

Meaningfulness

A survey of art writing practice solicited and edited by Anne Lesley Selcer

DEDICATED TO KATHLEEN FRASER AND KEVIN KILLIAN

Genevieve Quick

My writing acts as research in technology, media, gender, and identity. Writing forces me to dive deep into other artists' practices that tangentially relate to my own studio explorations. Through writing I get to peer at an idea from around the corner from my own obsessions or predilections. In my studio practice I intentionally overflow myself with too many ideas and images to create a breadth of options that allows me to develop non-linear and surprising relationships. In contrast, in my writing I have been trying to force myself to articulate an idea as clearly as I possibly can. However, now I am interested in playing with language to create a multiplicity of meanings, such that time and reality can shift and blur. Reading science fiction by authors of color is important to me right now as politically minded fantasy. While there is a need for straightforward, rigorous critique right now (i.e. clearly stating what is wrong), imagination for me is also productive, as it is generative. Fantasy dares to put forth models for world building, alternative approaches, and speculations on the future.

from "Latin American Circle Presents: An Evening of Performances," *Daily Serving*, May 17, 2017

Fifty years ago, in conversations with Robert Smithson, Allan Kaprow referred to museums as mausoleums, and proposed the Guggenheim be emptied of all of its contents and presented as a sculptural form. Today, we still struggle with bringing life into museums. In particular, performance work can be conceptually fraught in the museum when artists have circumvented the commodification and rarefaction of art by creating ephemeral works designed for the context of the everyday and the accessibility of public space. However, museums can also archive works for future generations to appreciate (as has happened with Kaprow's documents at the Guggenheim), give artists their due institutional respect, and even disrupt traditional museological models that prioritize stasis and physically disengaged viewers. While the museum context benefited some performances in "Latin American Circle Presents: An Evening of Performances" at the Guggenheim on May 5, it also formalized works that were intended to reverberate off of the social and political life of public space, drawing on larger questions of how major institutions support site-specific performance works and how the museum attempts to engage its public through event-based programming.

Astria Suparak

My creative projects (which include curating, writing, and art-making), often focus on subcultures and misunderstood histories. Since moving to the Bay Area a few years ago I've been researching and reconsidering common assumptions (including mine) about identity and authenticity, particularly in relation to ethnicity, linguistics, and food. It's important for me (and you) to foreground the work and experiences of women of color and other marginalized perspectives.

from *HALF-FANCY, HALF-JUNGLE*, 2nd floor projects, 2017

This isn't an issue of free speech or the right of artists to tackle particular subjects. It's not about the quality of the art. The more crucial questions are: How many of the opportunities given to Jimmie Durham were from people who thought he was speaking about Native issues from

an authentic, personal experience? How many of those institutions and curators felt good about themselves for including who they believed was a Native American artist, and diversifying their majority white line-ups? When will institutions create real connections and long-term commitments to brown and black voices?



Native American "families longing to be near their children camped in tipis outside this boarding school," Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota, January 1891, collection of National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.

Aruna D'Souza

I look at art now to teach me how to be less of an asshole in the world. Sounds flip, but I'm very serious about it—I search out the work that, in its conceptual, formal, material, and ethical propositions makes space for a loving, fierce, expansive, generous, and just mode of being. That work can take the form of extremely research-based work, or "protest art," or art that in its content takes on questions of political resistance and, at its most essential, survival. But as often it looks like Alma Thomas's purely abstract paintings, or Ruth Asawa's woven wire sculptures, or other works that make their points in glancing and subtle ways. I look for art that is gentle or angry, that is uncompromising or expansive, that is focused on what's wrong with the now or that offers a vision of a future—or, even better, that is all these things at once. I am an art critic, but with few pretensions to the title—I write in order to be a perpetual student, not an expert.

from "A Feminist Diary," *Canadian Art*, February 19, 2019

Alma Thomas once said, "Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man." It would be easy to hear in her words an echo of Matisse's infamous remark that he dreamed of making art that was "a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair" for a tired businessman: a palliative, an escape, a retreat into bourgeois complacency. But Thomas's paintings, the art workshops she taught in neighbourhood community centres, her garden—all these taken together suggest to me, that her paintings are, emphatically, not mere escapes. Rather, they are respites—breaks from the action, not flights from them. To my eye Thomas's work, like Howardena Pindell's abstract paintings, which she has referred to as "Tylenol for the Trump Era," and like so much of the work I am most interested in looking at right now, seems less like an apolitical retreat from the harsh realities of her political moment than an act of nurturing and care for a community stretched to its limit.

Anne Lesley Selcer

Collectively looking implies a community of sense which feels something like a vestige of a "sensuous communi-

ty," that not-forthcoming utopia or fantasy of the vanquished commons. Language opens a way to be in my senses with others, in *our* senses, our sense—it's a way to be at the party. The best art writing feels like poetry against philosophy, or like philosophy gone gorgeous or resistant. As a teen I encountered art writing and distinctly wondered, *how on earth could anyone know that by seeing that?* Thus I fell under the thrall of theōria, but misread as poetry. I have the memory of discovering Gary Indiana's writing between graphically attractive pink covers at the Columbus, Ohio downtown public library and being filled with deep feelings of lust and relief, "*this is what a person can do.*" I am obsessed with representation, the myriad ways representation fails, but also constitutes life; I often write about aesthetics and politics. I make work as a poet and occasionally use other mediums. Using language to create and to critically think opens new channels in each. My poet's recalcitrance introduces conceptual and formal risk to my art writing. When I was writing my books, the content of both forms of writing dovetailed into one another. I love writing by artists the best. I am currently reading everything Ariella Azoulay writes. She creates anti-colonial discourse around photography and representation. I also recently found a beautiful book of philosophy by François Laruelle called *The Concept of Non-Photography*. I also love Hilton Als, Hito Steyerl, Susan Sontag, Maria Fusco and John Kelsey. The hybridity of the French Feminists set an example for irreverence, depth, genre-bending and jouissance; feminism's losing me a bit lately, but jouissance is mine forever. I read everything I can get my eyes on on the detention centers at the border right now. Being present to the US currently consumes massive resources of my interior life. That's our shared sense in June, 2019.

from "Being Desire [on Juliana Huxtable's book *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*]," *Jacket2*, May 24, 2018

Let's try this: The self is outside now, held in one hundred or one thousand communication receptors—a face, a pout of lips, light on legs and pointed toes, sent / received. The self is social as ever in its isolation to work, screen, its own personal domestic economy; the domestic realm is punctured by images galore, superabundant info, and sooo much language. As much as the internet is the agora, the polis, the marketplace, the café, the club, the gallery and the library—now all accessible from within the bedroom—it is an apparatus for producing the self. We can no longer talk about the self, we need to talk about the selfie. Because the self has been ensorcelled by the screen. Because social life is in the midst of a dramatic reorganization both materially and conceptually, and the main medium of this reorganization is a gigantic representation machine which is also a gargantuan gazing machine. Because we carry subjectivity in our pockets, office equipment on our backs. I want to call it the internet, but it is more like what the internet makes possible: a complex matrix of the tech industry, the stock market, credit scoring, YouTube likes, twitter bots and of course, social media. "If the primary tool of biopolitics was the census, perhaps we can consider the paradigmatic tool of necropolitics to be the algorithm," says Micha Cárdenas. It's not new. It is the acuminated tip of modernism tagging or labeling an already-sorted world. On a different artist, I wrote, "To imagine the self in a box, as an icon, setting preferences, adding friends, sharing links, being redirected, seeking out jobs and friends

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and lovers and apartments...is to continually frame and reframe binaries of ugliness and beauty, blackness and whiteness, the abject and the body, the human and the less-than-human."

Claudia La Rocco

I write about art because it's here. Except when/until it isn't. Like us. That's maybe a too-cute answer, but it covers (like a stupidly thin sheet of ice) a very big set of mixed up ideas (like a murky depth of water shot through with dim rays of light) about permanence & impermanence and presence & absence. Two [sic] things I seem to be forever worrying at. And criticism, because it's as well a worried at (and contested, and misunderstood, and etc.) mode of art making, is a great place to chase one's tail while also chasing other, even less obtainable things. "Art making" is key here: no thanks to writing or reading "art writing" that isn't also throwing its hat into the ring. The urgency of the attempt, even (especially?) when it fails, is the important thing. The necessary thing.

from "It will still all happen," *Affidavit*, August 13, 2018

For days after seeing Variations on Themes from Lost and Found: Scenes from a Life and other works by John Bernd, I listened to one of the songs in the score on repeat: New Order's "Age of Consent," released in 1983. The lyrics are painful, ending with a long repeat of the phrase "I've lost you." Yet the song is intensely alive, buoyant (that word again). When I listen to it I think of the dancers racing up and downstage in the small Stanford studio, punctuating their runs with these space-eating leaps that almost land them in the front row of the audience. And I think of one of Bernd's simple, evocative drawings: one line bisecting the page, two diagonal lines stretching from the bottom corners into that line, flanking six irregular little rectangles: a road, one long passing lane, reaching into the horizon, where we never shall.

Brian Karl

I write about art as part of an ongoing effort to make a better world. I return again and again to asking what motivates the choices made by individuals in creating new things and by institutions that choose to support and promote those works. While my writing about art is more analytic, and other creative work I generate (these days, primarily moving images) can be said to be more synthetic, hopefully all of the work I produce shows both characteristics. Because I'm concerned about the larger world and the histories of how we got to be living in the physical and social circumstances we currently find ourselves, I'm currently reading for the third or fourth time about Ishi, the last of the Yahi tribe in Northern California, as a particularly poignant and well documented episode of modernity and settler colonialism overwhelming indigenous peoples and cultures in the part of the world I presently live and work (as elsewhere). I'm also reading a lot about the Anthropocene—it seems as an ongoing necessity to keep thinking about how this precarious world we inhabit is intensely changing.

from "Ralph Eugene Meatyard's 'American Mystic'" *Art-Agenda* April 20, 2017

His decision to cover his models' faces denies not only individuality but intimacy. These are not the enticing and disinhibiting masks of Rio Carnival but darkly libidinal occlusions and projections, shot through with hints of interpersonal failure. Their startling uncanny suggests a crepuscular American Gothic mythology akin to horror movies, or—given the all-white subjects and basic, Midwestern Americana settings—the Ku Klux Klan. The artist also wrought other "masks" through composition and technique: blurring subjects' faces with shadow, movement, intervening objects, and bodies inclined away from a fuller view, as with a boy's face half-erased by the grillwork in front of a mausoleum in *Untitled* (1955).

Leora Fridman

When I write, I am invested in entanglement. I think: how can language bind us in a way that makes room for more stories? How can language accelerate honest solidarity? As a poet and writer with some background in fiction writing and journalism, I approach art writing to continuously fold information together. As a multilingual

queer Mexican American Jew, I thread a multiplicity of realities and histories. And as writer and artist consistently in collaboration with other artists, activists, and organizations, I see my work as inextricable from relationship and from social, environmental and racial justice issues of the present. I write about art in an attempt to enfold experience, entangle experience, describe and inscribe without any belief that I can generalize beyond my own experience. I'm invested in art as a research practice, and research-based practices of writing that explore porousness and entanglement as contemporary states, particularly when it comes to climate apocalypse and the ills of late-stage capitalism. This investment is informed by my years writing inside a chronically ill body and informed by thinkers including Johanna Hedva, Esme Weijin Wang, Anne Boyer, Eleni Stecopoulos, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mia Mingus.

from "All Good Quiets Begin This Way," *Living Room Light Exchange*, forthcoming publication, Fall 2019

My senses feel more alert from the constant looping of questions with questions, my body activated by the sense of unsettling. One person is not answering another. Instead we try to sense toward one another's bodies, tentative, our own awareness of what Weefur terms "a collective proprioception." Soon we break from the formal gathering but continue to speak in clumps, sitting and standing but still moving in similar worlds: this living room, these artists and humans and cooling night. A cognizance remains of the methodologies we are using to move. A hushed watchfulness, a posture facing the rules we meet.

Brandon Brown

Writing about art has been adjacent to my work as a poet for a long time, and often they almost coincide. If I write anything, it's likely to try and better understand something that is confusing or obscure to me, through a combination of study, chance, and intuition. The intuition that things don't connect but correspond, that the abyss between the protest and the best ABBA songs is, while immense, not unassimilable. My earliest friends were painters, and they modeled for me how to attend to the minor, the meaningless, the ornamental, the gestural; how to savor these things and take them seriously. This approach continues to delight me, and delight is a rare and precious thing in our present circumstances. I don't think the artwork or the poem is going to bring about a more just or livable world, by any stretch. And yet I relish the capacity of the poem or the artwork to provide a *glimpse* of what that more just, better world might be, look like, or sound like.

from "Pet Sounds," *Open Space*, May 2, 2019

The *Triumph of Death* is not like *Pet Sounds* or *Pet Sounds*. It does not offer beauty and terror in a composite, covertly utopian masterpiece of melody and harmony, nor does it face this fiery trash world with affirmation and refusal in equal measure. I mean, it is a fucked up and hilarious masterpiece of its own. Perhaps my favorite detail is the skeleton riding a hurdy-gurdy, making sweet catchy melody while the wheels crush the maxillofacial bones of some peasant. There's a lot to love about *The Triumph of Death*. Its scale is so expansive, as if Brueghel had made a list of the most transgressive figures to show suffering the sentence of death common to us. Troubadours, cardinals, sleeping pilgrims: sweethearts of the grave.

Emma Bolland

A confession: I don't write about art, I write as art—even if at times an idea or a specificity of an art that is not writing enters my texts as a preoccupation. I don't name my writing in terms of genre, but simply struggle with 'writing'. My recent book *Over, In, and Under* has been variously categorised as poetry, essay form, autofiction, or simply 'hybrid'. Similarly my collaborative work with Helen Clarke, *Sh! fLight!* (a score), has been performed in visual arts, literary, and academic contexts, and the published version named as both art writing and poetry. For a while now I have been considering the relations between ideas of silence and the possibility of a post traumatic language that might be explored *via* strategies of translation. Not just between languages, but also between different systems of writing, making, and performing, in which 'tongue' is not only language, but also an action, an object, a tone. I make no distinction

between my writing and my other modes of practice; they are each part of the other. Right now I'm working on a long text and a companion 'essay' film—both a translation and poetic writing through of Louis Delluc's screenplay for the lost impressionist film *Le Silence* (1920). I employ an 'expanded' idea of screenwriting; the relations between text and film fluid, discursive, problematic. It is a 'literature in flux', to quote Claudia Sternberg—excerpts of drafts published as poetry, academic article, performed as live film narration. It has various titles, 'The Iris Opens / The Iris Closes', 'Blink', and others. For me, reading is also practice. I think of Daniela Cascella, who has been annotating the same book for a number of years—reading matter becomes reading object. I'm drawn to texts that, in different ways, articulate trauma. On my desk: Vahni Capildeo's *Skin Can Hold*, Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women*, Nathalie Léger's *Supplément à la vie de Barbara Loden*, Claudia Rankine's *DON'T LET ME BE LONELY: an American Lyric*, Ella Freeman-Sharpe's *Dream Analysis* (a 1937 first edition published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf that I picked up for peanuts); by my bed, Ann Quin's fragments and stories. An important press for art writing and artist's writing is Sharon Kivland's MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE—I have shelves of their output. I'm a bad reader, dipping in and out, letting my focus drift, rarely finishing things. Performances of texts are also texts, in that the space of the performance is a different kind of page. I saw Harry Josephine Giles perform their sequence *Abolish the Police* the other week—the tones, modulations, eye contact, were another layer of language. Writing—and reading—are also bound up in friendship, love, and community. Brian Lewis, Nell Osbourne, Hilary Reid White, Sharon Kivland, Helen Clarke, Jazz Linklater, Sarah Bernstein, Craig Batty, Roy Claire Potter, so many others—sharing, supporting, coming together, making things happen—in reading, writing, research, praxis, we are nothing without each other.

collaged from "OR IN THE WAY WE WRITE IN A DREAM. Do you see?" *Corridor8*, February 5, 2018

...for the second time, I dream about this article (for which the deadline looms, for which I have nothing, despite my demanding of the publication that I should write it); but in the hypnagogic transit, my dream, my fantasy of writing escapes me... I roll over, close my eyes, grab its tail. [...] ...I try to enumerate the ways in which artists may write, but even this, why must we have these lists, these bloody lists to explain ourselves as writers, to explain ourselves as artists who are writers, when: 'here are the fucking words'. [...] ...let me reassure you: I am not discounting an art writing that is an art criticism, or a creative journalism, or asserting a hierarchy of inventiveness or craft or any other quality or non-quality, or claiming that boundaries and intersections of and between various modes of writing are ever clear, or that writing as art cannot or does not engage with art histories and criticisms of art, or even that as artists we also write about something that is, in part, outside of us... <exasperates self at feeling the need to be conciliatory>. An instance: Jeanne Randolph writes of ficto-criticism as friendship in relation to artists and community, a subtlety that defies risks of relational-reduction in a writing about or alongside... some of my best friends are writing-along-siders, indeed, I occasionally do it myself...and I could add more caveats, continue to apologise. [...] I am subjective, and a malcontent, insecure about my value, my place in all these things. [...] In my first dream of writing, the article remained obscure, not giving up its shape. I roamed the basements of a large villa, perhaps in the Italian style. The sort of place I imagine other people go. Figures emerged from shadows, glancing at me then moving on, convening amongst themselves and speaking words I could not hear. Claire, Maria, (not the first time I have dreamed about Maria—once the 'dream-she' ran at me with a giant pencil, crowned with an enormous blue rubber, a dildo of erasure, smooth and almond-scented—this again when I was struggling to write), Sharon, Joanna, other writers I admire, murmuring together in an exclusive half-light (and wearing such LOVELY COATS—oh, their elusive, grammatical bodies). I woke up sweating, empty... [...] I think I will no longer call myself an art writer. I will simply be an artist and a writer, writing without writing somehow—or in the way we write in a dream. Do you see? DO YOU SEE?