

Journal of Writing in Creative Practice Volume 10 Number 1

© 2017 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jwcp.10.1.89_1

JOANNE TATHAM

Royal College of Art

Dear Louise (April 2015)

Keywords

1.

2.

3.

4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9.

10.

11. 12. 13.

14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20.

21.

22.

23.

24.

25.

26.

27.

28.

29.

30.

31.

32.

33. 34. 35. 36.

art writing artists' writing practice-based/practiceled 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.





(

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.

90 Journal of Writing in Creative Practice

9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24.

1. 2.

3.

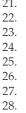
4.

5.

6.

7.

8.



29.







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

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

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

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

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

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

24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31.

33.

34.

35.

36.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

20.

21.

22.

23.

www.intellectbooks.com 91







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

1. 2.

3.

4. 5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16. 17.

18.

19.

20.

21. 22.

23.

24.25.

26.

27. 28.

29.

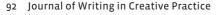
30. 31.

32.

33.

34. 35.

36.









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

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

Ioanne

Suggested citation

Tatham, J. (2017), 'Dear Louise (April 2015)', Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, 10:1, pp. 89–93, doi: 10.1386/jwcp.10.1.89_1

Contributor details

Joanne Tatham is an artist and a reader in contemporary art at the Royal College of Art, London. As an artist, she has worked in collaboration with Tom O'Sullivan since 1995, after meeting on the MFA programme at Glasgow School of Art. Their artworks occur across the spectrum of approaches and 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 appointments at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, and Northumbria University, Newcastle.

Contact: School of Fine Art, Royal College of Art, 20 Howie Street, London SW11 4AY, United Kingdom.

E-mail: joanne.tatham@rca.ac.uk

Joanne Tatham has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16. 17.

18. 19.

20.

21. 22.

23.

24.

25.

26.

27.

28.

29. 30.

31.

32.

33. 34.

35.

36.



JWCP 10 1.indb 93 9/27/2017 8:59:45 PM