then current exhibition and «cast» in the narrative opposite the history of the art institution, inaugurated in the charged year of 1968 by a Hollywood star past her fame. *Transatlantic Journeys* was published in the form of a book (Appendix 1) to be presented as my contribution to Konstfack's graduate show, the Spring Exhibition, in May of 2009.

The present essay is a reflection upon (in its part 1) the state of art criticism, or art writing, of today, a field constituting the backdrop of the whole project, and (in part 2) my own process of writing the fiction and on how (or whether) the result succeeds both in contributing to the present discussion and in embodying my ideas about the engaged encounter, the meeting with the other, the *henvendelsen* (the approach, the address).

Throughout the process, the Norwegian word *henvendelsen* has been a recurring theme. I prefer this expression of my mother tongue to the English «the address» or «the approach» as it more directly denotes the gesture of (literally translated:) *turning to* another. For a while, I used the English quasi-word «the to-turn-ing» as a figure, but ended up feeling that both «the engaged encounter» and the pair «approach+address» cover what I want to be getting at.

So what about this figure? The *henvendelsen* seems to be closer to a literary than to an art theoretical concept, perhaps related to the literary figure of the apostrophe – an exclamatory phrase in a speech or poem addressed to a person or thing. With a particular interest, one turns to somebody. My research treats how you, when «to-turn-ing» something or somebody, venture to take part in a community (smaller or larger; between two people behind closed doors or in a crowd; face to face or mediated; private or public) and in how this choice involves both risks and responsibilities for the individual, who gives up her security and exposes her self. You might be a person face to face with another person, a reader face to face with a text – or a viewer/critic face to face with the work of an artist in an exhibition. In the case of the latter, you are later meeting a second, more wide-ranging manifestation of the engaged encounter when you expose your face to the reading public in the form of a publication of your review.

The fiction part of my thesis project is a purely literary reflection on moments of *henvendelsen* – of which art criticism can be a staging or exemplary instance, even if the moments certainly don't appear in any guise of art criticism in the book's two narratives, which avoid the topic and go by the rules of their own internal universe, with starting points explicitly in elements found during the stay at the art centre.

Like when writing a more traditional review, their author has visited an art show and is rendering her experiences of it, she has chosen what she found to be the more eloquent parts and treated them in writing. Still, a short story can hardly be said to satisfy the common expectations of a piece of art criticism. What, then, when it is positioned as one, i.e. written by a graduate student in Critical Writing as part of a study into art criticism? One answer is to be found in the effect of contrasting. When approaching the works of art through an unusual mode of writing, the question I necessarily run into is what the *usual* mode is. Thus the project becomes a research into the workings of art criticism as such. What happens with the artwork over the course of being treated in the writer's mind and words? How is it even possible to treat – not to mention, translate – a non-linguistic work in/to words? How autonomous is the piece of art writing, what is the hierarchy between that and the artwork? These and other, related questions have played central parts in my general research for some time now.

The project is also, hopefully, making a case for an understanding of a playful, tentative, and less orthodox practicing of art writing, and opening up for other, broader discussions than the ones heard in endless roundtable discussions on the crisis of the practice, as it is an account for criticism as a site for something that bears an all-embracing relevance – the engaged encounters.

Part one

The crisis in art criticism

Criticism is terribly wanting in professionalism nowadays... The real problem, perhaps, is that critics are no longer writing for a public (...), only for each other.

Art criticism is in worldwide crisis. (...) practiced more widely than ever before, and almost completely ignored. (...) Critics seldom know who reads beyond the gallerist who commissioned and the artist about whom they write: and often that reading public is ghostly precisely because it does not exist.

Introduction

It might not seem that art criticism's challenges have changed much since the 1970 congress of AICA, the International Association of Art Critics, from whose participants I have included the quotes to the left.^{iv} (One of the participants resumes: «Critics, I suppose, have always felt they were in crisis»). The topic of Lawrence Alloway's keynote paper: «The Crisis in Criticism Today» – the same five words, give or take, still in 2009 frequently opening the invitation card whenever a roundtable or seminar is held on the subject of art criticism. The comparative quote^v to the right is taken from the anthology *The State of Art Criticism*, released in 2008.

Obvious similarities aside, the situation is of course not unaltered. Over the last decade, we have seen an upsurge in discourse on the topic, most often concluding that the critic has, unlike what the situation was still like for the 1970 debaters, lost their power over to other, market-driven roles in the field, notably the curator and, increasingly catching up, the art collector. My point of departure has been the contemporary debate about this crisis in art criticism, as discussed in recent book publications like, to state some of my main references, *Gest: Laboratory of Synthesis #1* edited by Robert Garnett and Andrew Hunt, *Canvases and Careers Today – Criticism and its Markets* edited by Isabelle Graw and Daniel Birnbaum and *The State of Art Criticism* edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman. Besides using them as source material on the issue's various stances and approaches, I include these books

as symptoms of the increased attention recently devoted to the question. Briefly introduced:

Gest: Laboratory of Synthesis #1 is but one expression of a multi-part project by UK-based writers and curators Robert Garnett and Andrew Hunt aimed at generating new approaches to art writing. The starting point was what the editors understood as a gap between the writings of the market-driven, mainstream art magazines and those of the academic art theoretical journals, one frequently seen as a symptom of the alleged crisis in art criticism. Is there a need for a mid-ground between, e.g., *Frieze* and *Radical Philosophy*?

Graw and Birnbaum's publication, the result of a conference held at Staedelschule in Frankfurt in 2007, is structured around a 1965 study (also named *Canvases and Careers*^{vi}) which it uses as a «contrast-medium» to better understand current changes. A «dealer-critic system» (the term stems from the '65 study) has been replaced by a «dealer-collector system». It is the relations between criticism, art and the market within this system that the book seeks to examine.

Elkins and Newman's book is constructive in that it gives a broad range of voices through its transcription of two recent elaborate roundtable discussions between a number of critics and writers, plus those seminars' keynote texts and some subsequent responses.

A seminal roundtable discussion

Elkins is only one to point back (repeatedly throughout the text compilation, even voiced by other participants) to a roundtable discussion published in the journal *October* in 2002 under the heading *The Present Conditions of Art Criticism*, one now seminal to the discussion. Influential senior art theorists Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh and others affiliated with the journal deplored the lack of a steadfast – «serious, complex, and rigorous»^{vii} – theoretical grounding in much of today's criticism, its failure to subscribe to a certain methodology, ensuring a verifiability, and write about contemporary art within that framework. This tradition goes back to the pages of *Artforum* ca 1962-74^{viii}, when many of the same writers made up its profiled staff of critics. Their opponent: «the poet-critic who waxes on about beauty as the moral subject of art and architecture (...) in a pop libertarian way perfect for market rule»^{ix}

The participants in *The State...* write the *October* attitudes off as judgmental, dogmatic, old fashioned and – in Boris Groys' words – «not sexy»^x. *October's* postmodern criticism, which saw art as one signifying practice among many, and whose theories dealt with the sign, with representation, and with visual culture and ideology, according to Robert Garnett in *Gest* reached a point where theory came before the artwork and artistic practice was necessarily read according to the specific, politically correct pretext if the art was to be counted with as an intelligent contribution and the artist as a relevant agent. Today, *October* critics should realize that their methods are no longer adequate: the reason why other modes have taken hold is that their «discourse-specific paradigm» is no longer efficient, no longer valid for the art actually produced. Thus there is no reason for melancholy and disapproval.

Ossification of theory

Robert Garnett^{xi} describes the situation in today's art criticism as defined in different, but related ways: such as criticism no longer being suitable as a validatory voice in the realm of contemporary art, that role is normally seen as taken on by the curator; furthermore, mainstream critical writing is in low currency, as proved by the fact that it is in more academic circles of art theory seen as unworthy of citing or discussing, as it is market-driven, selling out, and in the pocket of the trade – commercial galleries or other for-profit institutions.

One key factor behind the problem might be the way in which, from postmodernism on, the cluster of philosophical ideas we know as critical theory has gained hegemony, both broadly speaking in humanities and specifically in art theory and in writings on art. Gavin Butt, editor of the anthology *After Criticism New responses to art and performance*, in his introduction points to more or less the same result as Garnett: a transmutation of certain philosophical resources into «Art Theory» with the theoretical turn in visual culture in the 70s and 80s, and then an ossification of theory that mutes its critical potential. So the crisis lies not (only) in art criticism, but in criticality as such, in critical theory. The field has not managed to renew its critical resources so as to be apt to speak of the art that is actually produced today. Ideas that were in the eighties conceived to function critically, to question the doxa, have themselves become today's doxa and thus impotent when meeting the task. As that era's critical upheaval was against traditional forms of criticism, today we question the validity of the «critical» heritage the upheaval left.

The last thing we need

More and more often we see contemporary critics resign from the post of elevated authority looking in and down on the production of art to give their judgment from a safe distance. Instead, they claim a place within. But discussions about the loss of critical distance have been up before, precisely when the distanced critic was deemed dead in the postmodernist 80s: feminists and Marxists pointed to the ideological bias in a «universal» critique and spoke of gender and class perspectives, poststructuralism regarded it impossible to make valid value judgments and practiced deconstructive criticism, wanting to read the text (or see the work) from within, far from searching for any inherent, not to mention intended, meaning. Art historian and critic Ina Blom looks back^{xii}:

«Today's sterile strategy debates, weighed down by a sense of duty and responsibility and worried about the «role» of criticism in the bigger picture of culture, makes me miss the postmodern fantasies of the early 1980s (...)».

She refers to a writing (Gregory Ulmer is her example) that dissolves the image of the critic who from a critical distance materialized the legitimate authority of judgment, in Ulmer's case one that understood criticism as «interventional, mimetic, allegorical and parasitical (the latter in a positive sense).» The absent opponent would obviously be the modernist critic, one keeping his distance and securing his authority from there.

Today's climate of worry and low self-esteem on behalf of the professional role of the critic is inhabited by a saddening percentage of the speakers in the overall debate on the state of art criticism. Blom:

«...the super rich collectors (...) are today the ones to set the agenda. They have the power to define which was once held by the critics (...)», and given this situation, she admits, the repeated debates about the fair place of art criticism may be understandable. «Still, they are the last thing we need.» Blom reasons, like Elkins, that there is no true professional community of critics, broadly speaking – all that is shared by the journalists, academics, artists, cultural activists and curators who pen it, is «certain organized, systematized fascination for certain kinds of objects and

situations». Whatever will or passion the critical practice offers has little to do with what the debates are voicing.

After seeing numerous discussion roundtables, seminars and debate books under the same kind of headlines, I get a feeling we are treading water and can't help but subscribe to Blom's attitude and wonder whether there is any real progress to be found in continuing the discussion along these same lines. And what does it do to the self-image of critics, their understanding of their own role? Critic Jennifer Allen sighs: «But getting an invitation to one of these panels is like being asked if you're dead.»^{xiii}

Crisis as emancipation

One problem in criticism is the paradox that though the amount of published art writing has skyrocketed, its importance seems questionable. How much is actually even read, and when it is, what consequences, if any, does it have? The James Elkins quote I opened with leaves little doubt of his view – others take far more optimistic stances: a quite common view that came to visibility as my research proceeded was that of seeing the crisis not as a standstill or a problem to be solved, but rather as an opening up of possibilities for the practice.

In the introduction to *Canvases (...)*, Isabelle Graw makes it clear that in her and Birnbaum's initiative there is an ambition to leave the usual pessimism and deploring of criticism's obsolescence behind and rather bring forth a more differentiated analysis taking in the differences between different formats and types of criticism. Graw discloses a strange fact:

«While the American participants mostly declared criticism as obsolete while hoping for turning its weakness into a strength, most European participants departed from the opposite diagnosis: that criticism never has been as strong as it is today, since it is now part of a knowledge-based economy.»

The latter point is significant: though critics have little or no influence on the commercial market, influence has increased in other arenas. Graw mentions conferences like the one behind the book; the Biennales, Manifestas and Academies:

«If it is true that we live an economy based on knowledge (...), then critics produce a commodity that is very much in demand». As an example, she uses the artist John Currin, who became successful without critical acclaim. Even for him, there comes a time when he is in need of art historical legitimation. And so he has Norman Bryson write in his Gagosian catalogue. Graw points to «the power of knowledge» to explain this need, while I must admit I subscribe to Boris Groys' insights as he opens an essay on art criticism in his recent book *Art Power* by claiming that today, an artwork without a accompanying text is embarrassing, like a naked person in a public place. Nobody reads the critic's text, he says, but it needs to be there anyway to dress up the art. However, Groys doesn't deplore this, but sees it as what I would rewrite as a huge playground with no surveillance cameras opened up for the writer.

Also on a positive note, the initiators behind *Gest* declare that they will not strive to close the gap they have identified between the various kinds of art criticism or offer (re)solutions to the crisis. Rather, they see the schism as something of a positive potential, a chance to re-envision art writing.

What qualifies as art criticism?

James Elkins claims that art criticism is the single least well theorized subject in the humanities. «There is virtually no agreement even on the basic issues»^{xiv} among the participants of his (highly qualified) roundtable, he observes. And discussions about the criteria of art criticism do often capitulate and conclude that it has no one set of principles. The strange lack of adequate books of *the* history of art criticism bears witness to an archipelago of histories, modes and standards in place of a consensus. But one might find this heterogeneity a strength. Art criticism, after appearing as a literary genre in the mid-1700s, would in the 1800s disseminate into a variety of art-related discourses then known as *Kunstliteratur*^{xv}, a mirroring of today's variety in forms and practices. The *Kunstliteratur* would include reviews, but also museum guides, travel accounts, monographs, even fiction, poetry, manifestos and much more. Elkins^{xvi} discerns seven different kinds of contemporary writing classifiable as art criticism:

- the catalogue essay
- the academic treatise

- cultural criticism
- the conservative harangue
- the philosopher's essay
- descriptive art criticism
- poetic art criticism

Each and every one of these allow for a debate: how can the catalogue essay, ordered and paid by the gallery, so to speak a marketing text, count as anything critical? And can a piece of poetic writing, which offers no hint of judgment if it even mentions the artwork in between the poetry, serve?

Poetry

Elkins' «poetic art criticism» denotes, simply, writers with a desire to write something that has a literary value in and for itself. Many critics, Elkins reminds us, have had split practices between poetry and criticism, for example a contemporary writer like Peter Schjeldahl of the *New Yorker* or historical ones like Oscar Wilde and Charles Baudelaire. The writer Dave Hickey does not publish poetry as such, but could still be mentioned as an important contemporary example of someone whose approach to writing pulls him in the direction of literary author rather than scientific theorist. When I pick him as an example among the numerous representatives of this ambition, it is because the prolific and unapologetic (symptomatically Las Vegas-based!) Hickey tends to become the scapegoat in many a politically correct roundtable discussion, as that of *October*.

The term belle-lettrisme is used pejoratively to devalue the writings of critics who write poetically, subjectively, impressionistically or ekphrastically. Such modes are frequently dismissed as wishy-washy, romantic, devoid of criticality and useless by its more academic opponents. In *Canvases (...)*,^{xvii} artist and writer Melanie Gilligan admits to write art criticism in «weird» combinations of essay and fiction, but shuns the name «art writer», as she associates it with belle-lettrisme and finds that it re-brands criticism as reflections on art that do not stake a position on what is worthwhile. She carries out an example of the anti-belle-lettrisme condemnation: relentlessly, she puts the label on a recent review in *Artforum* in which the reviewer

was, first of all, of course a priori affirmative of the work; he was writing in personal anecdotes; and he was using the same approach as the artist he wrote about in over-referencing and -reusing pop cultural and art historical forms «to create the right look and feel» but without really signifying much.

Judgment

The central worry for many contributors to the conversation, like Gilligan, is that critics no longer dare or want to take a stand and offer a judgment of the work on view. We rarely do see negative assessments of art on print. The writer might have been more tempted by the task of writing an «interesting» text, locating some distinctive angle to write from, thereby saying something or other worth reading about the work's subject matter or formal solutions, downplaying the value judgment. Or her reluctance might be a result of a tougher market; a legacy from postmodernism; or both^{xviii}. After a survey conducted in 2002, the results showed that judging art was the least popular goal for American art critics and describing it the most popular one^{xix}. This essay does not allow for a satisfying account of the whole picture of this question, but I do want to include one consequential stance, that of Boris Groys.

When interviewed in *Frieze* recently^{xx}, the art historian and critic told interviewer Brian Dillon that in the eighties, when Groys started publishing reviews, he soon realized that nobody cared *what* he wrote in his reviews, be it description or evaluation, and no matter if the conclusion was affirmative or an advise against seeing the show in question, but they did pay respect to *that* he wrote:

«I understood immediately that the code of contemporary criticism is not plus or minus: I would say it's a digital code: zero or one, mentioned or not mentioned.»

If this were a fact (and to my experience, it does hold some truth), it would indeed demand a whole other politics from art writers and put the whole question of critical judgment in a new light.

The term Art Writing

As the reader might have noticed, I have been alternating between the terms art writing and art criticism in this text. The former phrase is, if possible, even less

consensually defined than the latter, but I will here give an outline of its usage.

Melanie Gilligan's definition is already mentioned. Furthermore:

--Some writers, like Jane Rendell and Mieke Bal, uses it to emphasize that when writing, the critic is always situated, always with a certain background, outlook, and personal motive. Rendell: «...the term art writing is not new, it has been around in so-called academic circles for some time now. (...) the very form of the writing itself is taken to be integral to the way in which a critic positions him/herself. Feminist critics (...) have been examining critical distance, questions of intimacy and the relationships critics construct with artists, artworks and places for producing and viewing art. The personal and the autobiographical enter the debate, not in order to assert an ego criticism, but as part of an on-going political exploration of subjectivity». ^{xxi}

--Loosely defined by Brian Dillon in *Art Review* magazine, art writing has in part replaced art criticism, and it is generally seen as «light-footed», «flimsy, uncommitted», «a woolly non-genre given to theory-stoked boosterism and/or shamelessly impressionistic blather». ^{xxii}

--Sometimes, the term is seemingly used to cover all writing in the contemporary arts field that is not itself defined as artworks.

--My working definition has been something like «a critical text operating in the contemporary arts field, which reflects on its own form and position and which does not necessarily limit itself to the theoretical-analytical genre».

In Elkins/Newman's roundtable discussion, Groys claims that the opposition between the critic and the artist has become blurred, and Irit Rogoff responds that while art history worked in favor of exclusivity and clear boundaries, what we see today is a real revision of the notion of collaboration, opening new possibilities and allowing new configurations. Is art writing a common place where artists and critics alike add to the production of meaning, without one being subject to the other?

An emerging field

This thesis project refers to and takes lessons from an existing – still limited, but growing – discourse about text in the contemporary art field on a continuum spanning from the art review to art writing to fiction. Adding something new to that existing field of knowledge is one goal inherent in the project. This essay has already begun

outlining it; in this chapter I will introduce other relevant practitioners, institutions and initiatives:

In London, since last fall a new MA program called *Art Writing* is offered by Goldsmiths College. It says to represent «the new academic discipline of ‘art writing’»^{xxiii}, and addresses artists and writers alike – or students who are interested in practicing writing both as art and about art, and art as writing. Michael Newman, co-editor of *The State of Art Criticism*, is one of the program’s professors; Maria Fusco the director.

Fusco, an art critic, lecturer and fiction writer, is also the editor of a new journal (2008) for and about experimental art writing, *The Happy Hypocrite* (published by Book Works – who are, by taking on Fusco, Garnett/Hunt’s *Gest (...)* and writers like Stewart Home, another contributor to the discourse). Maria Fusco will in 2009 become the first writer-in-residence at London’s Whitechapel Gallery. «Writing about art might (...) prove itself the last redoubt of experimental writing per se»^{xxiv}, *Art Review*’s Dillon comments on the first issue of the journal, calling it «a timely response to the fraying in the edges of art criticism (...)». Quoting Groys’ book *Art Power*, he adds – tongue in cheek – that art writing seems a uniquely wide open space for doing exactly what the writer desires – the readers won’t mind, as they hardly even exist.

Fusco emphasizes^{xxv} the distinction between «criticism» and «critical writing». The latter is something with a more intrinsic relation to the art object; writing *with* the object, but also *beyond* it. Her practice is often referred to as art writing, and then as something likely to be performed by practitioners who define themselves as artists as well as those who call themselves writers or critics – or performers, authors, theorists and so on, as seen in *The Happy Hypocrite*.

Also in London, the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) has lately paid the subject attention. Examples are a talk and screening with Maria Fusco and the seminar *Art Writing Beyond Criticism*, a debate about alternatives to standardized forms of art writing, including writing concerned with fiction, performative or formalized writing processes. The seminar featured contributors «responding to a situation in which art is increasingly ‘surrounded’ by explanatory, judgmental or informative texts».

Another example of a contemporary writer asking relevant questions is Jane Rendell, an interdisciplinary practitioner – an architect, researcher, art critic and teacher in art and architecture at Bartlett School of Architecture. Her practice, which she has named «site-writing», is a response to her questions of investigation:

--what space or position does the writer/critic subject take up vis-à-vis the art in question?

--what happens if the relation writing has to art is more than writing *about* art, namely writing *as* or *with* art?

--how can writing construct spaces and not just represent them?

--how can «imaginative/fictional/poetic voices be used to produce alternative places for art criticism»^{xxvi}?

--what is it possible for a critic to say and still have it «count» as criticism?

The publication series *F.R. David* is published by de Appel in Amsterdam. The journals are announced to focus on writing as the core material of a number of visual artists, but equally as a mode that exists parallel to or in service of the visual^{xxvii}.

Finally, writer and researcher Gavin Butt is the editor of the anthology *After Criticism. New responses to art and performance*. As touched upon earlier, Butt describes how, after the weakening of the status of art criticism and with the so called performative turn in the humanities, a new and performative kind of arts writing has brought new energy to the field during the last decade or so. Butt's weight on queer theory and performance places parts of his research outside my field of interest, but his point of departure (suggested in the title of his anthology) coincides with mine.

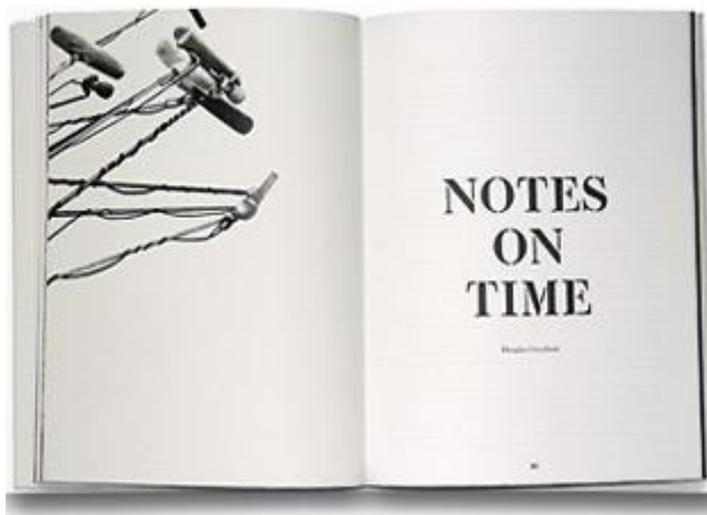
Case studies

To sum up: in this project, I look into the status of art criticism in the contemporary arts field and ask how experimenting with it in literary forms can be productive. Over a given art exhibition, I write a literary short story in place of art criticism as well as reflect over my own practice in doing so. At this point, I want to comment on three selected efforts in experimental art writing by Jane Rendell, Dave Eggers and in an issue of *The Happy Hypocrite*. I have chosen three very different cases, mirroring an undeniably diffuse field. By operating far off the mark of what is normally considered

art criticism, these three attempts help pose the question of where its borders are drawn.

The Happy Hypocrite. The journal (ed. Maria Fusco) bears the subtitle «for and about experimental art writing». Implicitly, each issue states that a piece of art writing does not necessarily stand in an observable relation to any one artwork or art exhibition, unlike what we expect from art criticism, be it in a paper, a magazine or an academic journal.

In the first issue, named *Linguistic Hardcore*, the contents include a translation into English of excerpts of a French novel by a relatively unknown Situationist writer, and an introduction to this author; an adventure story of artists Kurt Schwitters and Yves Klein, some tribe members, and Tarzan; a series of paintings and drawings implying a story of international politics represented by male state leaders alongside architecture and design items; a humorous short story about farting people to death; a series of clippings from a 1969 USA-friendly Tehran newspaper; Douglas Coupland's essays on the topic of time; a series of drawings showing microphones; a selection of Loch Ness Monster quotes, photos and historical facts, rearranged; and a reprint of the old journal Bananas.



To the question of text as *response to art*, The Happy Hypocrite offers little. In very few of the texts can any source which the text would be responding to be traced. It thus runs the risk of coming across as unmotivated, random and thus inconsequential. But only when considered within a discourse of art writing in the sense of «writing

about, from, around or through artworks experienced by the writer». If art writing is read as «art in the form of writing», however, the reading experience is another. But then, what histories and practices does the publication nod to? The literary fanzine, the underground culture mag?

Jane Rendell's «site-writing». When writing catalogue essays for an exhibition of art or architecture, Rendell might let the text alternate between a selection of her own pre-written fiction texts that she finds suitable as «emotional positions»^{xxviii} to speak of the artworks from, and a more straightforward introduction to the artworks (like in her essay for an Elina Brotherus-show).

The following is an excerpt from Rendell's account^{xxix} of being commissioned to write a catalogue essay for a group exhibition and solving it as a fictional narrative (the underlining is my emphasis):

The time-frame offered by *Elles sont passées par ici*, a group show (...), made it impossible for me to visit the site or to view the works - at the moment of writing the artworks were not yet in existence. I was sent a map and photographs of the small fishing village in which the work was to be installed as well as statements written by the artists and visual images of their previous works. My encounter was with the sites of these representations. I used them to create a fictional piece, '*She is walking about in a town which she does not know*', structured as a walk through the town visiting places in which the artists intended to position their projects. (...)

Drawing upon the uncanny, upon Freud (...), I invented a subject who explores an unknown town thinking that the places she passes feel strangely familiar.

The next excerpt is from the fiction text in question, *She is walking about in a town which she does not know*. (The text is coded: everything in bold is cut and pasted from the map and photos; text in italics is quotes from the artists' statements. The rest is Rendell's own.)

Face-à-Face

Nouveau

Ici Paris

She is confused now, in this town, which she does not know. Has she been here before? Should she turn back before it is too late. Across the quiet, she takes a turn to the right, down past the silence, to the right again, back towards the sea, over a wall, through a garden of sea cabbage. She must keep moving, but pass unseen. Over another wall, more slowly now her feet are hurting, hugging close to the long side of a shadow.

«*Around me*»

«*Above me*»

A dark line falls across her shoulders. (...)

Through her «site-writing», Rendell aims to «spatialize criticism», something which can occur when we let discussions of site-specificity apply even to art criticism. She investigates the material, conceptual, emotional and ideological position of the writer and finds herself having to rethink notions of distance and judgment – key terms in criticism. The spatial qualities of writing become important in the conveying of meaning.

Dave Eggers on Thomas Demand. Eggers is an internationally renowned author. His latest novel is *What is the what* (McSweeney's, 2006). He runs a publishing house and edits the magazine *The Believer* – his scope of activities is broader than just his authorship. But he is not a current figure in contemporary art contexts, which is why he is included here: I want to know how someone from outside the rank of the usual suspects undertakes art writing when commissioned it. As he does appear in the art exhibition catalogue, it can't be denied that the text functions as art writing.

His contribution to the catalogue *L'Esprit d'Escalier*, published on occasion of the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art's solo exhibition of the German artist Thomas Demand in 2007, is the first one you meet when opening the book. His text is named

Fictional episodes from the life of Thomas Demand. Loose, fictional scenes from the life of the character «Thomas Demand» are played out:

On a trip to China with his father (...) they both attend a funeral of one of his father's business associates. There are hundreds of mourners in attendance, and as Thomas and his father walk past the embalmed body, encased in a casket lined with silk, Thomas notices that tucked in with the dead man are many small objects made of paper. Origami?

The catalogue successfully opens with a text that is easily accessible, well written, funny, poetic and imaginatively structured: the episodes are put on separate, grey «cards» which give them a sense of archive material or catalogued history, mimicking presentation modes we think of as «true», while what I appreciate is how the episodes are obviously lies (claiming this and that about the artist's mindset and personal history) and how the artist and gallery approves of that.

But it is an annoying fact that the *Episodes* seem to want to explain the most salient characteristics of Demand's work through telling tales from his past. It connotes too much to the historical-biographical explanatory models which theories of both literature and art left behind with poststructuralism. Take the episode from the funeral, («Origami?»), which is easily read as a causal interpretation, a *reason why* Demand today works with cutting and folding paper. All of the episodes do this to some extent: one tells of how «Thomas Demand» came to build architecture (the artist is known for his photographs of paper models he meticulously builds, picturing architectural structures), and mentions an encounter with yellowcake, a material used to produce nuclear weapons which is central to a well-known series of Demand's. Another can easily be read as an explanation of how «Demand» learns that architecture, just as well as humans if not better, can be characters in an image or story.

Part two

Transatlantic journeys

In the following, my ambition is to give an account of the various motivations behind this project of art writing in the form of fiction, of the questions that surfaced prompted by the writing process and of how I assess it as a contribution to the field of art writing.

For a recapitulation of the framework of the fiction text before I go into detail in this chapter, please consult the foreword in *Transatlantic Journeys* (Appendix 1).

Ambition

My initial motivation when I first composed my project proposal was to try out a fiction writing mode without putting aside the analytical view of the art critic. In the words of my initial project proposal (2008), I wanted «to look at the various elements I meet during my visit (the artist, the artworks, the curators, the assistants, the institution's history or reputation, the buildings, the work climate, the language used...) and «cast» them in different roles in my narrative. I consider[ed] this a practical investigation of what possible critical moves I can make vis-à-vis both art and its institutions through the language of fiction.»

The writing process would take place during the production and subsequent display of an art show and take its source material from there. The result would be a piece that could be read independently from the exhibition, unlike what art criticism normally does, but at the same time necessarily one that was strongly tied to it, carrying within it the conditions under which it was produced as well as explicitly treating selected features of content singled out from those conditions or circumstances.

I wanted to sharpen my critical eye on the conditions of an institution's exhibition production, as that conscious process of including and omitting, resulting in a display carrying a specific world view, does lie before and behind virtually every art event which we the art audience and art critics experience. I also wanted to take on the challenge of putting my fiction writing (which I have so far only carried out outside of what I consider to be my professional practice) to work in the realm where I feel at

home professionally, the field of production, display and discussion of contemporary art.

Getting here

For the last few years, I have been beginning to identify as a profound research interest the question of what it is words (can) do when they meet with art. Looking back, I can see that it mattered even before I explicitly recognized it as such. I investigated it through *Dialoger* (2005-06), the exhibition project I co-organised for students from the art academy in Oslo and my peers from the Aesthetics department at the University of Oslo, where students' texts (including my own) and visual work came together; doing my BA (2003-06) I divided my time between art and language/linguistics as my major fields; I wrote and published art criticism, puzzled by the semiotic questions it raised (as well as «a deeper, neverending question of taste, social hierarchy, consensus, power, the forming of collective and individual identity, the voice of the majority, the reception of oppositional voices and so on», as I put it in my letter of motivation when I applied at Konstfack). For my MA thesis, it was a natural step to want to develop and consolidate these experiences.

A proto-project

My most recent step on the way towards the master project, which should be mentioned since (today, though perhaps not consciously at the time) I consider it the proto-project of the thesis, was the small text compilation *Paragone Gone Gone* (2008). Accompanied by a reflective essay, it consisted of three short «reviews»: one of a visual artwork, one of a piece of music and one of recorded, moving images. All were fiction texts; one a dialogue. For a sample, a short excerpt from the text «about» a Vija Celmins drawing:

Horrible scenes are played out in microcosm on the front of the envelope. The two rows of postage stamps make up an area that seems to be at war. On the rest of the letter, it's snow-covered and peaceful, but on the five stamps, thick black smoke is rising, the land is bombed out and there's not a person in sight; it smells of gas. A wooden home, still white, waits its turn. Ten, nine, eight, seven, where is this building located, she wonders. Six, five, is there anyone in there? Four, three, «10 February

1966», the circle writes. That's when the mom went off to the post office and paid thirty cents for the postage.



Vija Celmins: Letter (1968). Collection of the artist.

Photo from Hammer Museum, www.hammer.ucla.edu

I wished to experiment with what solutions are available to the problematic of the writer's feeling of insufficiency in her attempt to represent the non-verbal artwork in words, and among other approaches I studied the ekphrasis - the form known from antiquity on as a text which negotiates the word/image conflict by talking about an object in such a detailed or vivid way that it almost becomes visible before the reader's eyes. Also, I was curious about phenomenological approaches to artworks: experimenting with temporarily letting the individual viewer's unpredictable, direct, perhaps physical or sensuous experiences of the artwork take primacy over any interpretation of the work's discursive contents or art historical implications.

The underlying conflict was how the critic, when describing an artwork as part of a review, is faced with the impossible task of «translating» an expression from one medium (e.g. drawing) to another (words); the dream of «translating» a piece of art exhaustively however being utopian, since images have tools at their disposal that writing lack (just like the other way around).

Pertaining directly to the thesis project are these overriding questions from the *Paragone* essay (slightly revised): «Speaking of power and hierarchies, we sometimes see that an art critic with some authority shapes the audience's reception of a work to such an extent that the text seems to subdue the work and determine what it's «really» about. On the other hand, it is the work of the artist, not the critic, which enjoys a status of nucleus in our common field. In my work, I want to investigate what the ideal role and function of the critic could be. To inform about art, to educate, to judge – or to be an interesting writer in her own right, co-existing with (but not hierarchically different from) the artwork? I wish to find out how the two can be successfully combined. (...)

Can a critic write not parasitically «about» a work, but rather «from», «with» or «around» it? What is it the writer does, exactly, when she makes up verbal solutions to convey something non-verbal? Is it a kind of art? Or is it merely crutches, an inferior substitute?»

Initiating the fiction writing

After getting acquainted with the Henie Onstad Art centre (HOK), I soon found the history of the centre fascinating enough to start writing drafts for a story around it and its founders. Another, second part of the narrative appeared when after a while I realized that a subject I have previously taken an interest in through my writing was reactivated as I got a closer look at a particular one of the works on view, the Leu piece. The preexisting subject involves the individual's choice to (not) take up a place in a social community, an effort involving the risk of being hurt or rejected. The overlap presented me with an opportunity to appropriate a character from a preexisting text of mine into the project: by optimistically sending the book by mail to a Karl Rossmann, Per-Oskar Leu made a request for community with a stranger. Why he did not get a response to his request is a question inherent in the narrative, one it deals with through offering an encounter with that stranger. I «cast» my preexisting character (who was only a sketch at the time) into the narrative mix where he was soon adapted and merged with Karl Rossmann.

I now had two points of departure for two separate, but related halves of the total text. To get started, I made use of an elementary common denominator for the one half

about the founders and the other about Karl: the figure of air travel and especially the transatlantic flight played a central role in both. (On top of that, the real Mrs. Henie died onboard a flight). Another random double appearance was the syllable *leu* in both the name of the artist, in one half of the story, and in the cause of death (leukemia) of the protagonist in the other. These served as initial creative building blocks. After a while, the real subject came to view when the more profound common theme of the engaged encounter, the *henvendelsen*, was elaborated. This I will soon give an account of.

As well as the character Karl and the couple Henie/Onstad, I cast other found elements: the real life Norwegian artist behind the selected artwork, Per-Oskar Leu; the physical location of the Høvik peninsula with the centre and the Henie/Onstad gravesite overlooking the entrance; the political-ideological history of the institution (the unexpected combination of money from Hollywood and from shipping along with avant-garde ambitions, and an atmosphere of violent countercultural protests that turned into approval) and more.

In the final two-short-stories-in-one, real and fictional persons come together, as do real and fictional historical episodes. Sometimes the two halves are repeating each other, most notably in that they treat the same main subject of human relations (as explained later) and in central personality traits of the protagonists. Also, there is the off-stage role in both of them of a factor existing in real-life: the artist Leu in the second half and the art centre in the first. At other times the halves are contrasting: the public life of the traveling celebrity with the ship magnate and the outwardness of their life in the limelight versus the interiority in Karl's world of solitude and lack of mobility. Ground level contrasts with air level; the present with the 1960s.

The importance of context

It was not merely the fascination with the exciting life span of Sonja Henie that had me pick her as material for the investigation. Long before arriving at the centre, I knew I was going to write with a starting point in a work of art, and I soon had an idea of also wanting to incorporate the larger framing of it: I had to go one level up to the theme of the exhibition, or two levels to the exhibiting institution. Needless to say, the context always colors our understanding of any exhibit. There is always a framework carrying meaning and even ideology. And this framework has a history, in this case

one of a sixties-seventies era with both admirable artistic programming and controversy because of the clash between a counterculture zeitgeist and the shipping/showbiz/US-financing enabling the same programming.

In the case of HOK, its early years felt present for two reasons:

--because lately, and tangibly during my stay, the centre has been actively trying to evoke its energy from those golden years, using its past status as a doubtlessly significant venue for avant-garde cross-artistic activities in their marketing of today's programming^{xxx}

--because of the physical presence of the founders in the form of their gravesite conspicuously located on a hill directly overlooking HOK's main entrance. Decades after their deaths, the founders still keep an eye on their centre. I had visited many times before, but never noticed the grave, which now became a fascination and another building block.

The process of making connections, discovering and then advancing them, has proven itself to be a central method in my writing. Though some served as starting points, like the transatlantic flight, most came to view as the story developed. For instance, certain materials came to play a central part, their texture and functions or habits, like Karl's wax and the dark wood materials that fascinate Sonja. Photography was an important tool in assembling the elements, as with the gravestone and the dark wood.

The timeline on the book's centerfold is the point of reference for some of the connections. At the same time, it serves to inform about the real-life conditions of the story: the publication of the Kafka novel, the opening of the art centre.

«Bridges»

During the investigations I coined the term «bridges» in my notes when working with what methods, ways or tools the writer can take advantage of when she is to write a response to an artwork. The bridge is the link from the artwork to the responding text. When I experience and then filter the art, and subsequently render my own thoughts in words, what is the vehicle, the translation, the transitional tool, between the art and the words?

The bridges would all be alternatives to the traditional hermeneutic task of interpreting, i.e. telling the audience what the work is «really» about, revealing its hidden meaning. The potential liberation in abandoning interpretation was described

by Susan Sontag in her classic 1969 essay *Against Interpretation*: interpreting artworks (including films, plays and so on) is no innocent activity. Interpretation makes the world manageable and intelligible to us, but this is no advantage: in doing so, it violates art. It's not that artworks are ineffable and should be left alone, but instead of having critics set up a shadow world of meanings for the artwork, we need a vocabulary of forms, «revealing the sensuous surfaces». The task of the critic (and probably even more strikingly so in the era of postmodern visual excess that was just starting to show its overwhelming presence when Sontag wrote this) is to help us see the thing at all, make it real to us, show us *how* it is and *that* it is, not what it means^{xxx1}.

Though I have wanted to speak of language in relation to experience, not to genre, I did wonder if the «making the thing real to us» could be done through the bridge of a self-sufficient piece of fiction. Other bridges could lean on the interview, the palimpsest, the journal/log and the ekphrasis, or the text could serve as a freestanding continuation of a phrase or scene that the writer saw in the work. Then there was the response with a metaphorical, metonymical or allegorical relation to the work. A central question was what degree of independence from the exhibit the text would have, and whether it would comment directly on it at all (not to mention how), or if it should exist parallel to the artworks. By the end of the writing period, I had put the many test pieces aside and ended up with a no-compromise fiction text where we at all times stay within the universe of the characters – a freestanding continuation of elements from the exhibition.

Also, I had worked with inserting fact-based fragments, even art theoretical ones, into the story. But I found that I did not look to blur the genre borders between criticism and fiction: the blurring happens in the positioning of the latter in a framework of the former.

Allegory

The allegory is one bridge I found particularly interesting in this process of uncovering potential critical writing mode(s). I recognize some of its key principles in my own approaches, and besides, it is more than a bridge: allegory, the doubling of one text by another, is an attitude as well as a technique, according to Craig Owens, «allegory is the model for all criticism, all commentary.^{xxxii}

Though in this essay I refer specifically to Owens' take on it, the allegory is a form referred to in many different contexts and discourses and can take on different meanings. But it is always connected with memorizing (or saving from oblivion) the transient or that which is lost, and always involving two parallel texts or systems of meaning where one is read through the other, «however fragmentary, intermittent or chaotic their relationship may be». With help from Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin, Owens links the formerly taboo figure of allegory to postmodernist, contemporary art practices (contemporary of the late seventies/early eighties, especially the «Pictures» artists) like appropriation and the site-specific – and to the leveling of text and image the way he had experienced it in the work of Robert Smithson.

«Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. (...) And in his hands the image becomes something other (*allos*=other + *agoreuei*=to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost and obscured: allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image».

According to Owens, allegory has as its own model the palimpsest – by dictionary definition «a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain, or (figurative:) something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form». I find it obvious that the palimpsest can serve as a fruitful testing ground for critical writing, being a site of negotiation between the primacy/power of the artwork («earlier form») and that of the criticism («later writing»), though guaranteed that none of them will ever completely take over, both are necessarily represented.

Performative criticism?

In his *After Criticism (...)*, editor Gavin Butt gives his account of the alleged crisis in art criticism and then suggests criticism goes performative instead of relying on theory, as contemporary art has outgrown it. Writing «about» an artwork may be substituted by a writing that «enfolds its subject into the very writerly mode itself». Is

it a performative criticism I want to carry out when I want to give a response to artworks through a fiction text?

The notion of performativity has been the object of much research over the past decades, especially in feminist/queer theory and most notably by Judith Butler, something the scope of this paper unfortunately does not allow a full account of. The term has been widespread in various strands of theory lately, and seems somewhat misused: for instance, it is sometimes referred to as «performative» when critics write their personal experience of the exhibition opening party, anecdotes about their relationship with the artist, etcetera, into the review. Whether the resulting text is worth reading or not, I don't see how the fact that the critic «performs» his personal life in the text thereby makes it perform any insight about the understanding of art or culture.

The discourse of performativity goes back to the linguist J. L. Austin and his seminal *How to do things with words* (1962). Briefly put, Austin stated that some utterances are performatives while others are constatives. The linguistic performatives cannot, like the constatives, be determined as true or false claims; rather, they are «speech acts», instances of language through which the speaker performs some action, utterances that do what they say. This lies at the core of my investigation of fiction writing as a response to art in place of the more commonplace art review, as it speaks of the dichotomy between showing and telling. «Drawing on the speech acts of J.L. Austin», Butt writes, «such writers [on performance art] have worked to eschew a critical project which sees itself as writing only within a «constative» discursive register – in which the work of performance is described, in which matters of art-historical «fact» are recounted – in favor of engaging in a «performative» modality of criticism: one which does not reproduce the object or event it addresses but instead *enacts* it through the very practice of writing.»^{xxxiii}

One last point of Butt's is the one about the openness to failure. Referring to Derrida's phrase «each time one single time» (from his *Politics of Friendship*), Butt explains how the performative critical response is necessarily one by which one risks to fail to communicate as intended. The specific, the unpredictable and the

undecidable all reside in the singular *act* of address which is the performative. It is in this «critical event» *After Criticism* (...) takes an interest.

My main interest: henvendelsen – the engaged approach

By daring to meet somebody else's approach, people confirm their humanity (given the hypothesis that humanity is in part defined by relating to a group and trusting in a community, as commented by the Aristotle quote taken from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which opens the book: «For a human is a social being and his nature is to live in the company of others»). Both Karl and Sonja embody the difficulties of this daring.

In the part of his artwork where Per-Oskar Leu sent new copies of the novel to a number of different Karls, there was even a note asking the recipients to read it and get back to the artist, telling him how they liked the book. In the story, this encouragement is merely implicated, not spelled out.

Transatlantic Journeys allowed me to treat the engaged approach in two ways: on the level of the literary experience, where the narrator speaks to the reader; and on the level of the fictitious sphere, where the characters, both Karl and the others, struggle with it in their lives and between each other. On both levels – as well as on a third, that of the overriding subject of the project, namely the addressing inherent in criticism – the fascination lies in the risks and the responsibilities the gesture entails.

In the case of the level of narrator/reader, the writing process taught me much about how the text addresses the reader and how this address changes when I bring in elements from outside the diegetic sphere (as I experimented with when inserting fact-based fragments) and a different narrating voice is activated. The connection text/reader, like artwork/viewer and human/human, is a meaningful address, and a relation, or encounter, with responsibilities. Therefore, I had to take care not to obscure the reliable narrator for the reader in interweaving too many external elements. Out of the extradiegetic textual elements, only the timeline survived.

Benveniste and the enunciation

In *Problèmes de linguistique générale* by Emile Benveniste (1902-76), the French structuralist linguist, we learn how language can produce subjects^{xxxiv}. His theory has been an important source for my fictional gestalt of the *henvendelsen* and of my

thinking of the relative risks the subject exposes herself to when verbally interacting face to face with another.

Benveniste's interest here lies in the personal pronouns – I, you etc. When the speaker ventures to use the pronoun I, she assumes her subjecthood^{xxxv} and takes on responsibility for inhabiting the I in encounters with others. She dares being the unique person filling up the otherwise empty sign I – in that unique moment of uttering when I is awakened from the zombie state of the deictics, the group of words which unlike song or cup don't denote a fixed referent out in the world, but refer directly back to the unique moment of utterance. Likewise, «you» are the one addressed there and then.

The enunciation, the situation in which the utterance falls, is a performance by the subject: according to Benveniste's distinctions, the past tense combined with the third person pronoun means objective historical accounts («narrative»), the present tense and first/second person pronoun is interactive dialogue («discourse»), or performative^{xxxvi}. Unlike the narrative, the discourse implies a speaking subject. It has a communicative aspect, it is a *henvendelse*. The *narrative* is merely the content of utterances, the information I claim or recount. The *discourse* emphasizes the position of the speaker and is thus relational and ideological. The message being sent out is not neutral and objective, it is said in a particular, non-contingent way by a positioned human individual intending something.

Levinas and the face of the other^{xxxvii}

Emmanuel Levinas is equally a reference for this project's notion of the engaged encounter. Or as he would say, the meeting with «the face of the other». The Lithuanian-born philosopher's groundbreaking principle developed in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) was that the grounds for philosophy should be ethics, not ontology. The personal responsibility we have when encountering another person was among his greatest philosophical concerns. This ethical commitment is infinite.

The self is in fact only possible with its recognition of the other – and the other as perfect alterity, completely different from the self. The self exists only as a relation, not as a substance, only as an I addressing a You. It seriously challenges the security of the self, but it is a challenge we must take on.

Before moving on to building his very distinct ethics, Levinas studied phenomenology. It remained his most significant influence. Lived life, rather than abstract deduction, was the source to human knowledge. Our thought must be open to the face of the other – the «face» denoting the way in which the other is presented to me, an experience which exceeds any idea I might have had about him/her a priori. We are always responsible for and in debt to the other. We are in fact, to Levinas, responsible for their death – some aspects of his ethics hold a higher degree of existential severity than what my project absorbs. However, his consequential thesis that the presentation of the other questions the feeling of safety in the self is paramount to it, as is the sense of the social community being superior to both the individual and our impersonal structures of knowledge (ontology). Our responsibility for the other is beautifully summed up as «having-the-other-in-one's skin».

Language was another key topic for Levinas. It is in language, in the enunciation, that the state of openness to the other can reside. In the approach, the *henvendelsen*, there is a commitment to the other.

In addition to being part of the grounds for the general conflicts of the fiction stories, the theories of both Benveniste and Levinas have come to appear directly in the text: among other appropriations, my handwritten notes of keywords/-phrases after reading Levinas became Sonja's notebook jottings about You/Me, represented as her own thoughts and without any reference to the philosopher. Benveniste's theories are interpreted and used most overtly in the scene where Karl reflects about how the social situation of conversation is, precisely, social, as soon as the personal pronouns are put to use.

Criticism as henvendelse

Like when Karl got mail, criticism is an engaged *henvendelse*. Involvement in art criticism is yet another matter of choosing to take part in a community: to write something over someone else's work is an engaged approach, a reaction, interaction or initiation of a conversation. The work and the text make up a claim and a reply to the claim. With the next step, when the criticism is published, the next encounter takes place, that between the text and a public who in turn have a chance to give their reply to the claims of the text.

Hence, the subject matter of the narrative extends to the overriding theme of the project and vice versa. In the investigation, art criticism is perceived not as fundamentally different from and external to the art object it is «about», but as a reply, a new layer (yet independent), perhaps a palimpsest or allegory, to the work. It is a question of whether the critic is «with» or «above» the object; and of what kinds of intense action that potentially goes on in the space between them.

Publication

In itself, the act of getting a piece of critical writing published functions likewise: through transmitting our voice to the public, we confirm our status as individuals with a belonging or alliance to a society. In implicitly assuming that what you think and write bears any relevance at all to others, you demonstrate taking a chance of trusting the community to find that you and your views are something of concern to them – and in bothering to respond. Publishing your writing equals choosing to take part in a society.

In a magazine interview, the curator Massimiliano Gioni once said something along the lines of that publishing your views on art equals not recognizing form, but recognizing yourself as part of a community. (The what and when of the interview I cannot recall, but Gioni's insight sticks). You are participating in a collective exercise that has little to do with the object in itself, but a lot with where we come from and where we want to go. The thing itself, I would add, is neither available to us nor interesting. What it enables us to think and talk to each other about, on the other hand, is crucial. Criticism is, when boiled down to its basics, a practice that facilitates, stages, explores and reflects on human encounters.

Blind alleys: intro

To include a report of one's doubts and failures in the final assessment of a project is a two-sided coin. Allowing oneself to be open to doubts and uncertainties is not normally associated with critical authority. But reflections on false starts can help illuminate how you found your perspectives. And daring to take a tentative approach has been a leitmotif in this work. Only by taking chances and entering into unknown territory can I find new challenges as a writer and theorist.

Blind alleys: instrumentalization

«Who do you think you're talking to?», *Frieze* magazine's headline asks when Brian Dillon and Boris Groys come together to discuss the unstable status of art criticism. Read literally, the question is timely. Who is the critic talking to – not to mention, who is she talking on behalf of, whom does she serve? A closer look at the issue raises questions of authorship, ethics, positioning and politics. The question I am getting at is: when making up a character in response to an artwork and spinning a fictive story from the life of an art patron, am I merely taking advantage of them to carry out my own creative writing?

Am I, rather than aiming to communicate with my readers about a strong artwork and an institution with a fascinating past, taking what I need from them and overlooking the rest? But if so, just how morally reprehensible is such a disregard of an artwork's intention? Writer and academic Pablo Lafuente discusses how the critic needs not operate from a position independent of the production and distribution of art, but gains from working from an engaged position: «In fact, the work made by the artist is not exactly the same work written about by the critic – the critic makes the work appear other than it is, producing a new work.»^{xxxviii}

Blind alley: wishy-washiness

Could my writing possibly be an instance of the «shamelessly impressionistic blather» which has, according to Brian Dillon in *Art Review*, replaced real criticality of late? Or an empty, random play with pop-cultural signifiers as described in the belle-lettrist accusations of Melanie Gilligan? Professor of art history Joseph Masheck^{xxxix} complains that «in every generation art criticism must be rescued from belle-lettrists armed with newly fashionable ways of taking the most accomplished works as just so much conveniently pre-processed roughage for their presumptuously higher-echelon text production.»

In reply, I would repeat Maria Fusco's emphasis^{xl} on the distinction between «criticism» and «critical writing», where the latter is something with a more intrinsic relation to the art object; writing *with* the object, but also *beyond* it. Fusco was sometimes bored with contemporary art as a critic, and would «fill it up» for herself when reviewing. It would, though, hardly be useful if art magazines like *Frieze*, with their restrictions on number of words, published fiction reviews, she added^{xli}. I don't

see that art writing needs to supplant the more commonplace reviewing. Why do we have to choose?

Furthermore, Jane Rendell's account of her essay for Kunsthalle Thun in Switzerland in 2005, *You tell me*, comes to mind as relevant. Here, she enters various positions in relation to the artists, the rooms, the objects that figure as subject matter in the artworks and so on, and uses first, second and third person pronouns in an attempt to show that the critic is not «outside» the art, but somehow already inside it, in an attempt to re-think what we call critical judgment, thereby creating a new kind of art critical practice.^{xliii}

And Gavin Butt observes: «Ideas which we thought we had dismissed in the wake of post-structuralism as modernist myths, such as «experience» (...), now appear to be returning, albeit in significantly transformed ways, to early twenty-first century creative and critical work in order to forge a way beyond the «impasse» of theory mentioned earlier.»^{xliiii}

Andrew Hunt asks, in a line of reasoning about taste and judgment in situations where regarding the «new» in an artwork with little or no preexisting discourse, whether it would be more interesting to take risks and go with your intuitive hunches when writing about it or exhibiting it. Hunt and Garnett are brave in their endeavor to open up for other writing modes less faithful to dominant discourses. Hunt: «[Garnett] is really interested in the way Deleuzian theory has been read in terms of affect and the aesthetic, and the way that late-Marxist, post-Structuralist theory and deconstruction have stripped the aesthetic away from the art object. (...) we're ignoring what the artwork does best, which might be to do with an immanent rather than a transcendental form of aesthetic rapture, rather than a bureaucratic form of discourse (...) I'm interested in exploring a more intelligent and exciting way of including both of these positions in one line of reasoning, both in terms of writing about art and making exhibitions.»^{xliv}

Future

What concrete use can we make of approaches like mine? Where can they work from? Some galleries have started distributing literary texts, sometimes by authors well acquainted with the field of contemporary art and sometimes «appropriated» from outside it, in addition to the regular press release when an exhibition opens, or as a substitute for it. These texts can open up new ways of seeing the art on view.

Journals like *The Happy Hypocrite*, *Afterall*, *Cabinet* and *Dot Dot Dot* are another distribution platform. Most likely, given the upsurge in attention paid to the practice of art writing, we will see an increase in publications devoted to it.

«...not such a bad place». *Conclusion*

To evaluate an experiment like mine, it would be helpful to position it historically, showing how the (scattered) history of art criticism might possibly be leading up to a moment where practitioners find themselves where they are today. Regrettably, it lies outside the scope of this project to provide this contextualization. With a firmer historical positioning one could begin to answer: why these questions now? Why attempts to write in fictive modes within a framework of art criticism in 2009?

I do think the choice of the fiction form allowed me to express that which I at present find to be the most interesting thing about art criticism, the *henvendelsen*, in a more advanced way than an orthodox review of my stay at HOK ever could. The themes inherent to the practice of criticism were given a space to appear, metamorphosed, in the fiction: the site/art/experience could be embodied, taken into the text; like Karl embodies the wax, the text encloses the experience.

I would like to explore further what potential expressions of criticality might be inherent in my claim that criticism echoes universal human dilemmas concerning the joining of a community and the running the risk of rejection when one could have stayed safe and solitary. In this landscape, can I find a critical potential relating to solidarity, to the ethics vis-à-vis the other on which Levinas insisted so strongly? The approach towards the reading public which criticism entails implies questions of democracy and the free press. Parallel to that, there is all along the venture of the writing individual behind the review. The community aspect and that of the particular human being run side by side.

To conclude on a productive note, I turn to Boris Groys (the emphasis is mine):

«...a bitter, disappointed, nihilistic tone pervades the art criticism of today, which clearly ruins its style. This is a shame, because **the art system is still not such a bad place for a writer. (...) Under the pretext of opening up the different contexts of a work of art, the most diverse theories, intellectual takes, rhetoric**

strategies, stylistic props, scholarly knowledge, personal stories, and examples from all walks of life can be combined in the same text at will – in a way not possible in the two other areas open to writers in our culture, the academy and the mass media.»^{xlv}

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Notes

ⁱ In Will Holder & Falke Pisano (ed.): F.R. David, "The "as yet..." issue (on speculation)" (journal published by de Appel Amsterdam, 2007)

ⁱⁱ Graw/Birnbaum (ed.) 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Graw/Birnbaum (ed.) 2008

^{iv} AICA 1970

^v Elkins/Newman 2008:71-76

^{vi} «Canvases and Careers. Institutional change in the French painting world» by Harrison and Cynthia White (University of Chicago Press 1993)

^{vii} Elkins/Newman 2008:85

^{viii} Elkins/Newman 2008:84

^{ix} Hal Foster quoted in Garnett/Hunt 2008:122

^x Elkins/Newman 2008:173

^{xi} In the essay *How criticism lost its sense of humor*, Garnett/Hunt 2008:120

^{xii} All quotes by Blom are from Walgermo:2008. My translation from Norwegian.

^{xiii} Allen 2008

^{xiv} Elkins/Newman 2008:371.

^{xv} Term of Julius von Schlosser's. Elkins/Newman 2008:23, note 42

^{xvi} Elkins 2003

^{xvii} Graw/Birnbaum 2008:121

^{xviii} See for example M. Gilligan in Graw/Birnbaum 2008:125

^{xix} Elkins/Newman 2008:79

^{xx} Dillon 2009

^{xxi} Rendell 2005, 'Architecture-Writing', in Jane Rendell (ed.) *Critical Architecture*, special issue of the *Journal of Architecture*, (June 2005), v. 10. n. 3, pp. 255-64.

^{xxii} Dillon 2008

^{xxiii} <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/pg/mfa-art-writing.php>

^{xxiv} Dillon 2008

^{xxv} in conversation, London, Sept 17th 2008.

^{xxvi} Rendell 2004

^{xxvii} <http://www.deappel.nl/publications/>

^{xxviii} Rendell website - Essays - *Longing for the lightness of spring*

^{xxix} Rendell 2007

^{xxx} Ugelstad 2007

^{xxxi} Sontag 2001

^{xxxii} Owens 1992

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- xxxiii Butt 2005:10
xxxiv Benveniste 1986
xxxv Foster et al 2004:583
xxxvi *ibid.*
xxxvii Hand 2001
xxxviii Lafuente on www.ica.org.uk
xxxix Elkins/Newman 2008:348
xl in conversation, London, Sept 17th 2008.
xli *Ibid.*
xlii Rendell website - Essays – *You tell me*
xliii Butt 2005:17
xliv Garnett/Hunt 2008:114
xlv Groys 2008:117