

## Dear reader: of private and public writing

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### I am in my bedroom writing

'Dear Reader' is a call from a text to something beyond the text. It pulls that other 'beyond' the text into the text. It is a convention that is not very popular anymore. It is quite an old convention. Cervantes, in *Don Quixote*, employs it in his famous irreverent Preface to that work.

Idle reader: thou mayest believe me without any oath that I would this book, as it is the child of my brain, were the fairest, gayest, and cleverest that could be imagined. But I could not counteract Nature's law that everything shall beget its like; and what, then, could this sterile, illtilled wit of mine beget but the story of a dry, shrivelled, whimsical offspring, full of thoughts of all sorts and such as never came into any other imagination – just what might be begotten in a prison, where every misery is lodged and every doleful sound makes its dwelling?... Sometimes when a father has an ugly, loutish son, the love he bears him so blindfolds his eyes that he does not see his defects, or, rather, takes them for gifts and charms of mind and body, and talks of them to his friends as wit and grace. I, however – for though I pass for the father, I am but the stepfather to "Don Quixote" – have no desire to go with the current of custom, or to implore thee, dearest reader, almost with tears in my eyes, as others do, to pardon or excuse the defects thou wilt perceive in this child of mine.

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century it was a convention often associated with 'sentimentalism', didacticism and women writers in the expanding magazine and periodical press. For some critics it is seen as an 'intrusion' in the writing or an interruption in the text, because when the unfolding of the text is broken by a direct appeal to the reader, the narrative is interrupted or momentarily suspended by calling attention to the processes of writing and of reading. Laurence Sterne used this to great comic effect in *Tristram Shandy*, making great play of the confused overlaid temporalities of writing and reading.

Harriet Beecher Stowe used it in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to enhance the political force of her argument by promoting an explicit reading of the story as a critique of slavery. The 'Dear Reader' rhetorical device is combined with the use of inclusive words such as 'you', 'we', 'our', 'us'. So, for example, in Chapter IV she writes: "Let us enter the dwelling", later following this by: "At this table was seated Uncle Tom... who, as he is to be the hero of our story, we must daguerreotype for our readers." So she not only addresses the reader – 'Dear Reader' – but she at once includes the reader – let us enter – and objectifies the

reader – "we must daguerreotype" Uncle Tom "for our readers". Interestingly, she uses this as part of her 'realism' effect.

The direct acknowledgement of a writing being read, by direct appeal to the reader, is now most often seen as an interruption of 'realism' and a source of funny or destabilising effects. Indeed, when the reader is addressed directly – 'you' – it can often be seen as a combative or antagonistic device – setting up a confrontation between two parties. The conceptual artist Adrian Piper uses this kind of direct challenging mode of address – hey you! – in her *Calling Cards* series of works.

Dear Friend.

I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

This work eloquently instantiates the potency of direct address in interrupting not only a given discursive or textual flow, but also in interrupting 'business as usual'.

In starting with this title – 'Dear Reader' – I am of course foregrounding the question of address – To whom is what we write addressed? Who do we write for? Who do we write 'to'? How does our writing call forth particular types of reading and readers? How does a particular way of writing summon a particular reader into place? What does a particular writing make the reader become? Could we usefully think about writing as only incidentally the production of texts, but more properly as the production of readers?

In adding the qualifying second part to this title – 'Of Private and Public Writing' – I am already beginning to suggest two different modes of address – 'private' and 'public'. In a crude quick glossing of this title, we might assume that 'private' is for a limited, particular, and well-defined readership whereas 'public'; is for a generalised, open and only loosely specified readership. However, it is never quite that simple. Such seemingly neat and happy distinctions become dissolved by the flow of writings and readings in the contingent circumstances and accidents of our worlds.

The notion of 'publicness' is so contested today in so many conversations, but especially in contemporary art debates. Terms such as public-sphere, public-realm, public-space, counter-publics, 'the' public, and many others in circulation index a wide range of contests and divergent constructions of 'public-ness' that perhaps are ultimately inassimilable to each other. Even more noticeable is the evacuation of concepts of 'public-ness' so that public becomes reduced to a crude notion of 'publicity'. Consider

the 2009 fourth plinth project in Trafalgar Square, London by Antony Gormley – *One and Other* – the collapse of publicness into solitary discrete mediated public visibility (as Brian Sewell helpfully pointed out, the set up is attuned to the television camera not the ambulant passer by): a *Big Brother* model of public-ness, as short term media celebrity for various sequentially numbered ‘plinthers’. Whatever, one thinks of this work, it would seem reasonable to suggest that it demonstrates that the notion of ‘public-ness’ is in some way troubled for contemporary culture because of a fundamental loss of content for ‘public-ness’ as it is reduced to mere ‘publicity’ – and the ascendancy of a neoliberal model that sees virtue in private profitability and nothing else.

‘Private-ness’ is also unstable and admits of inassimilable and contrary usages. The ‘private’ may pertain to that which is personal or owned and possessed, but then that which admits of ownership can also be bought and sold. My ‘private’ self suggests a somewhat strange mode of possession in the space of personhood – I ‘own’ myself and I own my privacy. ‘Private-ness’ can be that which excludes – ‘PRIVATE, Keep Out’ – and also a map of bodily parts – ‘my private parts’ – and thus its wide application to different situations and problems exists in tension with, and dependency upon, the instabilities of ‘public-ness’. Again, ‘private-ness’ has (arguably) been reduced to a matter of property relations and self-ownership (extending to kinds of ownership of one’s image, voice, name etc.) The private and the domestic and the personal are terms that have become weakened conceptually, as we become increasingly unclear about the nature and value of contemporary social being.

The public/private opposition has been a changeable construct since classical antiquity – I do not wish to suggest that these terms were once stable and fixed and are now all fuzzy: its more a matter of suggesting that the social and political mapping that these terms once tried to provide has become emptied of content as the nature of our social and political systems have been transformed.

What might conventionally be thought of as private writings – diaries, journals, notes, letters – in being written down are fundamentally open to reading in many contexts other than that of initial production and original purpose. Writing persists and circulates to greater or lesser degrees. So ‘Dear Diary’ may posit a phantasmatic non-reader or simply myself as my own reader, but it is somehow oriented to ‘another’ reader beyond the moment of production – there is a projection of writing to an always possible reader somewhere out there beyond the horizon of now, the moment of writing. In simple terms, we could just say a private writing can become a public document and a public writing can become a space of private consumption and production: for example reading your horoscope in the newspaper and feeling your private self described. But, there is also the sense that the basic dichotomy of public/private is no longer centrally meaningful. This is complicated in some ways by the recognition that the act of writing – the production of diaries and journals and confessional texts and personal testimonies

and personal accounts – as indeed the act of reading privately, of withdrawing from others to attend to the text – is not simply a matter of a pre-existing fully formed ‘self’ leaving its traces and extruding its expressions. The acts of private writing and reading can be seen as acts of producing the self, of making a ‘private’ interiority, produced as a collateral effect of the circulation of signs and language and meanings. Montaigne’s *Essays* are often cited as exemplary instances of public writing as the very act of production of private self and personhood.

My title then, "Dear Reader: Of Private and Public Writings" is foregrounding writing as entailing different possible modes of address, and inhabiting a compromised unstable space of private-ness/public-ness. In this talk ‘today’, and now in this writing ‘afterwards’, ‘I’ wish to bring ‘you’ with ‘me’ in trying to think about writing and modes of address and in exploring writing as an activity that inhabits an unstable multiple space of private-ness/public-ness. And, why, you may ask, do I want to drag you along with me through a talk about writing – a talk that is later to be re-written – complicating things further now by moving on to another unstable semantic tension between talking and writing and the somewhat outmoded field of oppositions between oralities and literacies. Why do I want to complicate your day, forcing upon your attention questions of writing, modes of address, private-ness, public-ness and so on, at the beginning of what should be a pleasant day among friends and colleagues discussing interesting cultural work and interesting ideas?

In being invited to talk to you at the Art Text conference about ‘the roles of writing in artistic research and in artistic work and artistic development – essay writing, literary writing, poetics, documentation, the journal kept over time etc.’ I was very conscious of someone having already done a much better job on this topic than I ever could. For Jan Svenungsson, who will be known to many of you, has written a wonderful book, concise, full of ideas, and careful and original thinking on artists writing – *An Artist’s Text Book*, published by KUVVA in Helsinki. I was fortunate enough to hear Jan Svenungsson speak in Dublin in May last year about this book and Professor Jan Kaila from KUVVA generously gave me a copy of the book to read. The book is an example in itself of what the book discusses: the way artists’ writing can operate with an openness and freedom that academic disciplines – such as art history – can sometimes seem to stymie or curb. The book is direct, frank, concise, elegant, learned and generous to its readers. I might even risk saying that it is really a romance novel: it is an artist writing about his love affair with a text, another artist’s writing – De Chirico’s *Hebdomeros*. And this love affair, this book is a very hard act to follow. So not knowing how I could improve upon this work, I decided to try to begin from one idea in the book and attend closely to that idea – the idea is about how to start writing when you are uncertain where to begin. Jan describes a simple technique to start writing and to avoid getting stuck. Here’s what Jan writes...

Start by reading all the background material available and making notes of what

you find interesting. During this reading period, your mind will automatically start to focus on the problems at hand, and without your having to think hard about it, preliminary versions of ideas (good or bad) will appear in your mind – these should all be noted down. When the reading period comes to an end, its time to sit down with your computer (I favour sitting comfortably on a bed with my laptop computer and reference material spread out all around me) and try, in as concentrated a way as you can, to just pour out as much writing as possible which has some connection with the theme at hand. [...] The text will be full of repetitions. There will be lots of trash. Half-baked thoughts, stupid ideas, embarrassing opinions. Its not a problem! Nobody but you will read this version of the text.[...] Have a break (an hour, a day, a week). Go for a walk [...] Return to your text with good eyes.

Reading this advice, I was struck by this idea of a writing that no-one else but you will read – but also by this image of a writer sitting on a bed, surrounded by his own stuff, his notes and reference material gathered around him. Equally striking was the idea of a delay, a temporal displacement: You write something, you take a break and you come back, read it again and end up reading it differently from when you first wrote it. It is interesting to consider what is changing here from one reading to another?

Jan describes a very particular type of private writing – but also a writing that is read differently by the same person. He elegantly rehearses the strange choreography of ‘private-ness’ and ‘public-ness’ at play in writing. This work of reading, writing, re-reading, and re-writing over time moves from a private space to a public space. Another aspect of this advice that struck me was the proposition that you read all you can on a particular subject or topic. This movement from writings that circulate, and that you can gain access to readily, towards a moment of withdrawal into private space – the bedroom – private writing and private reading and private re-reading and re-writing – is followed by a further return to the circuit of writings, writings that circulate in the world beyond the bedroom. And so it was by reading Jan’s book, about artists and writing and the artist’s text, I came up with my title and so was able to respond to the invitation.

Now, you may be forgiven for thinking that this is an awful lot of talk for just one small title. This title that is just two phrases and not even a proper sentence...and here I am mouthing on for several pages already! You might think – isn’t he going to say something more important? More useful? Can’t he just get on with it?!

This careful, time-consuming, self-involved reading and re-reading of his own title isn’t that exactly the kind of attention to detailed close reading, the kind of ‘academic exercise, that causes so much trouble? Isn’t this the kind of dry self-serving academicism that we are all terrified of becoming swallowed up by? Isn’t this what causes concern and anxiety for art researchers who are prompted to query, why such inordinate reverence and attention to mere writing?

Indeed, the premise of *An Artist’s Text Book* is in part the difficulty that writing presents to even comfortable writers by the task of writing for art school, for university, for academic purposes. This book is offering help to overcome a difficulty that writing

presents in academic settings, difficulty even for comfortable writers. This anxiety and even frustration with the task of writing is very widespread among those engaged in arts research. So much so that I would like to use some anecdotal material to open up this theme of anxiety and writing a little more, even as it applies beyond the field of artistic research.

### Writing father

I remember as a child my father writing and the stress and anxiety that would permeate the household as he sat at the table wrestling with pen and paper to write his application form for renewal of his driving licence or motor tax certification or driving insurance or some such. His job was to drive. He was a chauffeur. He drove important people to important meetings and waited outside in his car to drive them to the next important place. His driving licence was essential to his job and his ability to earn a living. So renewing it every few years and paying taxes related to driving and filling out forms for all of these were central to his livelihood and survival.

But whenever the forms and the writing were happening, we children knew to make ourselves scarce, to withdraw and keep out of the way, to give him some ‘privacy’, as he was struggling with these forms and their boxes for name, date of birth, address, employment, employers address, registration numbers and so on. He was tortured by these forms and struggled to write into the boxes provided. There he sat, pen in hand, pinned down and penned in place by the state’s apparatus demanding his personal and professional details on the standard form. The task of writing himself into the boxes provided clearly tormented him. He would huff, and puff and mutter and come very close to swearing – instead of saying ‘shit!’ (or as we more often say in Dublin, ‘shite!’) he would say ‘shhhhugar!’ – ‘ah shhhhhhugar!’ as he made an error or had to start again with a new form.

The strangest part of this was that he had one recreation, one daily habit of pleasure, an obsession nearly – he loved to write the answers into crossword puzzles. And not just any old crosswords – really difficult ones – these cryptic crosswords with their strange ambiguous clues that combined all kinds of language games and turned higher order literacy skills into game skills – metalinguistic skills as I later learned to call them in my university education – punning, metaphor, anagram, classical allusions, etymology, proverbs and all kinds of word play that used every aspect of the written sign, its sounds, its orthography and its meanings as a basis for play. He loved to write himself into these boxes. It was part of his identity that he had a reputation for brilliance with all kinds of wordplay. No huffing and puffing. No ‘shhhugar!’ – just hours of delighted complexity and mastery – he was at home with himself a master of the word play. So this same person, who struggled with the simplest form, even as his livelihood depended on it, also played endlessly with the complex form, relishing the torments of the trickiest and the

most oblique of crossword questions.

On his deathbed, in the viscous syrupy hallucinations of morphine and long past ever speaking lucidly again, he suddenly lurched forward one last time, pointed his shaking finger at the hospital wall, as if waving a pen and blurting out, as if in a eureka moment mouthing "I've got it. 16 down. It's..." and then faded out in an inaudible mutter. We never got to hear how he solved his final clue, how he answered his remaining question, how he filled in his last box. (Well, his second last box. There was one more box for him to fill out.)

Thinking of this strange man's obsessions and anxieties, and writing myself now, "Dear Reader", about private and public writings, I am conscious of the strange contradictoriness of writing as a multiply constituted field of many strange effects. It seems clear that fear and anxiety with writing are not simply to do with technique or with some special personality type. Writing is a space of power, of pleasure, of play, of control and of effect.

### Writing class

The final anecdotal example I would like to use today, about writing and anxiety, about getting stuck, is taken from a classroom. Back in Dublin, we often work in the Graduate School with researchers to do short simple writing tasks in the classroom, for example, writing a short proposal or an abstract (a simple convention of providing a summary description of a research project or report). Typically, things get a little nervous and a certain uneasy shuffling takes place as people look around trying to gauge each other's reactions to the daunting task of writing somewhat 'publicly' in the immediacy of the classroom. But generally people then go quiet, hunch down and start writing. Then we sometimes follow this by asking people to pass what has been written to the person on one's left. Now, things often turn a little more sinister. Eyes widen a little. People breathe a little quicker, inhale and say "why...?" They are surprised. They signal a certain confusion and disquiet. "You want us to read each other's writing?... Are we supposed to correct each other's work?"

This nervousness, this anxiety, we eventually worked out was the opening up of a sense of vulnerability about not being 'any good', feeling somewhat infantilised by being asked to write by the 'teacher' and further exacerbated by the strange transfer of this relationship from teacher/student to student/student.

Most interesting for the current topic, "Dear Reader", is that the text was typically seen as subject to two different modes of reception. Students often indicated quite strongly that they would have written differently if they had known that it was to be 'real' people that would be reading their text. In some way the writing-for-the-teacher-to-read was experienced as closer in form to the exercise of writing the driving licence application in the official form for the state's apparatus. It was a de-personalised acquiescence with

a power that was not necessarily seen as addressing a 'person', just addressing a function of a bureaucratic set of relations. (Indeed, the whole state apparatus of examination and accreditation looms large in this scenario.)

In exploring these issues, we have often made use of two texts (i) Adrian Piper's (mentioned already) first ever published text *About "Space, Time, Language, Form"* and (ii) Joan Didion's *Why I Write*. Adrian Piper's text is her first printed piece and is also employed as an introduction to her collected writings. These two texts, for me, help build another layer over the base model of writing as a movement from writer-to-reader, from some moment of 'private-ness' to a moment of 'public-ness'. In these two texts the strange dynamics of writing and subjectivity come into play in a rich and intriguing way.

Piper's text also pertains to a key moment when the question of art and the production of writing came together in a radically new way in the crucible of conceptualism, and in a way that is still arguably an important part of our contemporary horizon in art practice. Piper describes how Terry Atkinson, from Art + Language took a piece of work for inclusion in the now famous *Art+Language* Journal (1969) and asked for an artists' statement. Piper describes the painful process of writing the piece *Space, Time, Language, Form* in a small introductory text prefacing a republication of the statement in her collected writings:

Terry Atkinson [...] asked me to supply a written statement about my current work concerns [...] I said I would. I really tried. I found it almost impossible. I had never written about specific preoccupations in my work before while I was still in the process of working them out [...]

The process was excruciating. I would never have believed it could be so agonizingly difficult to make verbal sense of my own creative impulses. I felt dull and completely helpless. I wanted to say what I was doing, and why, and I couldn't. [...] it was a nightmare.

[...] I really hated the idea that there was something it would be good for me to do that I couldn't do, so I kept practicing doing it, on purposes, until it got easier (I've never gotten to the point of being able to describe my concerns while I was exploring them; my perspective on them is always retrospective to some extent).

Here Piper describes writing in terms of a crisis of confidence and competency but also as a sustained struggle for agency. She also provides a clear case for construing critical literacy in art writing as an achieved or learned skill rather than a natural inborn talent thus cutting against any tendency to assume that writing skills and art production skills are somehow incompatible in the one person, a familiar myth within certain romantic models of art education still current in the contemporary academy. In this respect it is worth citing Piper's introduction to her own collected writings, which she says represent: "two simultaneous processes: first, the process of my learning to think clearly about my work, and second, the process of my gaining critical distance from my role as an artist and socially embedded being". She says that these two processes are related, claiming that: "I don't think that it is possible either to think clearly about one's work if the more

general cultural and socio-political ramifications of making it are ignored, or to write convincingly about such general ramifications, while ignoring one's own creative contributions to them." In this way writing is presented as a space of negotiating 'privately' and 'publicly' the complex dynamics of the creative working through of issues, concerns, perspectives and ideas developed in one's work. Writing is here described by Piper as a dynamic and multiple process that enhances thinking and provides critical agency.

The Joan Didion text provides an interesting counterpoint. Didion describes the dynamics of writing in a way that emphasises agency in a different manner. Didion's text is from a lecture that she gave in the University of California, Berkeley using the Orwell's title "Why I Write".

Of course I stole the title for this talk...One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound; and the sound they share is this:

I  
I  
I

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions...but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

Didion here describes writing as an excess of subjective agency 'invading' the private space of the reader. But she also goes on to describe how she came through her own college education, her problematic relationship with intellectual culture and her way of writing as part of thinking and knowing stuff. But crucially she identifies the way she often writes without knowing fully the significance of what is written until much later in her writing process. Taking the example of two sentences from her novel *A Book of Common Prayer* she describes the complex invention and discovery that is at work in producing her text:

I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.  
I knew about airports.

These lines appear about halfway through *A Book of Common Prayer*, but I wrote them during the second week I worked on the book, long before I had any idea where Charlotte Douglas had been or why she went to airports. Until I wrote these lines I had no character called "Victor" in mind: the necessity for mentioning a name, and the name "Victor," occurred to me as I wrote the sentence: *I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not* carried a little more narrative drive. Most important of all, until I wrote these lines I did not know who "I" was, who was telling the story. I had intended until that moment that the "I" be no more than the voice of the author, a nineteenth-century omniscient narrator. But there it was:

I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.

I knew about airports.  
This “I” was the voice of no author in my house. This “I” was someone who not only knew why Charlotte went to the airport but also knew someone called “Victor.” Who was Victor? Who was this narrator? Why was this narrator telling me this story? Let em tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write a novel.

Didion thus moves in an elegant and concise text from a discussion of an ‘I’ that relentlessly asserts itself in writing to a reversal whereby she discovers another ‘I’ that is not reducible to her as the author but rather becomes a narrator that stands apart from her. The writing process is a process here of discovery and invention. Didion artfully plays with the unsettling ‘shifting’ effects of the first person singular in this text and in so doing reveals something of the immense plasticity of language and of thinking creatively through writing.

What these two texts are useful for in the discussion of writing with art researchers, is dispelling the myths of writing: **(i)** writing as a dry objective de-personalised space of linear facts and **(ii)** writing as an innate ability or talent or gift or particular intelligence. These texts don’t *prove* these claims, just as my anecdotes earlier don’t *prove* anything: But they hopefully help to enable thinking beyond clichés about writing as linear, as transparent, as fundamentally alien to creative intelligences and pleasures. Piper and Didion talk about the work of writing in developmental, emergent and creative terms, not as the simple transcription of pre-defined and well-formed ideas from their ‘mind’ to the page. An important issue here is the recognition that writing is not simply a transmission of pre-made messages from writers to readers: the message, and the writer, and the reader, are all produced in some sense in the very processes of writing, reading, re-writing and re-reading etc. The simple sender, message, receiver model has to be complicated a little to see writing as a means of extended thinking and creative critical understanding.

Here again we see also the complicated and different ways in which questions and themes of subjectivity and relationality come into play within the nexus of writing/reading practices.

### And then I found myself writing this

When we approach a theme like writing and subjectivity now, in 2009, we do so after five decades of work that has worked tirelessly through the question of writing: writing degree zero; *écriture féminine*; writing the self; writing and difference; writing politics; critical literacies and so forth. So how can I speak about art, writing, and research after this ferment of thinking, of debate, of writing, of research and of art? How does my speaking hope to become an enlivening conversation with you and not just a deadening rehearsal of the dead weight of the endless already written? – Think of all that paper that becomes wooden, as what has been written becomes re-written and re-re-written.

This brings me back to Jan Svenungsson’s book and the questions that he asks right

at the outset of the book: "Are there characteristics common to texts by visual artists? - Are there any special writing qualities they are more likely to achieve?" What his book does is look closely at a range of texts that come from artist-writers who comprise a different kind of canon than the one's cited above. This is a very important consideration. Several times, Jan makes a distinction between art history writing and artists' writing. He presents artists' writings as not being bounded in the same way as conventional humanities academic scholarship. Discussing the writing of the artist Mike Kelley he asserts:

One difference between what we have here and what we would have had if an art historian had written this text is that Kelley (while being very precise and academic) remains unbounded. He can jump whenever he feels like like it, because in the end he has the freedom the art historian cannot claim in quite the same way.

Jan later describes the "many rules which are never questioned" in the Humanities asserting that:

For a scientist or scholar to break the rules which guide how one's work is to be communicated and defined could be a dangerous act. Then consider that the breaking of rules is what is expected from artists in the contemporary situation.

Jan's claims, in the context of the specific texts he examines, are compelling. He connects this freedom to move across bounds with the established expectation that artists will break rules – they will transgress. But I am a little uneasy here. I think that many disciplines and practices would want to claim a similar privilege for themselves: philosophy, literature, ethnography, cultural studies, psychoanalytic criticism, theology, history and so forth. I wonder if the impulse to say we are special, we have special ways of doing things, we have an especial gift of autonomy and boundlessness might not be counter productive.

What if we were to forge alliances across disciplines – and to connect what we do with aspects of a critical and creative humanities writing? Not to blend ourselves in with this spectrum of disciplines but to make common cause in trying to create a different kind of academy that is not the august self-serving, self-important, conservative institution that demands respect – but the dynamic, mobile, playful, thoughtful, inventive, contested space of enquiry about the world and our different worlds that rub up against each other in this world?

This seems very abstract and idealistic I am sure – but as a first step, we might not abandon the sense that art making and art writing are different, but rather we might simply not make this the fundamental, absolute or essential difference. Maybe arts researchers can use many different modes of writing simultaneously. And maybe we can navigate a way through large corpuses of writing – such as the various literatures on writing and subjectivity – without mastering those writings, but at the same time without superficially attending and effectively neglecting the work that others have

done. Isn't this a key skill for advanced study in anything: the ability to work with large diverse bodies of material and begin to make a provisional way through the material? Jan Svenungsson does this brilliantly in his book as he constructs a provisional typology of artists writing.

Recently, I have tried to initiate a seminar on the relationships between political community, public-ness and death. I was prompted to do this by an argument I got into with Chantal Mouffe at a conference in London last year. We were discussing a paper by her in *OPEN* the Netherlands journal from SKOR which was about art and the public sphere. Her essay was about the way we should think of the political and the difference between 'agonism' and 'antagonism': she proposed that artists have a very special role in transposing what may become antagonism into agonism. She put me firmly in my place when I suggested that there might be a problem with the special-ness that she was giving to artists. She said that I clearly didn't know what I was talking about, and I obviously failed to understand the basic distinction in Heidegger between the 'ontic' and the 'ontological'. There was a kind of bullying manoeuvre which is not unusual in academia whereby the critical 'defence' of ideas becomes the policing of territory and authority. Anyway, the argument was great fun – for the audience anyway.

However, the experience has left me somewhat concerned about how we are engaging humanities academics in art world conversations and the tendency to privilege philosophical texts in a way that defers to academic hierarchies and the nature of the reputational and disciplinary transactions put in play. Developing the initial research for the seminar on death, public-ness and the political, I came across an interesting book from the 1990s called *Political Theory for Mortals* by John Seery. In this book, Seery, opens by attacking the conventions of his own discipline – the cynical and inauthentic practices of people writing and publishing purely for the sake of the CV, of getting tenure, pretending they have re-discovered some old important overlooked text in the history of political theory, when really its a matter of trying to get some unwarranted mileage out of a justifiably forgotten dead letter.

Too much of the writing is predictable and formulaic, stocked with stock argumentation, rehearsals and regurgitations, uninspiring echoes. Too much time is spent scoring points, establishing professional authority, promoting career concerns. Many pieces are impressive in the sheer amassing of material, duly and dutifully footnoted (as if cross-referencing means consensus or confirmation); but too often such studies are all windup and no punch\_ or else the self-centering, semi-disguised because falsely modest subtext becomes all too transparent: "I'm smart. I've read a bunch of books. Respect me as a scholar."

Seery describes a scene of people writing and circulating their writing in an intellectually barren way for career advantage. There is, Seery alleges, an increasing inauthenticity and insincerity: writing which does not really care about or address the reader except as a means for reputational self-aggrandisement; writing which is not an extended thinking

but the charade of thinking. This is a very dangerous thing. It works to evacuate the academy of meaning, value and purpose. It undermines the shared basis of communicative agency that underpins meaningful enquiry. We must not create a system of inane writing and exhibiting designed to promote visibility and status without real care for what is at stake in what we have to say to each other. The intersubjective communicative exchange that transacts in the dialogues of research, between the multiplicities of private-ness and public-ness, is dependent upon something being at stake – something more than personal status, reputational capital or ‘scholarly respect’. But this should not be confused with a claim to re-insert the ‘subjective’, ‘authentic’, ‘heroic’ truth-speaking artist into the center of our project by appeal to a self-transparent narrating ‘I’. This will degenerate into wars of position where the stakes are simply our reputation and status, exactly as described for the field of political theory by Seery.

Rather than end on the sour note of Seery’s description of a cynical self-serving academy, I want to finish rather by opening up one possible avenue (one of many) of writing activity that I believe may offer an interesting and enabling way through here: I am thinking of various forms of experimental collective authorship, collaborative authorship and collaborative re-reading. The linkage of the terms private, public and writing I have so far rehearsed here, replays something from a longstanding discussion about authorship and the legal foundations of personhood. Some work has been done which maps a form of authorship, called "social authorship" which is proposed as a pre-copyright form of authorship and private and public circulation, where discrete single authoring is rendered ambiguous, because poems or texts are produced in social circles that generate texts without firmly anchoring these as the work of a single individual. There are already many experiments in this mode (including the already referenced work of *Art+Language*) and there are lots and lots of precedents going back though the Surrealists and so forth. One recent example strikes me as especially interesting. Last week in Stockholm, I met with some artists and one of them presented me with a small publication which is part of an extended artwork in progress *Looking for Headless*. I would like to finish by reading a short extract from Goldin+Senneby’s work which suggestively plays with themes of private-ness and confused authorship while also making play with the question of mode of address – in a way that further complicates the textual dynamics described by Didion above.

...two artists from Sweden send their *research* to Barlow. Emails, documents, images, audio files, private detective reports...they send him a variety of things, and he writes a novel about it. All the material they send is about Headless. Goldin+Senneby have a thing about Headless. But they don’t know what Headless is. But they really want to know. To begin with they send material electronically. But then it gets interesting: a private detective report, including video footage, they send that surface mail.

Neat?

Really?

Is it so neat? Or is it too obvious? They email John Barlow and tell him that they don't want to send this stuff across the internet. They punctuate the sentence with a cute emoticon, a semi-colon wink. Is that for me? For the eyes that will inevitably be drawn to their activities?

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