Brand-New-Life
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www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

Transgressing Academic Writing

Editorial Conversation

Helen V. Pritchard, Ines Kleesattel, Johannes Bruder, Lucie Kolb, Shaka McGlotten

In this conversation, the editors of the journal issue «Imagination as a Site of Struggle [b-n-l/focus/imagination-as-a-site-of-struggle]» reflect on intersectional writing on art, media, and technology, thinking through ways of transgressing academic writing. Based on their respective backgrounds and practices, they discuss weaving together creative modes of critical knowledge production and engagement to look beyond the content of the writing to the practice of writing itself.



Lucie Kolb: Helen and Shaka, you been editing the «Future Media Series» at Goldsmiths Press. How are you thinking about writing in this series?

Shaka McGlotten: Helen and I both practice a kind of writing that cuts across the academic and non-academic. I was really attracted to working in this series, if only because it was Helen who asked me. And if Helen asks me to do something, I just say yes. I'm like, sure, whatever it is. But also, as we're rebooting the series, I think we both knew the things we didn't want. You know, we didn't want the kind of TED talk, instrumentalist, or the-usual-suspects approaches to writing. We really wanted to encourage people to bring some of their quirkier work. We want manifestos. We want things that are intimate. The first book, actually, that we have coming out, that we've got going through the pipeline now is a book by Chris Hables Gray who's well known for his work on cyborgs in the 90s and militarism. And now he's in his 70s and he's still this anarchist curmudgeon feminist. The book is called Virus is a Language. I just reread it and it's this really great book that is about writing during the pandemic, writing and living in the pandemic. It's about thinking through virality as a language that we need to learn how to speak, not just in sense of pandemics, but in sense of how computation works today. Soit's a book that is super smart, super accessible, super intimate and moving. And I think it's a fun reboot. But this is also a pitch to all of you PhDers out there who arecompleting your doctorates …. Your dissertation committees are going to tell you all kinds of things that you need to do to finish your dissertation. I'm not on that committee, obviously. But what I would say is you should write the way you need to write to get through that. And then pitch it to our project. You want to add something, Helen?

Helen V. Pritchard: I will just add that, absolutely, I think that when we met we were both were very interested in and excited about the reciprocity of the queer exchanges in terms of writing practices. And, you know, I think that there might be a question of why think about writing in this moment? And one of the reasons, of course, is that what gets published and what gets written immensely affects the affective economies of institutional life. If we really want to think about how to, in Sylvia Wynter's terms, take up and make changes to imperial or colonial discourses, then actually we need to think about changing the institutions that make the decisions on what writing is valuable. In the last year, I was part of a really amazing workshop organized by Sophie Hope around loosening our relationships to writing, and thinking about how writing is a labor practice that, if you're in art, design or academic spaces, actually can be a form of workers' or situated inquiry. There's an amazing poet, Tinashe Mushakavanhu, who is a writer, editor and scholar from Zimbabwe. And we were together in this loosening-our-relationship-to-writing panel. And he said, in his work, it's really been about how to evade authoritarian regimes. And actually, he realized at some point that it wasn't about writing novels or about writing the perfect academic text, because these were always under the purview of the authoritarian regimes. And so, in his work, he really works in participatory ways to create a kind of collaged poetry pamphlet texts as the core part of his writing practice, in the way in which the pamphlet as a form can often evade authoritarian gazes. And maybe that means we can keep doing the writing we need to do, in this moment when authoritarian and fascist regimes are on the rise throughout Europe and the UK.

LK: I think these practices of yours, Helen and Shaka, between the critical and creative also link to Ines' approaches to academic writing that somewhat transgress the political and the personal. So, Ines, why has it been critical in your practice to challenge writing as a site?

Ines Kleesattel: In the early 2000s, I simultaneously studied philosophy at the university and art at the art academy. Back then, I experienced them as two very separate disciplines, at least in the German-speaking context—and for a long time it seemed to me that I would have to choose one or the other. In philosophy, we were taught not to say «I» in our texts and to

practice a very neutralizing and distancing language. I craved feminist theory, but if I ever encountered teachers who didn't consider feminism to be genuinely unphilosophical and an outdated activism, I was advised against focusing on such a «niche topic.» In art, the subjective, personal and emotional was more than welcome, while I was repeatedly told not to be so analytical and «bookish» in my work.
I owe a lot to my philosophical training: it taught me to question meticulously and argue carefully. To draw connections that are not obvious yet meet complexities. This, of course, is also politically important. And in Critical Theory, I even found a certain awareness of this. But the prevailing tone was one of knowing better, lecturing and monologizing, which is always somehow accompanied by exclusion and delegitimization. Especially when I started teaching theory myself, I found it increasingly cynical to talk about critiquing domination on a content level, while standing at the front and forcefully explaining the world to the students on a performative level.
Eve Sedgwick's question «What does knowledge do? How is it performative?» then became a key guiding question for me. How to enact, collaboratively, more relational and less violent ways of knowing instead of preaching them from a position of power? How to do theory as an embodied and embodying practice, interlinking critique and speculation? I also remember philosophy professors teaching at art schools complaining that art students wouldn't read theory properly, but only superficially and then taking from it whatever they wanted. This has gotten better. Maybe. In some contexts. On the one hand, there are more spaces for an honestly open, collaborative transdisciplinarity—like here at IXDM. But on the other hand, recently, there is also this authoritative backlash at universities and academies that calls for a return to supposedly traditional values. And it might be precisely in this situation that pursuing «improper,» dirty ways of critical theory as embodied-embodying practices can come up with tools for transformative struggles.

LK: Johannes, we're co-heading the practice-based PhD program Make/Sense, which also explores the significance and potential of creative writing practices within practice-based research. Many of our PhD candidates explore formats such as poetry, playwriting, science fiction, storytelling, gray literature, (technical) reports, briefs, sketchbooks, blog posts, manuals and manifestos. They write through transdisciplinary practice. You too, move transversally between fields and this affects your writing. And a lot of your research also explores questions of the limits of writing: what can be articulated, what can be said, and where it's necessary to not articulate or find other ways of articulating. What is your approach to writing and where do you see the major challenges?

Johannes Bruder: I think articulating in itself is a process of imagination and a site of struggle. Ines's bio-retrospective reminded me that I, too, had a fraught relationship with theory in my studies. I was really drawn to it, but not always in the ways you'd expect, as attempts to get a grip on—in the case of sociology—social life. I was also really interested in the meta question about what theory does or is supposed to do, how it is articulated in a political context, and how fragments of theory are re-articulated to essentially subvert the context they were born in. In my MA thesis, I analyzed the discourse of the French nouveaux philosophes, a group of French public intellectuals that mashedan «anti-totalitarianism» influenced by Solzhenitsyn with anti-muslim hate and a critique of the French left's idea of multiculturalism. I think this was the first time when I really felt like I understood how political articulation works; it was formative of how I today look at what the far right is doing in Germany and Italy, for instance, or how Israel is fabricating consent to genocidal violence. Writing is one mode of counter-articulating, e.g. through the practice of re-writing. We've together worked on the project «The Rewrite,» which started with collective annotations of central texts of climate politics, to get a grip on their political grammar and modes of articulation. This practice is about attention to the process of articulation and about finding ways to subvert the logic of

documents—or archives, library catalogues, collections, etc.—through re-articulating its central tenets (or re-writing them altogether). I think this is what occupies me recently, trying to find ways for re-articulating the given, un-hinging, counter-documenting.

LK: Make/Sense and Brand-New-Life share a vested interest in exploring ways to weave together creative modes of critical knowledge production and engagement by thinking through formats that transcend academic writing practices. Brand-New-Life started out committing to reshaping art criticism in Switzerland, moving beyond simple judgment to explore how art engages with social and political issues—and how we can extend those conversations across media such as writing and audio and visual storytelling. The journal has been experimenting with formats that bridge art criticism, artistic practice, and academic research, linking these often separate fields, and has been embracing practice-based formats, blending creative and critical insights, valuing personal experience, and tying it to forms of public engagement. Since launching in 2015, Brand-New-Life has evolved from an art criticism magazine into a journal for practice-based research and explored ways to map research that inhabits the space between criticism and academic as well as creative writing. And I feel that the proposals collected for this special issue contribute to this work and to making that field or that in-between space visible and tangible.

JOHANNES BRUDER

Dr. Johannes Bruder heads the Critical Media Lab Basel at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. Johannes has a strong interest in experimenting with research methods, knowledge practices, alternative pedagogies and modes of documenting that unsettle disciplinary paradigms and render research in the humanities operational in real-world contexts.

INES KLEESATTEL

Ines Kleesattel is an art researcher and philosopher specializing in relational practices of critique, situated aesthetics, doing theory in less masterly ways, and methods of transversal artistic research. She is professor of Art and Design Education at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW.

LUCIE KOLB

Lucie Kolb is founding member of Brand-New-Life, professor of critical publishing and head of the Make/Sense PhD program at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW.

SHAKA MCGLOTTEN

Shaka McGlotten is Professor of Media Studies and Anthropology at Purchase College-SUNY, where they also serve as Chair of the Gender Studies program and the Co-Chair of Media Studies. They are the author of «Dragging: Or, In the Drag of a Queer Life» and «Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality», as well as numerous chapters and articles. They have received support from Data & Society, The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Akademie Schloss Solitude, and the Andy Warhol Foundation.

HELEN V. PRITCHARD

Helen V. Pritchard is an artist-designer, geographer, activist and queer love theorist. Helen is Professor and Head of Research IXDM, at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. They are the co-editor of the anthology *Plants By Numbers: Art, Computation and Queer Feminist Technoscience [https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/plants-by-numbers-9781350343252/]* (2023) and the Future Media Series [https://mitpress.mit.edu/series/goldsmiths-press-future-media-series/] for Goldsmiths Press.

titipi.org [https://titipi.org/]
www.helenpritchard.info [http://www.helenpritchard.info/]

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