

Amanda Beech

CAA presentation notes

Special Relationships and The Tyranny of Freedom

Friday 24th February

12.30pm

Los Angeles

This short paper seeks to establish a few questions that aim to tackle that awkward relation between art criticism and artistic practice.

(I want to think specifically as well about the increasing culture of writing that is emerging from artists and this is not just the writing of artists' statements, manifestos and reflections on their own work but also a type of writing that has been more or less institutionalised or at least advocated by the institution in the wake of a European culture of the PhD in arts practice. This is where candidates taking a Doctoral research degree develop their practice over the 3-5 year programme whilst also developing writing alongside this as part of a thesis.)

My abstract points to the relationship between art criticism and art, and I try to focus here on the problem that writing about art, that task of representation has been given such a bad name that any commentary on the art work seems to be charged with an automatic conservatism. And we could say that this is true, since most writing that I identify as being about art is not criticism at all but descriptive, emotional economic supportive material, we could even struggle to call it journalism, by which the art work is the equivalent to the sensitive guest on some chat show, or is on the bandwagon of the usual press junkies that define most media interactions these days. Already we can open a can of worms and begin to annihilate our moral tradition that the artist and art work have more integrity than that.

But what about art criticism?

Art criticism, ironically has shied away from writing *about* art, and in particular I mean that it has tried to avoid a commentary on the art work as an object of scrutiny. When it comes to art theory I can't help but think of that October generation of writers, whose work tied art to philosophy and who created what we know to be the new art history and a new art criticism – a type of writing that was unshackled from the kind of linear dogmatism of art history as well as the decadence of the raconteur art-reviewer.

This type of writing on art created a discourse that seemed to give art a new life, new contexts and new politics. It gave the art of writing about art new life, and

new freedoms to stake out for art, a theory of art and culture, away from some of the standards we associate with both the organisational institutional tradition of statist politics or what was seen to be the political passivity of capitalist bourgeois taste. So writing about art had a new-leftist integrity – this was based in the understanding that writing about art is political, that is has a force in itself, and that different types of writing in both form and content can therefore transform the political.

Ok, well, that's all well and good, but when we look at the presuppositions underpinning the politics of this writing, a few problems emerge.

A key aim for this writing was that it sought to avoid the pitfalls of approaching art as an illustration to theory, or to create a form of writing that spoke for art, or one that layered art up with meaning as if writing were a supplement to art and art were lacking in some way. Alternatively this work sought to escape the problems of representing art in this way or making instrumental or evaluative claims for it that could be developed through capital or standard conditions of power.

It did this by closing the distance between author of the text and the work to produce an enmeshed often psychoanalytical text – the artwork being immanent to the writing. But within this what we see happening is that although these texts included artworks and a lot of writing about individual practices, its work tended moreover to set up theories of the image, and ontologies of language – new schemas for thinking how art produced politics – it produced a kind of writing that highlighted writing as having political agency and this did not rely upon the artwork. The legacy of this writing is that it opened us up to a marvellous scrutiny of culture where we are given the keys to unlock a more egalitarian world of critique, where discussing the design of a lamppost can be as valuable to discussing a Da Vinci. But, what gets interesting about this move is its internal contradiction, where, the methodology of this critical theory embedded the artwork within the text, but ironically by getting closer to the artwork in this way,

this writing is revealed as an agent in and of itself – as distinct and separate from the work. If we take this into consideration, its questionable how much art has got to do with this writing because we could say that the artworks are so embedded they are ultimately the silent vehicle for a writing.

The issue therefore is this – because this writing seeks freedom from representing art, i.e. it is not illustrating art or setting up conditions for its evaluation according to taste, what happens is that it ends up representing it anyhow, despite itself. It establishes its own power – a new legislative force of writing that makes the mistake of thinking that it is doing the opposite. Although these texts articulated a radical dematerialisation of order, a new order gets played out, where this in attempt for a non-representational writing becomes its own form of power.

Power is established precisely in the process of this retraction of representation – in a choreographed withdrawal from subjectivity to the place of analysis and pseudo-scientific methodologies. To open up a brief sketch of the issues here we can look to two points: a) writing becomes unable to put itself into question – or to understand that it legislates taste; and, b) the artwork gets lost. This means that this writing cannot take into account its place within the political because of its interest in transcending it.

The problem that I outline here, is a view that writing is necessary but problematic if we want to write in the context of freedom.

And this logic is repeated as much in the yBA generation that reacted violently against interpretative work by claiming, yes ironically, through a plethora of texts that writing, that thinking was morally suspect and that the only way was philistinism.

Moving on from that we see a tract of art criticism that embodies itself as *art* and identifies itself as performance, where the role of art criticism, art and curation are collapsed into new pluralistic performative identities. (Another attempt to escape the power and authority of writing.) The kind of writing I might refer to would stake out a space of radically subjectivised writing that supports fully the personality of the author, often in gestures of excess and theatricality. But, here we see the contradiction - that this self-consciously performative approach to writing thinks that because this writing is played out as form of art itself - as a subjective and temporal moment, as mere opinion - then evaluations, claims judgements are avoided, or retracted. This is the site of the exuberant apologetic opinion. It's only me. Writing becomes protected by framing itself as an artwork, it is not part of the debate but the subject of it.

In all of this we are reminded of the irony that seems to drive all the positions I have described: that is - that on the one hand writing about art seeks to be political, to have a critical politics, but on the other hand that it accepts with great dissatisfaction, that it supports and develops cultural capital – that it is embedded as and with power. It knows all this and yet it tries to out-manoeuve its position anyway. Here we can say that writing about art has a bad conscience - a type of middle class guilt - it understands that it brings art to the market and plays a part in making artists' careers, but as we have seen, it also attempts to counter or resist this process by mobilising itself away from a representational function.

In all these examples a founding principle is that the vectors of the power of writing and capital are collapsed as one. However should they be implicated in such a way? Is it possible to untie the claims that writing can make from its service for economic accumulation?

These approaches to writing, which are wrapped up in transcending, negating or avoiding the power that writing has for art, do not set writing free from its function as value maker, or cultural arbiter. Nor does they prevent art writing from being

simply a useful handbook for nervous curators and naive art-buyers. This attitude to art theory is didactically exercised in Louise Lawler's proposal for an artwork where she produced a series of matchboxes with snippets of art criticism on them and wanted to disperse them in a private view as a work of art. The authors of the texts didn't allow her to do this for that very fear that arts writing is its own commodity. Too late- this writing is always already commodified. This of course plays out the limits of institutional critique by writing and art, and reflexes back onto that old irony of how art relies upon people writing about it, but it also has seen this writing as its bad truth, where criticism is a rarefied and therefore acceptable form of advertising.

Sadly, it would appear that this self-undermining attitude to art criticism, judgement making and intellectualism has embedded itself as the defining axiom of our time. This is not only evidenced in our quick and plotted history of art criticism but can be seen in artworks and in the attitudes of artists.

However I would argue that the tyranny we face is the tyranny of this discourse itself, that is the principle that we must free ourselves from decision and its consequences. We must let go of the assumption that it is *only writing* that justifies the value of art, as if art were passive in this relationship. Here we see the incorrect idea that writing is the dreary bureaucratic form of management that nevertheless has power, and the art work as a free magical expression that emerges from nowhere. The more we assume this special power of writing against art the more we weaken the work of writing in itself. As such, this is a complete misunderstanding of the operations of both art and writing. My description of this understanding of art and writing is crude but nevertheless it is this principle that has grounded a lot of the work that goes on across the relationship between art and writing that had formed attitudes in the culture for the past decade and more, where writing is powerful but conservative and the art work is passive but special.

In short here are two points:

The work that believes in a freedom beyond itself is made ironic by the conditions of its production.

If we seek to critique the conventions that dominate our qualitative criteria then we must look beyond the language systems we use.

I'd argue that this claim to a formal hierarchy between writing and practice is untenable. In his essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," Davidson writes:

I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure, which language-users acquire and then apply, to cases. And we should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.¹

Artwork as capable of discourse in themselves.

¹ *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Ed. Ernest Lepore. New York: Blackwell, 1986. 433-46.