

Discussion paper from the Working Group on 'Situational Fiction', Chelsea College of Art & Design, University of the Arts London: On the value of 'Situational Fiction' for an artist's writing¹

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Abstract

This article takes the issue of epistemology in writing for (performance) art to ask: 'What is the value of using "fictional" – as in "novelistic" – writing in reflective discourse on creative practice generally?'

Using Susan Sontag's seminal essay 'Against Interpretation' as a starting point, the article argues that much writing on art assumes art's 'will-to-signify' – its value as a form of meaning – and consequently 'explanation' as the purpose of art writing. The problems with this reflex are discussed, including its suppression of alternative responses, which may include acknowledging that art is an affective entity: it has a function (if, in Kant's phrase, it is 'without purpose') and it has an ontology that may be more than its identity as signification.

Extending, or restoring, the scope of art's reflective discourse in this way, the paper also notes, via reference to George Steiner, that a reciprocal extension for the media of this discourse is also possible, and it seeks to map the two extensions as the axes of a grid that offers varied combinations of the content-form dimensions of art writing. One of these conjunctions produces 'fictional writing' as a possible response to art. Seeming to dispel the problem of reductionism in explanatory discourse, the article then goes on to argue that the use of fiction in the spaces of art writing – 'Situational Fiction' – may be valuable in other ways as well.

Hence, this is an argument for knowledge of creative practice in creative form. But 'Situational Fiction' may pursue this ethos of 'creative knowledge' in another way as well: as its reflexive dimension implicates the reader in deciding whether any aspect of this academic paper designates this work as 'fictional', as the paper understands this.

Introduction

- This short paper is designed to seed discussion among colleagues, students and other interested parties regarding the benefits of fictional writing and, specifically, one form of that – 'Situational Fiction' – in artists' written texts.

Keywords

creative knowledge
Situational Fiction
explanation
artists' writing
Susan Sontag

1. The term 'artist' is used here to designate 'creative practitioners'; while the Working Group was fine art-specific, we think that there

- is little in this paper that precludes its relevance for designers and other cultural producers.
2. Sontag regards 'explanation' as a cognate of 'interpretation' and includes it in her (anti-)topic's remit – as an operation that has a more determining relation to its object than her title's term. That is also how this paper uses 'explanation'.
 3. See George Steiner's *Real Presences* (1989: 12 and 16) though the point is implicit. Nor as Steiner also notes, is criticism necessary as a discrete and non-aesthetic enterprise, when '[a]ll serious art, music and literature is a *critical act*' (Steiner 1989: 11).
 4. No judgement of that judgement is intended: 'failure' in this context may be necessary to a thing's success as art. However, the idea that art might comprise its own critical reflection is overlooked, and to that extent, the call for an 'external' apparatus is a little premature.

- In particular, the paper engages with the idea of 'Situational Fiction' as a useful counter to the tendency towards *explanation* (of the artwork) that too often defines the function of artists' writing.
- The Working Group would like to flag the relationship between this initiative and proposed developments in 'Imaginative Writing'.

1.0 Explaining 'explanation'

A definition of the term is usefully located in 'explain', and in the etymology of that: 'Latin *explanare*, (as EX', [L., 'out of'] *planus* 'flat', assimilated to PLAIN')' (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 1995). And the definition of PLAIN' runs: 'adj., adv., n. [...] • **adj.** 1 clear; evident (*is plain to see*)' (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 1995).

Hence, even if tendentiously, 'explanation' is an 'out of flatness', or a 'making flat'. (Fancifully: it is a thing 'from Flatland'). Explanation is a making plain (and plane) the plain of making (that is often bumpy).

1.1 The command to explain – in words

The commonplace that art requires explaining goes a long way back. As Susan Sontag notes, it is a consequence of seeing art as 'content', which originates with Plato's theory of 'mimesis'² (Sontag 1994: 3). Sontag does not elaborate on the reasons for this emphasis on art as 'content' – though it would be possible to speculate, and suggest, following Jürgen Habermas, for example, that modernity prefers the 'cognitive' over and above 'aesthetic-expressive' elements (Habermas 2003: 1129). Nor does she discuss the logocentric aspect of 'the never consummated project of interpretation' – the fact that by and large, the project takes place in words (Sontag 1994: 5). Here, we would want to note, with George Steiner, that words are not the *necessary* medium of interpretation, or of cultural commentary.³ It is not, however, the intention of this paper to address *that* commonplace (ripe though it is for shaking down) but, instead, the commonplace that art benefits from explanation or that explanation is a reasonable response to art. And to take action accordingly.

1.2 Contemporary commands to artists to explain their work (in writing)

The command for explanation is the most insistent in the area of art as research. (In this, art as research has much in common with the educational arm of public galleries – an overlap which may owe less to the fact of their common pedagogic context, and more to shared *ideologies* of pedagogy). By way of evidence, we cite the following:

- Many of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's directives for 'practice-led research' in the Creative and Performing Arts – premised, as they are, on art's *failure* to represent itself contextually and critically, and document its process.⁴ While the actual term 'explanation' is absent from the seminal Arts and Humanities Research Board (the former AHRC) 2003 paper, the demand for creative

outputs to be accompanied by a 'scholarly apparatus' is nevertheless, and not surprisingly, read as a demand for those outputs to be 'explained'.⁵ In his response to the paper, Euan McArthur refers to the 'scholarly apparatus' as 'an accompanying explanatory text' (McArthur 2004: 79).

- Elsewhere, the AHRC takes up McArthur's gloss: paragraph 85 of the 2008 *Research Funding Guide* notes: 'The Council would expect [creative] practice to be accompanied by some form of documentation of the research process, as well as some form of textual analysis or explanation, to support its position and demonstrate critical reflection' (AHRC 2008b: 26). And the AHRC *Doctoral Guide* (2008) repeats this verbatim (AHRC 2008a: 26–27).

Suffice to say that these instructions seem to have a global reach: in a discussion of practice-based research entailing 'creative artefacts', the University of Technology, Sydney commends the idea that writing 'clarifies the basis of the claim for [the practical work's] originality' (Creativity and Cognition Studios, University of Technology Sydney).

5. The 'explanation' that the AHRC demands is less of the hermeneutic variety (i.e. a form of 'close-reading') and more of the sort that regards the creative text as a cultural phenomenon.
6. There is much to be said about the reasons for contemporary culture's preference for this ontology. For now, we will simply note that emphasizing 'content' facilitates the deployment of art in the service of 'knowledge and understanding' as construed by instrumental rationality.

1.3 The problems with the will-to-signify and its technology of explanation

Aside from the objections that this paper has already noted – namely, that 'explanation' flattens, and represents the worst end of a cultural cliché – there are other problems that accrue when 'explanation' is a mode of approach to culture.

1.3.1 Explanation and its others

As Susan Sontag notes, *interpretation* – as an outcome of 'mimesis' – implies only one of several ways of thinking the ontology of art.⁶ She writes, as the opening of her essay, 'The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical [that] art was an instrument of ritual' (Sontag 1994: 3). Of art thus construed we would *not* ask, 'What does it mean?' Or (with the AHRC) 'What is its significance?' Rather, we might ask, 'Does it work?' Or 'What is its affect?' De-naturalizing art-as-content, Sontag's move proposes that we outline the extended paradigm of art as other types of thing ... art as social function; art as pleasure; art as outcome; even art as useful object (following Duchamp's suggestion that a Rembrandt could be used as an ironing board) (Duchamp 1973: 142). And clearly, what comprises a legitimate response to art would differ as the theory of what art was changed.

Moreover, as Sontag's text proposes 'explanation' as just one of several types of response to art, it chimes with Steiner's claim that criticism can occur in different forms. Taken together, these comments propose two axes of a matrix that starts to map some of the possibilities for discourse around art, and which locates 'verbal explanation' as just one combination of possibilities in a larger field.

		Medium of response – examples				
Response to a work of art		Words		Visual images		Other creative medium e.g. musical work
		Non-fictional	Fictional ⁷	Non-aesthetic	Aesthetic	
Type of response – examples						
Interpretation including 'explanation' – <i>hermeneutics</i>		Review	e.g. novel; journal article		Artwork	
Discussion of work's function – <i>teleology</i>	Personal – i.e. sensuous and psychological 'affect'				Artwork	
	Social – i.e. discussion of artwork's purpose for a given society as e.g. ritual/magic/commodity			Matrix		
Description of entity – <i>ontology</i>		Auction catalogue-blurb; an 'erotics' of art (Sontag)				
Analyses of origins – <i>aetiology</i>		e.g. Biographical criticism		e.g. X-ray of a painting		

Figure 1: Matrix depicting the discourse around art via two analytic categories: Type of response and Medium of response. Note that it is indicative rather than exhaustive – both in the contents of its 'axes' and in the contents of the spaces that those axes generate. It is intended to indicate the way in which the current configuration of discourse around art represses alternative manifestations.

7. Note that fictional writing is an option for all the spaces in this column.

1.3.2 Undecidability

Taking a very different tack, we could also argue, in the wake of Paul de Man, that 'explanation' is a hopeless task. Paradoxically perhaps, this is the import of his essay 'Resistance to Theory' (de Man 1986). For art, as a mode of signification – if it must be thought of in this way – refuses 'decidability' (i.e. the

telos of all explanation and much interpretation, too) (de Man 1986: 14–17). Writing of the ‘literary’ (and art is, undecidably, a valid substitute), de Man identifies this as the ‘rhetorical dimension of discourse’; ‘the tropological dimension of language’ that resists theory as ‘the stable, cognitive field that extends from grammar to logic to a general science of man and of the phenomenal world’ (de Man 1986: 17). Only a theory that resists theory thus construed, would, de Man argues, resist decidability.

Hence:

2.0 Instead of explanation and its relatives...

...this paper offers ‘Situational Fiction’. Which is also a response to the hegemony of explanation, as described above.

2.1 Defining ‘Situational Fiction’

The term is not entirely new; it seems it has occasional use, elsewhere⁸ – but its deployment here is new – as it describes a certain use of writing in the context of an artist’s practice.

2.1.1 ‘Fiction’

First: to the ‘fictional’ aspect, and the question ‘What does “fiction” designate?’ – noting that term has several meanings. We are not commending false beliefs, no matter how expedient they might be. For this would not advance the cause of research as a truth-seeking missile. Nor would ‘fiction’ as a simple fabrication, or invention as opposed to fact (‘fiction’ as a lie). Rather, we are advocating ‘fiction’ in its complex sense as ‘literal lie for abstract truth’. Or: ‘true lies minus facts’. This is ‘fiction’ in its novelistic sense, but ‘fiction’ that is more than novels.

2.1.2 *The situations of an artist’s writing*

The various locations of an artist’s writing – where it is consumed or destined for – are reasonably familiar: most obviously, there is the ‘artist’s statement’, which takes extreme form as a manifesto. Artists write reviews (of other artists’ work); and talk about their work and that of others.⁹ Artists lecture, and write conference papers. Sometimes they write books. As *Art in Theory* testifies, artists’ essays make a major contribution to that field. Student-artists hurdle essays/dissertations/theses. Artists write reports on projects ... these include their RAE returns.

Each type of writing is associated with a (different) situation, when ‘situation’ refers to cultural-social-space, and when sometimes that space brings with it a specific physicality – an edition of a journal, conference hall, and so forth.

Hence ‘Situational Fiction’ is the use of fiction, as defined above, in the varied contexts of an artist’s writing. It is fiction, in its novelistic sense, that is written for a non-novelistic context: fiction outside the covers of a book, unless it is an art(ist’s) book.¹⁰ Having been defined, if only in a rudimentary way, we offer it without inverted commas: Situational Fiction.

2.2 The rationale for Situational Fiction

We propose it has a role to play in the varied contexts of an artist’s writing for the following reasons which, to begin with, mirror the problems with explanation as identified in 1.3–1.3.2.

8. To denote, so it seems, a category of Science Fiction, but we have yet to find an a priori definition of the term in that – or any other – application.
9. Note the relationship between reviewing and talking is not symmetrical. The former prohibits artist’s self-reflection but the latter tends to court it in the form of the ‘artist’s gallery talk’ and the open studio/residency discussion.
10. Which begs the question as to how an artist’s novel is to be distinguished from a novel (proper). The point here, perhaps, is that an artist’s fiction may not be a matter of its situatedness alone. Issues of aesthetics specific to the type of author (artist), for example, may come into play.

11. The connotation: denotation ratio varies *within* fictional genres. More is 'suggested' (without resolution) in say, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* than a James Bond novel. (The famous conundrum of Dostoyevsky's novel is the question: is Raskolnikov ill in body or mind, or both? Is he persuaded to kill the two women, simply to test out a theory? Ian Fleming's hero has nothing of this psychological ambiguity; no such complex 'inner life'.) So certain *forms* of fiction proximate the denotative tendency of forms of commentary more or less.
12. We are not proposing that art's 'bumpiness' is only a matter of its preference for connotation over denotation. The question of how, more precisely, art and conventional written commentary differ is the subject of further research for the Working Group.
13. Here, the will-to-meaning as a simple form – as 'this' but not 'this and that' supervenes. And probably rather easily...
14. More research is needed here as well – in order better to define this relationship. The question of the *value* of Situational Fiction as positivity (rather than a '*not being* explanation') is a pressing one. For instance, does it 'indicate' an aspect of the artwork that might demand attention? Would a congruence of 'bumpiness' propose a reading of the latter by the former?

2.2.1 Resisting the will to meaning manifest as 'explanation'

In taking the place of commentary that often seeks to flatten by, for example, levelling connotation to the plain of denotation, Situational Fiction offers (just) another art form. The spaces of an artist's writing are détourned by virtue of their occupation by a different register of truth that in its undecidability, cannot supply the 'master signifier'. When functioning well, this substitution iterates, among much else, the *artwork's* preference for a relatively connotative discourse.^{11, 12}

(Fictional writing's relegation of art's master texts may generate a number of responses. The logic of recursion proposes that the fictional trope is reapplied – so that a second fiction 'answers' to the first. And so on, as an infinite regress. Another route refuses that evasion of the master signifier, and, at two removes, proposes an interpretation of the fiction as interpretation of the artwork.¹³ Then again, a different way of thinking the 'deferral' that is Situational Fiction is the idea that the artwork and the fiction are a self-sufficient entity (even as the latter is 'deficient' by the standards of most commentary). From this perspective, there is *no* deferral. Two of these responses – the first and third – stay faithful to the rationale for Situational Fiction as resisting explanation.)

Perhaps it should be noted that in advocating this innovation we are not proposing *an evasion of the artwork*. Situational Fiction does not commend a phatic discourse, or a flight of fancy from the work that after all, originates the *very space* of writing (for the artist). Rather, we would like to think of writing in this context as a text that is linked to the artwork in a parallel, and not hierarchical relationship, and that may propose the 'reader's' going back and forth between the two.¹⁴

2.2.2 De-naturalizing explanation as response to art

If Situational Fiction does not fairly and squarely do the work of any of the other 'types of response to the artwork' that Figure 1 identifies, at least, in bringing into question the naturalness of 'explanation', it opens up the possibility for those.

2.2.3 New media

And likewise, in refusing the usual form of words (if not the verbal medium *per se*) it opens up the possibility of other types of media for texts on art, no matter how their purpose is construed.

So Situational Fiction can be seen to have a rationale in how it adequately counters the objections to the will-to-signify as manifest in 'explanation'. But there are other rationales, which do more positive work, although we would not want to underestimate the value of Situational Fiction as a form of 'culture jam'.

2.2.4 A pedagogic function

Beyond its status as 'not-explanation' it has a further purpose via the overlap between the writer's and the artist's working methods. In this coincidence, the artist learns from the way in which writing illuminates (other aspects of) their art practice. Or, at least, there is the potential for

this insight as both fictional writing and art are *aesthetic* practices. And that potential includes:

- Understanding via reflection, as the artist's processes are represented in a different medium that de-naturalizes them (makes them visible), even as estranging them through the medium of difference. In elaborating this point, it might be useful (at some future point) to inventorize the resonances present in *this* pairing: tropes and procedures that are shared across the two practices, and then the dissonances: ways in which the practices sustain their differences, which both define them and their 'others'. In short, we argue that Situational Fiction has a heuristic function in relation to *the artist*, independent of the writing's hermeneutic aspect.

Conclusion

If this paper has succeeded in commending Situational Fiction as a mode of response to creative practice, then one of the aims of the Working Group has been accomplished.

If too, it has encouraged creative practitioners to review their engagement with writing for their practice in terms of the elaborated field of opportunities that this paper has suggested, it has succeeded on another score.

But most importantly: if it has encouraged creative practitioners across the spectrum to think about the writing that they do as an aspect of their art practice – specifically, a forum for a form of *creative* practice that may, indeed include, but also go beyond Situational Fiction, then it has achieved its first and foremost aim: to claim writing as a space for art.

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Her preoccupation with the relations between art and writing – their coalitions, antagonisms, and mutualities is the legacy of undergraduate studies in English (University College London) and Fine Art (Central St Martins) as well as a Ph.D. in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, which among other things, was concerned with the question of what an artist's writing might be.

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