

# 'Fiction with footnotes': Writing art history as literary practice

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Jaś Elsner's description of art-historical writing as ekphrasis plants the practice firmly in the purview of poetry, literature or fiction, though be it, in his words, 'fiction with footnotes'. A similar propinquity between the creative work of the artist and that of the historian has been noted, among others, by Boris Groys, Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes and Hayden White, who have indicated that far from being ignobled by the fiction tag, the discipline is perhaps ennobled to deliver on the irreducible multiplicity of its 'objects' which hitherto sat uneasily with a scientific pursuit of linearity, resolution and teleological determination that also treats *writing* as a neutral expedient. Yet art historians seem reticent to embrace their literary selves, as though it is safer on the side of the putative objectivity of language.

The aim of the session is to develop the characteristics of art-historical writing as a *practice* that necessarily not only negotiates the boundary of visual and verbal, but also manifests a literary fiction produced in the discursive framing of knowledge and meaning-making about artefacts, subjects, processes and their historic contexts. The session offers theoretical and philosophical approaches, as well as case studies, to *writing as an epistemic practice* of art-historical research. Conceptualisations of art history's writing practice in view of fact, fiction and knowledge production, and critical readings of art history as *Wissenschaft* will help in framing the discipline as a practice that not only has to contend with political, institutional and ideological demands but also those of writing itself.

## Speakers and Abstracts

### The Uncut Thread: Art history as narrative

Susannah Thompson (*The Glasgow School of Art*)

In his take on Greenbergian Modernism in *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O'Doherty claimed that 'fables give you more latitude than art history'. From Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* and David Carrier's *Principles of Art History Writing* to James Elkins' *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts* and TJ Clark's *The Sight of Death*, there has been a notable and renewed interest in the literary and writerly qualities of art historical scholarship over the last three decades. New art historical writing has increasingly adopted the techniques and forms of fiction, while older models of art history have been reappraised and re-invoked in terms of style and form.

Such narrative shifts perhaps represent an attempt to undermine or contest the dogmatic, prescriptive modes of writing which dominated the discipline in the late 20th century. In acknowledging the limits (or impossibility) of art history as an objective, neutral pursuit bound by teleology and exhaustive theory, recent art-history writing has tentatively embraced hybrid forms, melding fiction, theory and history. In the work of art historians such as Teju Cole, Rebecca Solnit, Carol Mavor and Marina Warner, art history can be seen as both a field and form of writing and a creative practice in its own right. This paper will argue for models of art history which adopt the forms of creative non-fiction, ekphrasis and literature. In particular, it will examine texts by art historians and theorists which approach language as material to identify instances whereby art history as writing becomes fantastic, metaphorical and lyrical.

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### The Genealogy of Giorgione: John Keats, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Walter Pater

Luke Uglow (*University of Manchester*)

The final paragraph of Walter Pater's famous essay 'The School of Giorgione' is a provocation, a negation of the mode of art history which limited itself to 'strictly deducible facts': *Kunstwissenschaft*. Against this he offers his own writing, which through poetic ekphrases of the Louvre's *Concert champêtre*, exposes 'the essential truth, the *vraie vérité*'. Recent scholarship places Pater's essay within contemporary discourse surrounding the Whistler v. Ruskin libel trial, and focuses on his axiom: 'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.' We should, however, read the essay holistically and pay special attention to the conclusion which underscores the argument's disciplinary significance, its proffering of an art history

centred on 'our inheritance from past time', on art's 'permanent efficacy'. As in the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, Pater proposes responding to the past 'unhistorically'. Ironically appropriating a positivist vocabulary, Pater's art-historiography seeks material communion with the recurrent emergence of an aesthetic-ethical typology termed the Giorgionsque: 'an influence, a spirit or type in art'. The associative logic of Pater's writing, focused on a confluence of atemporal and synesthetic structures, constructs a genealogy (a 'school') of Giorgione in the 19th-century, including: John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet 'For a Venetian Pastoral', the artists who exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, but most of all Pater himself. Though often dismissed by modern art historians as a mythographer, perhaps his literary practice can offer us more than the barrenness of perpetual attribution and strictly contextualised iconographical interpretations.

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## **Writing Art: Challenges to a literary practice**

Tilo Reifenstein

In his drawings, Raymond Pettibon appropriates literary fragments not in order to reproduce a narrative impulse, rather, he appears interested in structural elements, choice of words, ekphrasis, a text's potential to subversion and response. What is more, the relationship between his drawn and written marks cannot usually be subsumed under the category of illustration.

If part of such art-historical scholarship thus involves contingencies of writing as a material practice and/or the *notational iconicity* of script (Sybille Krämer), how is one to *write* about such work without also engaging the selfsame aspects of writing. If art history is here the rewriting of an artistic text, a text made proper(ty) for art history, what is this text's relationship to the pictorial qualities of writing articulated in itself about another text?

This paper offers a methodological approach that considers the possibility of art-historical writing about artistic practice that also already writes, thus as a practice bound up in the liabilities of its subjects. Following Boris Groys' suggestion that the writing of art history occurs in a literary space, which implies that the historian, too, is involved in artistic production and thus cannot approach the work (formally) under scrutiny from an external position, this paper reflects on the possibilities of *writing about art*. Art history's recursive self-reflexivity—producing image-texts in order to trace the words and pictures of artists—is therefore used to reflect on the creative practice of art-history writing, as well as the assumed division between writing's own form, material and content.

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## **'Give me a break, an epistemological break, she declared.'**

Isabel Mehl (Leuphana University)

In 1986, writer and critic Lynne Tillman was invited by Craig Owens, a senior editor at *Art in America* at the time, to write about a major exhibition of French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir in Boston. It turned out to be the first job for Madame Realism. Madame Realism is a fictional art critic who takes artworks/exhibitions as a starting point for her in-depth reflections on the pre-conditions of our perception of art/world. She questions institutional frameworks and its instruments, e.g. audio guides or catalogue texts, and points to the disputable entanglements between art institutions, politics, and power. Through Madame Realism, Lynne Tillman occupies a position in writing about art that is not primarily based on (academic) knowledge or authority but takes place in a staged thinking process. Madame Realism drifts in the spaces between – between fiction and non-fiction, criticism and literature, gossip and contemplation. Whatever may happen, Madame Realism does not give up her search for (the possibility of) truth. The only permanent characteristic of hers is a political stance of doubt, a questioning of what we think, see and encounter, and why. Madame Realism does not settle on a poetic argument, not even an art critical one, but examines how starting off from the subjectivity of a fictional critic something like 'truth' can be constructed at all, and read. In 2007 she paused her voice, but eventually returned in summer 2018 with her seventeenth exercise in writing in reaction to the world/art as *an epistemic practice*.