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# RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

**ON WRITING:**

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## Writing and Indifference

### Dieter Roelstraete

1. A middling yet significant new trend in art writing has recently come to my (admittedly, highly imaginative) attention: invitations, made on the part of artists, to publish in certain publications and journals—the “artist book” is a particularly popular format that has helped propel this new trend—that come with only one restrictive clause: please feel free to write anything you want, as long you refrain from writing “about” the work. Indeed, the author is expressly asked, sometimes almost implored, to write “beside the point”: often a mere literary Spielerei will do (fiction is really big business in art writing right now, though poetry still is not), sometimes a more profound philosophical reflection is required, sometimes a dialogue or play may be considered fit for publishing, sometimes a broadly art-historical framing will do. Anything but a piece that seeks to engage, in varying degrees of directness—this in particular being the great new taboo—the work or the practice itself. (Clearly, it is the “about” stressed above that is the crux here: “you don’t have to write about my work / please don’t write about my work.”)

Things used to be quite different, and to a great extent of course they still are (meaning: what I am talking about here is still a relatively marginal phenomenon, but a significant one nonetheless, as what is really at stake in the observed resistance against writing “about” the artwork at hand is an institutionalized unease around questions of judgment). We have all written for artists who, upon receiving a commissioned monographic essay, are merely content to count the number of times their name is mentioned in the piece. In fact, the only time I was ever asked to write about an artist’s work, only to see the resulting piece turned down, that was exactly what happened: the artist in question felt that the essay wasn’t sufficiently “about” his work, and actively resented the extent to which I had usurped it to show off my presumed philosophical erudition. (He was right—but then you’ve never heard of him.) The exact opposite, in other words, of the above, more recent experiences, which can be recapped in the following terms: “I love how you usurp my work to show off your philosophical erudition!”

What, we must ask ourselves, is behind this trend, which, I do admit, may well exist only in my

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imagination? A few possible explanations: the artists in question are so unsure of the value of their work that they implicitly admit that it may not withstand deeper critical scrutiny, i.e. that it may not be worth being written “about.” The work is so empty that writers are called upon to pour just about anything they can muster into its terrifying void. Or, on the contrary: the work so full that it no longer requires being written “about,” that writing about it no longer makes any sense. Or, the work is so rich that it can dutifully absorb just about any thought—something the writer is then called upon to prove by associating wildly, ad-libbing creatively. Or perhaps writers are merely encouraged to quote as many irrelevant, off-topic Deleuzian and Derridean quips as possible—ventriloquizing Agamben is perhaps the most highly prized intellectual virtue in the current conjuncture—so that an apparently solid intellectual framework can be provided that the art itself is simply powerless to conjure (here, this trend could be seen as a critical corollary of the hypertrophy of art-historical referencing in recent practice: if you’re not sure whether your work is really good, be sure at least to paraphrase, quote, or reference an artwork that has been proven, historically, to be good). Write as much beside the point as you want, as long as you pimp the work’s theoretical credentials.

Who knows, but here’s an explanation that is probably somewhat closer to the truth [sic], and quite a bit bolder too: maybe most contemporary art can no longer be written “about” in the tried and tested sense of older critical establishments, and this is something that artists know better than anyone else (especially writers). “You can write about anything” because the art itself is simply no longer something that can be written about, or engaged with, in writing or—least of all, as we have known for some time now—as an aesthetic event.

2. Aesthetics”—the million-dollar word. The invitation to write (about) anything the writer feels like inevitably presumes that this writing will be worth the reader’s while as an aesthetic event first and foremost, for such kind of freestyle writing generally no longer aspires or even cares to inform or illuminate, analyze or, God forbid (and this is truly the crucial qualification), criticize. This anything-goes doctrine probably also explains why there is, first, too bloody damn much writing in today’s art world. If many of the older restrictions on art writing have fallen by the wayside, then inevitably there will be more writing, too. Second, it is also related to a dramatically increased interest, among a younger generation of artists, in discursive or literary forms formerly considered far out of the reach of art and the artist alike (and that, of course, has been a good thing, overall). Clearly, writing as such, i.e. as a formerly autonomous cultural practice or as the work of writers, has been annexed and included wholesale within the general orbit of art production, and even when written by somebody else, the catalogue essay is easily co-opted within the ever-expanding realm of artistic practice—a direct consequence of the increased demand for discursive literacy in art education and the growing trend toward reconfiguring artistic practice as curatorial practice or as research (artists-researchers now curate their careers, and catalogues, or publications more generally, becoming a prestigious and essential part thereof). These developments have been bad news, overall, for the general standards of much of the writing produced under the aegis of these trends.. Neither literary quality nor critical acumen is necessarily a primary concern for an artist constituency preferring promotion over the critic’s well-tempered preening and prodding. And so a certain aesthetically engaged tradition of art criticism in particular appears to have been wiped off the map of contemporary art discourse almost entirely, to be replaced by the boosterist ignominies of “curatorial” writing, much of which is an embarrassment indeed to long-held standards of both literary and critical quality. (The phenomenon of the international art world’s highly idiosyncratic take on “globish” also plays a key role in this conjuncture—but that too is a topic we can touch upon only in passing.) It is perhaps precisely because so much contemporary art writing is promotional in spirit, intent,

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and execution that literary standards have fallen so dizzyingly: it is a well-known fact that the best writing is often inspired by disgust, disdain, disappointment, disagreement—key ingredients of much of what historically has been allowed to pass for criticism. This is simply not a stance that the curator, ensnared in a web of art world dependencies—consider my earlier point regarding the writer’s obligation to provide solid intellectual frameworks when the art itself can no longer conjure them—is in a position to entertain. Curatorial promobabble, of a kind that seeks to anchor even the greatest mediocrities within a grand art-historical lineage (because what the artist wants is often not necessarily content, but the professional endorsement implied in the appearance in print of a certain author’s name), is simply the lingua franca of an art world within which everyone is presumed involved, insinuated, implied, embedded. A world without critiques and without criticisms, in which damning indictments, scathing reviews, and heartless clinical analysis no longer require the soothing cloak of the well-formulated argument and the balm of a poet’s bon mot simply because those indictments and analyses are no longer deemed possible—that is to say, in effect, wanted (or, worse still, allowed).

Needless to say, other factors also play into the complex of reasons and causes for the slow decline of standards of quality in contemporary art writing in the last twenty years, beyond the seamless replacement of writers’ writing by curators’ writing. One such factor could well be the decidedly managerial bent so deeply ingrained in the pragmatist rhetoric of curatorial training—the exponential growth of curatorial studies and training programs has not, alas, resulted in a comparable flowering of spirited art-writing. On the contrary, much curatorial “learning” appears to exist on the condition of something like stylistic—or, dare I say it, aesthetic—unlearning.

**Dieter Roelstraete is the newly appointed Manilow Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where he is currently preparing an exhibition of Polish-born, London-based artist Goshka Macuga (December 2012). From 2003 until 2011, he was a curator at the Antwerp museum of contemporary art MuHKA, where he organized exhibitions of Chantal Akerman (2012), Liam Gillick & Lawrence Weiner (2011), and thematic group shows focusing on contemporary art from Vancouver (2005) and Rio de Janeiro (2011), as well as projects such as *Emotion Pictures* (2005) and *The Order of Things* (2008). A philosopher by training and former editor of *Afterall* journal, Roelstraete has published extensively on contemporary art and culture in numerous catalogues and journals such as *Artforum*, *A Prior Magazine*, *e-flux journal*, *Frieze* and *Metropolis M*.**

Posted June 5, 2012. © Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

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