A survey of the historical phenomenon of visual artists who also write and publish on the context of their own contemporary practice.

Historically artists have always done much more than simply make work. Unlike other professions with strict demarcations artists have habitually occupied multiple positions within the terrain that makes up the art world. Thus artists continue to be critics (Donald Judd, Robert Rooney, Tracey Clement, Alex Gawronski), theorists (Ian Burn, Robert Smithson, Peter Halley, David Batchelor), historians (Ian Burn, Bernard Smith), curators (Richard Grayson, Tony Tuckson, Ian Burn, and all those artists running ARIs), collectors (most artists have a significant collection of other artists’ work), gallerists (James Dorahy, Scott Donovan, ARIs), and audiences, since a significant proportion of any artist’s audience is other artists.

It was not until the 1960s that the professionalisation of the arts drove a wedge into this informal system and created new separate competing disciplines of artist, curator, critic, and so on. Yet at the same time a growing awareness of the artworld’s ecology has shown the deep interconnectivity of all those positions. The most notable hybrid receiving recent critical attention has been the artist-musician and the supposed synchronicity between musical practice, abstraction, chromatic scales and composition. The hybrid of art and writing remains largely unacknowledged, probably because it defies an old supposition that art should speak for itself and trained writers are better suited for articulating the complexities of art.
Walk the Talk: the politics of artists who write

MARK TITMARSH

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Jacques Rancière, 2006

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From the 1980s onwards Peter Halley, David Batchelor, Liam Gillick, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe showed that artists could write with as much insight and literary talent as any critic might in understanding and articulating the changing conditions of abstraction, new media, and the expanded fields of paintings, videos, sculpture, and conceptual work. In Australia Bernard Smith sublimated his own painting practice so that he could document his contemporaries. Ian Burn developed published writing as an artform in itself, and Imants Tillers in a series of publications in Art & Text magazine defined an entire generation of postmodern painterly appropriation. Consequently Australia has produced a swarm of artists who find articulating their context as important as making work for exhibition. Artists such as Alex Gavronski, Lisa Kelly, Reuben Keehan, Dominique and Dan Angelos (Soda_Jerk), Tom Nicholson, Zanny Begg, Adam Geczy, Lily Hibberd, Mark Titmarsh, Guil Hastings, Christopher Dean and John Conomos divide their time between the studio, the gallery, and the word processor in an attempt to more fully develop the practice of contemporary art.

MAJOR PUBLICATIONS OF ARTISTS’ WRITINGS

Art historians and theorists have gathered artists’ written statements together usually as a form of privileged insight into the work and thinking of an acknowledged master. However when Herschel B. Chipp compiled a wide selection of artist writings from Post Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism, the result was less personal or psychological and more
conceptual in overview. The book Thoreau of Molten Art (1908) remains a highly authoritative account of aesthetic thinking and cultural momentum in the arts from the end of the 19th century to mid-20th century. The title signals a new interest in theory, contra Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic of the day, who believed the evolution of modern art was ‘immanent to practice’ only. In Chipp’s compendium, the writings of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian take an exemplary place, articulating the arrival and growth of abstract art, paralleled by a proliferation of new theoretical models and languages. 

Thoreau and Documents of Contemporary Art: a sourcebook of artist’s writings (1996, K. Stiles and P. Selz, eds) was devised as a sequel to Chipp’s pioneering work. It documented the paradigm shift from postwar modernism to late-20th century postmodernism and the so-called rise of the theory industry in art. Blasted Allergeries: an anthology of writings by contemporary artists (1989, Brian Wallis, ed.) is an even more specific look at the postmodern moment through the writings of Laurie Anderson, Dan Graham, Barbara Kruger, Matt Mullican, Richard Prince, Martha Rosler and others. Maria Witzling’s two important compilations, Voicing Our Visions (1991) and Voicing Today’s Visions (1994), captured the personal and aesthetic issues of women artists from the 19th and 20th centuries.

The dominant model for this kind of compilation was radically revised in 1992 with the publication of Art in Theory, 1900 – 1990 by Harrison and Wood. The book is vastly inclusive while the way Harrison and Wood chose to place the artist writings in the revised in 1992 with the publication of Art in Theory, 1900 – 1990. By 1992, as a result of precise condensation, the book is vastly inclusive while the way Harrison and Wood chose to place the artist writings in the revised in 1992 with the publication of Art in Theory, 1900 – 1990.

Recently the contextual model of artists writing has been creatively adapted in the Whitechapel series of Documents of Contemporary Art, with each book focusing on a single theme such as Colour, Sound, The Everyday, Appropriation, and so on. These texts, usually edited by an artist or critic directly associated with the subject matter, tend to function like artistic collages of writing and ideas, ranging in content from entire essays to single sentences.

ARTISTS THINK WITH THEIR EYES OPEN

One of the most important artist writers of the 20th century was Ian Burn, an Australian artist who was also the major conceptual artist of the 1960s and 1970s figuring in both the English and American forms of Conceptual Art. With Mal Ramsden and others he developed various including Art-Language during his time in London in the late 1960s. When he moved from there to NYC he worked with Joseph Kosuth and others on the second US conceptual art magazine, The East. While in NYC he also staged and curated the important conceptual art survey exhibition Conceptual Art and Conceptual Apotheosis at the New York Cultural Center in 1970. As Burn wrote at the time, ‘for any work to be conceptual, whatever the media, we need to think of it as an idea that depends on its context and mode of presentation. This is the conceptual attitude: it is based on the idea that ideas are in the viewer, not in the art itself. As such, the idea of conceptual art is a kind of philosophical critique of the way we think about art, and the way we think about ideas in general.’

Burn trained at the National Gallery School Melbourne in the early 1960s in the painting studios. His first works were figurative abstractions that led to an interest in geometric abstraction, with examples shown in the landmark Field exhibition at the NGV. He soon abandoned painting for glass and mirror based constructions, and eventually moved beyond objects altogether in favour of texts. In 1968 he returned to a synthesis of painting and text-based work. His enduring international reputation as one of the major figures of Conceptual art is based mostly on his activities in London and NYC, though more attention is gradually coming to his whole life practice.

Why did writing become so crucial for Burn, an artist who had studied approvingly under the famous landscape painter Fred Williams? And what could writing do for an artist’s practice? As Burn puts it: ‘I was first involved with the object, then there was a theory or framework contingent on the object, then the object become contingent on the theory, and finally in the current work there is the theory or framework itself.’

Burn’s most well known publications are his texts for Art-Language, The Fox, ArtForum, several catalogue essays, and two books that came out shortly before his death, National Life and Landscape (1990), and Dialogue (1991), a compilation of his essays. Perhaps the point of all this writing is condemned in a statement he made in his catalogue essay for the exhibition Looking at Seeing and Raising (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 1995). Burn argued that ‘discursive factors produce our seeing’ and that ‘self-critically glances the political entailed in cultures of seeing’. It is this same idea that Jacques Ranciere develops when he argues that the distribution of the sensible, including the visual in art, is a political act. As he puts it, ‘the system of boundaries that define what is visible or perceivable within any particular culture can be challenged by new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjects.’

Such is the work of the artist writer, the artist who ‘thinks with their eyes open’ thereby establishing ‘regimes of sensible intensity … between modes of being, modes of saying and modes of making’. As a result they form uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories and languages.

ART WRITING ART

Similar issues concerning the distribution of the sensible and the regimes of saying and making arise in the current atmosphere of doctoral research for artists. In an age of globalised knowledge, many artists have undertaken studio-led PhD research that requires ‘linguaging’ as the task of exegesis. Consequently they find themselves in a conflict between the scientific rational demands of the university based on new knowledge and the radical differences of visual intelligence. Between these competing modes of saying and making, artists begin to develop a new enunciative community that emerges in the tension between writing a thesis, producing art in the turbulence of the studio, and quantifying those outcomes in an assessable exhibition.

The thesis, the most problematic aspect of the process, usually involves these stages. Firstly, the artist’s way of being is identified by a kind of everyday ethnographic reading that generates a description of the practice, but not its significance, or how it generates meaning, and how it fits into a professional context.

To fill that gap another mode of understanding is required, involving an extra level of theory based on art history and critical theory which places the artist within an established genre of professional practice, usually grounded in conceptual, minimal or popist precedents. At this point art theory begins to reveal its limitations; it can say what is known about art and artworks in an historical or epistemological sense but is inadequate in showing ‘how’ art is, your facts. To get deeper than theory or practice requires something closer to a philosophical inquiry into the being of art itself. This is in turn requires a demolition of traditional aesthetics and the creation of post-aesthetics or an ontology of art. No wonder many artist struggle with their subject outcome and why universities scrumble for the knowenork safety of scientific repeatability.

The risk art takes in becoming a subject of doctoral research is that the visual will continually be folded back into the textual. The excess of the visual ever text is not simply a matter of translation. Nor is it satisfied by considering the visual as a language with the same status as a written text as, say, in semantics.

As Wittgenstein suggested, ‘Whereas one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’. Hence the visual, at times outside the chatter of language, remains an incurable silence, not beyond being
known altogether, but only to be pointed at like some unreachable star. Heidegger attempted to embrace this silence through the practice of formal indication, referring to the contingent nature of something in an attempt to get to its essence. In Heidegger’s practice, this resulted in the destruction of language and the creation of graphic hybrids whose words are scored through with a line or an ex. As Miguel de Beistegui put it, ‘can’t we see art as precisely non-language?’ Must we not acknowledge a certain resistance in its turn to philosophical discourse, whose tendency is, coming out of language, always to return to language, instead of passing and lingering before art’s almost excessive visibility?9

POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

For Ranciere it is this partitioning of the sensible, between the visual and its other, between the acts of making and seeing. Art anticipates work because the contrast is between artists who deal with politics in a direct, such as a device to make current political statements, as a way of saying ‘Sorry’ to the Stolen Generations, for example. Or as an exploration of otherwise, marginality and conflict between friend and enemy, them and us.13 Or as an investigation of the political condition of art, commonly known as institutional critique. Yet there exists another type of politics for art that gets beyond readable messages and direct political signification. This is a politics of being where art as an ontological intervention challenges dominant modes of rational economics, science, and communication models propagated by everyday discourse and media mythologies. The contrast is between artists who write in a literal sense, that is, more obvious current affairs, and those who work on politics beyond the newsworthy, a politics of foundational ontological concern.10 The former might be called political art and the latter ‘pol-ethetics’, indicating a neologistic linkage of politics, philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics. Pol-ethetic artists work under the presumption that no change in politics can occur without a challenge to the underlying structure of thinking, making and being.

5. Ian Burn, title of one of his paintings.
10. Ranciere, 2006: p. 44.

This is the first of two-part article; the second part to be published next month (July 2013, Issue No. 261).

Mark Titmarsh is a Sydney-based artist and writer.

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Outside of the exhibited artwork, but inspired by it, artists began to write systematically about their own context of thinking and making in publications or magazines that they sometimes worked for, or for magazines they created themselves. Artists wrote reviews and related articles for publication in journals and books on aesthetics and art theory for example, Donald Judd in Art Magazine, Ian Burn in Art-Language, Victor Burgin in several books, myself in On The Beach, and Lily Hibberd in an unknown journal.

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