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FINNISH ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS 160 YEARS

# An Artist's Text Book

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FINNISH ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS  
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## Intro

This book is about writing, from my point of view as a visual artist.

All artists need to write on a great number of occasions today, whether they like it or not. Many do not, and many wish they could write more easily. Complaints are heard about the art schools, where there is often little or no time for the actual teaching of writing as a subject – by artists who share the students’ concerns.

I really enjoy writing. Alongside my other work, I use it to find out about things I didn’t know, or more about those I think I know. I don’t write to end the discussion, or to explain with certainty how visual work is to be understood. One form of art can never truly be translated by another. That’s our luck.

In early 2005, I organized a workshop for the doctoral program at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki and gave two lectures on the subject of artists’ writing. My preparation was extensive. A period of intense reading and writing eventually led to the first version of the present text.

The lectures were written to be heard and not read. Adapting them to a book format made certain changes necessary. When I return to a text after a time, there are always words and phrases and thoughts that pop out of the page and ask to be optimized. I have tried to do all this with care. I have also tried to avoid the temptation to do extensive re-organization

or re-writing. My intention was not to create a new work but to stay true to the original spirit of the text while preparing it to be read in silence at leisure. For the workshop, I had also prepared an anthology of texts to read. This is present here in the form of a reading list at the end of the book. I have added a book by Tacita Dean, who should have been in the original text but wasn't. I therefore propose to you, dear reader, to look up her writing and decide for yourself what it is. It's worth it.

The book attempts both to analyse some artists' writing and to give practical tips and inspiration for how to write, based on my own story and experiences. It is not without contradictions. I hope it will have an interest for anyone who writes, or wants to write, whether artist or not. If sometimes I might seem naive or self-centered, well, I do hope it can be seen as a virtue!



I am a Swede who lives in Germany. When I lectured in Finland, I was asked to do it in English. With regard to the subject of this text, it may seem odd that it was written in a second language. This has a special interest, however. Given the internationalization of the art world, artists from all over the world are using English for their verbal communication today. It is different and more complicated to write in a different language than one's own, certainly, but a serious attempt to do it can also open possibilities which one may not have been aware of before. In the second part of this book, I analyse texts by four extraordinary artists-writers. Two of them wrote in a language not their first. Finally, I can't deny that the very foolishness of the endeavour attracted me a great deal. Many of my projects have been started in the same way.

I would like to thank Andrew Shields in Basel for his sensitive work in making sure that the language used is proper English while still being my English.

I'm also grateful to professor Jan Kaila in Helsinki for inviting me to do this work in the first place, and for supporting the idea of its publication.



## The decisive text

Today's artists can't escape explaining themselves, and they can't escape writing. Already in art school, you will have to put a great many words together to describe what your work is about, and even more so after. You will always need to be ready to express yourself about the work, whether it exists in the real world or is just a shadow in your imagination, in order to be included in exhibitions or to get money for production or living. Very often, the words will have to appear on paper or screen.

With no escape from writing, you have to ask yourself how to do it, and what to aim for? Who is in control? How do I take control? What is good writing and when is writing bad?

I always thought of myself as a visual artist. However, since 1981, I have written and published a substantial number of texts. I always loved this alternative form of expression. The texts were mainly written in Swedish, with some examples in English or French, and many with translations.

Typically, these pieces are short essays or articles; on art, music, architecture. They have appeared in exhibition catalogues for myself and others, in newspapers and magazines. Many were commissioned. I rarely say no when invited to write on some subject. I am too curious

to see what will come out of me, if I accept an offer to write about a subject, even when it is unfamiliar. I was always convinced that ideas will develop during the act of writing, and I want to be there to greet them. I only need to find some starting point. Sometimes, it's as if it happens by itself, never mind all the preliminary work that had to be thrown away, in order for this surprising action to take place. I am deeply fascinated by the act of writing as such.

A few years ago I was invited to give a lecture on my “Hebdomeros” project in Paris, at a symposium on Artists’ Writings. Later I received the publication with the collected papers of the conference. It’s a thick book. A great many art historians present their detailed research about various topics. I am the only artist present. The only one who is speaking for himself, that is. In my view, there are important differences to be found between the roles of an artist and a scholar. Both roles are interesting – but can they be joined?

The research I have done for this text has been of a much more random character than the art historians at the French symposium could ever have allowed themselves. I can permit myself to be inconclusive. It’s an artist’s prerogative – random research has always been a favourite technique of mine. My aims are active, not reactive.

My original inspiration to become an artist came from a text. When I was fifteen years old, I read the American dadaist Man Ray’s story of his life, *Self Portrait*<sup>1</sup>. I became entranced by the wonder of this story, by the possibilities this text painted for what could – perhaps – be a life. At that age, there is no true limit for what your life may become. Growing older, perspectives change.

What matters here is the importance of the story of the artist, written by himself – the way Man Ray had taken control of the appearance of his life and work! The way a text can trigger a chain of events.

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1 Ray, Man: *Self Portrait*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston 1963. *Självporträtt*, translation into Swedish by Magnus Hedlund and Claes Hylinger, Bo Cavefors Bokförlag, Lund 1976.

By chance, I had read a particular passage quoted in a magazine. It was about how Man Ray had been invited to provide a film for a Dada festival, with just a few days to go, and how he concocted it in his darkroom by exposing nails directly on film stock – and the uproar that ensued. I immediately knew I had to get that book.

An artist has the ambition to influence people. To make them curious, to inspire them, to point out directions, to help others see things in some particular way, to criticize and to analyse life and society. Man Ray made me excited about his attempt to do all this, through the way he put words together to communicate his version – his vision – his verbal painting of what his life had been. During the writing of his book, he will have asked himself endless questions about alternative choices. It took him about fifteen years to complete. Still, he must have had a sense of what was to be the core of his text that remained with him all this time. Every writer needs to have a sense of direction, some basic idea and a vision, even if he or she does not at first know where to find the road that will lead there. In the case of Man Ray, the guiding vision is perhaps summed up in his words to his publisher some months before the book's release:

Inspiration, not information, is the general purpose of this book.<sup>2</sup>

It was a very particular feeling for me when much later I was invited to write an essay for the Stockholm Moderna Museet's catalogue of their Man Ray exhibition in 2004<sup>3</sup>. The curator told me he wanted my personal story about Man Ray. It gave me the opportunity to go back to analyse *Self Portrait* in a more thorough (and different) fashion than when I had read it the first time around.

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2 Baldwin, Neil: *Man Ray, American Artist*, Potter, New York 1988, p. 314.

3 Svenungsson, Jan: "The Making of Man Ray", in: *Man Ray Moderna Museet 2004*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 2004, pp. 27–37.

In the text that I wrote, I interweave my story about how reading Man Ray's book got me into contact with people who knew him in Paris and what happened then, with a discussion of Man Ray's reasons for putting such emphasis on a text. How is it that a central position in his oeuvre is occupied by a narrative? Why is that? What purpose does it fill? I propose that he struggled with an identity issue, coming from the fact that his activities as an artist were not confined to just one technique: he was both a painter and a film maker, both a sculptor and a photographer. He needed to invent a structure wherein all his activities could come together and be simultaneously motivated. From early on, he had felt a need to erect a sort of verbal scaffolding around his disparate work, a sort of narrative umbrella, in order to claim the right of interpretation. Before writing the autobiography, he had already published a number of texts and books on his own work – something which was not common at the time. But Man Ray was far more concerned with his image than most of his contemporaries. In his writing, he strives to construct an overall logic for his artistic work, which does not always have to be based on facts. For instance, he would state that he:

...photographed what [he] did not wish to paint.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, it is easy to see that practically all of Man Ray's figurative paintings and drawings from 1921 and onwards were based on photographs. But does it matter? The sentence sounds good, and it makes sense, in its own way. Text, for Man Ray, was just another tool to achieve specific goals, not some form of higher truth.

The story he presents is selective and its timeline incoherent, yet it achieves its purpose of communicating the desired image of Man Ray's life and work. The method is subtle and seemingly self-effacing. Much

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4 Ibid., p. 70.

of the book is devoted to portraits in text of friends and colleagues, nearly all of them now famous, which makes it all the more attractive. Together these portraits form a sort of grid through which the contours of Man Ray himself emerge, coloured by his associations.

As a photographer Man Ray had a definite talent for styling – making men and women look more appealing, more like ‘themselves’. In writing his book he used this technique on his life, in the shape of a narrative in words. His carefully orchestrated story of his life as an artist becomes the hub to which all his disparate ideas can be traced and explained. The story creates an aura which sheds light on the art works.

With this narrative version of himself, Man Ray succeeded in making a statement about “Man Ray” that no one could ignore from then on. I guess his ultimate aim was to register his trademark.

There are other artists who wrote autobiographies towards the end of their lives. But not many of these books have taken a central place in the artist’s oeuvre, on a par with the visual work – most are but more or less faint recollections of what has been. Most people who write about their life will attempt to look good. A few will manage to write about themselves in a way which has a transformative, productive character.



Given this and other examples of visual artists who have felt the urge to write, we may still wonder whether it matters that they are visual artists. Is there anything distinct about a painter who chooses to write a book, in comparison to a musician – or a plumber?

– What is it that visual artists may be able to add to their existing modes of expression?

– What happens to the relation between text and image when the same person does both?

– Are there any characteristics common to texts by visual artists?

– Are there any special writing qualities they are more likely to achieve?

– Is there something the visual artist can *only* achieve in text, something which will then truly complement the visuals?

Artists did not always have to write. An artist of Man Ray's generation will have made an active choice to do so. With the exception of their correspondence, most artists during Modernism did not need to write anything, neither during their time at art school (if they ever went to one), nor afterwards – because society, and the society of artists itself, had a sense of the separation of crafts. There were poets, journalists, sculptors, painters, etc. – each category defined through commitment to a certain mode of production. How one saw oneself did not need constant redefinition, because the tools of one's craft were an important part of one's definition.

This certainty started to change for good with the popular breakthrough of Marcel Duchamp in the early sixties. The reverberations that followed include pop art, minimalism and conceptualism, all the way up to the relational esthetics and curatorialism of today. Since then, the self-understanding of the contemporary artist has changed irrevocably and has become one grounded much more in language-based definitions than in any particular technical skill. With some delay, this paradigm shift spread to art education. Earlier, teachers in art school would correct student sketches using pen or brush; now, they are much more likely to discuss the student's verbal formulations about the work. From the sixties onwards, looking to be part of the university, art academies started giving up their independent status. The fact that artists today write doctoral theses based on their own work is but the most extreme example of a general development.

My research before writing this text consisted of reading a lot, and as the language used was going to be English, I limited my reading to this language, with some in translation. There are differences, of course, between how you write depending on the language you use – just compare a quality French newspaper with an English one, or a German newspaper with a Swedish one – but this is not my topic. There are important factors to a text that remain independent of language.

## How I write

At dinner recently with an art historian friend, I asked her what are the necessary preconditions for writing a thesis in art history. Her answer was simple. Three points:

1. original idea
2. primary material
3. know the field

A few days later, in my local bookstore I found a Penguin guide to writing in English, which I bought out of curiosity. Here I read, among other things, the following basic observations:

Writing is a form of communication, and all communication involves a sender, a receiver, and an intervening space that has to be bridged.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Manser, Martin; Curtis, Stephen: *The Penguin Writer's Manual*, Penguin Books, London 2002, p. 181.

...you can control not only how your message comes across, but how you come across as a person. (...) The crucial fact is you are in control, able to define your own image, quietly, in your own time, just as you define your message.<sup>6</sup>

The general notion of what constitutes a good writing style has probably not changed greatly over the centuries – at least, in English, not since the latter part of the seventeenth century. The same qualities characterize good style in the twenty-first century as in preceding ones: they are clarity, simplicity, economy, variety, vigour, and suitability.<sup>7</sup>

Good prose has a rhythm, like poetry. Unlike most poetry, it does not have a regular repeated rhythm. It should have a rhythm of a subtler, less obtrusive kind; it is made up of a satisfying sequence of longer and shorter, emphatic and less emphatic words and syllables.<sup>8</sup>

Then I came across a short text (which I don't want to reproduce here), written by an artist in a catalogue of his work. I read it, I re-read it, then I read it again. The first sentence is easy. In the second, it gets complicated; by the third sentence, I'm lost. I hardly understand a word, and much less why he is using these words. What's going on?

I could sit down, of course, and make a very deliberate attempt to understand the exact meaning of these lines, like a submissive student. Very carefully, I could consider the complicated grammatical construction of each sentence and look up the unfamiliar words in a dictionary while patiently trying to reconstitute in my head what it is that is actually

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6 Ibid., p. 182.

7 Ibid., p. 198.

8 Ibid., p. 228.



being communicated here. Maybe I could then rewrite the text in a shorter way, or maybe I would need the same amount of words. I don't know, and it doesn't matter. It would still irritate me. Because I don't understand why anyone would choose to write in a deliberately over-complicated and obscure way? Especially an artist who is introducing his own exhibition in a museum. What can he gain? I use the word 'choose' because I know that this particular artist can be a very good writer – but in this text I see a cynicism appear, an aggression towards the reader, a desire (conscious or sub-conscious) to make the reader bounce back, rather than to create any real understanding. Can this attitude ever be defended?

Can the wish not to be understood inspire good writing? I don't think so. To use a dangerous word, I believe a good writer will always try to *seduce* readers, one way or the other, not to aggress them. Because if the reader doesn't read what the writer has written, the text will simply not exist!

Text is a temporal form of communication. Readers have to start somewhere (normally at the beginning), and there has to be sufficient stimuli to motivate them to continue until the end. A text which is truly boring or off-putting will simply never be read to the end, if at all – and as a result, it will not exist in any meaningful way. The valid way for a text to exist is for it to hover in the space between the letters on the page and the reader's imagination, during the act of reading – and afterwards, if it is a good text. An existence limited to the state of ink on paper (or bytes in a file) which nobody ever cares to decipher is a sad fate for words. If it is an artist's text, it's even sadder. Such artists could have made better use of their time.

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Writing is a craft. Writing better can be learned. Nevertheless, there might be important obstacles to overcome. In the late nineties, I was responsible for the Master's program at the School of Photography and Film in Gothenburg, one of the first such programs in Sweden. Among

other things, it was my job to coach the students in writing, to help them prepare to write their MFA theses. I was often surprised at how hard it seemed to be for some students to get themselves together and actually write... something... not to mention the thesis. Having to write can inspire deep fear. Each year, there were surprising cases. Students I knew could write well, because I had seen other texts, but who had such respect for the task ahead that they got completely stuck. A fault committed by several who failed was not being able to let themselves loose, to play around, to go devil-may-care with their writing. They were 'economic' in their attitude, believing perhaps that the text needed to be written in the right order, and that you must not continue with chapter two before you have finished chapter one<sup>9</sup>. But in my experience, the best way to start writing a text is to be the opposite of economical:

– Allow yourself to write lots of words which you know you will edit out at a later stage. In the beginning, it's enough to have just a vague idea of what the text is going to be about. You don't yet know what you are going to say, because what it will be becomes clear only through the act of writing it.

I believe this is true for every writer, to varying degrees, even a very disciplined one like Flaubert (famous for writing just a few sentences a day). In order to get closer to the formulation of the ideas you will eventually want to express, you will have to allow a great degree of redundancy at the first stage of writing.

If the task at hand is to write an essay on a certain subject, and you have only the vaguest idea about what should be in it, I have a suggestion about how to do it (the long version). Somebody else will suggest a different method, but that is their responsibility. This is my way:

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9 Ten years on, I look back at this period and follow the trajectories of former students. I am happy and relieved to see that having once failed to finish a text does not prevent somebody from becoming a successful artist. Writing is not everything, fortunately!

– Start by reading all the background material available and making notes of what you find interesting. During this reading period, your mind will automatically start to focus on the problems at hand, and without your having to think hard about it, preliminary versions of ideas (good or bad) will appear in your mind– these should all be noted down. When the reading period comes to an end, it's time to sit down with your computer (I favour sitting comfortably on a bed with my laptop computer and reference material spread out all around me) and try, in as concentrated a way as you can, to just pour out as much writing as possible which has some connection with the theme at hand. I prefer to write on the computer in order to have everything saved in the same place from the beginning. Empty your mind! Think like a surrealist: automatic writing! Continue until you cannot come up with any more idea even vaguely related to the theme. When this stage is reached, you will typically have a load of text many times the length of what you are ultimately aiming for. It may have taken several hours, or days, or weeks, or...

The text will be full of repetitions. There will be lots of trash. Half-baked thoughts, stupid ideas, embarrassing opinions. It's not a problem! Nobody but you will read this version of the text. Just save it to your hard disk, and make a new copy: "Essay, second version". Have a break (an hour, a day, or a week). Go for a walk in the streets, or take a run through the forest. Physical activity can work for the writer like the developer in the (analog) photographer's lab. Return to your text with good eyes. Go through everything written, and accept every part of it at face value, not yet throwing anything away. Correct spelling mistakes, and fix obvious omissions. Add whatever additional ideas that come up while you are at it.

Now enter the crucial phase. Clean a table or a wall or a floor. Print out everything you have written on paper. Order the sheets of text in front of you. Change your role from unrestrained producer of text to that of rigorous editor.

Attack your material with pen in hand. Eliminate all repetitions. Cross out the idiotic parts, and what is simply not relevant. Use scissor and tape to re-arrange the order of the parts if needed. Then copy this new arrangement into the computer. Take another break.

Make a new version of the file. Go through the newly edited text carefully from the beginning, making sure you yourself understand the sense of each sentence, verifying the transparency of each and every one. If you don't understand your own sentences perfectly – no one else will. During this process, lots of little details will attract your attention; together, they may provoke questions and become the basis for new ideas. Develop into an appropriate shape all the ideas and themes which are present in the text.

Print out on paper again. Read with pen in hand. Try hard to spot your own particular mannerisms and change them. Look out for symmetries and returning words. Consider meaning once again. Cut all crap, again. Enter changes into computer.

Repeat the process until you feel there is no more that can be done, no more that can be cut. You must be convinced that all thoughts are clear and in the right order.

It will take considerable time. Breaks are important. The brain's background processing activity can be remarkably productive. Changes of perspectives are crucial. Reading the printout instead of the screen is a completely different experience.

At some point in the process, you will have stopped worrying about content and depth, because you know it's there, by then. In the final stages of writing, it's all about the value of words and sentences. It's the outer layer, the rhythm, the tension. Depth cannot be without a surface!

At last, it's as if you can no longer care. The text is on its own. It's been born.

Enjoy the surprising result.

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What is precision in a text? What is lack of precision? Precision is certainly not a function of using complicated words. But it can be! There are technical and philosophical texts where terribly complicated words may be motivated – but these words should never be a goal in themselves.

Still, the use of simple words does not guarantee you will be more precise – it all depends on how your words are combined with each other. It's what you do with the words that count, not the words themselves. Each word has a meaning or several; that's a given. What makes writing so fascinating is the way this meaning can be endlessly multiplied through the way they are combined. Words set down next to each other can throw sparks and ignite fires. The possibilities are endless. The sheer number of combinations available makes every act of writing a creative act. Even in the simplest text, you will at some point have to pause for a moment in order to ponder using this or that synonym. At this moment, you will be shaping the vague idea you started with into something more precise: the simple transfer from head to hand has turned into a creative act. From this point on, the possibilities multiply exponentially. This is what makes it difficult to write – and this is also what makes it such a wonderful adventure.

In the previous pages, I have described how I like to write – when I have enough time. Anyone who wants to write and who attempts it repeatedly, with a view to publication, will eventually develop their own technique and find some kind of voice.



## How others write

I will now attempt to define some general categories of artists' writings. It's just an exercise: we can then use these categories as we like. They certainly do not represent any truths, and they don't cover everything. A text may belong to more than one category. I could propose more or different categories, but classificatory precision is not the point here. Maybe the same categories would be relevant for a study of writings by bricklayers or lawyers. And maybe not!

The first category I call:

### **Expressive me-centered storytelling in the first person.**

What I found so attractive in Man Ray's autobiography was the way he invites the reader along by making it so easy to identify with him. At the same time as you set out on an adventure with the 'I' voice of the text, you are introduced to a set of ideas which acquire attraction by association. Reading this book, I felt invited to share something: a life, a set of values, successes and mishaps. That last word is important, because unless they share a certain number of disappointments, me-centered writers will be less able to capture the reader's genuine trust

and interest. Disappointments can be presented in numerous ways, not all of them in full accordance with the truth.

Another artist-writer in this category, if less clear-cut, is Louise Bourgeois. I have been reading *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father* which is a collection of writings and interviews from 1923–1997. It starts with diary pages from when the artist was only 12 years old. Through all the various texts that follow – letters, essays, interviews – one factor remains constant: the artist’s focus on her own childhood as a reference point for all her work. In this, Bourgeois is the exact opposite of Man Ray, who speeds past his first fifteen years in a few pages, without even revealing the names of his parents! In my view, this is just a difference of focus, not of method. Early on, Bourgeois realises that she can return endlessly to her childhood for inspiration and material – and as she does, she keeps deconstructing it and reconstructing it for her purposes. It’s a tool, a mirror, a point of departure and a construction.

The text I have selected by Louise Bourgeois for the reading list is typical in this respect. It mixes memories from childhood and introspective psychological questioning with descriptions of sculpture and analysis of process; of the way her sculpture works and the way her writing functions.

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I need my memories. They are my documents. I keep watch over them. They are my privacy and I am intensely jealous of them. Cézanne said, “I am jealous of my little sensations.” To reminisce and woolgather is negative. You have to differentiate between memories. Are you going to them or are they coming to you. If you are going to them you are wasting time. Nostalgia is not productive. If they come to you, they are the seeds for sculpture.

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There was a *grenier*, an attic with exposed beams. It was very large and very beautiful. My father had a passion for fine furniture.



All the *sièges de bois* were hanging up there. It was very pure. No tapestries, just the wood itself. You would look up and see these armchairs hanging in very good order. The floor was bare. It was quite impressive. This is the origin of a lot of hanging pieces.

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A daughter is a disappointment. If you bring a daughter into this world, you have to be forgiven, the way my mother was forgiven because I was the spitting image of my father. That was my first piece of luck. It may be why he treated me like the son he always wanted. I was gifted enough to satisfy my father. This was my second piece of luck.

All daughters hate their mothers. In Freudian terms the daughter blames the mother for the loss of the penis. They blame the castration on the mother. I am deeply grateful not to have gone through this ordeal. I would have been totally unable to deal with the criticism of a daughter. Sons are always partial to their mother unless their mother was unfair to them. That is to say asked too much from them so they collapse. A lot of parents make a career out of having children. They live through the child and destroy him. It is better to have parents who use their children as unpaid labor.<sup>10</sup>

Bourgeois seems to claim absence of control over the way her memories influence her work. At the same time, when reading through this collection of writings (in which many texts have the form of statements or interviews, but whenever a second person is involved the resulting texts have probably been carefully worked over by the artist, as they

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10 Bourgeois, Louise: "Self-expression is Sacred and Fatal" (1992), in Bourgeois, Louise: *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923–1997*, edited by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1998/2000, p. 225.

all seem very precisely shaped) – you cannot escape a feeling that this artist–writer is in extreme control of everything she does.

In the last paragraph of the selected text, she makes a reference to when Structuralism took over from Existentialism in French intellectual debate. She says the structuralists were interested in words, language and grammar, whereas the existentialists were interested in experience. Then she places herself firmly on the side of the existentialists, on the side of experience.

But she does this in a text, using words.

## **Methodical revelation of (philosophical) truths.**

I choose to illustrate this category with a famous text by Henri Matisse: “Notes of a painter” from 1908. Matisse does not seem to have been very interested in writing as such. In the collection of texts where this one is included, almost all other pieces are interviews, and I don’t suppose any has been edited by Matisse, as I think is the case for Bourgeois. Matisse may not have felt the need to write very often, but it becomes clear from this anthology that he was always ready to present his view, to make statements about what he believes is right or wrong in art, what is valuable and what should be avoided.

The selected text he wrote himself, and he did this at an early point in his career when he had achieved some notoriety and fame and was being regarded by many in the public as a ‘wild painter’, without self-control or sense of history. The text, first published in a French art magazine, is apparently written to counter this public view. Within a year, it had been translated into Russian and German and republished in these countries. It is clearly meant to provide a theoretical platform and understanding for the new way of painting Matisse is introducing. It is written in the first person, but its perspective is far from the people- and event-oriented storytelling in Man Ray’s book,

or the childhood fixation of Louise Bourgeois. Matisse would never, in any text or interview, tell stories about family and friends. His focus is all on the presentation of his work, and on his thinking about it. His personal circumstances remain private. His ambition is obviously to convince the reader of the validity of his ideas, not of the attractiveness of his persona.

In his text he talks about ‘sensations’, about methods and process and goals. But he speaks in general terms. He avoids complicated words or practical demonstrations of ideas, and does not become technical. When he is being pedagogical, he remains more concerned with general principles than with conveying practical information.

Here are two typical sentences:

My choice of colours does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences.<sup>11</sup>

The simplest means are those which best enable an artist to express himself. If he fears the banal he cannot avoid it by appearing strange, or going in for bizarre drawing and eccentric colour. His means of expression must derive almost of necessity from his temperament.<sup>12</sup>

In the rather humble manner in which he writes, and in the way he is focused on explaining his own working methods, while insisting on the use of intuitive choice, Matisse does not necessarily seem to want to direct how others should work. He is not a manifesto writer.

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11 Matisse, Henri: “Notes of a Painter” (1908), in Matisse, Henri: *Matisse on Art*, edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley 1973/1994, p. 38. Translation by Jack Flam.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Using a popular formula, I could say Matisse offers ‘help to self-help’. He addresses an audience already intrigued by his visual work; an important part of this audience is made up of other artists. To this audience, he tries to explain in words what it is he has done in pictures. While you read you will visualize the pictures. The process is rather straightforward.

I think this attitude toward writing comes easily to many artists, as it offers a direct and seemingly uncomplicated way to communicate some of one’s ‘discoveries’... proposing them, without necessarily insisting on them as the one and only solution.

## **Systematic revelation of technical and pedagogical truths.**

This category is of course close to the category in which I put Matisse, but there are some important differences. I have chosen a little book by Paul Klee as an example, but later I will discuss an important book by David Hockney which is related to this category.

Early modernism is full of manifesto-writers and teachers. It was not always the real innovators among the artists who wrote the manifestos, or who became the most energetic teachers. Perhaps the innovators didn’t feel the need for the self-gratification found in writing a handbook of cubism, like Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger did, or teaching its principles in his own school, year after year, long after Picasso had moved on to other things, as did André Lhote.

Nevertheless, there are examples of first-rate artists who made pedagogy a priority. What happened at and around the Bauhaus school<sup>13</sup> is one obvious example. Here, a whole new set of aesthetic values for society was developed in a systematic way, taking its inspiration, on the one hand, from pre-industrial craftsmanship and the basic qualities of forms in nature and, on the other, from an enthusiastic embrace of the new possibilities offered

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13 Weimar 1919–1925, Dessau 1925–1932, Berlin 193–1933.

by modern construction and production methods. An atmosphere reigned at the school which at times came close to a new religion. Perhaps the most important of the professors at the Bauhaus was Paul Klee, who in 1925 published his *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, for use by the students and others.

Whereas Matisse, in “Notes of a Painter”, stayed with general indications of what direction to take (what I called help to self-help), Klee does not shy from being concrete in his descriptions of how things work in a picture. He deconstructs visual language with the help of both text and diagrams.

**40** Formation of the Black Arrow  
(Fig. 76).

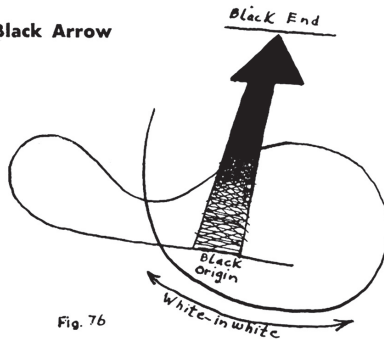


Fig. 76

This arrow forms when a given, or adequate, or actual white receives intensified energies from additive, acting, or futural black. Why not the other way around? Answer: The stress lies on rare specialty as against broad generality. The latter affects us as competently static and customary; the first one as unusual, activating. And the arrow always flies in the direction of action.

In a well-arranged equilibrium of both characteristics, the direction of movement manifests itself so forcefully that the ambiguous symbol (arrow) may be eliminated.

The given white, much-too-much-seen and tiresome white, is noticed by the eye with little sensation; but the contrasting peculiarity of sudden action (black) sharpens the vividness of vision toward the climax or the termination of this action.

This extraordinary increase in energy (in a productive sense) or of energy food (in a receptive sense) is decisive for the direction of movement.

**57**

14 Klee, Paul: *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, (1925), Faber and Faber, London 1953/1968, p. 57. Translation by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy.

*Pedagogical Sketchbook* starts with an analysis of the most basic elements in a picture: different types of lines (active, passive, medial lines – complete with sketches) and how they function in relation to other forms... It goes on to describe and deconstruct other aspects of an image in a similar reductive manner. The writer seems to assume that the making of an image has a scientific basis and that he holds a number of truths in his hand which he can convey to us. The eager reader should be able to achieve the same results as the writer. As with all comparable textbooks for artists, reality has shown us that this promise is not easily fulfilled. When we read *Pedagogical Sketchbook* today, we do it with knowledge of the unique character of Klee's own pictorial oeuvre. It is difficult to separate our impression of his pedagogical text from our awareness that no one has really been able to follow in his footsteps. No former student of the Bauhaus school achieved an individual status at all comparable with that of the majority of the teachers, Klee foremost among them!

This kind of positivistic writing (with its conclusive stating of truths) may at first seem to be rare among artists today, but is this really the case? Replace the offer of concrete advice guiding visual production (picture on paper), which is the *Sketchbook's* theme, with the enthusiastic application of highly abstract theory – and the picture may begin to look different. Let's just hope that whatever new examples of this attitude you will find will also have some of the discrepancy between stated analytical ambitions and the artist's own production that is characteristic of the *Pedagogical Sketchbook*.

In fact, if you read what Klee writes closely, the analytical attitude may begin to change its colour and indeed come close to a sort of poetry. I believe that there is a built-in gap in this little book between the good advice to be found on the surface and the content hiding deeper down.

## Literary experimentation, with content in the open and in disguise.

There are two key-words here: 'literary' and 'disguise'. The artist-writer active in this category, conscious of the formal aspects of his or her writing, experiments with language and structure in contrast to the categories already mentioned. By content which is 'in the open' or 'in disguise', I mean the way a piece can be written to reveal its meaning in different layers, which are accessible or not, depending on the reader's ability to follow traces and use his imagination. My example is a text called "A Craft Too Small", by Frances Stark, a relatively young<sup>15</sup> Los Angeles artist who has written extensively and has had a collection of her texts published. The piece is dedicated to Bas Jan Ader and was written for a book on his work, published in 2000. Ader was a Dutch performance artist working in Los Angeles who disappeared in 1975 when he tried to cross the Atlantic, in order to return to Holland, on a very small sailboat. It was to have been an artistic act, a performance called "In Search of the Miraculous".

In her text, Frances Stark does not at any point make any direct reference to her subject, Ader. He is only mentioned in the dedication. Based on the context for which the piece was written and from its title, as well as the fact that Stark at one point discusses a book on cosmology called *In Search of the Miraculous* (which may or may not have given Ader his title), it is made clear in a subtle way that the text as a whole is a reflection on this artist's tragic last performance:

I remember very distinctly at the age of fourteen a friend, who was verging on adulthood, announced to me that she was suicidal. I simply could not grasp the notion of ceasing to exist. I asked if maybe instead of killing herself she could just drastically change her identity and begin a different life... just say to yourself I'm no longer me, I'll 'kill' me and just start living in some different way. It seemed to me

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15 Born 1967.

very plausible and logical. Based on my optimistic and / or pragmatic approach to her suicidal urge, I never could have foreseen my own melancholic tendency toward listlessness, but I do have one.

So what do I do when I'm listless? I kind of am now, and what if I said I'm too sad to tell you? OK, that's a little forced, however, ask anyone who knows me and they will tell you I tend to get depressed, and bogged down and sometimes even cry when my work is undone. That is when I start to think about following my old advice and start considering abandoning my identity. That would entail forgetting my past and all my handy anecdotes that reside there. More importantly – to abandon my identity – I would have to quit being an artist, quit doing art.

I'd have to quit my job... and my job is my life.

One hundred years ago, my favorite artist, author Robert Musil, wrote this in a letter to a friend: 'Art' for me is only a means of reaching a higher level of the 'self'.

One day ago, a friend of mine wrote, in a letter to me: 'I think I am addicted... to my identity as an artist... (which is) probably detrimental to the ideal of art making itself, I think you realize this.' I wrote back: 'When I think about eradicating the identity – short of killing oneself, incidentally or on purpose – the artist-ego always elbows in, making it all seem like a staged burning of the paintings, only to be followed by an exhibition of their ashes.' And Zarathustra spoke thus: "I love him who makes his virtue his addiction and his catastrophe: for his virtue's sake he wants to live on and live no longer."<sup>16</sup>

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16 Stark, Frances: "A Craft too Small" (2000), in: Stark, Frances; *Collected Writings: 1993–2003*, Book Works, London 2003, p. 26.



Stark's text is written in an energetic chatty tone. It's in the first person and has no qualms about bringing forth the writer's artist persona. It takes in a wide number of references, both personal and literary – all the while circling around themes of melancholy and despair and departure. Taken in by the atmosphere of the writing, the reader will start connecting these references and scattered bits of information. The result is touching and moving. The subject has been addressed in an unexpected way and a wide avenue of associations has been made available for the reader.

I have also chosen to illustrate this category with a second text, this one very famous: "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", written in 1967 by Robert Smithson. I had always managed to avoid reading Smithson until starting to prepare for this lecture. I somehow didn't want to read him, precisely because of the overpowering consensus that he and his art and his words were so important and have inspired so many. Now that I finally forced myself to read a volume of his writing, I no longer feel contrarian and fully understand what makes everyone so excited: Smithson was a truly brilliant writer. His texts are works in themselves. You don't need to know anything about context or art or Smithson to be drawn into the worlds that these texts create. His use of language is so rich, with such a beautiful intonation and rhythm, that it motivates the reading all by itself.

Each text has a particular narrative structure. A story is told, often based on some sort of journey. If you are knowledgeable about Smithson and/or have an interest in his concerns – or just a general love of what art can be – then the text will open up like a flower, revealing layer after layer of meaning and beauty. Typical of most of Smithson's texts is a strong emphasis on place and time, established through a large number of exact descriptive references. This is combined with a love for abstract philosophical discussion, which is thus connected to reality, while emphasising the importance of the specifics of place. There is no uniformity in this writing: at each moment it may take an unexpected turn of event, either go to a higher plane, or lower. Look at this example:

As I walked north along what was left of River Drive, I saw a monument in the middle of the river – it was a pumping derrick with a long pipe attached to it. The pipe was supported in part by a set of pontoons, while the rest of it extended about three blocks along the river bank till it disappeared into the earth. One could hear debris rattling in the water that passed through the great pipe.

Nearby, on the river bank, was an artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river. This constituted a monumental fountain that suggested six horizontal smokestacks that seemed to be flooding the river with liquid smoke. The great pipe was in some enigmatic way connected with the infernal fountain. It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed “homosexual tendencies” but I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, “It was there.”<sup>17</sup>

The editor of Smithson’s collected writings, Jack Flam, talks about how Smithson writes in such a way that it:

...allows him to give a special kind of accent to apparently random perceptions, which would not easily find a place within an expository text, but which can create flashes of illumination when properly placed or glanced at.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Smithson, Robert: “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967), in Smithson, Robert: *The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996, p. 71.

18 Flam, Jack: “Introduction: Reading Robert Smithson” in Smithson 1996, p. xv.

and how:

Indeed, Smithson treated written texts as if they too – like his plastic works – were made of solid materials; as if words were not only abstract signs for things and concepts, but also a form of matter.<sup>19</sup>

and then finally:

One of the most striking aspects of Smithson's work as a whole is the way in which he uses a strongly anti-romantic, anti-sublime stance to create, paradoxically, what seems to be a romantic evocation of the sublime. Or, more accurately, in many of his later works especially, both the sublime and its opposite seem to coexist with, and even energize, each other.<sup>20</sup>

To me, through the many layers of his texts, Smithson is able to convey something of the great, wonderful promise of art: to experience life more richly, to see things more clearly, to feel sensations more intensively. In one word: to 'understand'. He does this not by explaining – but by recreating, using words as his tools.

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The way Smithson writes, with erudite references to different non-art related fields, brings with it a first taste of an attitude which started to develop in his time<sup>21</sup>: the theorization of contemporary art production. It was in part an effect of the success of the art movements of

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19 Ibid. p. xv.

20 Ibid. p. xxiii

21 He died in an airplane crash in 1973, 35 years old.

minimalism and conceptualism. In the mid-seventies, if you were a graduate student at one of the main American art schools, you were just as likely to have a conceptual artist as your professor as a painter. This transformation brought with it the wide introduction of abstract logic to art education. And with it cultural theory, de-constructivism and post-modernism. All fields of interest perfectly suited for the academically inclined artist – and artist-writer. Which brings me to my next category:

### **Well-referenced academic writing with further ambitions.**

In the context of artists grappling with how to write a doctoral thesis, this category obviously has some special relevance. My example here is by Mike Kelley: a masterful essay from 1993 called: “Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny”.

Robert Smithson’s education was limited to a year or two at the Art Student’s league in New York, where he finished before he was twenty years old. Kelley, in contrast, is a solid product of the new, academic, art education system: he has an MFA from the California Institute of Arts – and he was for many years a professor himself, at the Pasadena College of Design. I note this because these formal qualifications seem to stand in some contrast to Kelley’s known association with underground culture, punk rock and comic strips, among other things. Kelley’s texts, however, quickly make it clear that he is extremely well read and fluent in a wide range of theoretical discourses. It is important to note that, in all his various texts, he makes sure the door is not entirely shut, thus leaving the possibility of escape open should the academic air turn stifling. My chosen text is an interesting example connected to an exhibition of ‘site-specific’ sculpture in the Dutch town of Arnhem. Always looking for a way to turn things on their heads, Kelley comes up with the idea of asking for the ‘site’ of the local art museum.

He then presents his radical idea (which acquires another meaning in this context, where the ‘radical’ is the expected), which is to curate a ‘conservative’ exhibition in the local museum. His subject: the human figure, as seen through a number of collections of artifacts, art and non-art. Choosing to curate this exhibition was a serious response to a post-modern discussion at the time – but also:

...the project was somewhat a joke on site specificity as gesture of “resistance”.<sup>22</sup>

In order for the exhibition not to be understood simply as parody, Kelley decides to write an ambitious essay for the catalogue – and it becomes an amazing text: very learned, very original, rich and inspiring.

### **The Part and Lack (The Organs without Body)**

In recent art, the modernist notion of the fragment as a microcosm has given way to a willingness to let fragments be fragments, to allow partiality to exist. As in the case of Nauman’s uncomfortably dysfunctional formalism, wholeness is something that can only be played with, and the image of wholeness only a pathetic comment on the lost utopianism of modernism. It is comparable to a kind of acting out of socially expected norms, the presentation of a false “true self,” long after the notion of a unified psychological mind has given way to the schizophrenic model as the normative one.(38) Now, “sham,” “falseness,” and all the other terms that once were pejorative have become appropriate to contemporary notions of the function of art. Surrealism offers some of the earliest examples. Salvador Dali wrote in 1930 that “It has to be said

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22 Kelley, Mike: “Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny” (1993), in Kelley, Mike: *Foul Perfection – essays and criticism*, edited by John C. Welchman, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2003, pp. 70–71.

once for all to art critics, artists, &c., that they need expect nothing from the new surrealist images but disappointment, distaste and repulsion. Quite apart from plastic investigation and other buncombe, the new images of surrealism must come more and more to take the forms and colors of demoralization and confusion.”<sup>(39)</sup> Dali’s inspirations (“masturbation, exhibitionism, crime, love”)<sup>(40)</sup> and surrealism’s basic motivating factor, desire, all point toward lack as the focus of art. Art is creation in response to lack. Quite different from a stand-in for the archetype, which must be there, somewhere, the art object is a kind of fetish, a replacement for some *real* thing that is missing.<sup>23</sup>

“Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny” is structured like a traditional scholarly text. There are loads of footnotes, and many erudite references to external source material in the text itself. But read it closely, and you will become aware that there are subtle differences from what a ‘real’ scholar’s text would have been like. Kelley himself is more present in these pages than an academic could normally have allowed himself, both in the way he addresses the reader with an unapologetic ‘I’ and in the choice of examples, where he doesn’t bother to respect established classification systems. His final reason for inclusion or exclusion of an

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23 Ibid., p. 84. The footnotes to this excerpt read:

(38) See e.g. R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine, 1967/68). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’Anti-Oedipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972) is perhaps the most influential text in recent critical theory appealing to the schizophrenic model; it was translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane as *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking, 1977; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

(39) Salvador Dali, “The Stinking Ass,” trans. J. Bronowski, *This Quarter* 5, no. 1 (September 1932); reprinted in Lucy Lippard, ed., *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hal, 1970), p. 97.

(40) Ibid.

object in a category is based on his sensibility, not on any theoretical relevance. His artist identity is also present in another productive manner, as the reader will follow his sober discussion on the choice of objects for his exhibition with one sly eye on the example of Kelley's own practice as an artist – without him having to bring this up. This also gives him the authority to allow himself obvious contradictions:

In all cases I am treating photographs as documentation of figurative sculpture, including some for which this is not actually the case, such as Cindy Sherman's photographs of medical demonstration models arranged into figures.<sup>24</sup>

I will not try to analyse in detail what exactly Kelley's argument in his text is, and how it functions. One difference between what we have here and what we would have had if an art historian had written this text is that Kelley (while being very precise and academic) remains unbounded. He can jump whenever he feels like it, because in the end he has a freedom the art historian cannot claim in quite the same way. Still, if you compare Kelley's text with Smithson's, all Kelley's leaps take place within a conservative language structure. He engages in none of the fireworks of poetic combinations that characterize Smithson's text. Kelley manages to be simultaneously eye-openingly informative about a wide area of research and to self-consciously project himself as an artist. His writing is at the same time scholarly and subjective, funny and demanding. It's a text to return to, with increased pleasure.

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24 *Ibid.*, p. 76





## Close reading

Earlier, I talked about how I originally had become inspired to dedicate myself to art not so much because of looking at things but through reading about them in a book written by an artist about himself.

I chose a somewhat provocative word for what I think a text should do to readers: I said it should 'seduce' them. By 'seduction', in this context, I do not want to exclude demanding analyses written by philosophers, which could well be the most seductive texts of all. It's not about eliminating all obstacles, but about making your obstacles and what it is you intend to convey as attractive as possible. It all comes down to the quality of the writing itself. By 'seductive quality', I simply mean a quality that makes the reader attached to the text, in such a way that he or she will not leave it until it has been read. And when this stage is reached, the text should have left a mark.

There are many ways to write. Each writer will develop tricks in order to overcome the problems connected with getting started, or how to finish, in this particular mode of expression. In the discussion that followed my first lecture we talked about how for some it may be helpful to use a recording device, instead of a notebook, as a tool for collecting ideas and shaping them into language. Someone mentioned how

important it is to have somebody you know read the text before it is too late – somebody whose reactions *you* are able to read. This person will never share the same attachment to what you have written as you do, and that is precisely the point. You will listen carefully to this person's opinions and criticisms and then judge their impact also because of what you know about the person. Any criticism that you are not able to happily and willfully ignore – must be acted upon. The process may be repeated with several people. Between their conflicting opinions you will be responsible for establishing your own way. Eventually, you will come to a point in the development of your text when you should no longer submit the manuscript to friends. There is a limit even to outside help.

Good writing technique has a lot to do with being able to switch between different roles: to be able one moment to be private and explore your inside, explore your fantasies, then next moment to step out of yourself and analyse what you have found, from the outside.

In the first half of this book, I proposed a selection of categories for artists' texts. I claim no stable value for this classification. I simply think it is useful to attempt to organize knowledge and material in some kind of pattern, even if this pattern will later demand to be re-organized.

In the second half of the book, I would like to introduce four more artist's texts to look at, in greater detail, but I'll leave the categorization open this time.

## Transform life

In art, there are, after all, no other boundaries than the ones we create. Often, we will create rules in order to be able to transgress them later.

In science, though, there are boundaries and rules that are generally accepted, like the principle of reproducibility. When a scientist (or more likely a group of scientists) publishes new results based on experiments, the results will not be accepted, no matter how accurate or beautiful they may seem, until a second group of scientists has reproduced the experiments that the first group reported – and got the same results. At this point, the theory proposed will enter the collective knowledge base of its field.

It is very unlikely that the results of an artist's 'research' will ever be able to pass this type of proof procedure, and in the Humanities the confirmation process works differently. But even here there are many rules which are never questioned – and which for many artists would seem too reductive.

For a scientist or scholar, to break the rules which guide how one's work is to be communicated and defined could be a dangerous act. Then consider that the breaking of rules is what is expected from artists in the contemporary situation.

In 1905, Albert Einstein formulated the “Special Theory of Relativity” and theorized time is not absolute but relative to speed. He thereby transgressed all existing ideas about the nature of time and space. Still, he published his paper in a scientific journal, using the agreed-upon language. He did not promote his ideas by writing a novel about them, or composing an opera. Others would do that for him, later.

After some time, other scientists reported that when they repeated Einstein’s calculations they came to the same results. Later still, experiments in the real world confirmed vital parts of Einstein’s theory.

A short time after the publication of the “Special Theory of Relativity”, either Braque or Picasso made the ‘first’ collage. One of them pasted a piece of printed paper onto his painting or drawing and said: “This is art”. And enough of those who saw the picture took this statement at face value for it to be followed by similar actions, by Picasso and Braque and others. But what did the artist prove? Nothing – except that he was able to convince himself as well as other people to accept his action as having the value of ‘art’. He was surely not the first to glue a piece of printed paper onto another surface, for whatever reason. But he was the first to frame this act as high art, the first to make it acceptable in this context, the first to choose to transgress that particular border – and he did it in such a way that he achieved believability. The only thing he proved was that he was able to make a certain act pass as art!

Using the terminology I proposed earlier, he performed this transgression in a seductive enough way to ‘get away with it’.

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The artist’s gesture is concerned with itself. It may be concerned with other things as well, but one part of it will always be directed towards itself.

A popular idea today is that the artist’s investigation can be compared to the scientist’s research. I see many problems with this thinking. I think it may deny the qualities of both fields. A scientist will always strive for a result which can be shared by other scientists, in one

way or another – his or her work has a rational basis. But the artist's activity is attached to the irrational – and its results can, it seems to me, never really be shared on an equal basis. In art, the rules will always be defined afterwards. In art, a dangerous and wonderful freedom prevails, and the only way forward is to aim for such power of expression or persuasion (of whatever kind) that in the intoxication of the moment, the intoxication of the work will be so inspiring, so well done, that resistance will be overcome – and the work will be accepted!

I always thought the best motto for an artist was the one proposed by Arthur Rimbaud and taken up by the surrealists:

– Changer la vie. Transform life.



## Hebdomeros

In 1999, I created an unusual reading experience in a gallery in south Sweden. The installation was the culmination of my love affair with a novel, an affair that had then lasted for 13 years. When I had first read the book, I had identified so intimately with its content and tone of voice that I wanted it to become my own. I began to translate it into Swedish, and later also to illustrate it. I then became the graphic designer of my 'book', and instead of printing it, I wrote it out by hand on large sheets of Arches watercolour paper, interspersed with dry-mounted colour photographs. In the resulting exhibition,<sup>25</sup> I invited the visitor to quite literally step inside the book and be surrounded by its pages, allowing all sorts of non-linear reading methods, revealing several layers of meaning at once. The 108 pages of the book were mounted on all available walls of the gallery, in clockwise order. A visitor to the gallery could read the whole book through in order, or connect between pages and words in a visual manner, or jump between pages randomly, or look at the handwritten pages as images, or look only at the photographs, or, or, or...

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25 "Jan Svenungsson's Hebdomeros by Giorgio de Chirico", at the Anders Tornberg Gallery in Lund, March 6 – April 18, 1999.

The narrative space of the book had been joined with the physical space of the gallery. My exhibition was a grand attempt to appropriate a text that I love, and to make it mine, as much as possible, in as many ways as possible.

This text, *Hebdomeros*, is a surrealist novel by the Greek-Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. It was written in French<sup>26</sup> and first published in 1929 in Paris.

De Chirico is one of the most influential artists of the modern era. Without him, surrealism would not have happened – and the impact of surrealism on our culture today is immense.

One strange aspect of de Chirico's case is that his “metaphysical period”, which had these repercussions, lasted only a few years, until about 1917. Then he began to change his style and his thinking. He was only 29 years old. Something happened to him at this time: he was beset by doubt, he needed to reaffirm his belief in art, he started looking for his national roots... As a result he changed, and art history has given him bad marks for this ever since. By the mid-twenties, he found himself in the odd situation of being, while still relatively young, both revered as a father figure by the most exciting avant-garde movement in Paris – and at war with that very same movement, who didn't like his further development. At one time when de Chirico showed new work in a gallery, the surrealists mounted a concurrent exhibition in another, with old work by de Chirico. It must have been a terrible situation to experience. What was his answer? He wrote a book! In it, he brought it all together, his visual world, his ideas and understanding of life, his disappointment and anger, his sense of poetry. The book became one of the few masterpieces of surrealist literature<sup>27</sup>. Even his enemies – the

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26 An acquired language, as de Chirico's mother tongue was Italian. He was born and raised in Greece.

27 De Chirico would never have accepted the label “surrealist literature”, but would – probably – have asked for “metaphysical literature”. Sorry.



surrealists – celebrated it. They likened the advent of the book to sitting at the bedside of a dying man, who suddenly rises and utters a few brilliant final words.

In English translation by John Ashbery<sup>28</sup>, this is the opening sequence of *Hebdomeros*:

...And then began the visit to that strange building located in an austere respectable but by no means dismal street. Seen from outside, the building looked like a German consulate in Melbourne. Large shops took up the whole ground floor. Though it was neither a Sunday nor a holiday the shops were closed at the time, which gave to this portion of the street a weary, melancholy air, that particular dreary atmosphere one associates with Anglo-Saxon towns on Sundays. A faint smell of docks hung in the air, the indefinable and highly suggestive odor given off by warehouses adjoining the wharves in a port. The idea that the building resembled a German consulate in Melbourne was a purely personal one of Hebdomeros', and when he spoke about it to his friends they smiled and said they found the comparison *odd*, but they immediately dropped the subject and went on to talk about something else. Hebdomeros concluded from this that perhaps they had not really understood what he meant, and he reflected on the difficulty of making oneself understood when one's thoughts reached a certain height or depth. "It's strange," Hebdomeros was

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28 This translation is officially anonymous, and first appeared in a very obscure edition of *Hebdomeros* published by the Four Seasons Book Society, New York 1966. Republished in de Chirico, Giorgio: *Hebdomeros*, Exact Change, Cambridge 1992. For this volume, Ashbery wrote a very insightful introduction. He is also named as the translator of a couple of shorter texts included in the same volume. These two facts made me suspect that he must also be the anonymous translator of the novel itself. Some years ago I was able to confirm this theory with Ashbery himself, through a French intermediary.

thinking, “as for me, the very idea that something had escaped my understanding would keep me awake at nights, whereas people in general are not in the least perturbed when they see or read or hear things they find completely obscure.” They began to climb the stairs, which were very wide and made throughout of varnished wood; running up the middle was a carpet; at the foot of the stairs on a little Doric column carved out of oak and joined to the end of the banister stood a polychrome statue, also carved in wood, representing a Californian Negro with his hands stretched above his head, holding aloft a gas lamp whose burner had an asbestos mantle over it. Hebdomeros felt as though he were going upstairs to visit a dentist, or a doctor specializing in venereal diseases; this perturbed him a little, and he felt the onset of something like the colic; he tried to fight down this uneasiness by reminding himself he was not alone, that two of his friends were with him – strong, athletic fellows carrying automatics with spare magazines in the pockets of their trousers.<sup>29</sup>

Re-reading *Hebdomeros*, I am always moved in a most profound way. I can't really say why. Were I to choose five books for a desert island, *Hebdomeros* would definitely be one of them. I would no longer need to bring the Man Ray.

A typical characteristic of this text is the simultaneous presence of high and low. Hebdomeros feels superior towards his friends, but his stomach is nervous. Also note the precise but odd characterisation of things observed: “Seen from outside, the building looked like a German consulate in Melbourne”. This is a very telling picture in words, which nevertheless does not enable us to describe the building in any physi-

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29 De Chirico 1992, pp. 1–2.

cal detail. De Chirico never visited Australia<sup>30</sup>. While reading, we see the world of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings come alive – but in a fundamentally different medium.

The hero of the novel, Hebdomeros, is a man without age or features who moves between places and in time with the freedom normally found only in dreams, but his is a waking dream. All that happens in this text has a weird sense of reality which distinguishes it from other surrealist literature. The personal traits of Hebdomeros evade exact definition: he is simultaneously sentimental and precise, enthusiastic and ironic at his own expense, a naturalist and a romantic. He loves to explain the most peculiar occurrences to his friends... and there are always friends around. In contrast, de Chirico was a notorious loner.

Is this not just fiction then, and of the most self-indulgent kind!? No, it is not that easy: the book is fiction and at the same time a kind of grand translation of the whole of de Chirico's visual art into a verbal narrative. The text includes several subtexts, and to my mind, it is one of the most touching accounts of the experience of being an artist ever written. It is precise about a very contradictory condition, exhilarating and humble by turns. It is impossible to say where de Chirico's irony starts or ends. Impossible – until you dare make your own decision!

...this is why I say to you, my friends: be methodical, don't waste your strength; when you have found a sign, turn it round and round, look at it from the front and from the side, take a three-quarter view and a foreshortened view; remove it and note what

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30 But I did! On arrival in Melbourne in 1998, the German Consulate was on top of my agenda for things to see. Let's say it did not look exactly as in the book... but it doesn't matter. Even when I know the real-life reference to this characterisation, the description remains potent. "Like a German Consulate in Melbourne" does not bring up an image of the German Consulate in Melbourne, but a precise vision of a German Consulate in Melbourne, which may or may not be close to the one de Chirico had in mind when he wrote the sentence.

form the memory of its appearance takes in its place; observe from which angle it looks like a horse, and from which like the molding on your ceiling; see when it suggests the aspect of a ladder, or a plumed helmet; in which position it resembles Africa, which itself resembles a huge heart: the heart of the earth, a vast, heated heart; I dare even say overheated, it beats too fast and needs to adjust itself. According to the predictions of a great poet who died about twenty years ago, it is the continent where the world will know its last great civilization before growing cold forever and sharing the fate of the moon. But for the moment these gloomy predictions don't worry anybody, particularly as you all have long been involved in the difficult game of reversing time and switching your angle of vision; this may be said without flattering you, for you have always pitted your obstinacy as metaphysical seekers and the tolerant and generous nobility of your elect souls, the souls of born poets, against the mockery of skeptics. And you, who at heart believe even less in space than in time, you have always had faith in the rhythmical march which carries forward the great human races, a march which nothing can resist; you have always lived in the comforting half-light given to your cool rooms by the shutters closed against the ardor of the noonday sun, and in meditation on theorems learned by heart and never to be forgotten, like the evening prayer taught by the bigoted tutor to the wanton child." Thus spoke Hebdomeros, and his disciples, who had been joined by several sailors and some local fishermen, listened to him in silence; but they pressed more and more closely around him and he was obliged finally to do as Christ did in the same circumstances on the advice of an apostle: he climbed onto a boat moored by the shore and, standing on the prow, continued his inspired discourse. Far off, behind the hills overlooking the town to the east, the first paleness of the dawn was creeping chastely into the sky.<sup>31</sup>

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31 De Chirico 1992, pp. 42–43.

Back in 1986, when I had begun reading *Hebdomeros* and settled into the peculiar character of this text, I noticed something strange happen: the text came alive, and its action became visible. To me, it was like seeing a film being projected on the inside of my eyes, so convincing, because dense with detail like life itself. I became engrossed with the text and wanted all my friends to read it, but none of them spoke French (I didn't know of any English translation at the time<sup>32</sup>). I had to translate it myself. I started – and it soon developed into an obsession. I produced several versions of the full book text, none of them really good. I took a break for a few years, then took up the project again. I travelled to the city in Greece<sup>33</sup> where de Chirico had spent his earliest childhood to photograph invented 'traces' of the book's action and scenery. Finally, I 'published' my illustrated and translated version of this book in a three-dimensional exhibition in which you could finally move freely between the pages of this great adventure. A multiple transformation had taken place, from de Chirico's picture sources to his text, from his text in French to mine in Swedish, from the imagery contained in the words of his text to precise photographs in my 'book', and finally from the space between letters to real physical space between readers. None of these connections or translation layers are verifiable in any rational sense – they all depend on our intuition for confirmation that they are exact.

De Chirico attempted to create an art in which ideas and enigmatic philosophical concepts take on visual form. Then, one day, he decided to take another step and render again, in words, a version of this world which he had introduced and let grow in a visual form. The art historian Gerd Roos is working on a study in which he shows that for almost every part of this text visual sources have been precisely

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32 Besides Ashbery's translation, there is another one, by Margaret Crosland, published by Peter Owen, London 1964. It is best avoided.

33 Volos.

quoted. Paintings and postcards. A vision evoked is in reality an image remembered. In this sense (as in many more), de Chirico is a precursor to post-modernism.

Another connection to the visual is the way we read information in a picture simultaneously... in *Hebdomeros*, there is no respect for common logic and the integrity of time and space. At the same time, the text is implacably precise in the logic of its details – which is an attitude I'm happy to identify as an artist's privilege.

We see Hebdomeros move through space, imaginary or almost real, as an incarnation of the ideal artist with access to all layers of society and all layers of knowledge. His heroic stance becomes possible (or rather, becomes attractive) through his ever present awareness that the distance between sublime greatness and ridicule is always much smaller than we would like it to be. As he points out the way with surprising clarity, Hebdomeros is touching, and he is one of us – the marvelous lies latent within all of us!

In this text, I find a kind of moral imperative which says that you may talk about anything, in any manner, as long as you do it with a maximum of precision.

## Secret Knowledge

One person who seems to have made Hebdomeros' imperative his own is the British artist David Hockney. In 1999, the same year as my Hebdomeros exhibition, a series of events brought him to the conclusion that a part of art history must be re-written – and that it was up to him to do it.

The book that ensued is called: *Secret Knowledge – Rediscovering the lost techniques of the Old Masters*, 2001.

The main interest for me here is less to discuss the verbal structure of this book than to look at it as a project and an ambition. Hockney steps over an invisible border when he decides to write his book. Artists rarely write art history – using words. Hockney's book has provoked a lively debate; symposiums have been held, television programs made, and an impressive number of articles and scientific papers have been published in response.

What Hockney attempts to prove is that for much longer than previously thought, lens and mirror-based projections have played a central role in Western painting. Until now, it has been thought that Vermeer van Delft used a camera obscura as an aid in making his paintings, but also that he was rather alone with this technique, an oddity in art history. Hockney believes otherwise: he claims that a large number

of painters since about 1430 have in fact been like 'early photorealists': painting or sketching from projections. This technique influenced the style of their paintings on a fundamental level, Hockney asserts. He assembles a fascinating case for his theory, which has far reaching consequences. Hockney does not say that everyone used optics; instead, he identifies two parallel developments. He does state, however, that from a certain point in time, painters were aware of the projection possibility and would have had to make an active choice not to use optics. Until 1840, painting and drawing were the only way to fix the result of the optical projection. With the invention of what Hockney calls the 'chemical camera', it all changed – there was now a way to fix the image that no longer required the tracing hand. From that point on, Hockney states, awkwardness returns as a now deliberate value in painting. The chemical camera has assumed the picture fixing role earlier fulfilled by the painter with his lens. Hence impressionism, then the modern explosion. With it, we see the triumph, for the first time in five hundred years, of a non-photographic way of seeing, Hockney argues. Nevertheless, the photographic way of seeing soon made a surprising return, with the popular success of cinema and cheap ways to print photographs in magazines – and finally television. According to Hockney, it is not until the advent of computer manipulation of photos that the hegemony of the lens finally comes to an end, and ushers in a new freedom never seen before. This is where we find ourselves today.

This book is much different in attitude from the theories peddled every once in a while where someone attempts to prove that a certain artist's style is the result of a particular eye disorder, Monet and El Greco being popular subjects. In these theories, the artist is seen more as a machine than a decision-making individual, and they inevitably fail to impress anyone with a real understanding of art and art making. But in Hockney's book, it is the decision-making faculty of the artist which is emphasised: why attempt to draw something without help when there is help to be had?



Hockney asserts:

... optics don't make the marks – they only produce an image, a look, a means of measurement. The artist is still responsible for the conception, and it requires great skill to overcome the technical problems and to be able to render that image in paint. However, the moment you realize that optics had a deep influence on painting, and *were* used by artists, you begin to look at paintings in a new way. You see striking similarities between artists you wouldn't normally associate; you notice big differences between painters who are traditionally grouped together; and you see distortions and discontinuities in pictures that are difficult to explain unless optics had been used in some way.<sup>34</sup>

*Secret Knowledge* is divided into three sections. The first, called “Visual Evidence”, is dominant. Here, Hockney presents his case, using comparative illustrations, mainly examples from art history, some manipulated in the computer to show the effect of specific lens-related distortions. In the second part, called “Textual Evidence”, he collects a number of texts from different sources, ancient and modern, to demonstrate how the various optical devices work, and to show that knowledge of these devices existed at the time.

In order for his theory to be convincing, one major objection has to be overcome: if optics were used by so many, why haven't we heard about it before?

Hockney argues that painters, like other members of important guilds, would have jealously guarded their trade secrets, preferring not to talk about how they arrived at their effects. At the same time, he indicates that there are some published accounts. How these should be interpreted is not crystal clear, however.

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34 Hockney, David: *Secret Knowledge – Rediscovering the lost techniques of the Old Masters*, Thames & Hudson, London 2001, p. 131.

In the final section of the book, called “Correspondence”, Hockney collects letters between himself and art historians and optical scientists. Here, the reader learns about the development of the argument and becomes familiar with some of its finer details – while also becoming aware of certain weaknesses. Enough private matters are touched upon in these letters to create an aura of familiarity with the writer: you feel sympathy for Hockney and become more inclined to identify with him and his project.

In a sense, Hockney makes instrumental use of projecting his private sphere in order to gain rhetorical advantage. The first section of the book reads almost like a detective story. Hockney, the artist, is seeking to unravel a well-kept secret. To reach his goal, he uses what he has: his ability as an artist and a draughtsman to prove his case in practice; his celebrity status in order to make contacts with the right people. Hockney, who brings to his project his authority as one of the world’s most famous figurative artists, is able to broaden the base for his argument by associating himself with scientists and scholars who provide academic credibility.

I think it is interesting for us to note how Hockney, in the first part of the book, constantly uses himself as a reference point for his argument. When he discusses drawings by other artists from the point of view of ‘how it is made’ he speaks from a position of practical authority which can never be achieved in quite the same way by the academic art historian. He sets up experiments with optical devices and variations on camera obscura similar to the ones he presumes the artists discussed have used. The results of his drawing experiments are used as illustrations alongside old master drawings and paintings to demonstrate the argument. Nevertheless, *Secret Knowledge* is not a Hockney art book in disguise. In it, Hockney attempts to prove his theory by proposing and carrying out repeatable experiments, almost like a scientist would do.

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In the current discussion of art as research, this book makes an interesting case. It is a brave attempt at introducing a new theory in a field with a firmly established scholarly tradition. The discovery and development of the theory is dependent on the artist's practice. In order to convince the public, Hockney uses the special possibilities of his position in an imaginative way. Every claim is supported by demonstration, either using source material – reproductions – available to everyone, or reporting his own experiments, which none but the most gifted artist could have carried out convincingly. What Hockney does not possess (formal scientific qualifications in the realms of optics and art history), he 'borrows' by bringing his discussions with scientists and scholars into the story, while also acknowledging that these experts at times question his theory. Without the presence and skill of David Hockney the artist, David Hockney the scholar would not have been as convincing! Another 'art factor' is the way the book reflects on the process of its own making: a typical attribute for an artist's project. The text starts with the decision to write a book, and the discovery process continues as the book is being written.

The theory presented is compelling – but so are several of the counterarguments available on the internet, where scholarly and scientific refutations of different parts of the theory can be found. I will not go into them now. Whatever the outcome of this debate, the book has done great service in two ways: by opening discussion on its topic and as a unique and forceful attempt by an artist to change art history 'from the other side'.



## Dream of flight

The risk of being proved wrong is one David Hockney assumes head-on, while Jyrki Siukonen largely avoids it. My next book is the theoretical part of his “demonstration of knowledge and skill”<sup>35</sup>, *Uplifted Spirits, Earthbound Machines*.<sup>36</sup>

Siukonen sets out to review the history of early flying machines in terms of their function as visual artifacts. What he creates is a poetic work in which extensive historical knowledge of early aeronautics, the modernistic avant-garde in the visual arts and early functionalism in architecture comes together in an unorthodox way to let an imaginative and personal story emerge.

Between these three parallel developments, Siukonen identifies connections and creates new ones. He refers to a vast number of sources and provides an ample collection of footnotes. At the same time, he seems to want to counter this scholarly approach by introducing decid-

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35 The term used for the doctoral dissertation of an artist, at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki.

36 Like de Chirico, Siukonen has written his book in an acquired language. I believe there are both advantages and disadvantages regarding writing in a second language. I experienced some of them myself as I worked on this text. It's a subject worth returning to.

edly non-academic observations into his text. There are footnotes of no consequence. There are references to the writer's childhood and his dreams. There are odd asides. The development of the 'story' happens in leaps which sometimes depend more on the writer's intuition than his logic. This work seems intent on creating its own category, one in which technological history is read in terms of its potential for inspiring artistic creation, rather than in its own functional terms.

In his preface, Siukonen describes how his initial ambition with the book was:

...to study how the concept of beauty was used in describing new technical innovations, especially aeroplanes.<sup>37</sup>

The text then took its own path, he says, and he soon found himself writing about an unexpected variety of things.

An issue relevant to this book is the investigation of the formal possibilities of an artist's thesis as such. What will have to be changed, in comparison to a traditional model, what could be added? The thesis written by an artist doesn't know what it is supposed to be: scholarly or artistic, or both. Can both be possible, at the same time? Can the artistic model be made to fly, or the scholarly alternative ever satisfy the longing of the artist? And what place can dream occupy in this context? Siukonen ends his introductory chapter thus:

... much of this work – rather a study on gravity than on levitation – is about personal dreams. The three quotations chosen for the opening above illustrate my interests from different angles. The aesthetic character of the dream flight, mentioned by Bachelard, has always been my starting point, and I fully agree with Wacjman

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37 Siukonen, Jyrki: *Uplifted Spirits, Earthbound Machines*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki 2001, p. 10.

about the powerful emotions and the sensual delight evoked by the rationalized results of that dream, the machines themselves. The question of the aesthetic value of these machines, as put forward by Ozenfant, is important too, since it implies another, larger question about “great sculpture,” that is, about art, its values, and its place in the society. The emblematic *Letatlin*, in which all the themes of this work eventually meet, is still a good test for all three approaches. Is it a failed machine or a piece of great sculpture, a mere aesthetic dream or a telling symbol of the condition of man? I do not propose to give a full answer but to tell a story. It aims to be, above all, a story true to the dream of flight.<sup>38</sup>

For the word ‘flight’, in this work, there are two alternative meanings: either flight as in what an airplane aims for, based on rational science – or flight as in ‘let your dreams fly’ – the symbolic duty of the artist. Siukonen gives us an idea of his preferences by mainly discussing airplanes that were built using not scientific principles but aesthetic preferences – and which consequently never took flight, except in the dreams of their creators.

Science is based on the idea of progress: a problem is studied in order to solve it, or at least to go some way towards overcoming it. In art, no problems are ever eliminated. They may seem to vanish for a time, but they will always be ready to return once the artist starts on a new work. In the natural sciences, progress can be shared. A published solution is a platform to use for those who come after. No such thing really happens in art. It may look that way when historians systematize the past – but what for one artist may be a perfect solution, for another may be useless. All teaching of art in the contemporary situation acknowledges this condition: the ambition is always to further the student’s ability to formulate his or her own solutions to the same old problems.

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38 Ibid., pp. 16–17.

It's like the weather: everything returns, and randomly at that. And so it is that Siukonen in his otherwise traditional use of footnotes also includes a large number of useless weather reports, tied to specific events. These markers of the text's 'art' identity are balanced by some excursions into careful source research, for example, in his attempt to establish exactly when Constantin Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp and Fernand Leger visited an airplane exhibition in Paris – if they ever did.

Towards the end of his book, Siukonen assembles all his poetic abilities and combines them with a really deep dig into his pile of sources. He creates a long and gracious narrative arc which starts in Tatlin's failure to create a flying machine and connects, via the poet Khlebnikov and writers Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, to the two architects Leonidov and Melnikov. In the work of both these individuals, flying is suggested; we learn, in fact, that Melnikov sketched a building which looked very much like two airplane wings – and this building was a dormitory, a laboratory for sleep for exhausted five-year-plan workers. Melnikov is quoted as saying that not enough importance is accorded sleep in our lives, a statement which Siukonen uses to bring us to a concept from Le Corbusier ("the house as a healing machine") and his own reflection that in Melnikov's time, in the Soviet state ruled by Stalin, the only place of retreat was sleep. Only in sleep was dream possible. And the dream of a future, as in Mayakovsky's last play in which a time machine takes the hero 100 years into the future, is like an escape. This escape is then likened to the escape of two Soviet pilots over the border and to the escape to suicide of Mayakovsky himself. His funeral procession passed outside Tatlin's studio. Siukonen quotes a historian who has said that man's rebirth is the leitmotif of Konstantin Melnikov's architecture. Siukonen disagrees and proposes instead that there need be no resurrection because sleep does not need to be understood as a 'symbolic death'. Instead, he points out that Melnikov's dreams, as well as his private house in which there are very special beds and which today is a museum, survived with him during a long hibernation. He notes



that it was Melnikov who designed Lenin's first glass coffin. A glass coffin, of course, is associated with the sleeping princess, and this leads us back to a detailed discussion of the laboratory of sleep building, with its double winged structure which made it resemble a famous gigantic airplane that never flew. The image of this plane was included in a book by Le Corbusier to illustrate an ideal construction. It also appeared on the cover of a children's book, and it is now likened by Siukonen to a machine of dreams, its triple wings broken and lying on the ground, which creates an implicit link to the failure of the Soviet experiment. Only in their sleep could these aviators fly, and only in their sleep could Soviet workers dream of a better future. Perhaps in their sleep, this plane could have taken off and brought them to another land, a land without fear. When the French photographer Nadar travelled in his balloon at the end of the nineteenth century, Siukonen relates, he saw a new world, a world where man would have the freedom of flight, which in turn would bring peace and a new era, and he dreamed in his balloon about the solution to a great problem, which Siukonen says was the heavier-than-air flying machine. His dream came true, we learn, on December 17, 1903, when Orville Wright took off for the first time in Kitty Hawk, lying flat on the wing of his machine, as if sleeping.

This is a short and incomplete summary of the dizzying flight of imagination that Siukonen manages to keep alive over some fifteen pages without ever losing his way. I have left out several important events. There are detailed footnotes for everyone and everything mentioned. All the events and all the people mentioned here are factual – but the result must be likened to a form of poetry, because of the selection and the way in which these facts are joined together. I think this is a very fine example of what can be done in a text when you know your subject and its wider context in extreme detail and have decided to use your imagination without inhibition. In order for this to be possible, of course, the writer will have to grant himself almost unlimited freedom – and never lose confidence that he can get away with it!

After this explosion of narrative freedom, Siukonen returns to a relatively sober mode of thesis writing with a summary of the stories he has related throughout his book and the conclusions that he wants to draw from his material. He ends with a quote from Tarkovsky in which art is said to be the bearer of absolute truth. Then there is one more ending, a three-page appendix with a second, extremely pedantic account of the contradictory information that appears in a number of books regarding the possibly mythical visit by Duchamp, Leger and Brancusi to an airplane exhibition in 1909 or 1912. No final verdict is given. The demonstration of scholarship is impressive. But the last three words are: "I don't know". Thus, if the path of art leads to absolute truth, the scholar's struggle may end in uncertainty!

## The implicit reference

A long time ago, I had lunch sitting next to Jean-François Lyotard. I tried my best to make intelligent conversation. He said something I found disturbing. He claimed that in the contemporary situation there was no art worth considering which did not question its own identity. In other words, there is no innocent observer. Back then, at the table, I tried to protest, but it was difficult. I never forgot the situation.

One thing of interest to me now, in my studies of artists' writings, is the possibility of using 'the other work' (the artist's visual work) as a direct or an implicit reference to what is being written about in the artist's text, even when its immediate subject is something else. While one reads de Chirico's book, his visual work becomes a constant source for cross referencing. In *Secret Knowledge*, Hockney's painting is part of the platform that builds the authority of the writer, and which he uses for psychological emphasis.

As the visual work does not depend on verbal definitions, its presence can hint at, or even question, ideas or layers of meaning in the text – without having to spell them out. Thus, writing artists can achieve a multi-layered richness in their texts that is not available – in the same way – to writing non-artists. This technique – if we may call it that – often introduces some aspects of autobiography even to texts which address something else. It may also be a way to satisfy Lyotard's troublesome requirement. I soon understood he was right.



## The powerful writer

As my final example, I would like to discuss an artist-writer who differs in an important way from the two previous ones. Both Siukonen and Hockney illustrate, to some degree and in different ways, what can happen when an artist decides to ‘play on the other side of the fence’, i.e., when the artist makes an excursion into the academic field of art history. In contrast, my final artist-writer is thoroughly familiar with the academic world. In fact, she has two parallel careers: Adrian Piper is both an internationally famous artist – and a tenured professor of analytical philosophy at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, USA. Moreover, in both her roles, she is a frequent writer.

Her texts about art are written in very precise and transparent language. In fact, it would be possible to say transparency as such is one of her recurring theme. Many of her texts are explanations of her own projects. She can be said to thematise the not uncontroversial idea that it is the artist herself who will provide the best explanation of her work. The precision of Piper’s language obviously borrows some of its technique from her philosophical practice. However, the philosopher is not allowed to dominate. Piper often refers to herself as an example, and she allows sudden changes of focus and attitude to influence her texts. I have decided to look at two. In the first one, Piper analyses one of her

own projects in detail, and in the other, she demonstrates with extreme vigour the prejudices and misconceptions in one critic's approach to her work.

Piper was born in New York to African-American parents. Her skin colour is apparently so light, however, that she easily can be taken for a white person. Likewise, her first name, Adrian, can be carried by both males and females. She studied art, and came into contact with the conceptual artists, especially Sol Lewitt, in 1967, when she was 19. She then started to work in a conceptual vein herself. After a few years, she felt disappointed with the lack of rigour in the language analyses of her fellow conceptualists. In 1970, she read Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and started to study philosophy at university. Simultaneously, she continued to make art, now mainly performance. In 1981, she completed her Ph.D. in philosophy. She had already started teaching some years before. She kept her parallel career as an artist secret from her students.

In 1987, Piper had a retrospective which travelled around the U.S., and in 1990 she was the first black woman to become a tenured professor of philosophy in the U.S.

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The major tool of philosophy is language, as philosophy is all about formulating clear thought. Everything that happens happens in language. Philosophical language can be very technical, like mathematics, but there is a wide range of possibilities. What can never be accepted in a philosopher's use of language is sloppiness and unintentional ambiguity. As a professional philosopher, the artist Adrian Piper has a formidable resource in her command of language.

Piper continually struggles with questions concerning interpretive priority, and she demands that the critic who comments on the artist's work must simultaneously be aware of and make clear his own position in the game.

I find a paradoxical attraction in her writing: everything is so precisely laid out, in such pristine detail, that you sometimes can't stop

yourself from inventing layers that are not visible in the text, but which could well be there. Can anyone be this transparent? Must she not be hiding something? This reader's projection can go either way, as we will see. It can be positive, as in my case. It can turn negative, as in the case of the critic Donald Kuspit. There is another factor which needs to be mentioned: humour. Piper is often funny, in a dry, precise way, mixed in with her didactic expositions.

The first text is called "Notes on Funk I-IV" and was written to explain, in detail, a series of collaborative performances staged between 1982 and 1984. These "Funk Lessons" consisted of Piper conducting dance classes for white audiences. The text exhaustively demonstrates and analyzes how you dance to funk music, what constitutes funk music, how it is related to black working-class culture, and what problems a white audience will have with it, as well as how an educated black middle class may also have problems with it, if of a different kind. Piper relates all this in exhaustive detail and in a very informative manner. You really do learn a lot of distinctions concerning funk music and its surrounding culture, stereotypes and prejudices, and you do learn a lot about what exactly Piper wanted to achieve in her performances, and what odd things happened in a few of them... and it could all so easily become boring... but it doesn't. Instead, the text establishes a convincing grip on the reader from the beginning because of the very generosity it projects. While discussing a performance and a music style, it manages to simultaneously touch on a number of other possible contents, which are all met with curiosity, all looked at with interest. Political consequences are taken into account. The reader follows along, fascinated: it's fun to learn!

So is this music sexist? Does it exploit women, as some performance participants have charged? Consider, for example, lyrics like "Push, push, in the bush"; "That fox is fine, fine, fine with me"; "Best in the west" (which, as sung by Chaka Khan, would pre-

sumably exploit men, according to this reasoning); and so on. Let's begin by making some elementary distinctions. You met someone new. You both clicked. Last night you slept together, and today you feel better than you've felt in years. You tell your best friend (or roommate or favorite co-worker), "Lord! He/she was fantastic in the sack." Are you exploiting your new lover by saying this to someone else?

Consider another case. You're at your consciousness-raising group (remember those?). You've gotten yourself into a lather about all your failed relationships with members of the opposite sex. You rage, "Men (women) are all pigs (bitches)." Can you be accused of sexist exploitation for having said this in a group? Would it be appropriate for members of this group to level this accusation at you under these circumstances? Consider a third case. You rave about your lover's sexual talents to your consciousness-raising group, which has twenty-five members. You want to share your exaltation, joy, and deep satisfaction and sense of peace with them, but without being too heavy or solemn about it. So you joke, "Mmmm-mm! The pecs (tits) on this man (woman) are a thing of beauty to behold!"

And so on.

Perhaps a general point begins to emerge here. The point is that language does not exist in a vacuum. It depends for its meaning and connotations on the specific context in which it is used. What may well be exploitative and sexist in the context of an editorial explaining why men and women should not have equal employ-

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39 Piper, Adrian: "Notes on Funk IV" (1984), in: Piper, Adrian: *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume I – Selected Writings in Meta-Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1996, p. 209.



ment opportunities, or in the context of a parent instructing a child on the dangers and liabilities of the opposite sex, may not be at all in the context of the intimate exchange of confidences and feelings between or among friends.<sup>39</sup>

Then there is the writing itself: it is rhythmic. Like funk, it's got a groove. Piper's texts do not introduce themselves as literature, but she makes use of subtle means to create variation in her language, making deliberate structural jumps, varying the length of words. Maybe it was exactly this feeling of looming perfection which caused a completely different reaction in critic Donald Kuspit, who was invited to write an essay for Piper's retrospective museum exhibition in 1987. It is the subject of the second text which I have chosen: "An Open Letter to Donald Kuspit".

After Kuspit had written his piece, he sent it to Piper for comments. She was disappointed with several aspects of the text and sent him back a critique, pointing out in detail all the things she thought weak or unsubstantiated, asking him to make revisions. They talked once on the phone, and quarelled, so Kuspit's text was pulled from the catalogue. A little later, Piper was surprised to see that Kuspit had published it anyway, in a magazine he edited. She read the published text and saw that he had hardly changed a word. It angered her, and she decided to add another layer of even more pointed critique to her first critique of the text – and publish all of it as an open letter.

The result is a unique text. It is always rare for an artist to answer back to a critic in writing. There are many reasons for this, one being that the critic is a professional writer and the artist is not. Thus, meeting for a duel on the writer's turf is more dangerous for the artist, who is likely not to have the same command of words as the critic. Also, artists do not want to make critics their enemies. None of this for Piper. She is not afraid, and she knows that her language skills can stand up to anyone's. So she takes on Kuspit, analysing in extreme detail all the points where he deviates from fact, or where he makes assumptions based on projections instead of observations. Piper's text is pedantic, cruel and very funny.

Page 12:

*“Meta-art necessarily leads to the ‘problematic solution’ of performance art, as Piper calls it. For Piper, performance art is the logical extension and execution of meta-art – its theory in concrete practice.”*

I don't see this. Surely you're not suggesting that if one does meta-art one must end up doing performance art as that genre is currently understood? Surely artists can practice meta-art on painting, sculpture, etc.? They certainly *do*, so obviously they *can*. In any case, I don't see how you can ascribe this view to me, since I certainly do quite a lot of meta-art about my own nonperformance work. I really don't understand what you're trying to say here.

Page 12:

*“Both [the problems of interpretive control and of transformation] have more than a hint of the narcissism – solipsism? – that motivates Piper's activity.”*

Which is it? Narcissism and solipsism are very different conditions (I have a paper on narcissism and moral alienation coming out in *The Journal of Philosophy* sometime this month, if you'd like to see it [84, no. 2 (February 1987), pp. 102–118]). Your subsequent comments do not make clear which you mean to ascribe to me. For the record: If you mean “solipsism,” you may be right; if you mean “narcissism,” you're wrong – at least according to the clinical definition of that term. But perhaps you're using it in some other way. In any event, I really think you should either extensively defend or else delete all the remarks in this essay that purport to report on my actual motivational and psychological states.

The fact is, Donald, that you really do not know me personally at all, and pretending can't make it so. It can only make you look careless or malicious in the eyes of people who do know me personally – and remember, I've been hanging around the art world since 1967 and academia since 1970, so there are a lot of them.

Your decision in the published text to eliminate *solipsism* in favor of *narcissism* strikes me as completely wrongheaded, particularly in light of your subsequent discussion. There you claim that “[Piper] articulates a self preoccupied with the conditions of its appearance in the world, a self that attempts to control the way the world mirrors it. It can even be said that such control is part – the essence? – of her art” But without any substantive textual analysis to defend these claims, they must be read as either (a) arbitrary authoritative pronouncements – and I’m afraid these antics erode rather than reinforce your critical authority – or else (b) as emotional announcements of how my writing makes you feel. I’m genuinely sorry that you feel controlled by my writing, Donald. On the other hand, I find it difficult to imagine sympathetically what it must be like to be in your psychological condition, in which the artist’s thoughts about her work are experienced as a source of oppression and control rather than of information or insight.<sup>40</sup>

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40 Piper, Adrian: “An Open Letter to Donald Kuspit” (1987), in: Piper, Adrian; *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume II – Selected Writings in Art Criticism*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1996, pp. 116–117.

Piper very deliberately eliminates any hint of the critic having the upper hand through control of language, both by an upfront reference to her work in philosophy, and by using some of its technical language. All through the text, she turns Kuspit's weapons around and uses them on him. Robert Storr, another professional critic, writes in the preface to Piper's collected writings:

...having one's text "reviewed" by its unrestrained subject is a critic's nightmare, but then, like all nightmares, as Piper's down-to-the-screws dismantling of Kuspit's theses show, the worst horrors are pure products of the dreamer's repressed fantasies. In Kuspit's case they center upon his need to reimpose the antiquated notion of the artist as a helplessly eloquent neurotic incapable of higher thought, and the critic as a superior intellectual being who organizes the spasmodic insights of creative individuals into overarching theories."<sup>41</sup>

At the end of her text, Piper treats Kuspit like one of her students. And she does get away with it, because she never fails to base her cruelties on example – that is, she remains careful to stay transparent herself while unmasking the lack of clarity in the other.

Piper has an extraordinary power of articulation, which even Kuspit admits when he writes:

*... – we cannot help but wonder whether she is hiding something, despite apparently revealing all.*<sup>42</sup>

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41 Storr, Robert; "Foreword", in Piper 1996, Vol. II, p. xiv.

42 Piper 1996, Vol. II, p.112.

Significantly, this sentence is one of the few in Kuspit's text that Piper approves of.

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One question I would like to ask Piper if I had the chance would be: do you deliberately attempt to insert secondary layers underneath the apparent transparency of your writing – or is this something that appears independently of your efforts? To me, the existence of further layers and a certain ambivalence regarding what the final message is are extremely important to an artist's text. One way or another, art will always address the imagination. The function of the imagination is not to accept words – or facts – as final, but to use them as starting points, or triggers, for speculation into further meaning, or what further action to take.

I don't see how this can happen in a text which does not allow for secondary layers. Categories of writing where secondary layers are not needed include pornography and instructions for filling out tax forms, while poetry is the science of ambiguity. But how do I achieve it, this secondary layer to my text – and will I ever be able to control what resides there?



## Move freely in all directions

In the workshop held in conjunction with the original lectures, I tried to force the participants to write fast, without much planning. I don't think fast writing is necessarily the best way to produce a text. What I was interested in exploring was the way a text can be made to 'write itself' – how one can find out what one's idea for the text is through the very act of writing it. A text comes alive during writing in dynamic interaction between:

fast and slow...

control and let go...

knowledge and risk taking...

projection of will and half-conscious dreaming...

A text will be a baby first, unintelligible but full of promise. It will grow up and learn to communicate more clearly. It might even revolt against its maker. At one point, it will leave home – and from then on, the writer will no longer have any influence over what happens to it.

What then is my own ideal for a text? After all these examples... of course I don't have a single recipe! Each successful text creates a new ideal. I can only repeat what I have said several times already: I find it

truly inspiring when a text is written in a transparent manner and yet has multiple levels. A text which is easy to read because its structure and language are smooth and carefully balanced. Actually, it should be hard to avoid reading such a text, because of the attraction it projects. When you have passed through the door of the first page, you'll find yourself in a room with lots of echoes, many layers of meaning. It is a well-lit room, not obscure. All details can be clearly studied. You will not stumble. But what does it all mean, everything you see here; what is it all trying to tell you?

I imagine this room that consists entirely of language, through which the reader can move freely in all directions and, like my hero Hebdomeros, see remarkable things take shape and, like him, begin to understand... begin to understand even that which is inconceivable.



## Read this!

Louise Bourgeois: *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923–1997*, edited by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1998

Giorgio de Chirico: *Hebdomeros*, Exact Change, Cambridge 1992

Tacita Dean: *An Aside: Selected by Tacita Dean*, National Touring Exhibitions (Hayward Gallery), London 2005

David Hockney: *Secret Knowledge – Rediscovering the lost techniques of the Old Masters*, Thames & Hudson, London 2001

Mike Kelley: *Foul Perfection – essays and criticism*, edited by John C. Welchman, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2003

Paul Klee: *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, (1925), Faber and Faber, London 1953/1968

Henri Matisse: *Matisse on Art*, edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995

Adrian Piper: *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, two volumes, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1996

Man Ray: *Self Portrait*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston 1963/1999.

Jyrki Siukonen: *Uplifted Spirits, Earthbound Machines*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki 2001

Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996

Frances Stark: *Collected Writings: 1993–2003*, Book Works, London 2003

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