

## *The Writing Artist*

### **Jan Svenungsson**

What is it that makes a work of art important?

My best answer is that there is something in it that you can't understand completely. Still, you do understand that this something *is* there, and that it has the potential to be understood. Because of this presence, the work attracts our attention and curiosity and we keep thinking about it.

Important works of art are active. They provoke different reactions depending on the viewer and they elude answers. On a practical level the work is an answer to a question that the artist has posed to himself, but it will only be a relevant answer if, on a fundamental level, the answer becomes a new question.

An endless generation of interpretative activity is the wished for outcome of an art work, not explanation. *Truth in art is by definition unstable.*

Now, let's imagine a scientist; someone studying an occurrence in nature. She will be looking hard at data, evaluating connections, testing alternatives, calculating probability, in order to arrive at a theory which will aim to answer, and put to rest, the questions that drove the scientist to this particular area of work. Eventually, our scientist will publish her theory, which will then be confirmed or repudiated by her peers. If she has done well it might become established as a truth. Later this truth might turn out to have been only temporary, but that is part of the game. It is good for everyone involved when the answer proposed seems stable, because then it can be used as a platform for new research. The value of a scientific result is higher when there is agreement on how to understand it.

If we imagine an art historian or a sociologist or an engineer instead it must not be very different. The research process will ultimately aim at proposing answers to questions, not necessarily to open new ones.

How about this new hybrid operator then, the artist who does research — artistic research? What kind of outcome does she wish for?

Does artistic activity and scientific and scholarly research have anything in common? The drive is curiosity, in both cases. The fundamental difference is that artistic activity's primary product is not knowledge, but the inspiration — to search for knowledge.

The scientist — or scholar — aims to establish knowledge which should be valid at least for a certain time, which can be shared and used as such, by others, whereas the artist strives to install in the viewer or reader an urge for further search, for further preoccupation with *what there is*. Of course,

the artist wants to reach as many people as possible, but what will be shared between them is not really comparable, because they will interpret the task of further searching in as many different ways.

The artist Man Ray, put it this way in 1963, when discussing his autobiography with his publisher, shortly before its release: “Inspiration, not information, is the general purpose of this book.”<sup>1</sup> With a sample of one, I can prove that he was successful in his ambition. Because of reading this book I decided that I would embark on a similar quest as an artist writer. I was fifteen at the time, and here I am now.

I have re-read *Self Portrait*<sup>2</sup> a few times at different points of my life, and other aspects of it have then come into focus. Today the text no longer inspires me the way it once did. Now I find it interesting more for its function, and the way the artist was able to use the tools of text to further certain goals tied up with his visual work. Man Ray had a particular problem in that his art making never conformed to either a technique or a style. It was all over the place, and fundamentally it was of a conceptual character, before this label had been coined.

Still he felt the need, towards the end of his life, to create a bigger frame in which it all could come together and support itself. He did not aim to eliminate contradictions, but instead to find a way to bring them to the fore and make them an asset, not a liability. He realised that the only really efficient way to do this was in the form of a narrative. The story of himself would be the motivating link between all these various strands of work and ideas.

In Man Ray’s book, some areas of his story are dealt with in great detail, others ignored. He only mentions one date, and it is false. The kind of truth he aims for is a projection. But it is an inclusive projection, which aims to involve and activate the reader. Man Ray is able to create an image of himself with a subtle charisma, and install in the reader an interest for his work as a reflection of this charisma. More importantly I think, is the way he aims to attract the reader to similar ideas and concepts as had kept him going all this time. Admiration for achievements can only take you so far, but inspiring shared curiosity of ideas can create addiction. This is the writing artist’s active solution.

Of course, the term artistic research was not yet heard of in Man Ray’s time. Certainly not as an academic discipline. But I have used his text as an example along with a number of others, some quite old, in a little book I published recently called *An Artist’s Text Book*.<sup>3</sup> In this book I aim to help and inspire aspiring artist writers. I also take it upon myself to analyse a few artists’ texts, some quite old, to see if there are some structures to be identified, or pointed to, in order to better understand what is special about artists’ writing.

I’d like to outline a few ideas present in this book.

For reasons that are also playful in intent, I establish five categories for artists’ text and give them the following labels:

- Expressive me-focused storytelling in the first person
- Methodical revelation of (philosophical) truths
- Systematic revelation of technical and pedagogical truths
- Literary experimentation, with content in the open and in disguise
- Well-referenced academic writing with further ambitions

Of course, I place the Man Ray text in the first category, along with an example from Louise Bourgeois<sup>4</sup>. In the second category I have Matisse, with *Notes of a Painter*<sup>5</sup>, a classic text where the artist lays out the rules of his work without mentioning anything of his private circumstances (in great contrast to Man Ray and Louise Bourgeois). In the third category I have Paul Klee and his very odd *Pedagogical Sketchbook*<sup>6</sup>, which on the surface seems to represent a 100 % instrumental view on art making, with the attitude: “if you take time to learn the technical rules here proposed you will make better work”. However, at the same time the text gives rise to a suspicion of double entendres, one reason being the simple fact of the playfulness of Klee’s graphic work.

The existence of Klee’s visual work cannot be ignored as a reference to reading his text, and this fact, that one will judge an artist’s text in the light of the same artist’s pictures, is an added dimension to artists’ writing. There are rich possibilities to play with contradictions and ambivalence here. Artists who write are therefore in possession of an extra instrument, which puts us apart from other writers, scholars or scientists.

In the fourth category I present an essay by Frances Stark<sup>7</sup> along with Robert Smithson’s seminal piece, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey”<sup>8</sup> - a beautiful example of an artist who takes a deep interest in the art of writing itself, not just as a tool or technique for the translation of ideas or works. Both texts play with several layers of meaning, and they are freestanding works, not needing to be read in relation to other work — which also means that knowing the actual practice of these artists plays a lesser role than in the understanding of Klee’s text.

The artist-writer active in this category is conscious of the formal aspects of his or her writing, experimenting with language and structure, not using text as a simple transfer of ideas. A piece can be written to reveal its meaning in different layers, accessible or not, depending on the reader’s capability to follow traces and use his imagination. In the words of Jack Flam on Robert Smithson: “he uses a strongly anti-romantic, anti-sublime stance to create, paradoxically, what seems to be a romantic evocation of the sublime”<sup>9</sup>

My fifth category “Well-referenced academic writing with further ambitions” is perhaps the most pertinent to the discussion of artists’ research. Here I have chosen a text from 1993, “Playing with Dead Things: on the Uncanny,”<sup>10</sup> by Mike Kelley which at first comes across as thoroughly academic, dense and footnoted. And it is, but there is a but. It was written upon the invitation for an exhibition of radical site-specific projects in the Dutch town of Arnhem. With Kelley’s reputation he was obviously expected to go against the norm and break some rules, and not wanting to disappoint he decided to do just that. His solution: to mount a very well researched thematic and traditional exhibition at the local museum, complete with this highly academic catalogue essay. When transgression of the norm is what is expected, conforming to tradition can be the radical choice.

This essay is structured like a traditional scholarly text. There are loads of footnotes, and many learned references to external source material in the text itself. But read it closely and you will become aware that there are subtle differences to what a scholar’s text could have been like. Mike Kelley himself is more present on these pages than he would normally have been allowed as an academic, and he doesn’t care to respect established classification systems.

There is obviously a layer of irony here, but it is very subtle and the result can be taken at face value and used as an instructive example of what artists can allow themselves to do, using their artist’s status as a tool.

My point is that all these writers, except possibly Matisse, employ tricks and play games in order to achieve the rich, multi-layered and ambiguous goals they have set for their texts. In a painting or an installation many contradictions will exist side by side. Whether you see them or not is dependent on your point of view. The visual field is not governed by dominant languages in the same way as is text (a text will have to be written in a specific language, whereas the visual producer can freely employ several concurrent language structures simultaneously). The visual product will always be working on more than one level at once, and it easily incorporates inconsistency and self-contradiction. It is only natural that an artist who chooses also to write, will be attracted to similar goals in her production of text.

If we recognise this palette of double entendres, subtle irony, subversion and multifocus that we see in artists' writings, we cannot NOT see problems arise with the new academicisation of artists' activities: artistic research. None of the artists here mentioned wrote for an academic context. Had they written for an academic forum, and had their work been submitted for peer review, there is a risk that the qualities which sets these texts apart would have become liabilities.

For the immediate future of artistic research I see two alternative dangers looming (and I am here talking only of the text part): On the one hand you have the institution fighting for acceptance from other parts of the university, for which it becomes necessary above all that artists' papers and dissertations are compatible with the standards of the rest of the university. This means in practical terms that irony and layering will be seen in a negative light, and that the demands on texts will focus on formal aspects. Word count, at the most basic level. With time, with this attitude prevailing, the activity of "artistic research" will have less and less to do with active, practicing artists, and instead become a refuge, or a career necessity, for artistically minded persons who prefer academia to an exhibition career. On the other hand, the other possible development is that the institution takes a step back and lets the artistic research writing become indistinguishable from what an artist would write in a "free" situation. This development might produce some important, multi-faceted and ambiguous writing, but it brings with it the risk that the rest of the university will increasingly see artistic research as a joke. I have no immediate solution to this dilemma, but I do think it needs to be pointed out.

I finish my book by focusing on Adrian Piper, whose writing I have become very interested in as a result of looking into this subject. She has the unique distinction of being both a genuine academic, as a tenured professor of analytical philosophy at Wellesley College, and a practising artist with international recognition.

As a philosopher her main working tools are words and text. A philosopher will develop an acute sensitivity to the meaning of words and their combinations. A philosopher's concepts can only be expressed, judged and discussed using words. The artist Piper, on the other hand, can express her ideas and concepts with a much wider range of tools, beside words and text, also images, installations, performances — and she is free to employ innuendo, create double entendres and embrace ambiguity. What is so particular about the art writings of Adrian Piper, is that she readily combines the analytical philosopher's mastery of language with an artist's sensibilities and choice of subjects. In control of her language, she can easily take a step back and change gear, change attitude, choose another mode. Whatever writing mode she is using, it is always very precisely applied, even when the subject is not as precise.

In a text by Piper from 1989, "A Paradox of Conscience," she compares the two fields she is working

in. This is how she describes the analytical philosopher's attitude to writing: "... the goal is to show one's respect for difficult and complex ideas by thinking as deeply and thoroughly as one can about them, and to show one's respect for one's readership by communicating one's thoughts about them as clearly, carefully, and consistently as possible".<sup>11</sup> She then goes on to point out that this is an attitude of intellectual conservatism, which has both good and bad sides. One of several good sides is that this attitude leads to the development of what she calls "an intellectual conscience", and which she explains as the acute inability to accept fuzzy thinking, garbled sentences and logical leaps and lacunae.

In the art world on the other hand: "... intellectual standards are there to be violated. This itself is contemporary Euroethnic art's most central intellectual standard of all. Even in this postmodern era, in which aesthetic innovation is supposed to be impossible, artists strive for innovative and ground-breaking ways to put this point across."<sup>12</sup> This leads to "intellectual radicalism" which just like the intellectual conscience of the analytic philosopher has both positives and negatives. A good side, according to Piper, is an inclusive and cosmopolitan sensibility. And a bad one is precisely the lack of an intellectual conscience, which ultimately leads to opportunism and a dependence on other people's judgement, and the undermining of intellectual responsibility.

In the last third of her text, after having established with high precision how the two different systems in which she takes part may function, and after having pointed out their respective strengths and weaknesses she then goes on to analyse an occurrence in the art world, an exhibition by Jeff Koons, even though he is not mentioned by name. During the course of this analysis another perspective is introduced, one value-laden and moralistic, which can certainly seem contradictory in the context, but which is difficult to rebut as the build up to it has been carried out with such exemplary clarity of thought.

The overall result is a text at the same time very convincing in its analytical clarity — and engaging and activating in its final contradictions.

As I see it, the artist who decides to attempt a research process that is to be reported within an academic framework must be highly aware of the risks connected to its reporting in written form. A research question has to have been formulated, I think that is clear. However, the outcome of this inquiry must at the same time introduce some sort of knowledge having been gained, while simultaneously activating the reader and trigger in her a further quest for knowledge — just in the way a good art work does. If this does not happen, the research process will not have served the purpose of art, and it will hurt the artist. It's a heavy demand being laid upon the artistic researcher, but I believe this field can only be successful if it accepts its contradictions and meet them with the highest ambitions possible.

Let me finish with another, short, quote from a text by Adrian Piper, which appears in her famous text, "Open Letter to Donald Kuspit" (1987), in which she takes apart down to the most minute detail a text this critic has written about her, and which she finds highly lacking in every aspect. Her text is a demonstration in demanding extraordinary clarity and transparency from writing about art. Very little of what Kuspit has written in his analysis of Piper's work finds acceptance in the eyes of the subject. This short sentence is met with approval, however, and I see it as a possible key to all of Piper's writing: "we cannot help but wonder whether she is hiding something, despite apparently revealing all."<sup>13</sup>

To conclude: I believe the existence of contradiction and ambiguity is crucial to good artists' writing. Art, one way or the other, is always meant to address the imagination. The function of the

imagination — the function of art — is to not accept words – or facts — as final, but to use them as starting points, or triggers, for speculation into further meaning.

I don't see how this can happen in a text which does not allow for secondary layers. The question in terms of artists' research is whether this ambiguity can also be allowed to exist here?

It will never be easy. The artist writing within the academic context must be much more precise, much more aware of her language and message than any other, precisely to be able not to compromise on the fundamental demand of the activating function of her text. The demands are very high, but we will fool ourselves if we think that this kind of research can become a streamlined mainstream subject – where contradiction will have been eliminated. Allowing this illusion to become established would cause great damage to the understanding of art in our societies and it would be destructive to the participating artists.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Baldwin, *Man Ray, American Artist* (New York: Potter, 1988), p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> Man Ray, *Self Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963). At the end of 1976 I read the Swedish translation by Magnus Hedlund and Claes Hylinger: *Självporträtt* (Lund: Bo Cavefors Bokförlag, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Jan Svenungsson, *An Artist's Text Book* (Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Self-expression is Sacred and Fatal" (1992), in Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923–1997*, edited by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998/2000).

<sup>5</sup> Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" (1908), in Henri Matisse, *Matisse on Art*, edited and translated by Jack Flam. (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1973/1994).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, (1925), translated by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (London: Faber and Faber, 1953/1968).

<sup>7</sup> Frances Stark, "A Craft too Small" (2000), in Frances Stark, *Collected Writings: 1993–2003* (London: Book Works, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), in Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Jack Flam, "Introduction: Reading Robert Smithson", in Smithson, *Collected Writings*, p. xv.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny" (1993), in Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection – essays and criticism*, edited by John C. Welchman (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Piper, "A Paradox of Conscience" (1989), in Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight – Volume II – Selected Writings in Art Criticism* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 149-150.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.