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All the Better for Being Vague? The Authority of Text

Abstract

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot makes a claim for the superiority of writing over painting: 'Language is a finer medium', she has her character claim, because it is '...all the better for being vague.' (Eliot, 1871:140).

This is a perceived advantage that many artists would find it difficult to agree with as we find the use of text in both academia and in relationship to visual art, to be anything but vague. On the contrary, language (and specifically writing) is the means by which hierarchies of power are established and reinforced and it is crucial in defining and conveying the meaning of images. For artists, this poses particular, well-rehearsed problems as we try to find a path between the 'not-knowing', the uncertainties of the visual, and the authority of the written word.

Rather than becoming trapped in the conventions of authoritative text, this paper argues for a different way of writing in both academia and in the art world at large: one that reflects the processes of visual practice and thinking. Drawing on current experiments in collaborative writing, it argues for forms of texts that are more akin to speech: texts that forgo the authority of the word in favour of approaches that provide a space where uncertain and imperfectly formed ideas can be expressed and tested.

Keywords: text; visual art; collaboration; feminist; authority; uncertainty.

When we first encounter the young Will Ladislaw in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* he has, after a period of indecision as to his future career, taken up the occupation of painter. When we next meet him he is in Rome, a pupil of the German artist, Naumann, and is on the point of abandoning painting in favour of writing. Eliot leads us to believe that this is because he lacks the determination and perseverance required to be a good painter. However, the real reason is revealed in this discussion with Naumann:

“Your painting and Plastik are poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them. Language is a finer medium.”

“Yes, for those who can't paint,” said Naumann.

...[Ladislaw] went on as if he had not heard. “Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection.”

(Eliot, 1871:140).

This exchange turns on its head the usual narrative relating to the pros and cons of image versus writing. As a wordsmith, we should not be surprised that Eliot regards writing as capable of greater subtlety than painting. However, we now take the authority of writing for granted and, even in the era of 'post-truth' and

'alternative facts', this authority is hard to dislodge. Contrary to Ladislav's view, the literalness and fixed meaning embodied in writing supposedly allows no room for ambiguity, whereas visual art is praised precisely because it does *not* insist, but merely implies. Writing tells us things in a more definitive manner than visual art can. Anyone who doubts this only needs to look at the arguments for and against doctoral degrees by practice.

For artists, the relationship between writing and image has, particularly since the absorption of art schools into the university sector, become troublesome. It now seems inseparable from questions of who has the authority to speak, and who is expected to be silent. There are also questions regarding which (or whose) writing becomes privileged and which are ignored. The form of writing, its structure and vocabulary, become crucial elements in conveying cultural importance and authority, and unless a writer becomes fluent with these conventions, their words are unlikely to be taken seriously or be regarded as authoritative.

Why is this important to visual practice? Where artifacts or images are made to inhabit a fine art context, the visual object is seldom given the space (or permission) to exist in its own right. Whether in the gallery or the academy, those in authority, i.e. those with the power to select artists and who provide the means by which art is distributed, demand that image be accompanied by writing. Writing is required from the outset: we must write our work *before* it exists in

order to apply for funding, we must write in order to explain our motivations, to show who we are and what we have done previously. Put bluntly, we are effectively writing fictions as, if we already *know*, what is the point of the investigation? But it doesn't end there. We must then allow others to interpret the objects/images, to tell viewers what to think, and what they should be feeling when they encounter said visual artifact. This plethora of words leaves little or no space for the viewer's, or the work's, voice.

Through this article – which deliberately flouts some of the expectations of authoritative writing by privileging anecdotes and opinions – my intention is to problematize some of the assumptions we make about the relationship between seeing, making, thinking, writing and reading. It will ramble through the mess of words to discuss the way that language (or lack of) controls and influences what we make, what we see and how we establish and maintain hierarchies. It concludes with examples of my own attempts to abandon the authority of writing, to argue for a space for forms of writing that are 'all the better for being vague'. Let me begin with an anecdote.

Language as trap

A few years ago I attended an artists' retreat at Wysing Arts in Cambridgeshire on the theme of 'Art and Writing'. As part of Escalator, the Arts Council's professional development programme for artists in the East of England, the retreat brought together a group of ten artists alongside postgraduate curation

students from the Royal College of Art (RCA). The intention behind this was that by critically engaging with the next generation of international curators, the artists' opportunities would expand. The RCA students' role was to curate a programme of visiting, established, artists and to critically engage with the work of the residency artists. Both visiting and residency artists were required to give presentations on their work.

One of the most striking aspects of this retreat was the marked contrast in the way the RCA students responded to these presentations. Having researched and selected the established artists to come and speak at the retreat, the budding curators responded to their presentations with fulsome discussions and questions. By contrast, the presentations by the residency artists were met with silence. My explanation for this (somewhat contentiously) was that many curators, even those on prestigious international curation courses, lack the confidence to respond to visual work when there is no supporting text to explain it. This is not to suggest that they could not offer an opinion but that the authority that comes through textual validation is how we 'know' when work is 'good' or 'important', and how we know what to say about it. By the end of the residency, my cynical view was confirmed when the students admitted that their silence in the face of us unknown artists arose from their fear of appearing stupid in front of their tutors. Language was perceived as a trap: they were obliged to speak but in so doing they would reveal their ignorance or stupidity.

It is probably not a coincidence that this particular RCA cohort was part of the Aspire programme, an Arts Council England initiative designed to increase cultural diversity in the running of UK arts institutions. The cohort was also young and overwhelmingly female. Following the sexual abuse scandals that filled the headlines in 2017 and 2018, it is finally being publicly acknowledged that class, race and gender are still obstacles to success in hierarchical institutions and the role of language in preserving social, economic and cultural hegemony in the arts should not be overlooked.

Writing Authority

The build-up of anger that led to these revelations and the #MeToo movement came as no surprise. Over recent years I have witnessed a resurgence in the number of young female fine art students who are grappling with issues of language. Most have not self-identified as 'feminist', but they demonstrate an awareness that at a very basic level, language is part of the problem and that on some level it is failing them. Instead, they attempt to find an alternative language in their visual practice which by its very nature, and contrary to Will Ladislav's claims, is far from orderly and is often vague. It could even be argued that the refusal of visual language to be specific, or definite, to deliberately leave itself open to ambiguity, is the very reason it attracts us. Because the visual can ignore the linear structure usually adopted by language, it invites multiple readings. The disorderly eye can go wherever it pleases.

Last year, in one of those moments of coincidence, when I was thinking about three artists I was curating for an exhibition, *The Maxim of Manner*, and of how they were all wrestling with language in one way or another, I was also reading Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Quartet* novels. Whilst the most frequently noted aspect of these novels is their depiction of female friendship, there is a less discussed motif: the role of language in forming identity and the need to find one's voice. By the end of the second book, Lenù, the protagonist, has recognized that language is unstable. Acquiring language, she finds, involves not only defining what one says, but defining who one is. Language becomes Lenù's means of negotiating her way across different social spheres and of understanding the, often hidden, power relationships that obstruct and exclude. In other words, language is simultaneously an escape and a trap.

By the time she reaches her thirties, having left her impoverished background behind her and become a successful author, Lenù has discovered what Virginia Woolf knew in the 1920s, and what Hélène Cixous proposed in the 1970s: that the way that language is used reflects, and is formed by, dominant power structures. Because of this, there are experiences that are beyond its expressive capability (Cixous, 1975). As Dale Spender argues in *Man-Made Language* (1980), until something can be named, until it is brought into being *through* language, and enters language, on some levels it cannot really be said to exist. This morning I learnt from Radio Four that the name 'Redbreast' was apparently given to the robin not because its chest is red but because, in Old English, there

was no word for 'orange'. Orange as a word did not exist in Britain until the fruit began arriving from Spain which raises the question of how many other experiences are there for which there is no name or that have been misnamed? Misnaming is another issue brought to light by the #MeToo movement as some experiences that were clearly misnamed or given euphemistic labels have acquired a different definition. For women therefore, there is still evidently a need to find an *écriture féminine*: a way to speak that voices our experiences and bodies and, until we do, language will continue to fail us.

To revive the arguments of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigary that were of significant interest to many feminist art students a couple of generations ago might be considered a waste of time. I am not the only lecturer to be told by colleagues that discussing feminist approaches is rehearsing something with no contemporary relevance. But this resurgence of young women graduating from art courses, who are unafraid to declare their relationship to language problematic, should make us question language further. It still fails to articulate their lives fully. They are lost for words.

The emergence over recent years of alternative digital spaces in which one could speak or make one's presence felt, may be partially responsible for this renewed engagement with language through writing. It has been something of a shock for many to realize that there is no automatic, egalitarian, right to speak: that some of us are expected to remain silent or to adopt the role of mirror, reflecting

endlessly the illusions that are taken for reality. Stepping beyond these invisible lines can bring the weight of language (and sometimes worse) upon our presumptuous heads, as trolls and their vitriolic abuse remind us that we have stepped beyond the invisible line of what we are, and are not, allowed to say. Nor are these invisible codes confined to our attempts to follow the rules of writing. For some, like the Turkish minister, Bülent Arinc, the mere sound of a woman's voice is a problem and therefore 'She should not laugh loudly in front of all the world and should preserve her decency at all times' (Agence France-Presse 2014), presumably by remaining silent.

Silence, like the void, is not a vacuum waiting to be filled. Witness the way it is often described: we have heavy silences and silences full of meaning. Silence and the void exist because we are afraid to reveal what is really there or because we are full to bursting with unspoken and unformed words that are too feeble to be summoned as representatives of what we really want to say. The intensity of this is unbearable; as George Eliot observed elsewhere in *Middlemarch*, '...if we had a keen vision and feeling...we should die of that roar that lies on the other side of silence' (Eliot 1871:143).

Learning to speak (and write)

How one speaks and uses language betrays social and educational background and, within academia, it is not uncommon for students to experience symptoms of Imposter Syndrome, an internalized belief that one is a fake or intellectual

phony (Clance & Imes, 1978). The cries for help in learning to write in 'academic language' underlines the ways that particular forms of text are seen as a necessary accoutrement to being taken seriously: to belonging, to being authoritative. In their conversational paper, *Inquiring Into Writing: An Interactive Interview*, Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt start to unpick and to challenge the unwritten rules of authoritative writing. What is also significant is Gale's awareness (achieved *through* the writing process) of how his own sense of Imposter Syndrome, derived from his working-class background, has driven him to use language as a cloak: 'So is it that when I am writing I am trying to prove myself, to identify myself as the "academic" who knows the rules of the language game and who is able to play the game as proficiently and eloquently as the rest?' (Gale and Wyatt 2006: 1123).

Gale compares his own sense of inadequacy with Wyatt's confident, more relaxed use of language, which he attributes to Wyatt's more privileged education and social background. For Gale, like Lenù, language is a means of escape but it is an escape that has come at a price, that of losing one's own voice.

I am insecure in the academy, so what do I do? I read and absorb all this stuff, theories, theorists, and then I use it: with my friends, with my students, with my doctoral student colleagues and in my writing. It informs my writing style. Like Emma said, I am using these other voices to say me. I am using their language to express me. I am insecure so I will use this language to

identify myself.

(Gale and Wyatt 2006: 1127).

Whilst the struggle to find an academic voice is a common phenomenon across subject disciplines, in fine art courses both undergraduate and postgraduate students feel they must acquire an additional dialect: the 'artspeak' so often associated with fine art and the frequently obtuse cultural theory that comes with it. On the long road to becoming a good writer it is necessary, advises Rebecca Solnit (2016), to 'read good writing'. This involves acquiring the confidence and skills to critically engage with the *form* of text – not just textual analysis but considerations of why some texts resonate more than others, or are simply a pleasure to read.

Confused by the texts they encounter, many students reach for a Thesaurus in order to write in a style that they believe conveys academic seriousness and authority. In practice this frequently results in texts that are devoid of meaning, even to their author. Others react by resisting engaging with texts altogether. It is not my intention here to discuss the varied forms of 'theoretical texts' (i.e. those discussing ideas), as this is too diverse a subject. However, it is important to consider the influence of texts produced in professional contexts. Of these, the promotional and interpretive material generated by galleries and critics deserve particular attention, as these are probably the first texts that students, artists and the public are likely to encounter in relation to contemporary art.

Authority and power

It is stating the obvious that in selecting artists for exhibition, galleries and curators are telling us who and what are important. When choosing which exhibitions to write about, critics use the medium of writing to establish and reinforce these hierarchies. The conformity in the way that language is used underlines their unwritten message of authority. Perhaps it is this authority, which exposes our inadequacies when we do not (or cannot) respond to work in the way the text tells us we should, that alienates us not only from text but also from the works themselves.

Critiquing artists' statements and gallery press releases is not new. In 1998 the Bank collective's work *Fax-Bak* awarded marks out of ten to gallery press releases, annotating them in order to draw attention to both the pomposity of language and the poor grammar. '[...] The endless nonsense they contained meant that we could be brutally honest about their conceits, assumptions and errors to the point of outright rudeness, under the none-too convincing cover of offering free advice' (Tate, 2016).

However, the recent research by the artist Sharon Kivland shows there has been little change in the style of texts produced by galleries. Since January 2017 Kivland has been collecting, and posting on Facebook, phrases from artist biographies and press releases, all issued by influential galleries and journals.

The impact wrought by her subtle change in the use of personal pronouns from 'he/she' to 'I', as in the two examples below:

I chart so far unexplored forms of knowledge and different systems of imagination, and converge a millennial drama of ethical struggles, hybris and curse into works that aim to grasp history by means of the hidden nature of things.

(31 August, 2017).

My work is both meaningful in historical terms, reminiscent of Roman civilization ending at Hadrian's wall, and in a contemporary political sense.

(11 September, 2017).

These really need no further comment but, apart from the obviously poor grammar, which makes it meaningless, what is more important is that these texts carry the weight of expertise, knowledge and power. Like those annotated by Bank, they could be viewed as representative of 'corporate authoritarianism' (Bank 1999), employed to reinforce the power of the institution and to rebuff any questioning of its judgement. By producing something apparently meaningless masquerading as meaningful, it could be argued that galleries are deliberately using writing to maintain an aura of mystique around their own knowledge. The only other plausible explanation is that such texts are fabricated to sound meaningful in order to hide the curator's own insecurities in the face of a visual

language they cannot 'read'. They have no words.

Confronted by such texts (because this is obviously what proper art writing sounds like), is it surprising that students start to mimic the tone and language in their own texts? When we encourage them to think about how their work might be received, they recall the gallery texts and interpret this as a requirement to tell us what to think, about the impact their work has on us. Yet they simultaneously believe ('Why, sometimes I believe in six impossible things before breakfast' (Carroll, 1907: 61)) that the work should not require text because the visual speaks for itself.

So students learn very early that the ability to write and speak about their work in an identifiable format and language is necessary if one wants to be considered a 'great' (or even 'serious') artist. In order to achieve this they read artists' statements, gallery press releases, critical reviews in respected publications and soon begin to use those familiar phrases 'My work investigates...', 'My work interrogates...', or 'my work disturbs...' and 'The viewer feels...' 'The viewer experiences...' In spite of the claims that art comes from a place beyond language, they are happy to use language to make claims for the work.

Exercises in group critiques, where the artist is instructed to be silent while the remaining participants respond to a visual artifact, can be painful for all concerned. The artist has to suppress their need to explain and the 'critics', like

the RCA students, are nervous of saying the 'wrong' thing and appearing ignorant and/or stupid. Ironically, when running crits along these lines with groups of postgraduate students, I have found that it is usually those who argue most strongly against the need to write about their work who struggle to remain silent. Language is clearly necessary to tell us what their work is 'about' and what it is doing to us.

As I warned at the beginning, I have contradicted myself and will no doubt continue to do so. Artists rely on words, spoken and written, to understand how our work is received. As a friend's perceptive daughter once observed, 'Art is just chatting...' so I am not arguing that art and writing should be divorced, or that we should not bother to make it comprehensible, but that there needs to be a shift in what we expect artists' writing to look like and what, as artists, we accept when others write about our work.

There is, I think, a fundamental issue here in that we are not clear enough in understanding *why* we write. In persuading students to engage with it enthusiastically we need to convince them that it is part of a learning process, a way to understand their own work. This is relatively uncomplicated. It is when we encounter writing in a professional sphere or propose writing in an academic context that the issues arise.

As lecturers and artists, we spend too little time critiquing visible and invisible

power structures. How often, when confronted by texts such as those Kivland addresses, do we say to students: 'This is not only very badly written, it is also ridiculous'? We tend to ignore the role of writing in professional contexts when teaching fine art and spend insufficient time encouraging students to critically engage with the *use* of language. On the occasions that I have directly addressed this issue, being frank about my own experiences as a reader and writer, there has been a collective sigh of relief. Making it acceptable to speak in one's own voice opens up possibilities for writing, and the process of writing itself, to become somewhere we can think and explore ideas free from the burden of needing to be authoritative.

I have long thought that one of the major problems is the way that language is used to insist on the power of visual art. In our expectation that an encounter with art should be transforming, we set it up to fail. Galleries tell us that their exhibiting artists are 'leading', 'significant' or 'important', or if less established, that they will be so in the future. All exhibitions are successful and there is never any admission of failure, let alone mediocrity. This hyperbole is the malevolent spirit sitting on every art student's (and artist's) shoulder. What might happen if we overcame our reluctance to admit that, at best, most of the work we encounter is merely interesting, stimulating or pleasant? Perhaps our expectations should be more akin to the way we judge, say, a book or film, where we seem content to accept something as merely 'good'? And what might happen if we accepted that our own visual offerings are not particularly significant or important?

Writing to think

So can we find another way to write, to make text work in different ways? Since I recognized writing as part of my practice, I have been attempting to find a different tone – one that eschews the certainty and authority normally attached to text. The watertight argument, supported with endless footnotes and references is not relevant to art practice. Instead, I am looking for a tone that is more fallible, that reflects my own uncertainties, comings and goings, and acknowledges that some ideas are imperfectly formed, because the demand for certainty becomes another way to silence. If I do not write and make public my experiences and thoughts until I am absolutely certain of their infallibility, I will never write.

Another difficulty associated with writing that 'is all the better for being vague' has been overcoming my fear of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. For, in writing that is fallible, text becomes more like speech, reflecting the conversations through which ideas start to take shape. But unlike speech, once in the public domain, we cannot usually correct, clarify, or elaborate. If the reader misunderstands, I cannot say 'that's not what I meant'. In trying to compensate for this, the text becomes more rambling, drawing closer to the way that visual work is formed. It is re-worked, refined, abandoned and then sent out in its imperfect state to see what comes back.

Recognizing the importance of conversation in forming text, I began writing

collaboratively. Conversations on trains with fellow artist XXXXX developed into conference papers and then into a chapter for a book. Perhaps it was the co-authoring that made me less nervous of how the work would be received, for if our writing was criticized we could hide behind each other. What was (and continues to be) an easy and natural process with XXXX has progressed to other textual collaborations.

In 2016 I co-authored two papers as part of XXXXXX, a project involving postgraduate staff and alumni from Norwich University of the Arts and the XXXXXXX. Part of the rationale for XXXXXXX had been to develop a curatorial approach that more closely resembled the process of making artwork, bringing the acceptance of 'failure' and 'not-knowing' that is embedded in art practice into the field of curation and installation of work. It seemed appropriate to extend this approach into our writing and, embracing the key focus of the project, dialogue between artists, the first paper emerged from a three-way process between the curators (myself and XXXX), and XXXXX (an exhibiting artist and one of my Ph.D students). Written during the planning stages of the exhibition, *XXXXX (Part I)* (XXXXXXXXX 2016) was published in the on-line journal, XXXXXX. We used a fairly straightforward process whereby texts bounced back and forth between the three of us before being amalgamated into a single text with one voice. As this article preceded the show, we tried to reflect the thinking behind the project, and our different experiences as curators and curated. However, conscious of a sense of responsibility to the other participants, I kept many of my reservations

about the project to myself – not only in the text itself, but also in the conversations with other participants.

Once the project was completed, XXXXX and I decided that the second, follow-up paper should focus on our perspective as curators, taking the form of a dialogue between the two of us where our individual voices could be identified. I was keen to write a more honest, questioning account of the project, and hoped that making our single voices identifiable would enable me to voice my concerns without speaking on behalf of anyone else. Being outside, or on the margins, of the institution loosely supporting the project, XXXXXX and I found that writing the text gave us a voice and a way to redress the power relationships that had made our roles so difficult to navigate.

The multiple issues XXXXX raised concerning artist-led projects, competing responsibilities, hierarchies and power relations (institutional and individual) for us, as curators, came to overshadow the project itself and we have struggled to make some sort of sense of what happened. Because of this, and the multiple voices involved, this article presents our own individual perspectives and adopts the conversational format to reflect both the many discussions we have subsequently shared and our own continually changing views of the project.

(XXXXXXX 2016).

This venture into collaborative writing has been liberating and is being further explored as part of an ongoing collaboration with XXXXX. In this process, where we co-author films and photographs as well as text, the process of writing operates as part conversation part thinking space. Writing is slower than speaking, and is therefore a more deliberate process. We write, carefully crafting words to be both speculative and coherent but, just as carefully, avoiding claims to authority. This is particularly important in this collaboration as we already occupy hierarchical roles as supervisor/student. By-passing the normal circumstances whereby XXXX submits his texts to me for comment, we offer each other fragments of writing and the other responds – not by altering or questioning the text but by offering thoughts and ideas prompted by the content of the writing, the images we share and the conversations that arise. This allows us to build the text organically and, importantly, becomes a place where we can discuss the questions that are generated through the visual practice.

How interesting these writings are to others is something we have yet to determine. They do, however, feel as though they are inching closer to Will Ladislav's claim for a language that is 'all the better for being vague'. Possibly because the space these writings occupy, as an artwork, is indeterminate. The writing does not explain the work, it does not have an

'argument' or point to make, nor does it make any claims for what it or the work 'does'.

This article first took shape nearly three years ago. It exists, like my visual practice, as a record of thinking in a particular time and space and, in an abbreviated form has had preliminary outings in research forums. However, submitting it for publication has been dependent on undertaking certain transformations. I have hesitated over this. If I am confident in my assertion that there is a need for a less authoritative, watertight form of academic writing in my field, I should resist altering it. But then the writing would remain virtually invisible. Undertaking these revisions has, I believe, resulted in a loss of spontaneity, and indeed my voice, making the text more stilted. In some ways this does indeed prove my point – we can only criticize existing hierarchies once we are accepted into them, and have joined their ranks.

Endnotes

¹ For some reason the experience of encountering one thing and then finding it crops up elsewhere repeatedly is known as the *Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon*

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