Gilda Williams on today’s art-writing explosion and the tyranny of the artist’s statement

I began to reexamine my past and decided to turn from my studies of social science to fiction. Unlike politics, which offered only extravagant promises of a utopian future, I knew fiction could present lives as they are truly lived.

WRITE ON

Rejoice! The crisis in art criticism is over, and how. In fact, we may be living the most expansive moment ever in the history of art writing. Samant Abt, Oliver Basconi, Andrew Berendini, Alice Butler, Ben Davis, Brian Dillon, Brian Doctrow, Andrew Durbin, Martin Herbert, Mario Lind, Tom Morton, Sally O'Reilly, Trevor Paglin, Chantal Pontbriand, Nato Thompson: just how many talented authors must the art world produce before we stop robotically lamenting some chronic crisis and recognize the waves of gifted art writers hyperbolically inventing literary hybrids, crossing plat-vanilla art reviews with diary-writing, journalism, autobiography, fiction, research, gossip, manifestos and more.

Not all this verbiage is uniformly great — but hey, neither is every last artwork on display in the galleries. We can deride poking fun at the jargon-heavy lowpoints — as rehearsed again last November with Daniel Blight’s tired Twite zur Kunst complaint over impenetrable press releases and artspeak, yawn. It is time to recognize, with joy and relief, that today we are more likely to stumble upon a smart text than a duff one in the best printed magazines and rising tide of good online sources, such as Rhizome, e-flux, Art F City, Bad At Sports, Galleries NY (now part of New York Observer), Antikat, Artpace Magazine, Hyperallergic, Triple Canopy, East of Borneo — a few go-to art websites topping a list which, to remain current, would require hourly updating. X- and Y-generation art writers have revolutionised the
genre, no longer just offering reactive commentary and chasing behind the main event — the art object — but producing tests that run parallel to or within art, often constituting the artwork itself, such as Jil Magid’s Failed States, 2012, or Katrina Palmer’s The Fabrication of the Dark Object (from Stewart Horne’s Seminars series published by Book Works — where the novel has a nervous breakdown), sometimes even reworking published texts to create definitively unfinished, art/test spilloffs.

The 21st-century art world generates industrial quantities of writing: in fact, we may now produce as much text as art. Flowing out of every art fair, every conference, every lecture, every exhibition come the transcripts, the catalogues, the papers, the blurbs, the mission statements, the brochures — armchair building up everywhere like law, unstoppable and gaining momentum — much of it without necessarily having a named author attached. In our resource-strapped world, the written word has been discovered to be a cheap and efficient entry point for aspiring art world members eager to insert themselves — even if marginally — into the fray, a DIY strategy which moreover takes advantage of that hard-toed specialist MA and can require no special equipment, funding or space, fitting flexibly around paid-work schedules. The Internet has been a boon for art writing, and, with its infinity of self-publishing platforms, the web erased overnight two principal editorial constraints endured by the paper-only generation: stringent word-counts, and overcautious or unsympathetic editors (although admittedly, plenty of online copy could stand a good once-over with the red pen). Today’s unapologetically self-promotional blogs, Twitter accounts and Facebook feeds spew out rapid-fire verdicts on artworks and art world behaviours in a gloves-off, punchy language that makes even the toughest old-school newspaper critics now look like choir boys.

Art writing seems poised to evolve into what curating was in recent decades, with 2014/15 shaping up as a bumper year for specialist symposia (Writing Art: Conflicts and Collaboration’ at the India Art Fair with Jawahar and the Courtauld Institute in New Delhi, January 2015; ‘Plastic Words’ at Ravens Row in London, December 2014 to January 2015; ‘Scripting Space: Writing as the Site of Exhibitions’ at the Judd Foundation in New York, 2014). Sometimes these too can produce their own tedious, writing-about-writing genre: ‘A text is capable of shaping the space of display, eliciting responses from its readers, directing conceptual wanderings, and declaring the political potential inherent in the gesture of framing.’ OK, so still plenty of room for improvement, then; but even if only a conservative one-third of today’s abundant art copy merits attention, that’s heaps of hot new reading. If there exists a crisis, it is one of overwhelming volume.

For sure, this new landscape bears no resemblance to the last time art criticism supposedly lacked in florid health, back in Clement Greenberg’s day. As the mid-1960s era grows into its 50-year mark, artists and critics alike are throwing into doubt their alleged 20th-century art historical lineage; as new media artist Jennifer Chan writes in Omar Kholeif’s You Are Here: Art After the Internet, 2014 (Books About), ‘Your canon was Dada, Warhol and Duchamp; mine is Cartesio, Pokémon and young boys performing cover songs.’ Similarly, 21st-century art writing is indebted to the Zone books as to James Joyce, JK Row or Tolkien, and may owe less to the purveyors of October to cultural commentator and novelist David Foster Wallace (1956-2008), whose widely read epistolary style unpacked contemporary cultural product — from a tennis star’s biog to a luxurious cruise — with unfailing candour and masterful prose, much as the art writers today. Art writing is not only more attuned to the present, but also more social, more collaborative, more polycentric, more ontologically and epistemologically diverse.

For those art writers digging into the deeper past, Rod Barthes’ Mythologies, 1957, or Susan Sontag’s On Photography is more than a glimpse into the 1960s and 1970s can feel more alive than corpse of 1960s and 1970s art criticism. A current generation may prefer WG Sebald’s oeuvre of prose and photographs Conceptual Art’s collaged text-and-image exploit, and feel indebted to JG Ballard’s visions of a parallel reality — or a future 15 minutes ahead of our own — than Andy Warhol’s overrated, long-term prefigurations. Innovative critics return to ‘nonfiction novels’ like Jon Ronson and Chris K’s for their seamless integration of storytelling and report analysis and description, comedy and tragedy, as well as unclassifiable and highly accomplished short stories. So: Dovis. Contemporary novelists feel as entitled as any critic art-write, as Dr Ben Lerner in 2004, 2014, confirming in his
Some artists’ practices deliberately eschew and resist translation into language; for these artists, writing that hateful artist’s statement may represent a kind of mild punishment, a haz ing ritual in the passage towards becoming fully fledged, fully exportable, fully 21st-century artists.

certainly about Christian Marclay’s magisterial — if over-commented — The Clock, or offering a memory-piece account of Muzaff, where a scrawly collection of bentdown hinges on prove edger than the Chamberlains and Judds.

This new wave may account for why description is now ripe for a refund, no longer indispensably accompanied by the adjective ‘more’ — which suddenly sounds as outdated as old modernists wringing their hands over abstract painting reduced to ‘more’ abstraction. Not off the press is Tom McCarthy’s speculative novel Satire Island, 2015, long awaited after his influential Remainder, 2005, a basically a book-length description set on a loop-the-loop the telling and retelling of a past moment as the protagonist endlessly articulates (into spoken word and the author into written language) the memory of his desired sights, smells and sounds to further instruct his obliging crew. At the Royal College of Art’s Critical Writing in Art & Design course, tutor Brian Dillon has symbolically banned the term ‘more description’ from class, suggesting to students that paying close attention can open up a field of possibility. Student results have included a detailed study of Simon Fujiwara’s movements, an essay on seven seconds of a Donna Summer track, and a piece on exhaustive multiple viewings of Derek Jarman’s Blue, 1995.

The most widely read American art writers today seem the most at well-researched journalism which concerns sociology, current affairs, lifestyle, business-writing, biography and reportage (see Christopher Glazik’s captivating profile of artist Stefan Simchowitz, ‘The Art World’s Patton Sato’on late December’s New York Times magazine). In the UK, the current top-selling popular contemporary art book is by an artist, Georgia Perry’s Hijacking the Gallery: Hijacking Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to be Understood, 2014. For artists of all stripes, this new spirit of art writing has opened a goldenmine of creative opportunity. If anything marks our current condition, it is the rise and rise of artists who put written text or spoken word front and centre in their art making, whether Paloma, [note] Darlington or Heather Phillipson in the UK or Magid, Brad Troemel, Jamie Shulman and Edoardo Shink in the US, among countless others, working with script-writing, art history, concrete poetry, recipes, the interview, automated and recorded texts — even prayer, as per Samuel Harley’s O, A Prayer Book published by Book Works in 2014.

It is no accident that many of today’s most respected artists are noted for their exceptional writing talents: Ed Ruscha, Claire, Takashi Murakami, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sisley Price, Frances Stark, Hito Steyerl and Anri Vukrant come rapidly to mind. In practice, 21st-century artists who happen to be blessed with a gift for language enjoy quite an advantage over their less literate peers — just as 16th-century Italian painters with a gift for the detailed rendering of angelic faces could outshine their Renaissance colleagues lacking that, frankly, niche skill. These may seem like curious add-on artistic abilities, but they function as signals of the broader artistic values of the day: whether in the Quattrocento, when delicate illusion reflected an artist’s sense of grace, or in the 21st century, when trenchant writing reflects an artist’s intellect, powers of observation and timely critical thinking.

In 1978 Joseph Beuys proclaimed that everybody is an artist, in 2015 everybody is an art writer — often whether they like it or not, once upon a time the art world harboured a cast of designated writers... art critics and scholars — whose proximity to art making and facility with language gained them a special place. That age-old division of art writing labour between those who mostly write about art (the critics and art historians) and those who primarily make, display, collect, fund or sell art (artists, curators, museum directors, patrons, collectors, gallerymen) has broken down, judging from the many art-writing workshops I conduct, I think that the split now divides those who are inclined voluntarily towards art writing — those who love to write, who are keen to improve and to have their texts read, whatever their usual role — and those who are conscripted into it reluctant art writers who, like Melville’s Barfly the Scrivener, would ‘prefer not to’ but are obliged to write, and write a lot, in today’s art system.

In fact, alongside the happy realness of recent artists’ brilliantly innovating the written and spoken word, there are plenty of less verbal artists who rank high among those reluctant art writers, only marginally interested in writing but continually bargained into providing helpful explorations, statements, previous and comments to accompany their work. And yet, once artists’ practices deliberately eschew and resist translation into language; for these artists, writing is the hateful artist’s statement may represent a kind of mild punishment, a haz ing ritual in the passage towards becoming fully fledged, fully exportable, fully 21st-century artists. From my experience of conducting MFA art-writing seminars, there are plenty of reluctant artists-writers for whom the artwork is the artist’s statement, dash, and who would prefer if anything to avoid their written work within the skills of their art making, whether in the form of a diary, feline, screen-waver or undrable SMS message, rather than have language stand apart like some awful self-serving caption.

These artists tend to write impressionistically about the fluctuating haze of possibility surrounding their art, instinctively resisting closing down decisions through language and fulfilling anamorphic questions like: “What are your artistic goals?” Moreover, just when geographic boundaries have been turned down and a global art world shifts fluidly across continents, the obligatory English language returns to privilege native-English Anglo-Saxon speakers. In practice, artists less inclined towards writing can end up marginalised if not muddled within the art system; at the other end of the spectrum, highly literate artists — though better off — can despair over summarising their ambitious written work into Cliff Notes-like briefs, stripping out their text-based art to satisfy dive questions like: “What are the key issues in your practice?”

The conventional artist’s statement demands that if artists follow a set format (200-300 words), use a single medium (the English language) and
make it uniquely applicable to their own art-making: it should be expansive, partially
| Features 02 | Write On |

descriptive and completed in the first person, narrating key details and decisions.
Outside assistance — a recording levers, quotes an interviewee — is probably best

cancelled at the first draft. In practice, a 'successful' statement asks artists to work
The 1960s counterculture: littlequetion is permitted in form or media; no
| collaborations: to pre-modernists. This generation is still composed of
| statements is glaring. The internet has revolutionised
| how we about information — as Kenneth Goldsmith puts it,
| "we are reading and writing differently: sampling, pasting,
| growing, bookmarking, forwarding, reordering, retagging, and
| quickening language" — but the standard artist's statement could
| still be read with quill and ink.

Through the late 20th century artists sought to gain
their own voice. One thinks of Yvonne Rainer, Adrian Piper,
Mike Kelley, Andrea Fraser; unwilling to play Pollock to
anybody's Greenberg, whose artist/critic partnerships boiled
down to the critical rage, suppling the world, and the
artist-as-Nietzschean, mostly granting and throwing paint.
Futurist for the late-20th century artist who overcame that
patronising, top-down model of excellence, self-valorisation;
but the achievement has morphed_txnually into a size-
size-two-fulatile imposed on all artists, many of whom —
when faced with yet another daunting grant application in
gallery proposal — find themselves endlessl systled that
also, Robert Strafullon they're not. And why should they be?

As curator and writer Adam Smythe has written, "text
accompanied by a exhibition seems designed purely to speed
up our experience of art" (Against & Surrounding, 2016). Each
garden-variety can writing, we're meaning unilaterally,
reducing ideas to a pulp to be rapidly fed to time-starved art
consumers. Today's finest artists works seem deliberately to
consume this cult of brevity, attempting to slow the art
experience not only by demanding that their audience put
in opting reading time but also, for example in Palmy's
blow-by-blow accounts of her protagonist's thoughts and
gestures, by matching time into a hyperreal slow motion via
the skilful shaping of the written word. The standard artist's
statement — concise, in plain words — offers a
shortcut to extracting meaning from art. Must artists collude
with the accelerated consumption of their own work?

All restrictions and rules in art production and
authorship have been discarded one by one; the artist's
statement should not lag behind. As an alternative for
example, Goldsmith endorses "creative writing" whereby
readymade text is harvested off the net or elsewhere — as
art writers have done since at least the critic Paul Feneon
recount newspaper headlines as poems in his Novel in Three
Lines, a kind of 20/26 version of Twitter. This, alongside any
and all writing possibilities — invented co-authors, epistolary
text, even the option to not writing at all and instead asking
viewers to 'learn to read art', to quote Lawrence Weiner —
should be core replace the tyranny of the templated artist's
statement, recognisable today as a throwback to the long-
gone late 20th century, it

Adam Smythe is a writer and critic, a Lecturer at Goldsmiths College, London and author of How to Think about Contemporary Art (Reaktion Books).