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## Dear Susannah (April 2017)

### 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 one of a two-part article in the form of a letter.*

Dear Susannah (April 2017)

Dear Susannah,

The text that this one precedes was written for a week of events at Raven Row and South London Gallery in 2015. To summarise briefly, the event was concerned with collaboration and non-singular modes of authorship, and in particular how these intersected with gendered roles and behaviours within art. This was the second event focused on collaborative working that I'd been asked to participate in since I'd moved to London. In both cases, and for different reasons, I attended on my own, without the partner within the ongoing and long-standing collaboration I work within, and which would have been at least one of the reasons for the invitation.

My response to the invitation was to some extent, and as it often is, emotionally driven. Two summers ago, I was coming to the end of an 18 month period during which I would move home ten times and across three cities. This had been a liberating experience, at least in as much that I'd realised I was capable of such a thing and was still sleeping at night. It was also of course a consequence, to some degree or other, of the shift in my relationship with Tom. The text that came out of this hasn't been published before and revisiting it in response to your invitation, I felt it seemed to fit.

Earlier today I read an article online, in the Huffington Post. It proposed that white men should lose the right to vote. The argument being that this would redress the balance, the advantage, that white men had gained at the expense of those who were neither white nor male. Recent votes, it said, specifically those that brought us Brexit and Trump, would not have had the outcomes they did if white men had not had the vote. I found the argument persuasive, and a worthwhile one, not despite but because of the unlikelihood of it happening. In proposing the unthinkable, the writer exposed the structural power relations we blind ourselves to. The proposition pulled back the curtain on voting choices made in the service of the existing distribution of power – which is, of course (grossly, unevenly), in the hands of white men.

What I liked about this article was the way in which its central proposition effected something akin to a loosening of the knot that holds certain acts or behaviours together and in place. I like the idea of art effecting such a loosening, and I also like loosening as a figure of speech to describe what art does. I'm thinking about how a few weeks ago I used the word reveal as a means to describe how I thought a work we'd made had worked. It was for one of those 300 word REF descriptors. A colleague pulled me up on it – and I got it. It was too easy to say but too hard to back up: an inadequate, flabby cliché.

I'm thinking more broadly now about the vocabulary(ies) I use to talk about art. I know that I use, and like to use, metaphor and simile and analogy a lot. These are the modes of speech by which I teach or that I use in conversation with Tom about our work. This makes sense – after all, aren't these devices tight little knots of representation and therefore (neatly enough) somehow analogous

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1. themselves to the behaviours of art? These tight little knots are the point at which language unloos-  
 2. ens itself, to loop around an image, a thought or an association. I find such modes of speaking about  
 3. art to be powerful and rich. It creates a site for puns and jokes that then themselves throw up new,  
 4. unexpected relationships between words, objects and images.

5. Did I mention I'm dyspraxic?

6. I'll admit it; I don't usually write for academic journals. I don't feel it's the place I can do what I  
 7. do best, although I'm uncomfortable with that as a position for a couple of reasons. First it implies  
 8. that this is an either or, a this or a that: that I am either inside or outside the academy, whereas  
 9. the academy is in fact a site I work with and within as an artist in a way not dissimilar to the way I  
 10. encounter other public or professional contexts. I find I face a similar problem when I try and talk  
 11. about the thing or things I am supposedly here to talk about. I get stuck, come unstuck, in the act  
 12. of naming and making distinctions that puts art here and writing there, and the conjunction of the  
 13. two into art writing doesn't fix anything.

14. Last week I took the train from London to the south coast to meet with two new colleagues and  
 15. discuss an idea for a project or symposium, of sorts. The project under discussion, in conversations on  
 16. the train, in cafes and whilst walking along the seafront, had grown out of a shared interest in titles, and  
 17. more specifically the titles of artworks. What was their interpretative relationship to the artwork they  
 18. were attached to? And then: how was their form related, or not, to those perhaps similarly sounding  
 19. slivers of language used to sell goods, or services, or property? I felt I needed to help develop a collec-  
 20. tive thesis, however propositional. I felt failed by the vocabulary I had to hand and wondered if that was  
 21. indicative of inadequate or inappropriate learning – and if so, if it's actually as well that's the case.

22. I felt frustrated that something so central to what I do, have done, for so long, remained  
 23. elusive – and if so, if that's exactly the point.

24. Thinking now about the vocabulary I encounter within my job as an academic, I feel a familiar,  
 25. belligerent, exasperation. I question the value, the usefulness, of the exhortations that demand my  
 26. research question, my methodology, my contribution to knowledge. Yet these are conventions that  
 27. in undertaking a practice-based PhD, and then a series of academic posts, from research fellow  
 28. to associate professor, I must navigate and negotiate. I see it as awkward act of assimilation, one  
 29. framed by occasional feelings of fury.

30. I have conversations with other artists where we rule out words we might (previously, fool-  
 31. ishly?) have used to describe what we do. Practice is out for some. Creativity is out for many. I  
 32. agree with the reasoning, yet struggle to find suitable, satisfactory replacements. I prepare a pres-  
 33. entation where I talk about innovation and begin by acknowledging that the word is now sodden,  
 34. ruined. I talk with a friend about the shame he felt in showing me his initial proposal for a recently  
 35. embarked upon PhD.

36. I know what he means.

Dear Susannah (April 2017)

When you interviewed me back in 2006 I'd only recently finished my PhD. I remember feeling that the PhD, the act of doing it, was something to be slightly ashamed of, and it wasn't something I mentioned much at the time. The context might have changed, yet for different reasons shame may still be a useful, appropriate response. The terminology of academic research seems to have sneaked into and shifted the ways in which artists and curators describe what they do. The phrases research-based practice and practice-based research circulate circuitously and (I would argue) tautologically. This isn't just a result of artists doing PhDs – all of this is either a symptom or evidence through which art performs its aspirations of value. My own shame, I should note, had been accompanied by a sort of sickly pride – a sure sign to watch out for something.

Did I mention I'm a Gemini?

On Sunday evening I was sent a list of questions by a journalist in LA. Over in a different time and place, one of our works has been making an appearance at the Coachella festival in California. One of the questions asked how the work had been influenced by the Coachella Valley area. Another asked how we felt the work would interact with the music. I felt aware that there were answers I was expected to give, but far from able to voice them. The correct answers were alien, and I couldn't help but view them as someone else's word count.

Back here, with my word count, and writing this is punctuated by intermittently, periodically switching between here and social media as I watch the spectacle of Coachella from a distance. Twitter diverts, as it does. I click on a link to a curatorial research group. In this context, the word research presents to me as a further, perhaps unnecessary qualification, which in turn renders it opaque, mute, yet able nonetheless to perform value through its presence. The language here performs its meaning as a lump, a collage, collectively acting out accumulative associations. It's a different way of making meanings, of using words, to the one I'm trying to write with now. I think. I think about the phrases we use within our artwork, those lumps of language that are sometimes printed, sometimes constructed, sometimes spoken. There are questions here about intent, and transparency, and perhaps also truth.

A snap election has just been called. Theresa May has said that the country is coming together but that Westminster is not. The next day at PMQs Yvette Cooper challenges this, given that the House of Commons voted for article 50 and Twitter debates whether or not Tory MP David Mundell had responded by shouting 'Shut up bitch'. I watch and rewatch the footage, reluctantly wishing for evidence of misogyny that should require no further proof.

I think again about the strictures and conventions of academia. I recognise that for me, the visibility of such conventions offers an effective means to negotiate. It establishes useful self-limiting terrain for the encounter between art and language, providing me with a means to frame or better understand my persistent problem, the itch that arises from words encountering images and objects, and vice versa. So these conventions and behaviours are a frame, albeit one that is equally

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1. a block and a means to exclude, as well as a structure against which to pitch thought and work. The  
 2. relationship is both antagonistic and productive.

3. The opening week of Coachella coincided with an alarming increase in tensions between the  
 4. US and North Korea. Our work, described in the mainstream LA-based press as candy-coloured,  
 5. whimsical, is titled 'Is this what brings things into focus?'. I talk to Tom on Skype to try to make  
 6. sense of the work, and even if it is a work, and if it is then where its parameters lie. We talk about  
 7. occupying a position distinct and at a remove from the contexts we work across and within and  
 8. we talk about the title. We ask if this is what brings things into focus. We talk about how the title  
 9. speaks both clearly, directly and indirectly, uncertainly. I don't know where the question comes  
 10. from or what it is directed at – how could I?

11. The form of this writing, this letter to you, is a vehicle for digression, for dissonance. It allows  
 12. me to assert a position, with both tenacity and a degree of non-linearity. It's an opportunity to write  
 13. both as directly as I can and in my own voice, whilst simultaneously, conversely, allowing for the  
 14. possibility of a fiction, a first-person auto-fiction. I feel it's both public and intimate.

15. Earlier this week I saw that Tate had advertised for a Dean of Research. It's a job title that would  
 16. speak to the senior academic they may wish to attract, with a job description that fluently translates  
 17. the activities of the museum into those recognised by the academy. These aren't, of course, distinct  
 18. spheres, but for me Tate is a site within which the work of art and artists is primary, and I'm sensi-  
 19. tive to the ways in which the vocabulary of the academy asserts its own particular value systems,  
 20. its own power relations. The AHRC after all holds on tight to an epistemic position that excludes  
 21. the making and exhibition of art from receiving funding unless it demonstrates its critical reflection  
 22. through textual analysis. I don't want the things I do, that artists do, to be rendered mute for others  
 23. to step in and speak for. What we say and the form it takes matters. I think about complicity. I think  
 24. about being awkward, again.

25. What's black and white and pink all over?

26. We rarely, deliberately, describe our work as sculpture except of course when it's a publica-  
 27. tion. Our publication *An Anthology; I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so, so sorry* is an anthology that's also  
 28. an apology, with black text on white and pages edged in pink. It's a title that arrived to us whole  
 29. somehow, albeit one composed of words and phrases we'd used before. The apology, if it is an  
 30. apology as opposed to an affectation or verbal tic of self-deprecation, is as unexplained to us as it  
 31. would be to any other reader. I don't know what I'm sorry for, how could I? I wonder if the behav-  
 32. iour of the title isn't analogous to that of the texts within the publication. The texts perform the  
 33. limit conditions of their own rhetoric. They're not what brings things into focus. They're an indirect  
 34. exchange of uncertain value. They are the default exchange adjusted.

Best wishes,  
 Joanne

Dear Susannah (April 2017)

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