

'Everybody Knows, Everybody Knows' by Eloise Sweetman
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ABOLISH
THE WRITING
STRAND IN ART
DEPARTMENTS

Joseph Noonan-Ganley

I have put together a cataloguing system for my library in my studio. It is based primarily on authors' names, although sometimes there is no material authored by the person that the section is named after. Often the person is not a writer, but, for example an artist (Joseph Cornell), a family member (my mother), a dancer (Fanny Cerrito), or a cook (Alexis Soyer). The nominating act is one I find compelling. Not so that I can find my own meaning in the literature named. Nor that a Master has saved me time by pointing out worth, but in part so that I can hunt for the nominator's desire in the literature and in doing so, see if I can derive any pleasure out of it.

Although not all sections in my library are titled with an author's name, they are all titled with a person's name. They do not only hold items directly associated with that person, but a rich variety of tangentially associated material. Sections often contain such variety that they each need a customised cataloguing system to be invented. Therefore, they must be acknowledged as individual libraries, independent from their context within a larger library. They are embedded libraries capable of begetting their own libraries.

Take for example Adrian Rifkin's section: there are two books by him, *Street Noises*¹ and *Ingres, Then, and Now*,² but before they arrived in his section, I had first put the books he personally recommended to me, which are *The Complete Gospels*³ ed. Robert J. Miller and *Augustine: A very short introduction*,⁴ by Henry Chadwick. I had also inserted books he had talked about in lectures: *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*,⁵ trans. J.M. Cohen; *The Thief's Journal*⁶ by Jean Genet; *Dancer from the Dance*⁷ by Andrew Holleran and so on. In parallel to this cultivation of the library under Rifkin's name, I was making an artwork using the scripture of the medieval Christian heretics, the Cathars. Next to *The Complete Gospels*, which informed my readings on the Cathars, appeared many other books on the subject. I had to decide on appropriate categorisation for these, quite separate from the categorisation primarily associated with Rifkin. And so, within this sub-library, I created three distinct sections (texts on the inquisition, texts on the heresy, and texts by the heretics – the Cathars), which over the course of time, as my research and interests progressed – each begat further, more idiosyncratic sections. For example: “the relationship between

1 Adrian Rifkin, *Street Noises: parisian pleasure 1900–40*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.

2 Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres Then, and Now*, London: Routledge, 2000.

3 Robert J Miller, ed, *The Complete Gospels*, California: Polebridge Press, 1992.

4 Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

5 Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. by J.M. Cohen, London: Penguin, 1957.

6 Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*, London: Faber & Faber, 2009.

7 Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance*, New York: Perennial, 2001.

Prince's body language and his clothes in the video for 'If I was your Girlfriend' grew out of the 'Cathar writings' section.

If my Adrian Rifkin library could be seen as a literary portrait, it wouldn't be one in which Adrian Rifkin would fully recognise himself. Rather it is one in which the many new sub-libraries draw the lineage of an archive within which I am familiar with both him and myself.

LIBRARY

I am at The British Library, otherwise known as A Treasure House of Knowledge⁸ or simply The World's Knowledge. Notably in this library's vast collections that exceed 150 million items, there is the Magna Carta and Shakespeare's First Folio. It is also a legal deposit library, which expects a copy of everything published in the U.K. and Ireland. The books I've come to see are awaiting my arrival in the Rare Books and Music Reading Room on the 1st floor.

I was invited to the Sandberg Instituut in 2015 by Tom Vandeputte to teach 'writing' on the Studio for Immediate Spaces master's course. At this time, the theory course, which Tom taught, and the 'writing' culminated in a written thesis. The medium of writing and the denomination 'thesis' were the only explicit institutional strings attached across the Sandberg. Tom and I made a division between theory and writing based on our experience and expertise. Although theory is mostly written and most texts that I introduced the students to had a great deal of theoretical underpinning, the division served our interests. Creating a distance afforded us space to do very different types of work, without these being answerable or comparable to each other. In other words, it allowed different disciplines, which housed this labour, to exist in parallel to each other. I was rather pleased with this arrangement, as my experience as a student and studio⁹ lecturer in Fine Art departments across Ireland and the UK, premised my feeling of being a wolf in sheep's clothing at the Sandberg – that I, an artist who used writing as a material, had landed the job of a writer, a thesis tutor. Enabled by the isolation from the rest of the staff and curriculum, and emboldened by my institutional experience, I felt the imperative to suture the gap between studio and the writing components.¹⁰ The aim of this reflection is to

⁸ Philip Howard, *A Treasure House of Knowledge*, London: Scala Publishers, 2008.

⁹ I'm using studio in this essay in line with the division of written and studio work on Fine Art BA and MA courses, as well as throughout many other practice-based courses including the Studio For Immediate Spaces MA at the Sandberg.

¹⁰ The curricula, teaching and grades on BA, MA and PhD programmes in Fine Art in UK and Ireland are usually divided between a 20-40% weighting for the writing-based strand and the rest for the studio work.

uncover some of the institutional symptoms associated with my identification with the wolf. To problematise the dominant perspective of this narrative: that of the shepherd, the owner of the sheep.

NEST

The picture I have come to see is a reproduction of a graphic engraving from a minute wood-block, approximately 86mm by 61mm. Noble work in the fine lines that figure nature's nest: a raised plateau, cloistered by a lush tree and full shrubs, berries and small flowers among grass on the deck of the scene. A woven wooden fence. A pen for livestock delineates the background.

Writing on BA and MA Fine Art programmes is often conflated with the imposition to write. To write within the institution, is to write *for* the institution. It is to obey, it is thought. Writing is submission and a compromise of artistic logic. Writing *is* the institution. And this is not untrue. The institution wants to discipline, order and extort the student. So, to write in the eyes of the art student who considers this power play, is to work for the institution. It is to become the institution – perhaps this is where the sheep's clothing can be seen as a symptom. The ongoing need for a cover up. A soft, threat-reducing disguise. In studio work we teach the student to rigorously determine their own criteria for form(s), for duration, site etc. whereas the writing component's form and volume are predetermined in words and word count.¹¹ The result is the confusion of practice seen as non-academic (autonomous) and writing seen as academic (compromised). Within this simplified dichotomy, independence and submission, plays out, over and over. Artists are wolves, naturally, unintendedly deviant, and academics are shepherds minding their flock.

The Sandberg isn't connected to a university and there isn't an alternative governing body dictating the division between written and studio work, in teaching and in learning. It is surprising then that it's programmes often perpetuate the same formula of division that UK and Irish Fine Art departments in universities are based upon.¹² It seems that no matter how much philosophical

¹¹ On the Studio for Immediate Spaces we had a 6000 word count.

¹² In 2018 an internal investigation to address the lack of transparency about the different approaches to the thesis at the Sandberg was undertaken, and an inventory with its findings was produced (by Eva Hoonhout). From this, a number of characteristics are consistent across most departments: set word counts (2000 - 10,000), dedicated thesis staff, particular teaching and assessment procedures and timings, that all signal the thesis is taught in a separate strand.

non-division one uses in their approach to teaching, the organisational division of teaching, staffing and examining sears through it. This division betrays us. It allows writing to be imagined separate from art and vice versa. It allows writing to be dimly imagined as the practice of passing down the same knowledge from the Master to the student, and further, it propagates the idea this has been implanted in the DNA of the medium. And so, through the singularity of outcomes in the writing form (words, sentences), traditions and frameworks for learning art are excluded. Writing is a material, and as such can be manipulated by the artistic process, this is not new, but in art education a reluctance to acknowledge this is pervasive, which leaves a poor outlook for writing bound to the command of the institute.

ORNAMENT

This petite picture rests above a paragraph of large text. An ornament for the page. A little window to peek into, to wonder upon; a nest for the mind. It is set in an oval relief, which is itself enclosed in a rectangular box. Based on decorative architectural plaster moulding, the casings make the page function like space in those architectures.

In part, the problem has to do with ideas of ownership over what a thesis is, whose name it is. Who makes a thesis, who made them historically, how and why. To whose territory its fidelity lies. The thesis deadline is usually between December and April in the final year of study, with the idea that it is finished and out of the way before the beginning of the production of the graduating studio work. Therefore, the possibility for unfolding an embedded relationship between art and writing is severed. Any thesis that may have arisen from the writing practice can be forgotten, as the writing is forced to demonstrate its true secondary status in the folly of bureaucratic procedure. Artists have traditions for displaying and arranging knowledge, argument, problematics and criticality across expanded forms of exhibition making. So, the only reason that artistic strategies and languages wouldn't be eligible traditions within which to produce theses is if the discipline is not understood to have made any! So, why is this judgement internalised and proliferating? Why does the formulation of practice-based work in academia, as *academic*, bring about shame?

CONVERSATION

It is a scene of calm conversation and satisfaction after a good job done well. Three Shepherds take centre and left stage in nature's nest. They are wearing fine robes composed with diverse and sophisticated methods, neat upturned fur rimmed hats, and each has a bold crook. One looks back with a furrowed brow. Another, mouth open, with an ease in his expression holds his right arm out, pointing to the right of the picture.

An exception to this is the re-writing of the Fine Art doctoral examination regulations, initiated by Elizabeth Price at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University. These take the word 'thesis' off the writing-based requirement in favour of a "thesis of art work".¹³ Claiming the word for artistic work both acknowledges a retrospective and a prospective heritage of artistic theses, of artists making theses. It firmly states that articulation should be achieved artistically, which reverses the usual punitive command to articulate one's work in the language of an older, more established academic discipline. Although doctoral degrees typically have less structured divisions between writing and studio work this doesn't inhibit these prejudices from being perpetuated.¹⁴

Kathy Acker's 1990 *Dead Doll Humility* begins:

"IN ANY SOCIETY BASED ON CLASS, HUMILIATION IS A POLITICAL REALITY. HUMILIATION IS ONE METHOD BY WHICH POLITICAL POWER IS TRANSFORMED INTO SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS."¹⁵

It continues with the artist-protagonist, Capitol, who makes a series of dolls based on the writing and publishing world. A satire of Acker's own infantilisation by legal action taken against her for her use of a Harold Robbins text. Acker's scenario, from 1990, mirrors the bottomless pit still lying between the

¹³ The University of Oxford examination regulations for Fine Art research degrees at the Ruskin School of Art ask for "a thesis of art practice that makes an original contribution to knowledge [...]." <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/examregs/2015-16/rdftrsofart/>.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Price discussed these in depth in her keynote lecture at the *Art of Research: Research Narratives* conference, University of Art and Design, Helsinki, 28 October 2009.

¹⁵ Kathy Acker, 'Dead Doll Humility', in *Postmodern Culture* 1:1 (1990).

traditions of use of found, authored and copyright material in fine art disciplines and the traditions in those mostly written disciplines that use citation styles to delimit authorship. Citation tells the reader explicitly – “this is authored by x... this is authored by y”. Citation delimits property, maintains border integrity. Unless you have the literary authority (writers voice, privilege and experience) to handle other people’s property then you shouldn’t do so, it is believed. Citation can centralise a singular method for organising property according to the power of the individual. The prevalent use of academic software such as Turnitin, add to the policing of these boundaries. These programs scan submissions and give the examiner a percentage of total plagiarised material.

S H A R I N G

A dangling knot of hung beast carcasses is displayed prominently where they are pointing. They have found something out, something they want to share with me. They beckon me to participate in their conversation, their reflection. They are generous and offer to disseminate the results of their labour, their findings.

Writing for an artist is a thing in the world. Writing is thinking, writing is material, it is lodged in places that determine our movement, it is in us and it *is* us. It is stuff, it is power, it is voice, it is authority, it is suppression, as well as property.

Writing is before and after academia too. The institution often articulates itself and speaks in writing,¹⁶ but writing comes from speaking, from bodies, sex, gender, race and class and it is hewn from physical material, and labour – from the world. A portrayal of the medium as only a loyal mouthpiece for academia and its institutions is absurd.

¹⁶ In *The Dark Object*, Katrina Palmer satirises the function of writing in Art Departments in Universities. For example, the poster for tutorial sign ups (that are all cancelled) with visiting tutor G.W.F Hegel. Katrina Palmer, *The Dark Object*, London: Book Works, 2010, p. 46.

To follow plagiarism regulations leads one to borrow only the amount that is permitted, in the manner permitted, along with a declaration of whose property and voice it is. Each institution has its own rules for this. These regulations are at odds with artistic use of material. How can one play with, mirror, pick-apart, pulverise, or reconstitute a text that they do not own, knowing that they will be sending the resulting broken property with their name attached back for official inspection? Yet, this is the dilemma we must overcome. The infidelity we must attempt (whilst fighting infantilisation) during our cultivation of writing in studio-based education.

The intellectual value of not using a universal language for communicating the source type, author, and location, is based in a pedagogic rationale for new forms of appropriation, citing, and referencing, which have to be innovated by each student. Each time the student-artist renegotiates the disclosure of who owns and authored what. Out of approaching this unfolding, whole practices, problematics, politics and forms of criticality are able to arise. If the innovation of the negotiation of other people's material were to be skipped, given a pre-established system of demarcation, whole movements and genres in art wouldn't need to exist – (Dada, Appropriation Art). Or, they would become more urgent! Think of a Hannah Höch collage with tiny tags attached all over, trying to responsibly index each image, to tell the audience that she didn't take all of the source photographs. In art the unfolding and discovery of source and authorship is critically staged through allowing a situation for the viewer to think about what and how they see.

H A N G I N G

They are content. They have found and hung a deceptive beast. They hung it like a person is hung. By its neck. On display for the shepherd-men, for us. Half wolf, half sheep, it is strung on a branch,

lifeless. The wolf's right paw frozen, erect, figuring its last struggle – depicting the labour necessary to overcome such a mischievous beast.

The singularity of form in writing strands demonstrates cleanliness, stability. It must be writing. Even within the remaining media specific departments (painting, sculpture, print etc), it's commonplace for the media to be completely deconstructed. For example, a legitimate painting practice may well take the form of live work or video. To seriously acknowledge an artist's articulation of their research through a critical choice of means, is simply to acknowledge that disciplines have different paradigms. Art is taught with an audience at the centre, this is what the tradition of group critiques demonstrates: what the work means and does to the immediate audience. Through these, as well as one to one tutorials, art education has decided to be responsible for communicating idiosyncrasy, for rigorously developing itself as a practice of critical reflection, of critical difference. Idiosyncrasy is not a malfunction that hadn't been noticed by artists until it was pointed out in academia.

Some pedagogic lessons don't migrate between disciplines. There are contradictions in how volume is dealt with across studio and writing strands. Volume in space in studio-based work is always determined by the site, whereby students critically respond to this given volume, sometimes vast, sometimes tiny. Students at the Sandberg have exhibited across a metro station at one time, while at other times over the radio, on their fingernails and in nightclubs. Assessment isn't based on the student filling a volume of space, but rather on the students' critical response to their use of space. In terms of the writing strand, there is a word count, derived not from limited resources but based on a judgement of what filling a worthy volume *should* evidence. Are the average 507 words of each of the 940 pages of Miguel De Cervantes' *Don Quixote*¹⁷ any better than the average 85 words of each of the 95 pages of Anne Tallentire's *Object of a Life*¹⁸? Each mobilises different economies of volume to create different formal, material, narrative and critical points – there is no qualitative judgement based on quantity.

17 Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. by Edith Grossman, London: Vintage, 2005.

18 Anne Tallentire, *Object of A Life*, Isle of Wight: Copy Press, 2013.

M O N S T E R

Wolf and sheep legs intermingle. Too many legs. Legs that make the beast-knot worse while making the unheard words of the Shepherds better. Because I, like the Shepherds am repulsed and scared of this monstrosity, of its death – even while I have knowledge that it is me. This repulsion and division, ties the picture together, holding us viewers at its centre, while seeding a moral infestation.

It is a provoking imaginary that Thomas Bewick mobilised with his engraved illustrations of Aesop's fables. Of his Wolf in Sheep's Clothing. Interspecies communication pitted at a Christian moral education to condition the minds of the young¹⁹. The Philanthropist plays out against the Misanthropist. Frogs, lions, gnats, bulls

and geese render common human traits through the bipolar lens of good and bad²⁰.

It seems clear to me that the structural separation between writing and studio work in art education should be abolished. Bring the writing work in house. Allow the idiosyncratic reading that is already being done to be identified, supported and taught with the same spirit of self-directed learning that is crucial in contemporary art pedagogy.

Joseph Noonan-Ganley (1987) is an Irish artist based in London. Noonan-Ganley's exhibitions, performances and publications address themes of sexuality, appropriation and authorship through extensive manipulation of the material remnants of artists, designers, sports people, dressmakers and writers. He is part of the ongoing exhibition series *Something To Be Scared Of* with Linda Stupart and Sam Keogh and his book *The Cesspool of Rapture* was published by Ma Bibliothèque in 2019. Noonan-Ganley was Senior Lecturer on the Studio for Immediate Spaces MA at the Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam (2015-2019) and is an Early Career Academic Fellow in Fine Art at Newcastle University.

¹⁹ Bewick dedicated this contribution to children's literature to the "Youth of the British Isles", while drawing the lineage of the literary form of the fable to the Bible and exclaiming: "Lessons of reproof, religion, and morality, were, we find, continually delivered in this mode, by the sages of old, to the exalted among mankind". Thomas Bewick, *The Fables of Aesop, and Others, With Designs on Wood*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1885, pp. iii-x.

His moral exposition continues, when speaking of his influence by Croxall's *Aesop's Fables*, he says it had "led hundreds of young men into the paths of wisdom & rectitude, & perhaps in that way had done more good than the pulpit". Thomas Berwick, *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick Written By Himself*, edited by Iain Bain, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 131-2.

²⁰ In his preface to *The Fables of Aesop and Others*, he uses the figure of the 'philanthropist' and the 'misanthropist' to communicate his intentions behind using figures of animals to caricature good and evil: The Philanthropist: "views with feelings of benevolence the wavering balance, and adds those he finds on the confines to the number of the virtuous". The misanthropist: "great numbers exist whose whole lives seem to be spent in disfiguring the beautiful order which might otherwise reign in society, regardless of the misery which their wickedness scatters around them... The misanthrope, in contemplating the scene of mischief and disorder, is apt to arraign the wisdom and justice of Providence for permitting it to exist". Thomas Bewick, *The Fables of Aesop, and Others, With Designs on Wood*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1885, pp. iv-v.

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