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## Dear Louise (April 2015)

### Keywords

art writing  
artists' writing  
practice-based/practice-  
led research  
auto-fiction  
collaborative authorship  
fictocriticism

### Abstract

*I propose that the conventions of academia may subject the various practices and practitioners of contemporary art to a set of behaviours that privileges certain modes of knowledge and the discovery and presentation of that knowledge over others. This text aims to perform this position through its form, as a means in and of itself to assert the agency of creative practice as a set of processes, and outcomes that are not in any way lacking in rigour, or needing to be brought into line, or licked into shape. The writing you read has been assembled slowly, in pieces, both knowingly and unknowingly, drawing on an array of writing approaches, channeling a spectrum of literary and creative forms, from within and across and around fiction, art writing and other modes of experimental writing. This text is not an academic article, although it was written as a willing acceptance of an invitation to be included in this journal; as with much contemporary art practice, it performs through and in relation to the place that it is encountered within and I expect this to be the case here. Unlike most of my work, this text is untitled. This is part two of a two-part article in the form of a letter.*

Joanne Tatham

Dear Louise,

Although this is not in any specific sense a reply to anything you have written to me, I want to continue the conversation by writing to you. To some extent, we both know this is a fiction, as it is after all, primarily a vehicle to say the things one needs to say, or perhaps, more particularly, to find a way of saying those things in a way that feels appropriately direct and revealing. The epistolary form I am adopting here offers the possibility of such writing perhaps precisely because it is bound by conventions to the degree that it functions as a literary genre in its own right.

It's perhaps a curious way to go about writing and does, I realise, contain within it something of a paradox. I'm talking about finding a voice to say what I wish to say, and to say it clearly and directly and yet it seems that my means to do this is to adopt a voice (or voices) that I acknowledge as belonging to others. This paradox in turn reveals one of the things I want to talk about; the means through which I will do this, here in this letter, will mirror the content of that which I wish to talk about.

I've been thinking a lot about mimicry. It's obvious that this is something that occurs within my work (as well as our work), both in terms of the forms and conventions through which the work makes itself manifest and then, also, quite specifically in the writing and texts or scripts that often constitute part of our larger projects. It's one of those words that I fasten onto from time to time as a mechanism through which to deliver a finely tooled illumination of the wider processes of thought and interest around what it is I do.

What surprises me is that this word mimicry actually only just occurred to me as a useful or relevant way to describe what we (or perhaps just I) were doing – and in fact had been doing for quite a long time.

Going back 25 years to my undergraduate degree and I was attempting to slip into and out of, or around, the modes of art making that I saw were expected or accepted. I was motivated by my ambivalence towards the artistic subject positions on offer to me, and my nascent understanding of the urgent need to acquire an appropriate one, through which to then assert the meaning, the value of the artworks I made. My final degree show was not mine, it was a necessary fiction, one that I had successfully submerged myself within to the extent that I could no longer see the edges by the time it was presented.

My collaboration with Tom was a similar sort of negotiation, one born out of fascination and frustration with my own uncertainty as to my authorial status, and what as a young woman who wished to be an artist, I should or could say. The collaboration began as an act of mimicry. This manifest itself through the copies or perhaps pastiches I made of his work (works that were, in their way, also an attempt to consider the parameters of subjectivity that can sometimes seem to frame art making). Around this time I was also writing with found writing, creating first person disclosures out of psychology and anatomy texts.

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1. Twenty years later, these works provided the starting point for *An unsuccessful proposal for the*  
2. *1994 MFA interim exhibition*, a series of retrospective semi-fictionalised hypothetical projects written  
3. to accompany an exhibition at Glasgow School of Art in 2012 that mapped a post-WWII history of  
4. women artists in Glasgow

5. I'm tempted to create a further and perhaps somewhat inconvenient digression in which I tell  
6. you about my contribution to my school's sixth form magazine, in which I think I bewildered my  
7. fellow editorial team with an out of time approach to satire slash pastiche that was at odds with the  
8. general pitch and tone of the rest of the contributions.

9. The digression would be worth it as even now, in the process of writing this, I realise that this  
10. autobiographical aside reveals a continuity in the approaches that characterise, not only my practice  
11. as an artist but also probably something more fundamental about the construction and perfor-  
12. mance of my subject position, or the psychologies that underpin or form that.

13. Neatly, again, fortunately, this allows me to return to mimicry (although just the word, for now,  
14. if not the idea). It's also an opportunity to indulge in more personal disclosure. Disclosure was a  
15. word that Tom plucked from Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer's dialogical introduction to their  
16. history of semiotext(e), *Hatred of Capitalism*. This word, or its function as vehicle for further thought,  
17. became a source of focus or obsession even during 2011 and 2012, as I tried both to negotiate my  
18. hunch that my 19 year long relationship was over, whilst simultaneously writing a text with my  
19. soon to be ex-partner that spoke of our personal and creative histories and relationships within  
20. and through a community of artists in Glasgow that coincided with the start and ultimately end of  
21. our own relationship. We'd also only just recently divorced ourselves from Glasgow too of course,  
22. something we were both still coming to terms with.

23. It was a complicated time. We'd bought a 1971 three-storey town house (a house 40 years  
24. old at the time, the same age as myself, at the time). It was a house with open plan living spaces  
25. and wall to wall windows for which we had aspirational architectural plans, with a studio on the  
26. ground floor opening out onto the garden. Unsurprisingly, I'm somewhat obsessed by the 2014 film  
27. *Exhibition* (although I've yet to see it) in which an artist couple played by Viv Albertine and Liam  
28. Gillick acts out the end of their relationship in a modernist house. Back in 2012, I was still living  
29. in my own modernist house with Tom and desperate to do something, but not knowing how or  
30. what, I signed up to Guardian Soulmates, an act that felt equal parts shameful, empowering and  
31. bewildering.

32. Two and half years on of online dating and I have accessed spaces, languages and behaviours  
33. that fascinate me to an extent that I regard it, as whilst not in the same league as undertaking  
34. psychotherapy or a PhD, as similarly shifting things around in quite a fundamental way. I should  
35. add at this point that this shifting remains within and of the process in itself, with no relationships  
36. successfully jumping the species divide to become an established part of my so-called real life. It's

also been a place that has allowed and enabled me to write, although I have as yet to resolve what to do, if anything, with those tens of thousands of unpublished words.

It's a curious place, one that both compels and repels. There's misogyny of the worst kind, in that it may well remain invisible to those to whom it primarily shouldn't, by which I mean both the originators and recipients of these messages. A lot of men talk about chemistry and many go so far as to reveal their Myers Briggs personality type.

I'm ENFP on the cusp with ENFJ. I've got a 3 page summary of my personality type, or rather, given my borderline status, I've got two three page summaries of my personality types. I can take my pick. I'm also a Gemini, and as per the OkCupid parlance, 'it's fun to think about'.

I'm both an ideas person and a people person. I see everything as a part of a cosmic whole. As a kid, I did a lot of imaginary things. It's like acting. I have strong sometimes surprising values and viewpoints and I tend to try and use my social skills and contacts to persuade others gently (though enthusiastically) of the rightness of my views. I want to help people and to be liked and admired by other people on both an individual and a humanitarian level. I have a strong sense of ethics and fairness and I can be a little too aware of an imbalance. I am a perfect mimic. I can be someone else and get enormous insight about that person, and I want to tell them about it.

In 2012 Tom and myself made *The default exchange adjusted*. There'd been a lot of dumb works, works with mouths gawping, saying nothing, but this one spoke for itself, it had a voice. In fact it had two. This has been followed by a series of vocal works; objects that talk, and mainly about themselves, at least in as much as they articulate the contexts of their production or circulation. *Is your tesserae really necessary* spoke with two voices from two mouths of the histories and relationships of artists in Glasgow. It was a resolution of sorts of the fraught work begun in the 1971 townhouse. *DOES THE IT STICK* interwove the histories and agendas of public and private funding for art in Newcastle. Most recently however, *Shall we name it our shame or is our shame the same as it was silent*.

Shame sits within the list alongside mimicry and disclosure as a word that, for me, signposts modes of being, or enacting in others, through or from the making of art. These are words that seem important to me at this moment and perhaps always were, although it's just that I'm only now putting a name to these things. There are things here about voice, and therefore also about authorship and identity (all of which, in an inevitable sort of way, feels both vague and important). I could make another formally inconvenient autobiographical detour here and talk about shyness or stuttering but I won't. I could talk about typographical glitches or repetition or reiteration, but I won't.

There are other words I could talk about, but these are words of a different order that have arrived, delivered intact, and that rather than acting as tools, provoke, for me at least, the need to break these words down into their constituent parts, to decode them, to understand how they are

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1. used and then what this really indicates. Collaboration is one such word. Feminism is another.  
 2. I also have a particular interest in the rise of the word research and how it is now used and, of  
 3. course, misused. There are also words that arrived ready paired up and often preceded by the defi-  
 4. nite article. The creative economy. The accelerated academy. These provide external points of depar-  
 5. ture for further thinking and embody, as much as something can be embodied through words, the  
 6. future promise of all my frustrated parallel careers that will never be.

7. Now, as I add this final paragraph here, it's almost two years later and we've become friends in  
 8. that time, since you left on maternity leave. Earlier today we met to talk about your progress towards  
 9. your PhD, although I've since moved jobs and I'm no longer your PS. I loved that your writing felt  
 10. to continue our correspondence, not through acts of epistolary mimicry, but in the ways in which  
 11. we are both attempting to develop a form, a tone, a voice – and the politics and purpose that drives  
 12. this. I talk about disclosure, about intimacy; you talk about gossip. This final paragraph is both a liter-  
 13. ary device, a clumsy mechanism to reveal the workings of its own construction, but also a means to  
 14. demonstrate some of the behaviour that I feel we both wish our work, our writing, to enact.

Joanne

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 contexts of contemporary art, enacting a critique of its forms and vocabularies and the functions it  
 is expected to perform. Joanne was awarded her Ph.D. from Leeds University in 2004, followed by  
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