

Partial Aphasia

ON WRITING ABOUT ART

By Ruslana Lichtzier

Dedicated to Jason Morris †

TO THINK ABOUT / TO WRITE ABOUT— FROM ONSET, I MARK A GAP.

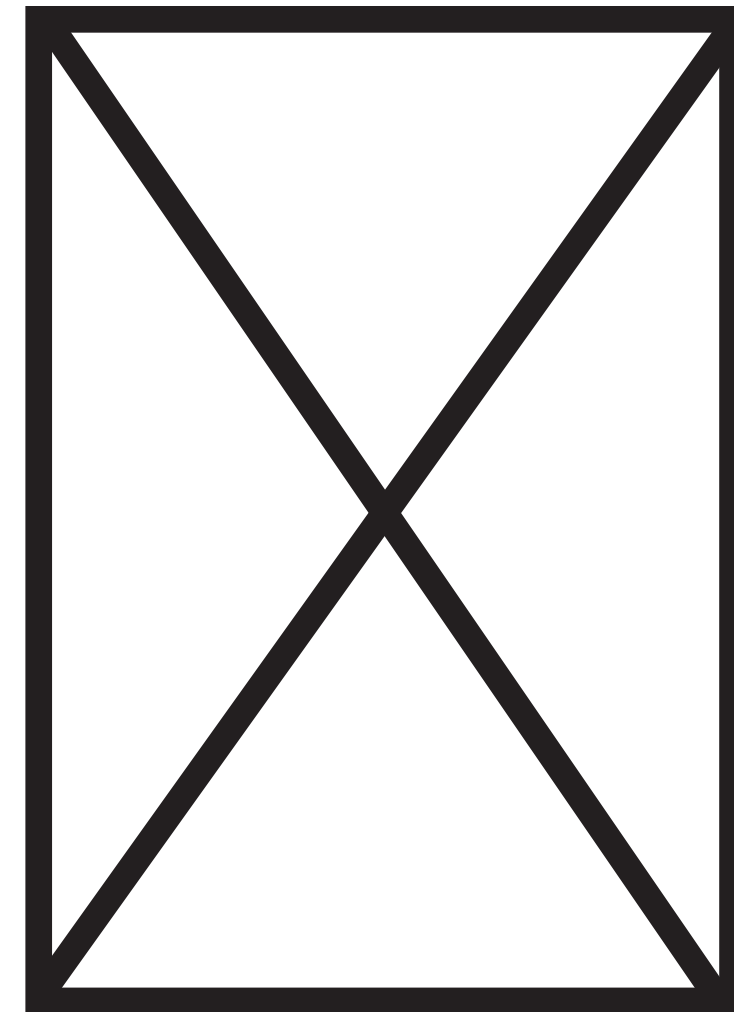
In a recent phone conversation with my friend, the artist Lior Modan, we were speaking about this text in the future tense. Lior said that the art writer should remain truthful to the artwork and to the artist who made it. I replied to him that I am not sure I can. Thinking about it, I agree with him—that contemplative writing should always be supported by research, and that the writer should refrain from the masturbatory urge to meditate on whatever is on their mind, while treating art as a proverbial doormat to such ruminations. But, I do not think that I am capable of being fully truthful to the art object, or the artist, since they are bound to remain, if not completely, partially concealed.

Let us begin by drawing boundaries. For one to write about art, one ought to spend some time thinking about it; ‘it’ being a specific object, an object that one must first encounter, physically: an object that demands a radical surrender to its experience.

The writer must become porous to the objects’ effects. To the simultaneous reception of different, fragmented kinds of knowledge. Physical symptoms may include vertigo, loss of sense of depth, partial blindness, and an irritating state of temporal aphasia.¹ While this occurs, the mind attempts to tie the object to other objects in the world; to pin it in the map of present cultural-political movements and to history. Yet, the work insists on telling a story. At this point, the writer may suffer from a sensory burden, but you must resist the urge to run. Do not. Instead, stay attuned and listen. The story has no words, it has been delivered with forms, textures, images, and matter.

All of this is to say that for one to write about art, one must experience it, and that experience occurs, in part, outside of language; hence the gap you step into while attempting to write about it clearly. The gap is not illuminated, it is dark and cavernous.²

In her 2012 novel,



Summer of Hate, Chris Kraus perfectly defines the formula for a contemporary art critical text: “...write a few pages about the artist’s work; compare him with some more-famous contemporaries; then, throw in some quotes from a couple of cultural theorists—their names mostly start with ‘B’—the trick was to pick the right one. Benjamin, Baudrillard, Bourriaud were too dated. Better to with Badiou.”³ Reading this made me laugh and then, straight right after, it made me disheartened. Kraus’ recipe is indeed the general rule in art related writing. I followed it many times. Most published texts focus on the *knowable*, on the “art and...” be it philosophically, anthropologically, historically, politically, et cetera. The texts are structured around the works’ context, while avoiding its core. Why? Because the core of a work speaks outside of language, it is uneasy and messy. Writing about the core forces a construction of a different kind of language, of a different form.—

When I write about art objects, exhibitions, and art processes, I insist on remembering this gap. I try to make sense of the sensible,

not only the thinkable. I write inside of a non-linear translation process, which is not the translation of one language to another, but rather the translation of my sensations into words. It is only a successful process in some measures; the rendition is never full. While writing, I desire to leave the traces of my hesitations, contradictory thoughts, and where words fail me. Unfortunately, these moments are often being cut with edits, since they exceed the limits of the text I am expected to produce.⁴

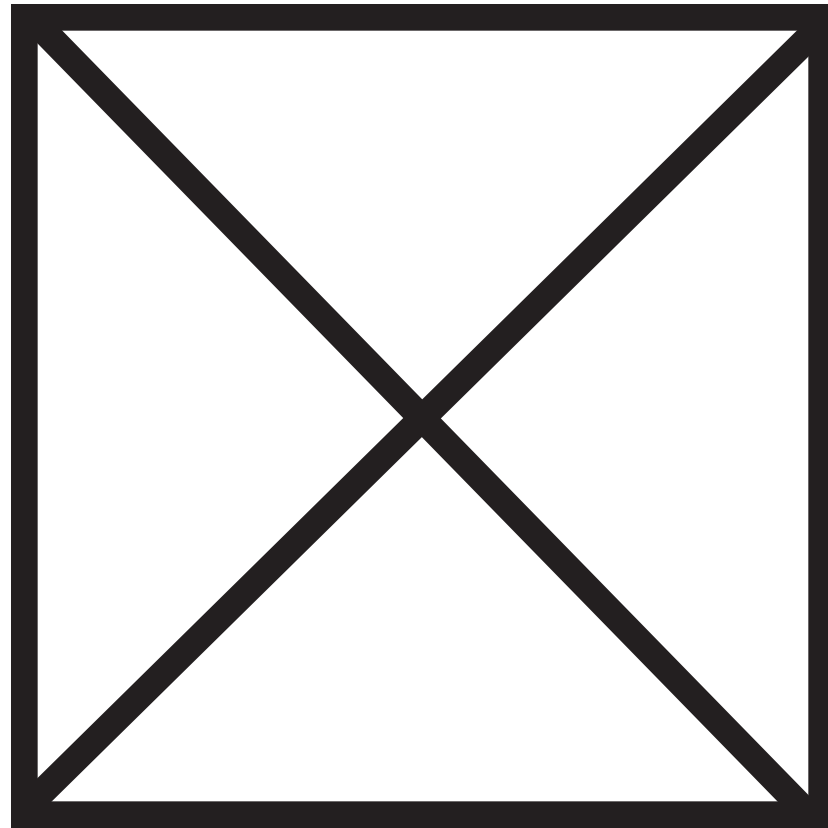
The uncomfortable phrasing of the previous paragraph—the repetition of “I,” “me,” and “my”—aims to bring home, finally, again (please let us be over with this), the fact that thought occurs *only* in bodies, and *only* in specific bodies. In this case, we are talking about my body, not because it is special, but because it is the one who currently speaks. In doing so, I am reminding you that, a) the originally masculine tendency of thinking outside the body covers-up the historical erasure of bodies of

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“others,” be it non-white, and non-masculine bodies; and b) writing without the body allows one to speak from the point of false authority (the academic “we”), which is always partially a lie.

I am done with writing; of authoring with false conviction. The one thing I will write about now, is my experience (I will keep the heated language; it brings me joy), and that is hard, because it is not a measured, calm experience: good work, you fall in love with.

It is about to get messy.

Experiencing good work shakes you to your fundamentals, it makes you laugh—with pleasure—while mirroring your innermost secret fears back to you. It turns a cold shoulder, screams “fuck off,” and brushes you away. It lures you in, whispering a language you cannot fully comprehend, and brings you to tears, filling your heart with longing and tenderness. Good work leaves you bewildered, disoriented, and bare. Writing about it is an act of masochism, I think.

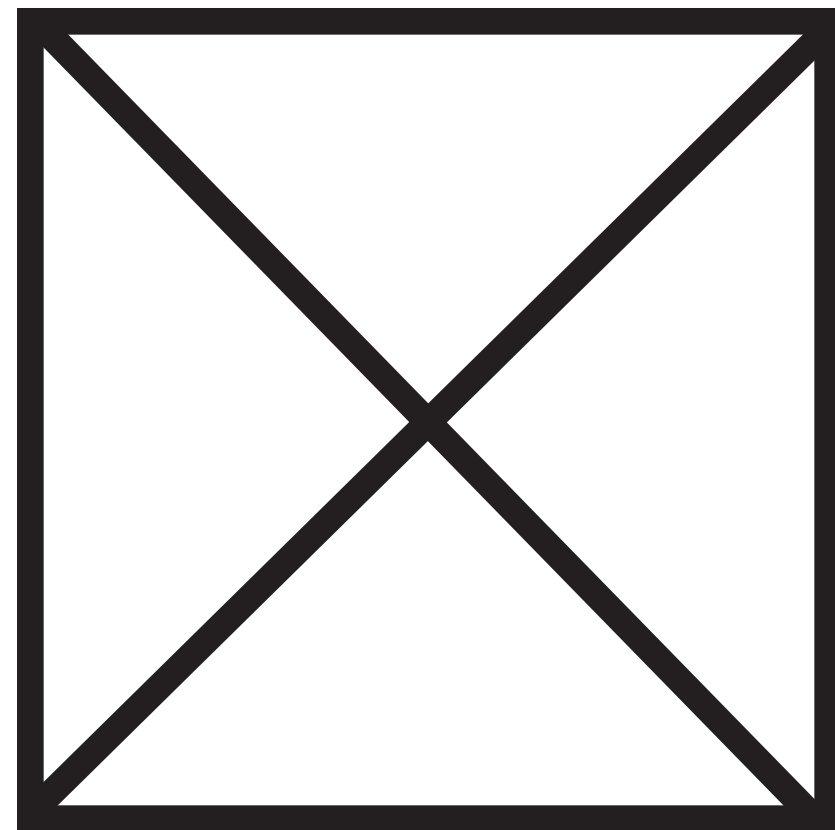
As Kathy Acker said, “Let one of art criticism’s languages be silence so that we can hear the sounds of the body: the winds and voices from far-off shores, the sounds of the unknown.”

To express the language of silence is to confront with the outside of cognitive comprehension. It is to think through a temporal aphasia, to acknowledge the unspeakable—the sensual—which is repressed. To think through silence, is to strip away the Eurocentric masculine discourse that always knows its order and cause, and exists to tell you just that. If we depart, if only for a moment, from ordinary language, that clings to syntax-context meaning making, and consider another language, that which speaks silence, we are going slightly mad. Then, we write with madness in our minds, with physical breaks, through failures and in multiplicity (this does not mean what you think, and quite the opposite, please stop motioning Deleuze, I beg you). If we want, and I think we must, let the body be present in the art related texts, we must give space for idiosyncratic forms, rather than succumb to the structure that is expected of us. I do not understand why we

obey restrictions: we are not cultural workers. Thinking about the fact I became an art writer forces me to accept my ridiculous irrelevancy. In the past decades, art became a novelty, a stock, an amusement for the rich. People—regular people—remember Pollock. Art failed, and that blame is on us (though I blame the boomers). In the insular art food-chain, art writers are not positioned high. The laughable remuneration for writing indicates it; you are either doing this as a hobby, and/or you belong to the upper class (which I am not a part of). Topping that with the routinely use of critical texts as a boost for the market, leaves an all too sour taste in my mouth. I swallow it and write. I write despite. I am done with following recipes.

† In commemoration of his new book of poetry *LEVON HELM*, published by the Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018.

- 1 Aphasia is a disorder that results from damage to portions of the brain that are responsible for language. For most people, these areas are on the left side of the brain. Aphasia usually occurs suddenly, often following a stroke or head injury, but it may also develop slowly, as the result of a brain tumor or a progressive neurological disease. The disorder impairs the expression and understanding of language as well as reading and writing. Aphasia may co-occur with speech disorders, such as dysarthria or apraxia of speech, which also result from brain damage. Source: National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD).
- 2 The same type of listening occurs also when art uses language, as the art object operates in a fundamentally different sphere than that of, let us say, text messages, emails, or literature.
- 3 Kraus, Chris. *Summer of Hate*. Semiotext(e), 2012.
Colby, Georgina. *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- 4 I am pointing on the limits of the review type essay; the form of the text you anticipate to encounter in an art magazine.
- 5 Colby, Georgina. *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.



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