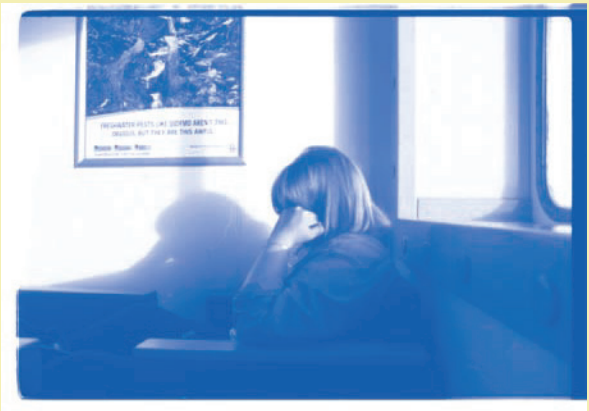




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Against Efficiency and other texts
by Matilda Fraser

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1. Velocity of Information

CONTRARY TO BELIEF, the historic Red Telephone which linked Washington and Moscow was never a telephone, nor was it red. Communications were conducted via Teletype, before shifting to fax machines in 1986. Messages travelling from the U.S. to Russia were sent in English, and Russia–U.S. communications were sent in Russian. Both were decoded and translated upon reception. While these messages were usually urgent, speed could not be compromised for the sake of integrity, lest any kind of misinterpretation spark an international incident. In writing, translators were afforded the time to examine all indeterminacies in communications, and the opportunity to preserve nuances that might have been otherwise overlooked. The rapidity of a phone call is too prone to errors in translation. Immediate and direct communications, despite their alleged efficiency, will only produce half-digested and unreliable messages.

Now, we read more than we ever have. There is also more content now than there ever has been before. We are confronted, now, with more information than it would ever be possible to read, never mind absorb. Digital publishing has had the unintended consequence of forcing those who engage with it to spread thin their attention, to combat the incessant proliferation of text.

As our reading practices speed up, so too do the transmission modes of cultural capital change to compensate. Many readers rely on Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks to capture and/or disperse information. The 'endless scroll' requires the broadcasters of cultural capital to use attention-seeking tactics (among them: targeted advertising, clickbait, inflammatory headlining) to ensure their content is privileged above other sources, but also enforces a system that both creates and perpetuates anxious reading, a feeling that to choose one is to sever all other possibilities.

An attention economy works on the principle of scarcity.

New platforms such as Hyperallergic or #500words attempt to bridge the gap with small, easily consumable texts, in response to the growing realisation that many readers are reduced to scanning or skimming text out of sheer helplessness in the face of overwhelming, endless content.[1] Other websites like Buzzfeed, Clickhole, Gawker, Stuff, the Daily Mail, distil content even further, catering to short attention spans. Anticipating distracted reading, they also provide mazes of hyperlinks—escape points out of texts. The immediacy of content is also its obscenity. Hence the state of criticism today: combative, linear, unimodal, and motivated to present a singular, necessarily limited reading.

As the temporality is collapsed between concept and thought, communication and reception, query and answer, call and response, so do spaces for contemplation become fewer and shorter. The faster an object moves, the simpler it becomes, until it is stripped of extraneous detail, nuance, non-essential data. Speed removes both detail and dissent. The information we seek becomes pornographic: things are there immediately, without distance and without charm—and without genuine pleasure.[2] Convenience has subsumed and suffocated many avenues of transmission.[3]

Boris Groys says he is often asked by colleagues, "Should I look at this exhibition, or should I skip it?"[4] Perhaps this is indicative of the oversaturation of information that we must contend with now, with the immediacy of the Internet providing us with gateways to innumerable fields—shows, exhibitions, endless content—of which, ten years ago, we would have only received limited, if any, access. Looking at art becomes about choosing one thing to look at, at the expense of endless options. The natural tendency is to try to compensate for this wealth of matter by engaging with more of it in order to avoid appearing uninformed. Aspects travel faster than the whole: we are playing an endless game of whisper down the lane.

The velocity of information is an unavoidable feature of communicating today. With an irrevocably distracted audience, we can no longer be sure that our transmissions are received. The porosity of critical writing is both its downfall and its strength: the proliferation of half-digested ideas undermines the integrity of conversation, while also promoting interesting alternatives and resisting hegemonies.

[1] Manjoo, Farhad (2013). “How people read online: You Won’t Finish This Article”, Slate. http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how_people_read_online_why_you_won_t_finish_this_article.html

[2] Baudrillard, Jean (2003). *The Obscene* in *Passwords*. Verso.

[3] Carr, Nicholas (2008). “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, The Atlantic. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/

[4] Groys, Boris (2008). “Who do You Think You’re Talking To?”, Frieze. https://www.frieze.com/article/who-do-you-think-youre-talking/



2.
False Gifts

A GIFT ECONOMY does not preclude a market economy: the two do not cancel each other out, but can often exist concurrently. A gift economy maintains a principle of reciprocity, but without the equivalence, overt exchange, or transactionality of a market economy.

However, the gift has at its heart an irresolvable internal contradiction[1]: in that a gift must be given freely, but by its nature demands reciprocity, return, acknowledgement, whether this is gratitude, simple energy transfer, or a returning gift of equal or greater worth.

In anthropological gift-exchange studies, not only worth, but time, are key factors in understanding the gift. The gift must not be returned immediately—to give the gift back or release it immediately is to negate it. The gift is not a gift if always only in motion, but also always relies on fluctuating possession.

Gift theory is not a seamless model with the discussion of art, but it is contiguous to art in the expanded field. In contrast with market or barter exchange, the gift can not be used for profit: this model is most productive in the discussion of art in terms of energy or aura transfer, rather than commodities, wealth, or goods. The productive capacity of the gift is always passed on, creating a community wherein members are bound by a collective reciprocal energy, which is both drawn from and added to by its participants. The gift cannot exist without the recipient(s). Creative practice relies on implicit, rather than explicit, exchange—the production of art relies on content, and the production of criticism relies on art, and so on ad infinitum. The gift in motion is transformative.

Hyde discusses the 'false gift' using the example of Alcoholics Anonymous members: "In AA they speak of people who are 'two-steppers'—that is, people who take Step One (accepting they are an alcoholic) and then jump directly to Step Twelve (helping others) without the in-between steps where the labor lies. They try to pass along something they themselves have not yet received."[2] The gift is not able to be transformative if it has only been partially received. Hyde: "We cannot really become bound to those who give us false gifts." A false gift is one that is both absorbed too fast and passed too fast. The gift requires time as the only evidence of its transaction after the call and response have cancelled each other out.

In critique, one must not only consider the material-language modes of framing, but the circumstances of transmission—often small, quick, simplified, and easily consumed. These are unavoidable conditions of reading. If the gift passes too quickly, its field of enquiry cannot be comprehended in any depth at all, tokenising work and reducing it to synecdochical gesture, one aspect mistaken for an entirety. The gift requires labour, and without it cannot enact transformation. Time, or the lull in between reception and relinquishment, is the mode of transformation. The supposed 'efficiency' of communications encourages superficial saturation. Incomplete data is surfaceonly and thus hollow, lighter, faster, and therefore afforded more reception, as it does not appear to require intense commitment. The object must stretch itself beyond recognition in order to cover increased terrain, and therefore disperse its energy too finely to retain its power. To read without committing to a text is to engage in communication without relation: reciprocity is not a part of this 'exchange'. The gift lacks substance, and so has not been received, so it cannot be passed on.

[1] Derrida, Jacques (1993). *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
[2] Hyde, Lewis (1997). *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*.

3 / 7.
Tension Reduction / Farming for Content

A PREDOMINANT FACET of contemporary criticism can be named as *tension reduction*: forcing a structure onto what is borne of non-linear thought; imposing the will of the critic onto a non-linear landscape in an implicitly violent process; highlighting certain aspects whilst erasing others; co-opting territory for the gains of the critic. Farming would also be an apt comparison for this mode of enquiry. This is not to characterise criticism < art as the negative dialectic of artificial < natural—that would be too simplistic.

The mind is a disorderly storehouse of many possibilities.[1] This chaos is the initial state from which a work is born, and once the work is externalised, it becomes—conceptually—in the public domain. At this point, the critic takes it up, attempting to find strands of it to tease out through dialogue, further extending and expanding its life and potency. The impulse here is to see criticism as a further refining of the original work's ideas, as an act of translation, as further persuasion of what the work 'means', or as an alternate entry point into the field of enquiry, dilating initial opacities so they can be comprehended by those not present. This is what is meant by tension reduction: in effect, a process of domesticating.

Refining becomes a mode of capture: blocking alterity and reducing work to a series of elements, severing connective tissue and gaps in favour of cohesion and clarity.

According to Negarestani, the spectator is the true labourer of effect/affect, and the critic can only offer alternate modes in understanding, but they cannot do the work for them. The critic's impulse is to try anyway; hence the excessive attempt to de-tension the work for the purpose of the spectator.

The critic is, naturally, eager to share their experience of the work in a way that persuades the reader both of what the work does and how the critic has read it.

However, much of art is not quantifiable, particularly in the realms of performance, affect, and gesture. Criticism, in many cases, becomes about overlaying logic onto a system that is not necessarily governed by logic, and therefore owes nothing to the systems external to itself. It's not to say that this is a mode of projection, but more of reduction. Occam's razor has no place in the treatment of art—it is unnecessary to consider the simplest solution as the most potent or productive, or even to privilege 'solutions' in understanding. It's a worthwhile project to resist making the hidden visible for as long as possible.

One of the many functions of art criticism is to examine the function of an artwork in the expanded field: to look at how an artwork breathes, and consider the work itself as a tool in understanding its alleged 'content'. If art is about understanding something beyond the artwork itself, criticism further expands the ways in which the artwork seeks to understand that. So this becomes an endless chain of expansion which exposes the indeterminacy at the heart of the object's power.

Curators are guilty too—artworks in group shows are thematically and curatorially promiscuous, and also expendable, in the way that curators bend the motive(s) of the work in favour of overarching themes. The difference between curatorial polemic and criticism is how the work is coopted—both before and after itself. Nevertheless, both modes submerge false alternatives and interesting perspectives, the nebulising agents which aid in the act(s) of dispersal.[2]

To name, or 'hail', one's terms is to call them into existence (*interpellation*). Naming the forces that drive a work requires the rejection of innumerable alternatives, removes other avenues of entry, and reduces the dialogue to a small number of concentrated, easily domesticated modes of investigation. Words have real power in taming the irreducibility of objects.

Tension reduction assumes that artwork is a code to crack—that it needs to be decoded in order to be understood. That the work needs to be 'got'. In many ways this is like building an empty doorway in the middle of a field, so that people have something to walk through.

To decode or translate work for interested parties means, necessarily, to simplify it. Criticism becomes about mining for content. To translate work means to choose one, or two interpretations at the expense of all other possibilities—to reduce an amorphous cloud to a flat plane. For these reasons, we should resist definition of terms for as long as possible, while recognising this as a necessary mode of unpicking work in order that it can be comprehended.

[1] Arnheim, Rudolf (1971). *Entropy and Art: An essay on disorder and order*; University of California Press.
[2] Negarestani, Reza (2013). *The Human Centipede*—lecture at Escape Velocities Symposium [e-flux].

4 + 4. Portals

The functions of criticism are multiple: the simplest being an act of recording[1], keeping traces visible. In this way, criticism can be of service to the work, both in disseminating it after the event and in augmenting the archive for future researchers.

An advantage of navigating the Internet is its ability to collapse distance: criticism is able to act as a cipher, of sorts, to viewers who are precluded from experiencing work corporeally.

Vernacular criticism is a productive, albeit holey, alternative—small, compact descriptions of embodied experience. While this mode is prone to affective fallacy and is loaded with potentially 'unqualified' judgements, it can be valuable in providing anecdotal evidence of bodies moving through space—hinting at the experiential qualities of presented work.

Imagine the Met without all the noise and crowds and strollers and miles of walking. I can see where some would find it stuffy...when I visited it was a mostly elderly UES crowd. That means it's quiet in here, like library kind of quiet—I actually like that as I don't get distracted.[2]

+ Ōamaru

We drove together to Ōamaru, the fog coming down on all edges of the near horizons.

We couldn't see very far in any direction.

The place was coated with a layer of grey dust held in the sky, hovering. The sky came down to the ground like an upturned bowl, lit from an invisible source.

We have to get out of here before the portal closes, I said. I was joking. *We have to leave soon or we'll all get deleted.*

Everything was yellow, whitish, or the colour of unbleached milk. The region is famous for its stone, which is a similar colour to the sky, the air, the dust, the roads.

Error! you crowed. *Data corrupted!*

All of the buildings, lit up with yellow, might have been constructed for the filming of a spaghetti western. It didn't seem that there was really anything behind them—as if behind the windows and guttering they were just a set of ribs open to the air and the weather. The shops were sort of ghostly. We bought custard pastries from a bakery with curiously empty shelves, old bread stacked outside.

We climbed the stairs to an inverted-commas gallery. *I've seen it before*, you said. *I can't join you. Go ahead.*

I admit there's something troubling about sitting in that lovely garden and wondering what a monster like Frick used to think about in that calm, reflective space.[3]

These portals act as small and contingent entry points to understanding works. Although they have only peripheral significance in the expanded field of an object, they can still provide a way in to viewing work and providing a way of grasping the environments in which it is placed.

Our reliance on multiple viewpoints is a strangely inefficient mode, but we all do it. Favouring multiple entries as the role of the individual critic is subsumed by the collective. Hive minds, code-switching, collective knowledge. Walking into a cloud of voices. Bear in mind that this is also a more democratic mode of unpicking, this multi-faceted noise.

Polyphony becomes one of the best ways to retain nuance and detail. No thing is less than the sum of its parts, and anything overlooked is at the expense of fuller understanding, as we cannot know its importance until we comprehend it.

Halfway up the stairs was a cupboard full of twisted bodies and carnival flags. The room was full of faces with stretched eyes, bulbous swelling heads, multiplied gazes ranging from bored to baleful to bilious. I don't think the owner was around, perhaps assuming that nobody would dare steal anything with so many eyes on them.

We sat in a gutter to eat crackers and fruit. Cars idled past, pausing before crossing the railway line. The sun beat down on the cobbled road.

We got in the car to follow the others disappearing. *We'd better get out of here*, one of us said, *before we get faxed into infinity*. As we crossed the railway line, we passed a great steam engine, apparently launching itself upwards from a cul-de-sac in the track. An old biker called out to us from the side of the road. We pulled over.

The guy reached into a coin box by the carriage and set its flues steaming. Flames shot out of various orifices. Mechanical skeletons bent back and forth, as if rowing or stoking coal.

As the show ended, we felt this was permission to leave. As if we'd had the horses blessed before setting out on a long journey. At the last, a sign saying *INFINITY PORTAL*. We never found out what this meant.

5.
Art as a Spectator Sport



1. We are now confronted with new and constantly shifting terms in modes of criticism and sharing of cultural capital. Therefore the proliferation of smaller and fastertravelling narratives and anecdotal evidence of physical experience.

2. The simpler a concept, the greater its velocity. Hence why #love as a radical simplification of data occurs with the greatest frequency on online platforms approximately double the incidence, six hundred million of its closest neighbours (#instagood and #me, at v300-million) on image sharing platform Instagram.[1]

3. How quickly does information simplify on the Internet? There have been few investigations into reverse-engineering how long content requires to pass from academic peerreviewed journals to meme-level infographic sharing.

4. As information simplifies, so it speeds up, and so its payload the work done to interpret it is lessened. This is what is called a "false gift" the illusion of sharing a unit of cultural capital which has been synthesised beyond its original content.

[1] Gat, Orit (2014). "Art Criticism in the Age of Yelp ", Rhizome. https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/nov/12/art-criticism-age-yelp/
[2] Comment on The Frick Collection (2014). Yelp. http://www.yelp.com/biz/frick-collection-new-york?hrid=EbPQr9j2r8m-zDbe7VETHw
[3] Comment on The Frick Collection (2014). Yelp. http://www.yelp.com/biz/frick-collection-new-york?hrid=kAAheF6HrkLuNRbFKk9bIQ

5. As text speeds up, it becomes clear that we are in flight from thinking.

6. In reading a text we are also already evading or in flight from other texts. Our distracted reading means that we are anticipating other texts even as we are engrossed in something our reading practices are always gesturing somewhere other than where we are. We need to consider duality or polyphony in our modes of writing to counteract this multiple data streams within the same text as an alternative to reading multiple separate texts, suitably captivating our distracted minds.

7. Text is always already gesturing out of itself, and as one might have expected in typical accelerationist mode this characteristic of writing is proliferating. The footnote has made way for the hyperlink. Text now exists more outside of itself than within itself. What are ways to capitalise on this? How can this be co-opted for use as a productive tool?

8. Evasive reading becomes evasive writing. This is already a characteristic of many writers, particularly in the areas of theory and philosophy, where a text can sometimes only be understood in relation to other texts. On the one hand, a text is always already incomplete: on the other hand:

9. "There are, you see, two ways of reading a book: you either see it as a box with something inside and start looking for what it signifies, and then if you're even more depraved you set off after signifiers. And you treat the next book like a box contained in the first containing it. And you annotate and interpret and question, and write a book about the book, and so on and on. Or there's the other way: you see the book as a little non-signifying machine, and the only question is 'Does it work, and how does it work?' How does it work for you? **If it doesn't work, if nothing comes through, you try another book.**" (Deleuze 1995: 7–8.)

10. In the face of overwhelming proliferation of information, resistance and rejection become equally valid responses.

11. It is impossible not to acknowledge that our reading practices have changed. We have gone from reading to scanning, in the face of a wealth of unlimited data. This is why the circulation of information is speeding up.

12. One of the ways to embrace our fractured thinking could be to allow time for it. Speeding up also becomes slowing down.

13. Recent years have seen the alleged resurgence of long-form journalism. Films are getting longer[2] as something of a resistance—perhaps with recourse to the fact that a film theatre is a constricted environment that inhibits distraction.

14. Therefore, one considers the potential of constructed environments in the transmission of art and discourse around art. The enforcing of limits in our entry points into text is a productive mode of enquiry, but is only one possibility of many.

15. The error lies in assuming the straightest route is the most worthwhile. The struggle for coherence in communicating ideas is a worthwhile one; but to minimise tension in conceptual opacities frequently becomes about removing nuance for the sake of easy transmission.

16. Information, in this context, becomes commodified. The commodity is legible, as opposed to the object (*gift*), which never quite reveals its secret.[3]

17. With tension resolved, information becomes more efficiently absorbed. However, this leaves us—in Baudrillard's teleological (and slightly hysterical) scenario of the limitless instantaneous availability of information which can be straightforwardly consumed—with vast leisure time as empty terrain left to fill, which is ultimately futile in its unfolding.

18. Time, in this way, can be likened to Bataille's *accursed share*—the excess which is unavoidably produced by the system, and which must be knowingly surrendered or squandered. *Failure* is built into the system. (Gifts are a sort of accursed share, in that they cannot be retained but must be passed on.)

19. The game of cricket is played with an approximate schedule of around six hours a day. Play is halted for rain and when there is bad light. Without a fixed time-scale, games of cricket can run on for a number of days before reaching a natural conclusion.

20. Cricket is usually pretty boring, unless something interesting happens. Spectators of cricket can therefore pay close attention or let their attention wander as needed.

21. Like cricket, favourable conditions for the viewing of art rely on good light, not being rained on, and a state of play. This is not to say that the viewing of art requires enforced tea breaks, but more that the conflation of these two modes of spectatorship could suggest an interesting alternative to the incessant scanning of artwork for useful data.

22. Heidegger had it right when he advocated *Gelassenheit*, a state of unexpectant waiting: to view and discuss artwork with all critical tools to hand, but without the expectation of a consolidated outcome. This is a way of entering an object's sphere of influence while remaining open to the object's internal laws.

23. In this aspect, cricket diverges from art, in that there is a winner and a loser; in art, there is no need for such a dichotomy. The notion of productive failure can be applied not only to the making of art but also to the attention, or inattention, it is afforded. Failure to create cohesive or satisfying responses to artwork allows for the production of interesting alternatives and subverts the deceptive coercion of superficial interpretations and popular narratives.

24. Allow me to end with a polite recommendation that spectators should refrain from walking in front of either the art or the batsman. The view is already obscured enough.

[1] Instagram Anonymous (2014). #Love Conquers All? (Waking Up From Instagram), aaaaarg.org.
[2] Batchelor, Rob (2013). "Why Are Films Getting Longer?", We Got This Covered. http://wegotthiscovered.com/movies/films-getting-longer
[3] Baudrillard, Jean (2012). The Ecstasy of Communcation, Semiotext(e).

6. Waiving as Hailing

EILEEN MYLES: "I once met the artist Jim Dine and he told me something very useful, which I've thought about though mostly ignored. Only go to places where you're invited. He meant countries."[1]

Who are we talking to? In art writing, who is making the call, and who is expected or invited to respond? It's paradoxical that artists must create work while anticipating an audience, but at the same time without pandering to them. The public, as a rule, do not like public art.[2]

New Zealand still retains much of the feeling of an outpost, a colony-minded backwater, shored up in the deep south of the globe. *Because of the presentness of the ocean we are hemmed in by non-access, or released to what we cannot possess.* [3] Our geographical isolation corresponds to a feeling of being *left behind*. We are always waiting for news that comes too late, wearing fashions six months behind everyone else. Surely by now, in the age of global intellectual capital, we should have outgrown our sense of peripherality, shrugged off the lingering traces of our 'duty' to transplanted or inherited Eurocentric culture. Or maybe not. Frequently, we still require an external arbiter of taste: artists are received at home only after they have achieved a modicum of success internationally (see: Frances Hodgkins, Katherine Mansfield, Simon Denny, Francis Upritchard, Billy Apple, Len Lye, Alexis Hunter, John Panting, Bill Culbert, and so on). This reflects, perhaps, the historic delay in communications that was previously unavoidable due to geographic constraints, but it's more likely that it stems from a deep need for reassurance.

We should, perhaps, be concentrating on what is close to home. The problem about maintaining relations in such a small pool enforces multiple material disadvantages, including one particularly gnarly issue: avoiding saying what we're all thinking. Those we critique are, by and large, peers or colleagues. "If you mention them, it makes no sense to criticise them, because it's obvious that whatever you say is an advertisement for them. You mention people that you like, and you don't mention the people you don't like."[4] So says Boris Groys.

Artists outside of the institution are frequently faced with having no 'real' critique of their work, because of local critics' reluctance to put forward negative judgments. This is mirrored in the structure of the social networks we all use daily: the choice of whether to 'like' or to remain silent. The pressure of putting forth a negative criticism—which requires writing with intense persuasion—is often not worth the effort. I'd hazard a guess that many writers don't feel qualified.

Perhaps this also stems from the reluctance to give voice to these problems lest they be taken up by mainstream media, which by and large does not have the tools—nor the willingness—to engage on art's own terms. Their modes of engagement are simple: a) *how much (taxpayer money) did it cost?* and b) *why isn't it a painting, like proper art?* Commodifying artwork is one way of readying it for export—as an exemplar of our 100% Pure New Zealand. Criticising work means acknowledging that sometimes, we need improvement, and not having to put on a brave face, or trying to prove that *yes, we can make work too!*

Perhaps our own ecosystem is the best place for close working: working with what is to hand, and hailing each other. Call and response is the intrinsic structure of the gift cycle. Gift-giving is agonistic and constraining. Criticism itself functions as one part of a call-and-response system. We give in order to enter into contract, and therefore reciprocal exchange—whether in service of ourselves, or of ideas. Who to and who from? Hopefully, each other. This kind of energy transfer is more of a generalised reciprocity—we all comment on each other's work, whether formally or informally.

The fact is that art doesn't always address us. Artwork overseas generally has only incidental relevance, while work made within our own ecosystem is made both by us and for us. It speaks to a lack of permission and an anxiety about who is being 'hailed' by work—the fear of waving back at somebody who was, as it turns out, waving at the person behind you. Our audience, first and foremost, is each other, and we should be waving at ourselves.

[1] Myles, Eileen (2009). *The Importance of Being Iceland*, MIT Press.
[2] Paper Monument (2009). I like your work: art and etiquette, Paper Monument.
[3] Samuels, Lisa (2010). *Membranism, wet gaps, archipelago poetics* in *Reading Room 4: Liquid State*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.
[4] Groys, Boris (2008). Who do You Think You're Talking To?", Frieze. https://www.frieze.com/article/who-do-you-think-youre-talking

10. Against Efficiency

"Their work is to mind the garden and raise food—not for me, as they imagine, but for themselves. They wouldn't do it at all if I didn't make them. And of course for a garden you want water. There is a beautiful spring about half a mile away up the hill. And from that spring there flows a stream which comes right past the garden. All I asked them to do was to take their water from the stream instead of trudging up to the spring with their buckets two or three times a day and tiring themselves out besides spilling half of it on the way back. But they wouldn't see it. In the end they refused point blank."

"Are they as stupid as all that?" asked Lucy.

The Magician sighed. "You wouldn't believe the troubles I've had with them. A few months ago they were all for washing up the plates and knives before dinner: they said it saved time afterwards. I've caught them planting boiled potatoes to save cooking them when they were dug up. One day the cat got into the dairy and twenty of them were at work moving all the milk out; no one thought of moving the cat."

—C.S. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

HOW DOES ONE LOOK at an artwork efficiently? How does one make work efficiently, transmit ideas with the minimum amount of noise, or read a poem in a labour-saving or cost-effective way? More imperatively—why would anybody mistake this for a good idea?

There's a strong focus on 'understanding' art. One does not want to be the last to get the joke—especially if the art is very serious. The artwork proliferates in many ways both before and beyond itself, and writing around it or through it is part of its unfolding. It is tempting, for the writer, to try to 'get' it for everyone else: for their interpretation to synthesise object(s) and aura into something more easily digested. The rule of parsimony in scientific discourse—which pervades other modes of writing—is congruous with Occam's Razor: that the simplest explanation is usually the best.

Art critics inhabit the difficult interstitial space of translating work into linear modes of reading; but one of the pleasures of using language is its porosity, the connective tissue between art and the (non-present) reader. The attempt to succinctly pin down each and every element of a work speaks to a writer's lack of trust in all concerned parties: trying to fill the hole at the centre of understanding and knowledge.

In translation, the object can and frequently does become synecdochical—in which one aspect of the thing comes to stand for the thing itself. Hegel: the beginning of knowledge is made to pass for actual knowing.[1] To describe a work in words is to transliterate it, not truly translate it, with translation being a process of ongoing negotiation, the *almost* discussed by Umberto Eco.[2] Perhaps the simplest way to combat this is to make like any good journalist and ensure the use of more than one source—de-monumentalising the role of the critic—whilst knowing that all of those sources are fallible and any picture made up of either one or many will be holey.

One wonders whether art needs to get got in the first place.

Conceptual transparency can become akin to overexposure: reducing art to a code that needs deciphering, merely a convoluted way of saying something simple. As if it could be de-tensioned and made orderly for the purpose of more economical stimulation.

"The notion that the simpler procedure is preferable because one would be foolish if they did more work than they had to is probably a pathological outgrowth of the industrial revolution."[3] The tendency to linearise content for the sake of more efficient, transactional understanding should be resisted at all costs. If something can be understood instantly, it is meaningless, cf. Baudrillard: if one were to travel to outer space and arrive in an instant, then the journey was useless. [paraphrase]

Art, by its nature, is non-essential. To write about art is frequently to purpose it for the sake of dialogue and information transmission, essentially using prosthetic logic as a tool for understanding. Art functions best as the accursed share—that which is borne out of play. To enter into exchange with work is to use a different mindset than that which created it—enforcing mechanical structure on organic forms.

How to talk about art without reducing it. How to let it persist in remaining hidden, without talking about it persuasively, without farming or mining—allowing inconsistencies within text. How a text can be both one and many. How to let yourself contradict yourself. Polyphony of voices. How allowing multiples in the one text is a way of rejecting 'taming'. How to acknowledge the aporia within a text that describes a work. How to talk around a work and rub shoulders with it without defining it. How to resist projecting a 'united front'. How the gift has at its heart an indeterminacy, irreconcilability, and internal contradiction, and how we can use this model in framing. This is not a manifesto, but perhaps an illumination of the possibility for interesting alternatives, false interpretations, semantic labyrinths, and conceptual culs-de-sac.

Regarding relevance, success, primacy, efficiency—art, and by extension art writing, shouldn't need to have too much to do with these. As a decidedly non-logical mode of inquiry, art practice doesn't necessarily have to follow capitalist modes of thought, a "desire for the elevation of one mode of expression over all those others"[4] such as thinking that art (and its unsettled intermediary, criticism) need to assume primacy in cultural imagination, as if they must always be universally vital and relevant. Art is already an excess, already wasteful, already a non-essential in a system of being that requires inefficiency to stabilise it, and is always already ignoring the straightest lines of desire.



[1] Taussig, Michael (1993). *Mimesis & Alterity*, Routledge.

[2] Eco, Umberto (2003). *Mouse or Rat – Translation as Negotiation*.

[3] Arnheim, Rudolf (1971). *Entropy and Art: An essay on disorder and order*, University of California Press.

[4] Bolina, Jaswinder (2014). *The Writing Class*, poetryfoundation.org.