

Gilda Williams on today's art-writing explosion and the tyranny of the artist's statement

I began to reexamine my past and decided to turn from my studies of social science to fiction. Unlike politics, which offered only extravagant promises of a utopian future, I knew fiction could present lives as they are truly lived.

Jill Magid
Fiction 2011

WRITE ON

Rejoice! The crisis in art criticism is over, and how. In fact, we may be living the most expansive moment ever in the history of art writing. Saul Anton, Oliver Basciano, Andrew Berardini, Alice Butler, Ben Davis, Brian Dillon, Brian Droitcour, Andrew Durbin, Martin Herbert, Maria Lind, Tom Morton, Sally O'Reilly, Trevor Paglin, Chantal Pontbriand, Nato Thompson: just how many talented authors must the art world produce before we stop robotically lamenting some chronic crisis and notice the waves of gifted art writers hyperbolically inventing literary hybrids, crossing plain-vanilla art reviews with diary-writing, journalism, autobiography, fiction, research, gossip, manifestos and more.

Not all this verbiage is uniformly great – but hey, neither is every last artwork on display in the galleries. We can cease poking fun at the jargon-heavy lowpoints – as rehearsed again last November with Daniel Blight's tired *Texte zur Kunst* complaint over impenetrable press releases and artspeak, yawn. It is time to recognise, with joy and relief, that today we are more likely to stumble upon a smart text than a duff one in the best printed magazines and rising tide of good online sources, such as *Rhizome*, *e-flux*, *Art F City*, *Bad At Sports*, *Gallerist NY* (now part of *New York Observer*), *Artslant*, *Artspace Magazine*, *Hyperallergic*, *Triple Canopy*, *East of Borneo* – a few go-to art websites topping a list which, to remain current, would require hourly updating. X- and Y-generation art writers have revolutionised the

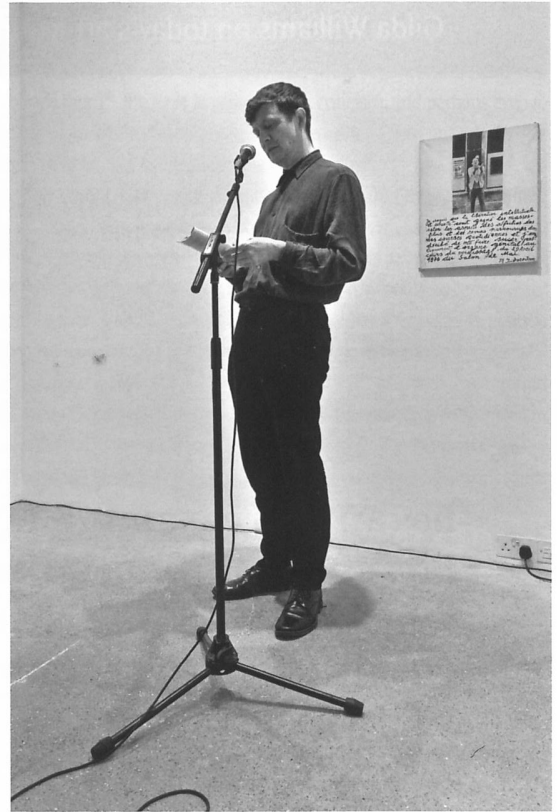


genre, no longer just offering reactive commentary and chasing behind the main event – the art object – but producing texts that run parallel to or within art, often constituting the artwork itself, such as Jill Magid's *Failed States*, 2012, or Katrina Palmer's *The Fabricator's Tale*, 2014, published by Book Works, following from her noted 2010 publication *The Dark Object* (from Stewart Home's *Semina* series published by Book Works – 'where the novel has a nervous breakdown'), sometimes even reworking published texts to create definitively unfinished, art/text spin-offs.

The 21st-century art world generates industrial quantities of writing; in fact, we may now produce as much text as art. Flowing out of every art fair, every conference, every launch, every exhibition come the transcripts, the catalogues, the papers, the blurbs, the mission statements, the brochures – artworks bubbling up everywhere like lava, unstoppable and gaining momentum – much of it without necessarily having a named author attached. In our resource-strapped world, the written word has been discovered to be a cheap and efficient entry point for aspiring art world members eager to insert themselves – even if marginally – into the fray, a DIY strategy which moreover takes advantage of that hard-earned specialist MA and can require no special equipment, funding or space, fitting flexibly around paid-work schedules. The internet has been a boon for art writing, and, with its infinity of self-publishing platforms, the web erased overnight two principal editorial constraints endured by the paper-only generation: stringent word-counts, and overcautious or unsympathetic editors (although admittedly, plenty of online copy could stand a good once-over with the red pen). Today's unapologetically self-promotional blogs, Twitter accounts and Facebook feeds spew out rapid-fire verdicts on artworks and art world behaviours in a gloves-off, punchy language that makes even the toughest old-school newspaper critics now look like choir boys.

Art writing seems poised to evolve into what curating was in recent decades, with 2014/15 shaping up as a bumper year for specialist symposia ('Writing Art: Conflicts and Collaboration' at the India Art Fair with *Artforum* and the Courtauld Institute in New Dehli, January 2015; 'Plastic Words' at Raven Row in London, December 2014 to January 2015; 'Scripting Space: Writing as the Site of Exhibition' at the Judd Foundation in New York, November 2014). Sometimes these too can produce their own tedious, writing-about-writing jargon: 'A text is capable of shaping the space of display, eliciting responses from its readers, directing conceptual wanderings, and declaring the political potential inherent in the gesture of framing.' OK, so still plenty of room for improvement, then; but even if only a conservative one-third of today's abundant art copy merits attention, that's heaps of hot new reading. If there exists a crisis, it is one of overwhelming volume.

For sure, this new landscape bears no resemblance to the last time art criticism supposedly basked in florid health, back in Clement Greenberg's day. As the mid-1960s era greys into its 50-year mark, artists and critics alike are throwing into doubt their alleged 20th-century art historical lineage; as new media artist Jennifer Chan writes in Omar Kholeif's *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, 2014 (Books AM379), 'Your canon was Dada, Warhol and Duchamp; mine is Cantopop, Pokémon and young



Jill Magid
Failed States 2012 installation view

Gerry Bibby
reading from his 2014 novel *The Drumhead* for the event 'Plastic Words: Verbalations', Raven Row, London 13 December 2014

boys performing cover songs.' Similarly, 21st-century art writing is as indebted to the Zone books as to James Joyce, JK Rowling or Tumblr, and may owe less to the purveyors of *October* than to cultural commentator and novelist David Foster Wallace (1962-2008), whose widely read essayistic style unpacked any contemporary cultural product – from a tennis star's biography to a luxury cruise – with unflinching candour and sterling prose. Like many art blogs, Wallace's hyperanalytical texts eventually come round to laying bare their own narcissism and self-indulgence – but this confessional tone too hovers somewhere between overeducated ennui, virtuoso stylisation and genuine existential malaise.

For those art writers digging into the deeper past, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, 1957, or Susan Sontag's or Georges Perec's work from the 1960s and 1970s can feel more alive than the corpse of 1980s and 1990s art criticism. A current generation may prefer WG Sebald's overlap of prose and photography to Conceptual Art's collaged text-and-image exploit, and feel more indebted to JG Ballard's visions of a parallel reality – set in a future 15 minutes ahead of our own – than Andy Warhol's overquoted, long-term prognostications. Innovative critics may turn to 'non-fiction novelists' like Jon Ronson and Chris Kraus for their seamless integration of storytelling and reportage, analysis and description, comedy and tragedy, as well as the unclassifiable and highly accomplished short stories of Lydia Davis. Contemporary novelists feel as entitled as any critic to art-write, as per Ben Lerner in *10:04*, 2014, tossing in his two

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cents about Christian Marclay's magisterial – if overcommented – *The Clock*, or offering a mesmerising account of Marfa, where a motley collection of bordertown hangers-on prove edgier than the Chamberlains and Judds.

This novelistic turn may account for why description is now ripe for a rehaul, no longer indispensably accompanied by the adjective 'mere' – which suddenly sounds as outdated as old modernists wringing their hands over abstract painting reduced to 'mere' decoration. Hot off the presses is Tom McCarthy's speculative novel *Satin Island*, 2015, long awaited after his influential *Remainder*, 2001/05, basically a book-length description set on auto-loop: the telling and retelling of a past moment as the protagonist endlessly articulates into spoken word (and the author into written language) the memory of his desired sights, smells and sounds to further instruct his obliging crew. At the Royal College of Art's Critical Writing in Art & Design course, tutor Brian Dillon has symbolically banned the term 'mere description' from class, suggesting to students that paying close attention can open up a field of possibility. Student results have included a detailed study of museum visitors' movements, an essay on seven seconds of a Donna Summer track, and a piece on exhaustive multiple viewings of Derek Jarman's *Blue*, 1993.

The most widely read American art writers today seem to excel at well-researched journalism which crosses sociology, current affairs, lifestyle, business-writing, biography and exposé (see Christopher Glazek's captivating profile of art shark Stefan Simchowicz, 'The Art World's Patron Satan', in late December's *New York Times* magazine). In the UK, the current top-selling popular contemporary art book is by an artist: Grayson Perry's *Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to be Understood*, 2014. For artists of all stripes, this new spirit of art writing has opened a goldmine of creative opportunity. If anything marks our current condition, it is the rise and rise of artists who put written text or spoken word front and centre in their art making, whether Palmer, Jessie Darling or Heather Philipson in the UK or Magid, Brad Troemel, Jamie Showlin and Edward Shenk in the US, among countless others, working with script-writing, art history, concrete poetry, recipes, the interview, automated and redacted texts – even prayer, as per Samuel Hasler's *O, A Prayer Book* published by Book Works in 2014. It is no accident that many of today's most respected artists are noted for their exceptional writing talents: Ed Atkins, Chan, Tacita Dean, Liam Gillick, Seth Price, Frances Stark, Hito Steyerl and Artie Vierkant come rapidly to mind. In practice, 21st-century artists who happen to be blessed with a gift for language enjoy quite an advantage over their less literate peers – just as 16th-century Italian painters with a gift for the detailed rendering of angelic faces could outshine their Renaissance colleagues lacking that, frankly, niche skill. These may seem like curious add-on artistic abilities, but they function as signals of the broader artistic values of the day: whether in the Quattrocento, when delicate figuration reflected an artist's sense of grace;

or in the 21st century, when trenchant writing reflects an artist's intellect, powers of observation and timely critical thinking.

In 1978 Joseph Beuys proclaimed that everybody is an artist; in 2015 everybody is an art writer – often whether they like it or not. Once upon a time the art world harboured a cast of designated writers – art critics and scholars – whose proximity to art making and facility with language gained them a special place. That age-old division of art-writing labour between those who mostly write about art (the critics and art historians) and those who primarily make, display, collect, fund or sell art (artists, curators, museum directors, patrons, collectors, gallerists) has broken down. Judging from the many art-writing workshops I conduct, I think that the split now divides those who are inclined voluntarily towards art writing – those who love to write, who are keen to improve and to have their texts read, whatever their usual role – and those who are conscripted into it: reluctant art writers who, like Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, would 'prefer not to' but are obliged to write, and write a lot, in today's art system.

In fact, alongside the happy swathes of recent artists brilliantly innovating the written and spoken word, there are plenty of less verbal artists who rank high among these reluctant art writers, only marginally interested in writing but continually badgered into providing helpful explanations, statements, provisos and comments to accompany their work. And yet, some artists' practices deliberately eschew and resist translation into language; for these artists, writing that hateful artist's statement may represent a kind of mild punishment, a hazing ritual in the passage towards becoming fully fledged, fully exportable, fully 21st-century artists. From my experience of conducting MFA art-writing seminars, there are plenty of reluctant artist-writers for whom the artwork is the artist's statement, duh, and who would prefer if anything to embed their nascent writing within the folds of their art making, whether in the form of a diary, fiction, screen-saver or vitriolic SMS message rather than have language stand apart like some awful self-serving caption.

These artists tend to write impressionistically about the flickering haze of possibility surrounding their art, instinctively resisting closing down decisions through language and fulfilling anemic questions like: 'What are your artistic goals?' Moreover, just when geographic boundaries have been torn down and a global art world drifts fluidly across continents, the obligatory English language returns to privilege native-tongue Anglo-Saxon speakers. In practice, artists less inclined towards writing can end up marginalised if not muzzled within the art system; at the other end of the spectrum, highly literate artists – though better off – can despair over summarising their ambitious written work into Cliff Notes-like briefs, straitjacketing their text-based art to satisfy dire questions like: 'What are the key issues in your practice?'

The conventional artist's statement demands that artists follow a set format (200-250 words), use a single medium (the English language) and

make it uniquely applicable to their own art making; it should be expressive, partially descriptive and completed in the first person, narrating key details and decisions. Outside assistance – a recording device, quotes, an interviewer – is probably best concealed in the final draft. In practice, a ‘successful’ statement asks artists to work like 19th-century pre-modernists: little variation is permitted in form or media; no collaborations; no readymades. Plainly, the contradiction between artists’ unfettered

studio/laptop practices and the constipated activity endorsed in their statements is glaring. The internet may have revolutionised how we absorb information – as Kenneth Goldsmith puts it, ‘we are reading and writing differently: skimming, parsing, grazing, bookmarking, forwarding, retweeting, reblogging, and spamming language’ – but the standard artist’s statement could still be penned with quill and ink.

Throughout the late 20th century artists fought to gain their own voice. One thinks of Yvonne Rainer, Adrian Piper, Mike Kelley, Andrea Fraser: unwilling to play Pollock to anybody’s Greenberg, whose artist/critic partnership boiled down to the critic-as-sage, supplying the words, and the artist-as-Neanderthal, mostly grunting and throwing paint. Hurray for the late-20th-century artists who overcame that patronising, top-down model and excelled at self-verbalisation; but this achievement has morphed monstrously into a one-size-fits-all fixture imposed on all artists, many of whom – when faced with yet another daunting grant application or gallery proposal – find themselves endlessly reminded that, alas, Robert Smithson they are not. And why should they be?

As curator and writer Adam Smythe has written, ‘text accompanying an exhibition seems designed purely to speed up our experience of art’ (*Against Accountancy*, 2014): much garden-variety art writing produces meaning univocally, reducing ideas to a pulp to be rapidly fed to time-strapped art consumers. Today’s finest artist writers seem deliberately to counter this cult of brevity, attempting to slow down the art experience not only by demanding that their audience put in copious reading time but also, for example in Palmer’s blow-by-blow accounts of her protagonists’ thoughts and gestures, by stretching time into a hyperreal slow motion via the skilful shaping of the written word. The standard artist’s statement – concise, to the point, in plain words – offers a shortcut to extracting meaning from art. Must artists collude with the accelerated consumption of their own work?

All restrictions and rules in art production and authorship have been discarded one by one; the artist’s statement should not lag behind. As an alternative, for example, Goldsmith endorses ‘uncreative writing’ whereby readymade text is harvested off the net or elsewhere – as art writers have done since at least the critic Félix Fénéon recast newspaper headlines as poems in his *Novels in Three Lines*, a kind of 1906 version of Twitter. This, alongside any and all writing possibilities – invited co-authors, epistolary text, even the option of not writing at all and instead asking viewers to ‘learn to read art’, to quote Lawrence Weiner – should by now replace the tyranny of the templated artist’s statement, recognisable today as a throwback to the long-gone late 20th century. ■



Katrina Palmer
Reality Flickers 2013

Jennifer Chan
Tristan 2013

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