

## WRITING ABOUT ART

Algerian-born French philosopher, Jacques Derrida through his career investigated the complex phenomenon of discourse through language. In his publication 'Of Grammatology' he carefully dissects semiotic analysis, scrutinised linguistics to recognise gaps which are in constant mediation between experience and reality. There are lapses in the formation of auditory or physical mark making. This fissure is a result of the 'signature' or the absence of it. In the practice of writing about art, the crux rests on repetitive jargons and clichés. "*Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity*", writes Gustave Flaubert. Art writers tend to view themselves as academics, instilled in theory and terminologies. They do not associate their craft with writing that includes the flair of poetry or, the imagination of fiction. Art writing is a mechanical production identifying as scholarly monographs or articles, drenched in formulaic methods of historiography or iconography. Therefore, reducing its capacity. Art writers tend to press their opinions while over emphasising on evidence. There is little scope for open-ended conversation between the reader and writer. An inference is imposed thereby leaving no margin for readers to form an opinion of their own. For instance, Claire Bishop's '*Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone*' is an informative text. She delineates the concept of contemporary spaces included as part of the art institutions due to the diversification of art-making media. Apart from her publication being rooted in an assumption of an audience familiarised with the know-how of the contemporary 'global' art scene; Bishop also narrows the purview of the reader. She repeatedly asks questions to the reader at the beginning of the paragraph which is followed by the answer presented by Bishop. The interrogation is always rhetoric, or at instances reflective of Bishop's beliefs. It does not intend to include the reader by giving them leeway to form unique outlooks. This is the case with most texts revolving in and around the practice of art.

Brevity is an art in itself. Texts of art history are lengthy and verbose. They have the tendency to be overwritten and complex, in place of streamlined ideas which are comprehensible and accessible. An example would be the text of Okwui Enwezor's '*The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition*'. Enwezor's text is packed with intellectually sound, robust projections on what is defined as the postcolonial. However, the essence of the text is submerged in technical terminologies followed by labyrinthine construction of sentences and weighty locution. This leaves little intimacy between the writer and text. The core of his arguments are then convoluted and a reader drifts away from time to time, having to read and re-read. The content of the matter is susceptible to filler phrases which seem unnecessary, verbiage and redundancy. Wordiness poses as a tactic to explain multiple possibilities but what it also does is reduce scope for interpretations. It also leads to a negligence of sentiment. The evidence of an emotional connect between the author and the text greatly shrinks. This lack of tenderness penetrates to the reader as discourse is consumed. A successful example of writing that implements personal narratives with that of discourse, ensuing sentimentality is that of Gordon Bennett's '*The Non-Sovereign Diaspora*'. The text takes inspiration from a fictional storytelling methodology, where he ingrains his autobiographical overviews with the particulars of Australian history. There is a lyrical tone to his work, a non-pedantic grace which is immediately relatable. Moreover, there is a certain flow of ease while browsing through the text. A lightness in its character without a pretence of scholarliness, encourages the reader to actively engage with the subject matter. Another great example employed as writing style is the work of Anthony Gardener in his text '*The Artist as Unsettler*'. Gardener in the publication looks at the work of artist Tom Nicholson integrating an oeuvre (that of Nicholson) to a mode of representation (drawing) to a broader context (Australia).

Gardener begins every paragraph with “*I would like to begin with*”. This consistency and restatement allows for an emphasis as well as a constant restarting. Through this technique Gardner reinstates a new point, a diverse perspective, a shift in thought. Therefore, keeping the reader engaged. There are multiple beginnings with bookmark each reprise.

Through his text *‘The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition’*, Enwezor also sheds light on the nullifying effect of globalisation on previously separated cultures, as well as shifts perspective to examine the homogenisation of culture due to the phenomenon. For instance Arjun Appadurai explains socio-political dialogue between Islamic nation and the Christian European world. In 2011, France imposed a ban on the mandatory muslim head cover - Hijab. Being home to the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, the country dictates a negation of differences. There is an urge to eliminate variation between the familiar and foreign. It is prompted by the state for aspects that seem alien to unconditionally change in order to establish common ground. Common ground essentially tailors to Euro-centricity which is palatable to the majority — in this case the white Frenchmen. In this way, the European nation reaches a ‘false universalism’, of which the collateral damage is an entire belief system. Cultural value of the other is erased, rather than striving for a mutual cognisance. There is little effort to test the grounds of negotiation, rather an ignorant ease of levelling turf is called to the forefront. Another example of an equation of internationalism to westernisation can be cited through the works of the prominent October group. In the 1980s and 90s, critics and art writers Hal Foster, Yves-Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh were well regarded for their writing on the arts. They contributed to the dialogue to expand on postmodernist theories, publishing extensively to report and analyse the artistic front of the time.

In 2004, they launched a major publication by the name *‘History of Modern Art Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-modernism, Postmodernism’*. An eminent flaw was seen in the methodological approach adopted by the Octoberists, which mirrored the dogma which rest (continues to rest) within the practice. The Octoberists covered aspects of Formalism, Modernism, Post Modernism and Post Structuralism. They also assessed of European Conceptual art and the social history of western art. Although the title *‘History of Modern Art Art Since 1900’* suggests an internationalist, comprehensive coverage of art history, it is seen that the canon is revolved around western art history. There is no examination of continents such as Africa, Asia or South America under the overarching umbrella of *‘History of Modern Art Art Since 1900’*. For instance, in the year 1947 of India, a major revolution took place in the realm of arts. There was a formation of the Bombay Progressives which challenged India’s conservative art establishment to steer the art fabric in a different direction. The Bombay Progressives not only magnified the reach of the arts within the country but also broke through geographical boundaries to take Indian arts to an international audience. Members of The Bombay Progressives were to known to be extensively popular in Britain and France. The founders of the group were K.H. Ara, M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza and F. N. Souza with S. K Bakre. Similarly, Négritude was an important cultural group which led to the evolution of modern African art. It was found in 1937 by a group of African artists aiming at the critiquing of colonialism and its consequences. It was through Négritude, the African art scene grew to embrace Modernity. The artists group delved through existing social issues and artistic styles, going back and forth through traditions. Négritude oscillated between finding the right balance between novelty and innovation, while safeguarding their identity as belonging to the African diaspora. The founding members of the group were Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor. With these examples it is evident that the title of the publication launched by the October group is not just deceiving but also ostracising and belittling. The debarring of certain histories

implies their incompetence. Whereas both, The Bombay Progressives and Négritude, were responsible for shaping not just the modern art market but they continue to transform the economy of the arts, till date. Substantial amount of art history which occurred post 1900s is neglected by the Octoberists. There is an exclusion of narratives which were not a part of the euro-centric model. The publication conventionalises Euro– American-records as the history of an entire subject of study.

In the world of art such flattening can also be noticed when categorisation of artefacts versus art is considered. Notoriously perpetual global cultural systems define the periphery of objects depending on the original custodians of the object. The western canon dictates the situation of material culture, at instances limiting perspectives and public discourse. One can decipher existing departmental boundaries and hierarchies which bound the impact and reach of the objects which have the potential to narrate well beyond the confines of their labels. For instance, much of Indigenous Art is looked at as ethnographic material. Indigenous Art is slotted in the cabinets of anthropological museums rather than galleries reserved for fine art. There is a strict delineation between institutions which house fine art, decorative art and ethnographic material. Its stature is reduced to an examination of the unfamiliar rather than an observance of complexity, cyclic narratives and extraordinary aesthetics. While collecting cultural material, Indigenous communities are not consulted. Rarely is there a sense of empathy for the nature of the objects. A significant percentage of objects extorted from Indigenous communities are sacred, with meaning integral to the community members. They could be used for rituals or are items reserved for funerary events. While compartmentalisation, without keeping Indigenous at the centre of the dialect, objects of material culture are restricted to a external lens. Hence, narratives change. As narratives of material objects are distorted, nonmaterial culture also transforms. In many cases, certain non material cultural aspects may even cease to exist completely due to a loss or misinterpretation of script. The housing of these objects in sites of anthropology cemented the identity of a community and its culture as primitive. Indigenous people, through narratives existing in these spaces are portrayed as belonging to vanquishing cultures. Whereas, western civilisation is the dominant culture, self-anointed as superior.

Another example in the practice of art where assigned identities favour certain sections of society is if one considers the text, *North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives: What are the alternatives?*, written by James Elkins. Elkins is a caucasian American art historian and art critic who is making headlines with his take on decolonisation of Art History. His publications and research shed light on the overlooked history of art, beyond the western canon. Elkins is regarded as a scholar, an art historian and an art critic. On the other hand, it is important to question the seriousness of the discussion if it were presented by a woman of colour. Would it hold the same value, would she be looked through a professional lens of an art historian or would she be considered an activist? Why is it that the practice of the arts considers one perspective as discourse while the other becomes a revolt against the system? It is important to question as readers and writers, who is consulted while producing and consuming discourse. References and citations shape the trajectory of art writing. Additionally, it is important to notice where the scholars who form part of a bibliography come from. How many of them form part of the argument put forth, is the information from an internal or external source, is there a variety of perspectives put forth to the reader? The necessary introspection while discussing the digital must go beyond certain names. Boris Groys is European man, an academician of the digital and a media theorist. He is renowned for elaborating on contemporaneity and its affiliation with the digital. But is the female centric work of Legacy Russell considered while empathising with new media? Legacy Russell is a young, Black woman who is also the director and curator of the New York based arts facility called The Kitchen.

She explores the weak ground in the digital realm, between gender, technology and physicality. She speaks of glitch feminism which is defined by the possibilities of an error. How an err can lead to revolution.

Derrida holds both the producer of language and its receiver accountable for the interpretation of a particular piece of lingual data. There is the ever-present 'iterable trace', a mark left after inscription.<sup>1</sup> The orator and receiver, both, dictate the course of communication. There is a constant negotiation on shared ground, in which selective agreement proves to be a variable. In Derrida's text 'Signature, Event, Context', Derrida mentions of 'absences', real and potential, which are implicit in the very existence of writing. He elaborates on the inherent negation of 'countersign' i.e between the mark making and its meaning, there is a loss of the producer of the sign. Arjun Appadurai, a writer and professor of social sciences at the New York School suggests while communicating, there must be a conscious care towards the viewer's level of understanding while, also ensuring a slight clandestine approach. Discourse, oratory or didactic, has a tendency to be dangerously skewed when the interchange is between political or social interest groups. Revealing more that necessary could steer dialogue in an unwanted direction. By this he does not intend to be cynical but, to uphold a certain prudence. The writer must aim to achieve limited agreement.

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