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The artists' text as work of art

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Publication date
2017
Document Version
Other version
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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
van Rijn, I. A. M. J. (2017). *The artists' text as work of art*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Download date:10 Nov 2026

Conclusion

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This research was spurred by the rise in the last decade of artists' writings: what I define as texts written and produced by visual artists. It takes the artists' text as its material, examining their potentially convoluted nature and finding a method with which they can be addressed. In being confronted with these writings I arrived at a few initial observations: the awkward, forced institutional position of artists' texts stood out, hovering in space between counter and pedestal, between bookshop and exhibition room. Artists' texts were marked by a lack of critique on the part of readers and theorists. By and large, scientific journals, (art) magazines, blogs, and newspapers alike seemed to pass over the writings by Jill Magid, Josef Strau, Gerry Bibby, Dora García, Keren Cytter, Jeremiah Day, Melvin Moti, Matthew Buckingham. Uncategorized, artists' texts were difficult to find, let alone acquire. Classified as novels, theoretical publications, and artists' books, catalogues, magazines, and grey literature, they have been labelled essays, poetry, readers, and any combination of the above. They have been published by art institutions, galleries, small presses, academic or literary publishing houses, or in collaboration with these organizations. Artists' texts developed in the lee of institutional discourse. *Fremdkörper,* or alien elements, they interfere with that discourse, counter it and circumvent it at the same time. This research aims at a method to approach the heterogeneous, nomadic, and unassignable artists' text.

My dissertation is premised on the observation that an awareness of the text *as text* is inherent in the artists' writing, unfolding against the backdrop of post-structuralist thought underlining the discursivity of knowledge and a Conceptual Art that posits the linguistic definition alone as the piece. The question arises whether 1) Conceptual Art can be read differently and 2) whether other histories can be divulged that enable an alternative comprehension of and approach to the artists' text. I turn my focus to the propositions inherent in the texts of artists. Reading the artists' text with textual strategies in its employment of narrative (chapter 1), its handling of form (chapter 2), the author's position (chapter 3), and its use of the word (chapter 4), the compared analysis of these textual procedures has led me to a set of characteristics that inscribe the immanent variations in the artists' text. By means of a theoretical patchwork, I find it possible to grasp these categorically defiant strategies implicit in artists' writing. In tandem I seek a method with which to approach the writing as subject and object.

Not interested in qualifying the artists' text as a *genre* due to the reductiveness of the term, I concentrate on the function of artists' writing: the productive force. Production is not only understood in terms of the economy of production, that is, printing, time, work, etc., but as a form of life, a compound of social, political, and cultural operations closely linked to their environment. These elements surface in artists' writing at different intensities, overlapping with each other and bleeding into each other. The extent to which the artists' writing inhabits a particular constellation, and treads its more or less intricate paths, can be understood when read in a transversal manner, that is, taking into account its crossing of different domains (mental, cultural, social and political, conscious of its material environment), as the four case studies demonstrate.

In order to study the textual function of the artists' text, central themes are singled out: the first chapter investigates narrative construction through Keren Cytter's *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters* (2008); the second chapter considers the form in, of, and through Dora García's *The Inadequate* (2011); the third chapter examines the author in *A Dissidence Coincidence But W.H.C.T.L.J.S.* (2008) by Josef Strau; and the fourth chapter takes up the function of the word in Matthew Buckingham's "Muhheankantuck – Everything Has a Name" (2005, 2007, 2008). The elements that emerge in this research demarcate the different densities, pace, and speed of the texts under review and provide a rubric to evaluate their place in the constellation of artists' writing—and the constellation itself.

Materialization, or Embodiment of Textual Means and Design

The artists' text explicitly relates to language as matter and not matter. While Conceptual artists, the first to conceptualize language as material and means, failed to bypass the problematic status of the object as commodity in capitalist society by the very employment of language, their works all but pulled out of the market they criticized and abhorred, more recent artists' writing acknowledges Conceptual Art's double bind and so-called defeat. Consciousness of art's culpability initiated the invention of alternative strategies to forge liaisons with the (a) world art couldn't (or didn't want to) flee. Instead of valuing a (post-structuralist) textual distance vis-à-vis a world, artists' writing bridges gaps between word and world through a direct relation with the *referent* who rewrites it, instead of using "purely" textual references that following post-structuralism epitomized a world always already postponed and forever out of reach. Thus historical sources are not used as irrefutable (textual) facts (Walser, Von Trier), but are valued as (coincidental) encounters, rumors, hearsay, and *faits divers*. Explicitly not grounded in textual solidity, what might be perceived as an unstable universe of the artists' text is created. In artists'

writing a word is always also a world: it is a wor(l)d steeped in potentiality, an obstinate refusal to display its textual capacities, thereby showing a mastery of its material.

As a result the difference between writer and reader in artists' writing has changed vis-à-vis Conceptual Art's and post-structuralism's address, likewise between text and image. Images are not integrated in writing explaining the text, for instance. Every one-on-one relationship is staved off. The artists' writing is rather conceived as a collaborative work. Elements colliding, its components (referents) are activated to varying degrees: transcribing them (Buckingham's "Muhheankantuck"), rewriting them, or translating them. Witness Walser's story "Der heiße Brei" in García's *The Inadequate*. These are insistently *textual* procedures, their variations affecting the artists' writing's participants in multivalent ways.

The artists' text often marks the position within which it finds itself. Both technique and speech is actualized as the writing is often performative: the different editions of "Muhheankantuck," for example, demonstrate the extent to which the textual form contributes to its performative character; the first two versions, being more descriptive, reporting on a state of affairs. Although a sensate thinking (*aisthesis*) permeate the texts I examine, each generating an onto-epistemological realm (we *know*, because "we" *are* of this world), what the different editions underline is that not all concretisms are created equal.

Narrativity, or Unearthing the Conceptual Kernel

The artists' text describes a narrative line regardless of its fragmented form. Fragmentation has to be understood, then, not so much as a break-up of a narrative, but as complicit in a dispersal of sense instead. Distribution of sense takes place both between bits and pieces of the artists' text, and textual strata that might construe an insoluble whole. Reformulating connections between parts of text that seem intractable and "impossible" at first sight, narrative as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* is redefined, the confusion of consecution and consequence, reading what comes *after* as *caused by*, is formulated anew. In the artists' writing, narrativity is redeployed starting from a conceptual kernel. This heart of the artists' text can be formulated as an immanent question, relocated in author (Strau) or character (Basaglia, Strau), in history (Buckingham), and/or anecdote (Cytter), disentangled through rewriting, appropriation, translation, the insertion of incomprehensible language, indention, or erasure. While they point out the materiality of the text *as* text, they also secure the communication of a narrative path.

Fiction: Speculation

The artists' text employs fiction to construe relations where logic cannot; it is the artists' writing's inconspicuous *trait d'union*. While fiction is inherent to Conceptual Art's foregrounding of the idea, extending its transient and ephemeral character, it also functions as a means to exploit the unknown (Buckingham), mysterious (Strau), or fantastical (Cytter). The agency of fiction in the artists' text inheres in fiction's capacity for speculation. Predicated on the *between* (García), the *perhaps* (Cytter), fiction is a means to gain knowledge. In this manner, fiction contributes to the artists' text as simultaneously action, praxis, and life of the mind.

World as Immanent in the Artists Text

The artists' text writes with the world in which, or rather, with which it lives. It generates a wor(l)d, based on its own erring thoughts, thereby leaving unexpected and unimaginable, unassignable (Buckingham) tracks. The artists' text situates itself expressly in the world we call real, from which it only apparently drifts away, designating, through the use of fiction, among other tools, what is not (yet) actualized. It does not denote the real directly, however. Performative, expressing what it states, it points at itself as life and lived through form. The artists' writing explicitly refers to the context from which it emerges and of which it forms a constitutive (and incessantly constituent) part—for instance, the exhibition and technical devices contributing to textual genesis in Strau's text. A multiplicity, an assemblage of enunciation in which worlds coalesce, meet only to part ways—the artists' text is an intra-active realm. The artists' text rearticulates language and text understood as functioning, incessantly experimenting with and nuancing reigning laws and discourse. Through this procedure artists' writing expresses its artistic research, its processual functioning as an operative force is underlined.

Reading artists' writing in a transversal manner, taking into account the multiplicity of domains that brings it about. The artists' text that is paradoxically *thick* and unassignable, radical in its effort to unhinge previous classifications of writing, yet "gentle" in the way it affects the institutional discourse to which it is both strange and actively responds. Grounded in empirical research that argues from the experience of external influences (impressions and reflections), and employing a conceptual orchestration enabling one to trace the function of the artists' text, this study allowed me to draw a line around writings that are strangely untimely, disconnected, and out of joint. From this position, adhering to time while keeping a distance from it, the artists' text acts

on a world (heterogeneous, composite) with which it (continues to) write. Acting on and affecting (this) world in multiple ways, several questions emerge as to the effect of this agency.

Thus concentrating on the text as text of the artists' writing, reading, comparing and analyzing its strategies with literature, mostly postmodern literature, the question arises as to how its function can be perceived in light of recent developments in literature. Defined as involved in a world it simultaneously helps to build, it would be interesting to investigate how this method of engagement and creation percolates up into a world with which the artists' text was (initially) held to be intimately linked: literature. Thinking-with-literature, reading artists' writing *through* textual strategies, the question imposes itself if and how these strategies themselves are changed in the process and resonate in that "other" domain. My research, both regarding its object and its method, underpinned by the conviction that the artists' text and literature aren't mutually exclusive, points to the implications of such an approach for the literary discipline with which the artists' text is related in this study.

Another question issues from this somewhat contrived isolation of the artists' text from the (still often) visually oriented art world that brings it forth. The artists' text as a manifold abundance of relations leaves it open to an examination of its affect within an institutional frame, which my study sets it apart from. As the artists' text resists categorization, my question concerns how its willingly *erring life* of and in writing can be understood by traditional art institutions attuned to safe objects and the safe keeping of them. This question taps into the (un)translatability of an artwork (the artists' text) into the language (the art institution's) it reshapes. To what extent can the changes the artists' writing brings about be accounted for in an institutional context given its mode of relations aren't exclusive to an institution's audience? Keeping in mind this paradoxical life of the artists' text that is embedded in an art world it simultaneously debunks we have to (continue to) reconsider institutional frames.