Writing Art and Creating Back: What Can We Do With Art (History)?
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Rede

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door

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‘Mevrouw en Mijne Heren Curatoren, 
Leden van het Presidium’.

This is, my dear audience, how Hans Jaffé addressed those gathered here in April 1964, following his appointment in 1963 as internationally – to my knowledge – the first Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History (Moderne en hedendaagse kunstgeschiedenis). He was a curator, from the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and used this Latin word (curator, rather than the Dutch conservator) to make a point: in universities and museums one finds people who care.

He chose as title for his Inaugural Lecture *het beeld en het woord* and asserts ‘ook na 1835 [he had referred to a book from that year] de rivaliteit tussen [de schilderkunst] en de kunst der dichters en schrijvers […] is vandaag nog evenzeer een feit als toen.’ In his own positioning, however, he prefers not to see such a rivalry or difference between curating and writing, the museum and the university, stressing interdependencies: clearly curating was then understood more as an academic, an art-historical endeavour than as a practice. As far as his own convictions about the relationship between speaking or writing about art and various art practices are concerned, he follows Paul Klee, implying that there is necessarily something poetic about a language that can best match an artwork. I quote:


4
My topic today encompasses word and image, art-historical and artistic or poetic writing and that multivalence and reluctance, as well as the possibility of indirect effectiveness already alluded to here. Similar to Jaffé, I would also like to begin with an artefact from the 19th century, the intellectual beginning of the era encompassed by Modern and Contemporary Art History: I brought with me two volumes from Friedrich Schiller’s *Sämtliche Werke*, 1838. I did not just buy them here on het Spui, although I could possibly have. They are here as a (diachronic) exhibit from a contemporary art exhibition that I curated last year entitled *Equilibrium? Royden Rabinowitch: Historical Turning Points and Artists’ Solidarity* (image 1).

One volume contains Schiller’s inaugural lecture, delivered in Jena in the momentous year 1789, where he insists on the connectedness of all historical events and, as I read it, even the investigation of universal history as part of such history. He, however, also makes a simplistic, a razor-sharp distinction between philosophical minds and bread-and-butter academics (*Brotgelehrte*). This is on the one hand a topical, insightful plea for open-ended, reflexive research and case for its longer-lasting effects, but he also speaks as though he could avoid being part of the institution (and never expected ever do administration). He did not endear himself to his colleagues, but presented a social constructionist approach (as we would call it today) to history-writing: history is made; and it was his belief that through it, through the university as opposed to his writing practice alone, he could better reach into public life. The other volume contains his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Human Beings*, i.e. his response to the violent excesses of the French Revolution, where art is thought capable of sensitising traumatised minds, the ones he hopes will implement *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. 

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Image 1  *Equilibrium? Royden Rabinowitch: Historical Turning Points and Artists’ Solidarity, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, January 2014*
Schiller was a literary writer who was appointed as a professor of history. It is as if at the beginnings of both the era that my field covers and that of this field’s institutionalisation through Jaffé’s chair, lies a most intriguing complica-
tion, a move between academic writing and practice: both fictional writing and curating, which is also a practice of making stories. It is as if Hayden
White’s insights,⁶ that all history is only thinkable in the form of narratives, of plots, and thus constructed, ought to be taken for granted as far as Modern and Contemporary Art History is concerned – and from the start. Contrary to
Paul Klee’s belief, we can never tell a story the ‘way it was’. Moreover, both
Schiller’s and Jaffé’s biographies as refugees (for the belief in freedom of speech and from NAZI Germany respectively) let these two volumes here function as a reminder that I should try to keep in mind ‘usefulness’ or the ways in which the constructions of art history today may relate to the politi-
cal, to public life.

When I arrived in Amsterdam a year ago, I had led a PhD programme for
(among others) artists. I was familiar with the researching artist, who creates,
contextualises and theorises themes pertaining to her work – in writing; all
the while trying to find a different voice, but remaining in broadly art-histori-
cal mode. I only wish here to be tangentially relevant to the artistic research
debate. Instead, in the following, I would like to introduce three art works
that I encountered upon arrival in the Netherlands and which resonate with
my research interests in that they establish a specific relationship between art
and (literary) writing – and on that basis proceed to three instances where art
historians (in a broad understanding of that term) have produced creative
work: the creating back of my title.

As you can already guess, these examples answer to those of Schiller and
Jaffé in sketching the relationship between contemporary art and its history as
quite far from still prevalent, stereotypical understandings. I am pleading for
an expanded concept of art history – to adapt Joseph Beuys’ term of an ex-
panded concept of art – and hope to make a case, supported by the notion of
radical history, not just for a useful art, but for a multiply useful, a ‘factifying’
art history.

As I arrived in Amsterdam, I encountered three works that engage with
literature. Maria Barnas was just showing Then / Then, 2014, in a local gallery
(image 2).⁷ The piece had developed out of The Writing Room, 2006, which I
had first seen in Dublin: images from guidebooks and the archive of the
Frankfurt Goethehaus are juxtaposed to reveal that, over time, nearly every-
thing has changed in this supposedly authentic location where Goethe had
penned Faust. Barnas as a published poet balanced in that work on the one
hand her urge to be in the writer’s ‘force field’, to admire, and on the other
her analytical impetus as a (researching) visual artist, where more often myths are debunked than created. Ever since I wrote and curated *Joyce in Art* (Dublin 2004),\(^8\) it had been my hope that visual artworks could help to multiply meanings and diversify approaches to literature and literary sites, but the visual art gallery is – or certain specific ones are – still a relatively unique space where this can be done. I find what I call ‘literary art exhibitions’ fascinating, but the Goethe museum itself did not e.g. buy Barnas’ piece to show that it investigates its own presumptions and those of its visitors, i.e. that it is a research organization. It withdrew the researching artist’s permission to access the archive. The notion of narratives being constructed is not universally popular, not even where Faust’s complicity with the devil could have led to institutional self-reflections or even critique. One conclusion that might be drawn from my remarks today might be that artists (as well as researchers or artists as researchers) will gravitate to the people and institutions – a force field one could call it – that either enable or need their work.

Dora García has another approach to literary writing and its (visual and scholarly legacy), also involving an institution: the Zurich Joyce Foundation. She made a documentary film of the *Finnegans Wake* reading group at work: *The Joycean Society*, 2013 (image 3).\(^9\) Already in 2007 I had suggested ‘The performance of (artistic) reading of Joyce […] bears the hallmarks of much current “relational” activity in the arts’.\(^{10}\) Now, in Amsterdam, I was delighted to find the Zurich Joyce Foundation, which has over long stretches given me
interdisciplinary hospitality and an intellectual home, artistically valued, and also my desideratum to see it in the visual art context carried out in two ways: through García’s work and a real live *Finnegans Wake* reading group in an art gallery.¹¹ Art spaces become the locus of research and draw attention to highly accomplished, but academically relatively marginal practices, such as collectively reading Joyce’s late work. Doing this appears to appeal on account of the proverbial difficulty of Joyce’s text, which can bestow status, where research credentials are sometimes still doubted. More importantly, an affinity exists due to the ways in which finally not-understanding is implied, taken for granted and thus valued. It is (among other things) the multiplicity of meanings in Joyce that attracts artists in search of a kind of research that does not presume that what emerges has been found before (not ‘re-search’ but *Forschung*).¹² Engaging in this jointly and performatively – like in a reading group – is as attractive as carrying the work of others forward, without initially too much regard for whether these works (or one’s own) belong to academic scholarship, literary writing or visual art.

It is relevant in the current context that what for Hans Jaffé Paul Klee had tentatively formulated, the notion of multiple meanings in and of art, was first theorised by Umberto Eco in his *Opera Aperta*, in the early 1960s (1962 not 1963 this time).¹³ At the point of Modern and Contemporary Art History’s institutionalization – its ‘making-certain’ – thus stands a key theoretical posi-
tion for both visual art and literature that built its argument on the basis of a poetics of James Joyce, i.e. a focus on border-crossing uncertainties of meaning. The book’s second part is about Joyce exclusively – with the unfortunate result that only that part was translated into English in a timely manner, leaving English-speaking artists and art history in thrall to Modernist formalism for some time longer (until Brian O’Doherty would commission Roland Barthes in 1967 to write The Death of the Author for his Aspen 5+6 issue as a first – and cross-Atlantic – compilation of conceptual art and writing practices, innovatively presented as a hybrid between editorial, curatorial and artistic practice. That was even before Op Losse Schroeven, Stedelijk Museum 1969, set the scene for Amsterdam’s remarkable contributions to conceptual art).  


One further contemporary art project should be mentioned: it is by Ahmet Öğüt and is at the moment displayed in the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. In one gallery room, Öğüt’s project is documented, where he re-fitted a fire engine with everything that is needed to print books on demand and on site: Fahrenheit 451: Reprinted, 2013 (image 4). The reason why a copy of Joyce’s Ulysses is reprinted and exhibited is the history of censorship of this book. The project is thus one of restitution: where books had been burned, the fire-
engine arrives not just to quench the fire, but to reprint the books, thus letting challenging, liberating thoughts work their way into communities that were previously deprived of them.

I should be clear, however, that Joyce made no claims for the liberating or any other effects (the censors would allege pornographic ones). His stock answer when asked what he had done during the First World War, was that he had written *Ulysses* – an autonomous work, therefore, or one insisting on an antagonistic relationship of his art to war, thus deliberately and (indirectly) political. He also reportedly wanted to make sure that academics would be kept busy for centuries and that reading groups were needed, i.e. communities forged that would feel responsible for the expansion into the societal sphere. The need to read aloud and the machinery of promotion that Joyce and his friends set in motion, I argue, already expand the work and aim for its efficacy: indirectly and communally, as well as (and before) any direct effect.

The notion underlying Öğüt’s project and the Van Abbemuseum’s programme is that of a useful art, *arte útil*. The Van Abbemuseum has over the years re-thought what a museum is, how it can operate (with whom co-operate) and how it can make stories with the exhibitions, collections and archives that will be revealing not just about the art itself or societal contexts, but interfere in contexts, histories and power structures. This is not so much direct (party-political) work, although that always has to go on (at the very least in order to keep the funders on side), but a utilization of (often autonomous) art for real life means. In doing so, it follows artistic strategies – and Theodor W. Adorno’s insight into the ‘dual character of art as autonomy and social fact […] the social fact of autonomy.’ It may even revise and expand these beliefs in the direction of a radical history in the way in which Gabriel Rockhill has formulated this multiple intertwining of the production, distribution and reception of art not with all things outside of art, but as part of the ‘multiple types, tiers, and sites of agency that animate sociohistorical force fields’ – and of these art is a part, not a separate, stable category in itself.

It was purposefully a Joyce-related work, Royden Rabinowitch’s *Greased Cone*, 1965, that I chose to exhibit when the opportunity arose for intervention and collective meaning-making with members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, January 2014, in Belfast. The cone is an art-historically internal reference to Constantin Brancusi’s *Portrait James Joyce*, 1928. But what is more important in that project’s context is that the cone can be experienced as a complex, a differentiating symbol of hierarchy. It is both sheltered and subverted by the grease that obscures the steel carrying it. It was challenging (but I think rewarding) to try to get the (few) participants to think and feel for
themselves (also facilitated by a performance workshop by Alastair MacLennan). *Arte útil* – as usefully, critically employed art operates and intervenes in and through institutions, curators, art historians (or all of them in different ways) and does not make an artwork as a talisman, Rockhill would say, shoulder impossible tasks itself.\(^{24}\)

**Image 5**  
Joseph Beuys and his *The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*, Belfast, 1974

Any peace-building or democratizing is, of course, not assumed to happen in one lonely viewing or reading, but utilizing both artworks and these discourses to intervene in thinking and doing can possibly lead to change. Joseph Beuys, who unsettled some of his contemporaries by leaving it unclear where art and life began and ended, felt compelled to create a *Ulysses Extension*, 1957-62 – creatively and critically. Such extensions, including of course academic responses, combine to create a ‘force field’ of energies and meanings sometimes reaching into, establishing themselves as part of the social and political domain. Rockhill’s term suits Joseph Beuys’ language well.

In my work on James Joyce I found that the kind of efficacy he cultivated – indirectly – spawned not just other such work and individual ‘epiphanies’, but
possibly surprisingly also more directly socially and politically engaged work, by Beuys, Martha Rosler and others. It is not the case that autonomy and heteronomy, indirect and direct efficacy exclude one another or split into neatly distinguishable camps. They remain blurred and in contestation. I find it remarkable that these artists as Joyce-readers pioneered direct social and political engagement that was different from much pre-WWII artwork, i.e. that goes beyond competing certainties. They are also, incidentally, among the key proponents of institutional critique, joined by Brian O’Doherty with his analysis that the gallery space is far from neutral, but part of all that determines any institution’s position. Beuys, as another pioneer of critiquing the gallery space, also never left it completely, thus taking further institutional critique into the realm of what we call new or experimental institutionalism: a differentiated, expanded and always precarious position.

I would like to argue that it is the wish to work in both the direct and the oblique modes, the autonomous and the academically or artistically heteronomous, as well as the impetus to create extensions of other works (from literature, art or art history) – that can be found in the recent creative or artistic work by prominent art historians. Mieke Bal has – alongside her prolific work in Cultural Analysis – made films (with Michelle Williams Gamaker), such as Madame B, 2013, in which they – visually, artistically – argue that Gustave Flaubert’s analysis of capitalism in Madame Bovary, 1856, is current and relevant and that it is possible to let audiences see a middle voice, i.e. a differentiated position, where a character is both victim and perpetrator. Making films is a valid mode of dissemination and mediation of academic work. What goes beyond this is that Mieke Bal has been a proponent of artistic research. The respect for analytical artistic practice that is the basis for supervising such doctoral work may find an expression, another voice in crossing the boundary into practice. As such, this work is comparable to art historical projects that employ creative means, such as Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas, 1924-29, which can be interpreted as close to contemporary (i.e. 1920s) collage, but remains an art-historical (and indeed curatorial) study with and through images. Warburg’s own location for the work was as a ‘science without a name’.

James Elkins’ current project Writing with Images may also be seen as close to Warburg’s atlas. However, he himself has developed a whole taxonomy. According to it, and in his current writing’s self-assessment, he is leaving art history. As an experiment with regard to the relationship between a literary text and images, this project carries forward W.G. Sebald’s books. Sebald is the writer who has done most to fuel artists’, as well as now art historians’, interest in problematizing the relationship between literary text and accom-
panying, uncaptioned images. As the visual artist Tacita Dean was inspired to respond to Sebald’s work with autobiographical fictional writing accompanied by photographs, Elkins joins her, it seems, from the other side. It remains to be seen if such writing (I mentioned Hayden White) will manage to be read as fiction alone and not as art-historical or rather Bildwissenschaft allegory or test case. It certainly functions as an aesthetic expansion on Elkins’ argument in *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts*, which paid attention to the writing that art historians do. This relationship to art-historiographical work could make one doubt that, in terms of reception, Elkins will be able to leave art history at all. Perhaps he also has to occupy a space that does not bear a name.

Elkins (as my other two examples) can arguably get anything published. Why should they make radical departures? Of course it is a privilege to be able to act out the freedom one has, to remain nimble, find a new interest or new means of mediating older ones. So I don’t want to overstate it, but the departures – other than taking the implications of Eco’s open work seriously – may also be a commentary of the state on art historical publishing. Or is it not also the slight boredom with expectations that even modern and contemporary art historians produce normative art-historical work, when from the outset (since Jaffé) such expectations were subverted creatively? To opt for a different ‘market’, as Elkins does, cannot but also imply a critique of the hegemonic modes of publication and (peer)review. A plan that James Elkins and I pursued with (other) Irish art historians for a global art history journal came to nothing, owing to prohibitive prices the interested publishing houses would have charged from libraries across the world, which our target audiences, we knew, could not pay. Alternative forms of writing and publishing (often by socially engaged artists) are rife.

Writing by artists that is located within visual art practice, such as Tacita Dean’s just mentioned, is called Art Writing. It has invigorated the publishing field and Maria Fusco, one of its driving forces, was able to state that the ‘readers who are willing and happy to spend time with experimental writing are currently clustered in and around art’. Elkins arguably inserts his project into a segment, a community that will understand the affiliation of this particular fiction with visual art – and by extension its reflection and mediation, i.e. art history, without (hopefully) spoiling the reading experience by incessant theorising. A naïve poet, however, Elkins is unlikely to be for his readers, rather the other end of the spectrum in Friedrich Schiller’s terminology, the sentimental, i.e. reflective one – or maybe both? Orhan Pamuk has, departing from Schiller, proposed that: ‘Reading a novel means understanding the world via a non-Cartesian logic [...] the constant and steadfast ability to be-
lieve simultaneously in contradictory ideas.” Such contradictory, contesting ideas are, of course, (academic) reflection and (artistic) creation. If we learn to sustain them, as in reading a novel, something may be gained, including a sense in the recipients that they, too, can sustain two perspectives simultaneously. My worries about the one-sided perspectives in the reception of Elkins’ (but also Bal’s) creative works may be unfounded.

Fusco, Yve Lomax, Michael Newman and Adrian Rifkin formulate in their *Eleven Statements around Art Writing* that it ‘does not take the modalities of writing as given, rather it tends to, and experiments with “non-division” between practice and theory, criticism and creativity’.

We are not speaking about an inability to see the divisions between scholarship and making, but a wish to suspend – or rather hold or bear – the differences (temporarily, in just such a non-Cartesian way about which readers know). This thought can then, I would like to argue, lead to radical historical insights where artworks, their exhibitions and interpretations all operate as part of a force field; where we intervene and negotiate with different voices the various social and / or political positions in the world.

We have come quite some way since Paul Klee expressed his worries – and simultaneously not so far at all: the *dichterische* aspect is still what artists seek, now both in their own writing as in the prose by which they wish their work to be accompanied. And now they add the academic format, too. In all of this, art historians follow suit – if they were not, as I hope to have shown, already acting in that space from the beginning. *Writing With Images*: a partnership is established, rather than – or in addition to – the age-old rivalry of which Jaffé still wrote, but in which he arguably no longer believed.

I have a third art historian’s creative work to discuss: Timothy J. Clark. Concerning this foremost English-speaking social art historian, the politics of any given practice (in writing or art) cannot but be in the foreground. He has, however, alongside his more directly socially engaged writings, published an experiment in Art Writing (about Poussin) and more recently completed a manuscript on Giotto’s *Arena Chapel*, which he kindly shared and discussed with colleagues here at the UvA. I quote:

> Everything in that masterpiece pushes painting into realms – into kinds of semantics – that none of us has words for. […] Maybe a great poet […] could make something of Joachim’s Dream. I’m sure I cannot. I need prose – I think art history in general needs prose – to circle around the emptiness, the lack of connection, at the Dream’s heart.”
In keeping with this expression of inability in light of the painting, Samuel Beckett is quoted at both the beginning and the end of the chapter. Clark’s text places itself into art history and I may be wrong in including it here. On the one hand, the text is more poetically creative than other academic ones in acknowledging inability, in circling around its subject matter (and emptiness, as it says). It is responding conscientiously to the challenge of finding an open work (after Eco) in the early Renaissance, indeed, the insight that words will often fail us when confronted with – especially multivalent – images. Thus the text is of our time, and it is producing a past. Yet, there is a strangely archaic feel to this chapter, owing to the use of the word ‘masterpiece’, the fact that it does not try too hard to enter itself into Giotto scholarship and also the reverie it exudes. A Marxist enthralled by the biblical story: we do need to think opposites simultaneously.

Jacques Rancière, largely drawing from the Schillerian tradition, has in art theory reconciled engagement and reverie. Through a text like Clark’s, suddenly, wonder and research, aesthetic aspects of art and socially engaged discourse no longer seem so clearly opposed. One may even throw caution to the wind and observe that a field that excelled in dividing itself up seemingly endlessly, is finding common ground. Warburg’s legacy of a personally inflected, historical psychology using images creatively, as I said, is now found quite extensively in art – and more and more also in art history. Institutionally speaking, artistic research practices also point to a movement towards one another. We are trading places: some art spaces are very capable research and publishing institutions, indeed (often in collaboration with universities). The museum’s near and yet far-away fields may look greener, less conflicted or more urgent or (as we’re using archaic words: more ‘authentic’) to art history – and ours to them. A little strategically employed autonomy, an attempt at indirect efficacy can, indeed, be no harm. And importantly, T.J. Clark is still (simultaneously) writing punchy essays in the New Left Review, where he says that the way to go is ‘not quietism’.

Currently, the co-existence in the world of, on the one hand post-traumatic situations that require (Schillerian) sensitization and on the other commodifications of traumatic memories that demand more direct approaches, calls for different registers, different voices – inside our work and out: Clark’s references to Beckett remind us that (as Terry Eagleton found) Beckett was political, because he was active in the Résistance during World War II, and in his work because he subsequently avoided the temptation to take the victor’s stance or adopt a triumphalist pose, as the cruelties of the war were particularly owed to such thinking. He adopted both a personally direct and an artistically indirect approach.
In his art Beckett worked through reduction. Artists, of course, know the lure of deskilling, as reduction to the minimum of artistic means for which one does not require craft talent is called. Paradoxically when they do, however, they have to get all the better at speaking about what they have done, i.e. they have to become art historians, contextualizing and theorizing their practice. Perhaps then we are (also) encountering what Maria Lind calls the ‘victory of the nerds’, commenting on Dora García’s *The Joycean Society.* Constructing respect for such admittedly rather extreme academic (and personal) practice does intervene in a political debate, one about academia – and how supposedly useless it is what the humanities and art do.

Such a text as Clark’s Giotto chapter may also (and first) propose a position when considering that which is left behind: in this case highly commercialised and commodified art on the one hand and corresponding strictures in academia. W.G. Sebald’s response to the introduction of the audit culture in UK universities – the Research Assessment Exercise in the 1980s (he worked at East Anglia) – was to quit literary criticism and turn to fictional writing – with images. As his readers, we are grateful.

Some visual artists have responded to the pressures to publish – and to the internet’s incessant text-production – with conceptual writing. This has taken its cue from conceptual art and consist in the main of decisions which text to copy or appropriate and re-publish under which conditions and whose authorship. Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*, 2003, a re-typed *New York Times* issue reveals a nodding interest in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, set on one day (just like a newspaper). More recently in conceptual writing, editing and (obviously) questioning the ethics of such plagiarising practice have come to the fore – and with it a focus on the possible indirectness of conceptual writing, together with its theorization and historicization. Now more loosely appropriating practices can be considered as conceptual writing, such as – possibly – T.J. Clark adopting an unusual tone for an engaged social art historian, and Elkins pushing a Sebaldian methodology into cognitive territory (if that is what he is doing). In Mieke Bal’s film the use of theatre actors instead of film ones renders the experience less transparent than watching a story unfold would otherwise be, making the viewer notice at every point that a Flaubert adaption or appropriation is what one is viewing. These two sides of conceptual writing – and the latter’s proximity to art history – has another, a political implication: Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman turn their attention to what they call ‘conceptualisms’. ‘Conceptual writing is allegorical writing [, they say, and] Allegorical writing […] is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly, usually because of overtly repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message.’
This sacredness might shine through Clark’s Giotto chapter. On the other hand, conceptual writing is connected with samizdat publishing behind the Iron Curtain in Pavel Büchler, now Manchester, originally from Prague. Iris Dressler has commented on Central European conceptual practices:

The methods of Conceptual Art, Mail Art, of Happenings or Actionism, which emerged [not just in New York, but especially also] under conditions of censorship and political violence, cannot be contemplated independently of these conditions. [...] the dematerialization of art also implied not leaving any calamitous traces behind. Here, ‘aesthetic of administration’ (Buchloh) implies not a self-critical [copying] of a ‘totally administered world’ but, more frequently, a subversive appropriation and critique of the rigid bureaucratic strategy of totalitarian regimes.

The appearance of sober-looking, ephemeral work in current art production in the West, while it was also a hallmark of Amsterdam-based conceptual art, profiting from and adding to this liberal environment, may not necessarily be a compliment to current social and political contexts. Such an interpretation may open doors for understanding the appropriation of ‘old’ art history or possibly even the turn to fiction writing by art historians (or literary scholars like Sebald), who share an interest in social relevance.

In focusing on the creative practices of Bal, Elkins and Clark, it is not my intention to propose a new theory of inter- or transdisciplinarity – not in the presence of Mieke Bal. Systems theory could also be useful in describing the ‘eco system’ that we inhabit together, but Kitty Zijlmans has already shouldered this task. It is instead my wish to hold up on show (epi-phanain – or to curate) diverse practices that appear on the boundaries of my discipline and that I can, I think, propose today – given the lineage of this field’s institutionalization through the curator Hans Jaffé – as inside this field; a field that Aby Warburg enhanced through his visual practice and preferred to call a science without a name. In order to account for such complexities, I think that a combined analysis of contemporary art, word and image, art historiography and curating suits our urgent tasks rather well – together of course with many other approaches. In my view, Modern and Contemporary Art History is creative art history – and it reaches into curatorial practice, creative writing, art writing, conceptual writing – as well as the mediation and contestation of cultural production in and through all modes of practice.

That does not mean we’re working in competition to artists: on the contrary. It means that we’re well-placed to appreciate the different means and formats with which we can all analyse and communicate. As art historians,
we’re trained not just to interpret meanings represented directly, iconographically, but to consider materiality, form and (institutional) context as bearers of and contributors to meaning. In this we are now helped by the tenets of social constructionism and radical history. We can understand ourselves as making active interventions in constructing meanings, practices and our fields. We are working in partnership and often solidarity with artists – in the same eco system, while they are attending to ours, intervening in it and through it in the social field. It does not mean abandoning our core modes of investigation (artists have long joined us in employing them, too), but we are abandoning notions of superiority. We are also more aware of the personally inflected, implicated if you will, and creative aspect of all our practices than before; of the fact that (our) story-telling is open and intrinsically interactive. Beuys would have said: we are all artists. Our work lives inside and outside of the inter-mingled realities of art spaces, research institutions and public space, in production, distribution and reception. When the authors I introduced employ fictive and creative means, they acknowledge that multiple voices are needed, including those by further art historians who can interpret these seemingly unrelated works (back) into art history and outwards, as interventions.

It is – again – James Joyce to whom we can turn when trying to understand an unusually multiple and interwoven notion of cultural practice and efficacy – one that has turned my remarks today more into a palimpsest of differently interwoven strands than a linear argument, too. Joyce pioneered multi-stylistic work in *Ulysses*, where all 18 episodes are different, including in their visual appearance. Fritz Senn has proposed that artistic work in response to Joyce ‘has a wider and more lasting effect than the sum total of our critical, scholarly comments and interpretations’. Joyce, therefore, in many ways has worked through artists – and artworks show effect through art historians, or at least often with our help, our active construction of meaning. In addition to the indirectness of the open work, Joyce intervened directly in the life of the city that he left. He acted out his likes and dislikes by entering real Dubliners into his early works (leading, predictably, to problems with publishers). Later he used his friends to give pointers towards – again multiple – modes of interpretation. Many artists do this quite ruthlessly, or quite realistically and reciprocally, too, turning other artists, critics, curators and art historians into the invisible ‘dark matter’ (as Gregory Sholette has called it) supporting their work. *Finnegans Wake* is unthinkable without reading groups or without the early collection of essays entitled *Our Exagmination round his Factification of Work in Progress*, 1929 (image 6). Joyce thus constructed a multiple efficacy, where the boundary between art and life, art and scholarship, art and politics
is not so easily determined – and more: it is revealed to be intertwined, not separate from public life, but actively pursued, in construction. Joyce’s ‘Factification’ is not a bad term for the core of what Gabriel Rockhill calls radical history.\(^{33}\)

How do art historians then ‘factify’ through – among other things – creating back? In other words, ‘What can we do with Art History’? As art historians, we can turn ourselves into tools for the efficacy of art, we can act in the world, we can create for ourselves, we can create so that others may (indirectly, in a differentiated way) feel called to expand, to look after an as yet undecided, always-contested efficacy.

How the creative work of art history can become useful, therefore, does not just depend on a film being made or the poetic text with images being written or curated, the camera being held up to people reading, or a fire engine being pimped. Their use lies in their afterlife, in the teaching of art history, in the testing of institutional practices along the way and in the collective reading with colleagues, as it happened here with Clarke’s chapter on Giotto. Nobody had a ready prepared answer as to the politics of the work. That lives in the
future: multiply. The text has to exist, be offered, be proposed. Sometimes, however, as with the unpredictability of a Joycean or other epiphany, the works and/or their creators, emboldened by their own works or their students, or the often quite remarkable circumstances in which they find themselves, will act in ‘useful’, ‘usable’, ‘factifying’ ways by indirect or direct means. Just like word and image relations, or those between art history, curating and art practice, these relations and modes of efficacy redefine themselves in individual instances. What matters is to be there and to see what can and may need to be done. Meanings change and as they do and we trace and construct them, we find that it’s not just artworks that can be seismographs of their time (in the Warburgian sense), but that the perceived importance of our doing as art historians is also indicative of our time.54 With that thought I have returned us to both the present and the space in which we are gathering.

Proposing this perspective means that we wish to be hospitable to those (artistic researchers and others) who come to us with high hopes and a trust and energy that we should not just welcome, but that is needed for our joint force field to thrive. It is a reminder of our academic independence’s attractiveness to artists whose own independence against all the odds we cherish in turn. Schiller considered art to be the daughter of freedom.55 What we are claiming for the artwork should, therefore, also be considered for the art historian’s work: it remains autonomous and simultaneously (indirectly and directly) works as a social fact – maybe sometimes as a useful art paired with a useful art history.

Schiller was (owing to the success of his inaugural lecture with the students) told he was not a historian. Jaffé inaugurated academic modern and contemporary art history I think without such problems. Today, art history assuredly speaks with many voices. And these many voices and languages are nowhere better spoken, encompassed, interpreted and to be pursued (the old tasks don’t go away) than in Amsterdam. Here the German origins of the discipline and the English-speaking hegemony in and of art and art theory are nearly effortlessly mixed and complemented by – therefore – a rich local tradition. The result is (or can be) an expanded Art History, a história da arte útil.

What can we do with (art) history then: we can acknowledge it as having expanded – and as always having been interdisciplinary and open, even in its foundational moments: artists write, art historians create back (and forth). We can be present and differentiate when the image gets abused in unilateral ways, speak up when the numbing visual spectacle is sold to us as the epitome of our area.56 We can appreciate Warburg, Joyce and others, such as Brian O’Doherty and the artists and art historians who were the focus here, as
forces for the constructive deconstruction of their (of our) discipline(s), as faithfully unfaithful appropriators of our field’s practices. And we can see and read together, write, curate and create together with artists and audiences, with students in a collective, open, self-critical, never-ending effort at meaning-making and world-making with images and words. The isolated or talisman function of art is, indeed, to be overcome: instead, we can intervene, create and perpetuate force fields with the works of others and our own – in many voices, directly and indirectly. We’re occasionally and then multiply useful. We care.

Thanks

I thank my students, who have been incredibly willing to engage in communal reading and discussing, especially when in front of artworks in Eindhoven, Bremen, the Stedelijk, and various galleries. Our Strijd ∞ exhibition is now in many places, including inside Ahmet Öğüt’s exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum. I thank my colleagues for their powerful intellectual energy and generosity of spirit: Frank van Vree, voor een hartelijk welkom in de Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen, Kati Röttger in Kunst- en Cultuurwetenschappen, Frans Grijzenhout, Lex Bosman en Hugo van der Velden in Kunstdgeschiedenis. In the Research Schools for Cultural Analysis Patricia Pisters and Mieke Bal, in Heritage and Memory Studies Rob van der Laarse and Ihab Salouf, and OSK. The incredibly hard-working and welcoming Modern and Contemporary Art History team: Anja, Gregor, Jeroen, Marga, Miriam, Rachel, Sher, Sophie and others who contribute to our teaching – and my little research group on Contemporary Art as a Site of Memory, including the PhD researchers, who helped so eagerly at this morning’s conference.

To the University of Amsterdam goes my gratitude for extending the trust to appoint me. I find Amsterdam and this university a congenial environment in which to make a contribution to the best of my ability.

There are a few people without whom I would not be here. Allen voran Antje von Graevenitz, die mir als Doktormutter Beuys erweiterten Kunstbegriff nahebrachte, meine ersten Publikationen in den Katalogen zu Harald Szeemanns Beuys Retrospektive ermöglichte und von Amsterdam aus so lehrte, dass ich gar nicht umhin konnte, ihr hierher folgen zu wollen. Fritz Senn, Director of the Zurich James Joyce Foundation, who extended cross-disciplinary hospitality and made that Finnegans Wake reading group a home. Similar to Alastair MacLennan, who welcomed me in Belfast, he possesses not just the academic independence of an amateur, but also what one
would call superior leadership skills. Otto Dann, University of Cologne, who saw to my first peer-reviewed publication – on Aby Warburg. He is editor of the historical texts in the scholarly edition of *Friedrich Schiller, Werke und Briefe*:58 of exactly what was printed here first. I heard of his passing as I invited him to be with us today.


As we were in the mid-1980s, for the first time allowed to visit family in the East, I bought these two Schiller volumes under the Fernsehturm in East Berlin, which – at Tacita Dean’s invitation – would become a topic for writing. The books’ presence in an Antique bookshop (for very little money) can represent liberating thought made ineffective for most through canonization. It needs reading (ideally reading together) for thoughts to avoid the chocolate box, or as Beuys would have said: ‘Die Begriffe werden nach einem halben Jahr absolute Leichen sein, wenn sie nicht ernährt werden […] man muß das Leben für die Sprache erst anliefern’.59 Only many years later would I learn that both Beuys’ and Joyce’s works were circulated clandestinely and eagerly – and collectively received – by artists behind the Iron Curtain. Whatever one might call it, serendipity, objective chance, epistemological allegiance or solidarity: to me they are constellations that are in keeping with Modern and Contemporary Art History.

Finally, a very special thanks to Hugh und Liam. In Dublins Holles Street Maternity Hospital geboren, bist Du, Liam, im *Ulysses*-Zeitraffer gewachsen und ein vielsprachiger, internationaler Teenager geworden, auf den ich stolz bin. Hugh, a quarter of a century now: what an amazing journey together! Go raibh maith agat agus tá mo chroi istigh ionat.

Ik heb gezegd.
Images


Notes

2. Ibid. p. 1.
3. Ibid. p. 11.
11. WrongRong Gallery, Amsterdam, organized by Mariana Linari.
12. This distinction was made during the Artistic Research conference that took place within the space of Dora García’s *Klau Mich Show* at Documenta 13, Kassel, 2012.
14. Jacques Derrida was later to formulate even more clearly: ‘What comes under theory or under […] correspondence, for example? […] the limits, the borders, and the distinctions have been shaken by an earthquake from which no classification concept […] can be sheltered. Order is no longer assured.’ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz (transl.), Chicago, London 1995 pp. 4, 5. The point I am making is that even when Schiller and Jaffé were appointed, such ‘proper’ academic order was suspended, practice allowed as (part of) an academic’s work.
16. It is entitled VOORUIT! / FORWARD!, 7 May-14 June 2015.
19. Scholars like Jacques Rancière and Luc Boltanski have taught us that these are rather well understood by those subjected to them. I had the opportunity to hear both of them speak in Amsterdam in the months since my arrival.
21. See: Pascal Gielen, ‘Institutional Imagination: Instituting Contemporary Art Minus the ‘Contemporary’, in: Pascal Gielen (ed.), Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World, Amsterdam, 2013. Gielen argues: ‘Art has not yet completely given up its right to a visionary sluggishness […] a third wave of institutional critique can only succeed if it uses its imagination […] It must […] not follow the world but intervene in the world.’ p. 31. For how, conversely, ‘the world’ intervenes in our cultural preferences, the work of Pierre Bourdieu needs to be consulted.

22. Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art, London and New York, 2013, p. 44.


24. It is unfortunately illusory to assume that autonomous, i.e. not overtly political work is always perceived as less threatening than directly engaged / representational practice. The institution that had first agreed to exhibit the work and host the workshop with the politicians, the Ulster Museum Belfast, cancelled the exhibition at two weeks’ notice. The Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, then enabled it.

25. I am referring to the animosities between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. The current reflections (as well as my co-edited volume on Beuysian Legacies – see note 39) constitute an attempt at thinking the space in between. In terms of a literal space combining such positions, one may think of the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, which opened with an Anti-Vietnam War exhibition – with minimalist work. It has also over the decades served as a space for Finnegans Wake readings and Bloomsday celebrations.


31. Orhan Pamuk, The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist, Cambridge and London, 2010, pp. 21, 22. He is himself also creator of a literary art museum, one dedicated to his own fiction’s genesis. It is a most intriguing thought to contrast this museum with the house of the Blooms from Joyce’s Ulysses, 7 Eccles Street, Dublin, which was torn down in the writer’s centenary year, 1982. I have argued (and through curating the work of James Coleman created a void at the centre of my Joyce in Art exhibition) that contemporary visual art is well placed to function as or instead of that potentially most important but lost literary museum.
35. The Schillerian tradition opens avenues for this thinking and is valued today by Rancière and Peter Osborne.
36. One may even remember that it all began with Vasari’s fictionalised biographies.
37. Aesthetics – in a notion forged around Schiller’s time, as Peter Osborne tells us – encompasses both the work and the discourse, i.e. becomes a practice. – Sophie Berrebi, The Shape of Evidence, Amsterdam, 2014: ‘What I call the shape of thinking is an invitation to drop the pseudo-objectivity of scholarly research and to develop forms of academic writing that acknowledge the vagaries and undecided self positioning of the author.’ p. 217. ‘artists […] spell out dialectical changes at work in art production, shifting back and forth between a disappearance of contemporary art as a whole and its reinvention in other sectors of culture and knowledge-production.’ p. 218.
38. Timothy J. Clark, ‘For a Left With No Future’, New Left Review 74, March/April 2012, pp. 53-75. p. 75. - Timothy J. Clark, Farewell to an Idea. Yale, 1999. Clark summarises that Beckett and other writers from the 1950s ‘speak so clearly to the ultimate reason for modernism’s change of face. […] These writers were communists, humanists, Resistance fighters, survivors of the camps, […] whose modernism was tempered by the worst kinds of experience.’ p. 407 Interestingly, he also seems to answer Mieke Bal’s approach to Flaubert by citing Claude Monet: ‘Oh, if Flaubert had been a painter, what would he ever have written, for God’s sake!’ Ibid. p. 12.
41. Possibly the linguistic turn for artists (which occurred in and through conceptual art and further through the PhD with practice) is now matched by a pictorial turn in art history? W.J.T. Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images, London and Chicago, 2005: ‘The pictorial or visual turn, then, is not unique to our time […] when […] a cultural practice erupts in symptoms of panic or euphoria (usually both) about ‘the visual’.’ p. 348. ‘The mistake is to construct a grand binary model of history centred on just one of these turning points.’ p. 349.
43. The definitions of research of the RAE (now REF) were, however, honed with every iteration and have long caught up: creative writing, art and curatorial practice are, if submitted with the appropriate research rhetoric, considered academic research and will earn money for the university if established enough in the reputational economy. Sebald campaigned for the recognition of literary translation as research.

44. It suits this argument well to remember that at the cradle of the conceptual way of thinking in art stood the Joyce-trained minds of Joseph Kosuth, Richard Hamilton, Brian O’Doherty and John Cage, who knew what to look out for in Marcel Duchamp’s notes. This was a point I made in *Joyce in Art* and ‘The Joyce Effect’.


46. through a group that calls itself ‘information as material’ and that includes Kenneth Goldsmith.


48. They are not leaving the element of aesthetic enjoyment, even reverie behind. It has been recuperated by Peter Osborne, particularly as part of a sentimental, i.e. reflective / conceptual artistic way of thinking and practicing, based on Schiller’s contemporaries. Peter Osborne found a shared connection, an understanding between the Jena Romantics and Sol LeWitt’s *Sentences on Conceptual Art* of 1969, which could be expanded into recent times (Osborne’s time of writing was the early 2010s) as a moment before the mainstreaming of artistic research. ‘There is a “particular recognisability” to the “now” of LeWitt’s Sentences on Conceptual Art today (1969 in 2011), through which it “enters into legibility” with the “then” of the Athenaeum Fragments (1798 in 2011): the recognisability of philosophical romanticism in conceptual art, and thereby, the retrospective anticipation of conceptual art in philosophical romanticism itself. […] they acquire a conjoint contemporaneity [art writing in 2011].’ Osborne, *Anywhere*, p. 55; ‘whether they knew it of not, the […] artist-critics of the 1960s and 1970s […] were following in the footsteps of what Schlegel called the ‘poeticizing-philosophers, philosophising poets’ of the 1790s […] both in combining the roles of artist and critic and in the collective aspects of their practices.’ p. 57; ‘contemporary art is historically determined as a postconceptual art. As such, it actualizes the idea of the work of art to be found in the Jena Romantic philosophy of art, under new historical conditions.’ p. 10. ‘Today the theoretical register […] is less strictly Romantic and more that of a fluid, philosophically reflective transdisciplinarity.’, p. 11.


52. Sylvia Beach (ed.) Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress, London, 1929.

53. ‘The adjective radical refers both to the dissolution of the supposedly natural objects of history and to the dynamic role of different forms of agency in history. […] radical history subverts the fundamental assumption that […] there are two distinct entities with a determinate relation […] we call “art” and “politics” [. They are] variable sociohistorical practices that have no essential nature or singular relation.’ Rockhill, Radical History, p. 3.

54. At this point, my slide showed a scanned cut-out from a back issue of the journal of the Deutscher Hochschulverband with the words: ‘Staatswesen: “Je besser der Zustand ist, in dem sich ein Staatswesen befindet, desto großzügiger verhält es sich gegenüber denen, die den Künsten und Wissenschaften nacheifern.” Philipp Melanchthon (1497 bis 1560)’.

55. Schiller, Friedrich von. Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man. Whitefish, without date, p. 4.

56. W.J.T. Mitchell, Picture Theory, Chicago and London, 1995: ‘it’s not totally surprising to find […] bureaucrats so cheery about the prospects for a culture of images and spectators. The common wisdom has it that spectators are easily manipulated by images, that clever use of images can deaden them to political horrors and condition them to accept racism, sexism, and deepening class division as natural, necessary conditions of existence.’, p. 2.

57. Pictures are “ways of worldmaking,” not just world mirroring. Poetry (as “making,” or poiesis) is foundational to picturing. Pictures are themselves products of poetry, and a poetics of pictures addresses itself to them […] A poetics of pictures, then, in contrast with a rhetoric of hermeneutics, is a study of “the lives of images”.’ Mitchell, What do pictures Want?, p. xv.
