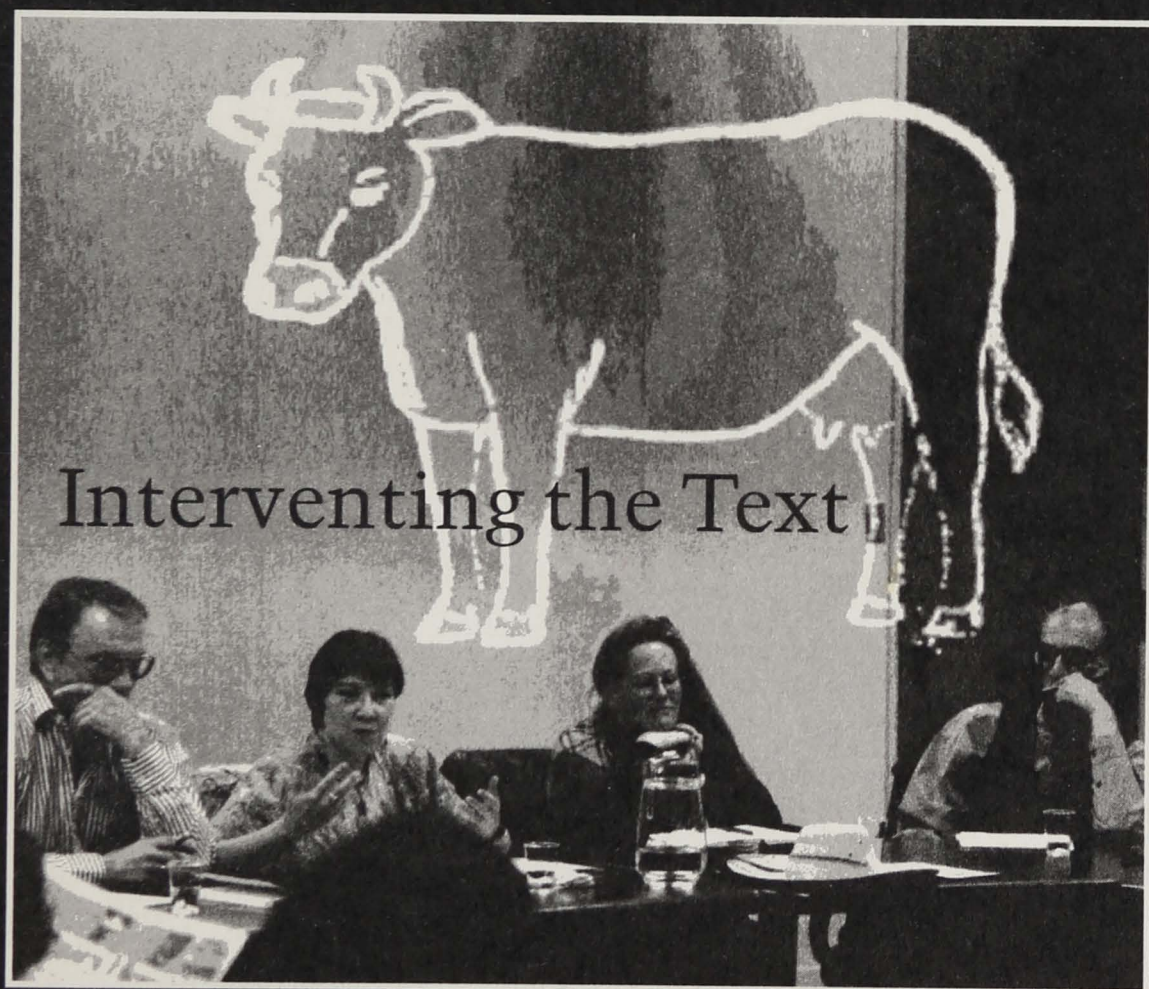


OPEN LETTER

A Canadian Journal of Writing and Theory
Eighth Series, Numbers 5-6: Winter-Spring 1993

\$12.00



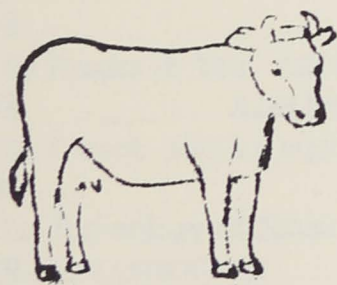
Interventing the Text

**Open Letter, Eighth Series, Nos. 5&6:
Winter-Spring 1993**

The publication of *Open Letter* is assisted by grants from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council.

**Interventing the Text:
The Calgary Conference, May 1991**

**Guest-edited by Susan Rudy Dorscht, Ashok Mathur,
and Fred Wah**



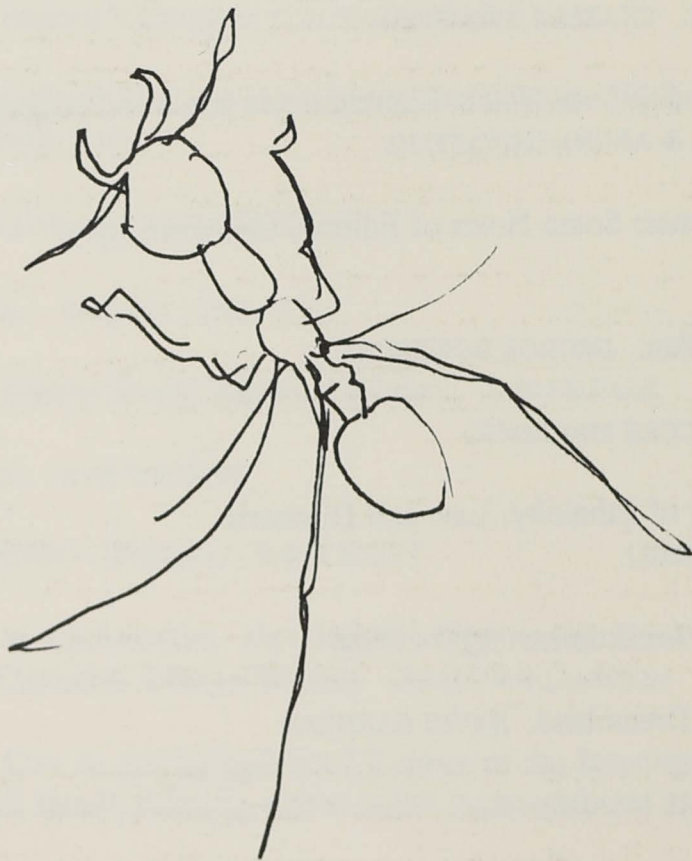
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This issue of *Open Letter* is comprised mostly of material generated by a conference held at the University of Calgary, May 2-4, 1991. 'Interventing the Text' was a symposium on the production and critical reception of language as text. Some of the papers presented at that conference are documented here, as well as a few others that gathered along the way. Since the conference was largely a reflection of creative and critical activity going on in Calgary, Ashok Mathur has collected and edited a small anthology of new local writing. Susan Rudy Dorscht has attended to the text editing and overall arrangement of the issue. Fred Wah has slliced the whole project Frank Davey's way. Any comments on the issue are welcome at Wah and/or Dorscht, English Department, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, T2N 1N4.

The ant-art for 'Interventing the Text' is drawn by Kari McQueen.



Artists Writing Artists

Fred Wah, Mireille Perron, Amy Gogarty, David Garneau, Lorne Falk, Rob Milthorp

Wah: I've been talking with a few of you over the past little while about getting together a group of people to talk about writing about art. I'm interested, 'literally,' in examining 'how you do it.'

Perron: One interesting question is, 'Should the structure of a text about visual art be different from texts about other subjects?' I mention this because a lot of us seem to be interested in having a certain parallel between the way the content and structure of our text is functioning and the way the content and structure of the work we are writing about functions.

Gogarty: Yes. I've been thinking about how a writer inhabits the body of the work of art; how you transport that body to someone who does not have access to the original body. I think that it works best when it's done through some sort of parallel textual body that is a process of translating.

Garneau: It seems to me that the difference between critical writing about written texts and critical writing about visual works, is the assumption, in literary criticism, that the reader has access to the primary text, while in visual art criticism the assumption is that the reader does not have access to the primary text, the work of art. The representation the reader usually gets are photographs. So, we are often writing mostly about photographs.

Falk: It is remarkable. That is a phenomenon in the visual arts and I don't know if there is a parallel in literature. Certain works of art become famous, even though almost no one has actually seen them.

Wah: Can you think of a recent example?

Falk: Most performance work. You could start with some of the things Joseph Beuys did, which were seen by very few people, but were documented and written about. Because of the nature of his practice and his status, a mythology around the work builds rather quickly.

Wah: To a certain extent that can happen in literature. This fall I was teaching a Graduate seminar and was using William Carlos Williams' 'Kora in Hell.' It was first published in 1917 in an edition of 300 or 400 hundred copies—yet it has been referred to throughout this century as a major prose-poem text. Yet very few people have ever read it.

Garneau: But if you wanted to you could reproduce that text as many times as you wished; once a performance piece is over its gone forever.

Perron: That's true for any kind of visual art work. The last catalogue Rob wrote, on Geoffery Hunter, will have a longer life than the access to the

works of art themselves. You could always go and ask Geoffery to see the same paintings but he could not reproduce the exhibition for you. This is the norm for us.

Milthorp: Tom Sherman (Canadian video artist and critic) once wrote something that stuck with me: the work itself is criticism of the work. The writing, for me, and I think that is what Tom was suggesting, becomes a parallel criticism, a parallel text: while derived from the original work it is not necessarily about the original work.

Garneau: I think this is a new attitude. Because critical texts about art are made in a different medium than what they critique, whereas in literary criticism the medium is the same, visual arts writing has found itself spending much of its energy describing the work, its context and reception: translating the original art works into the realm of written words—an activity that is, for the most part, not necessary in literary criticism. But you're right, recently I find myself being able to, or giving myself permission to, make parallel texts that respond with or to the work, and not spending as much time with description. Now I wonder if this might be a loss. One of the questions I'm bringing to this conversation is, 'Who is the text for?'

Milthorp: I think that's a key question.

Wah: To go back to the idea of the text outliving the performance: certainly having a broader accessibility than even the artifact itself, isn't that one of the main reasons anyone writes about art?

Garneau: As a reader I may want that extension of the otherwise inaccessible artifact. As I writer I want to take pleasure in writing. In this community, you really want to preserve, textually, some of the work: cultural centres are such because of the texts they generate even more than the amount of art produced. A sign of a center's cultural importance is the amount of money spent on producing exhibition catalogues; especially when their distribution and readership is so small.

Falk: This is very interesting in a practical sense. Most visual art exhibition catalogues produced in Canada have a first edition run of between 500-1500 copies. If you get rid of the 1500 catalogues in three years, it is considered a hot catalogue. Some have sold as many as 4000: that's extraordinary and involves international distribution. When you talk about reaching other people, those people belong to a rather intimate community. The notion of 'what/who the text is for,' is about sharing information about the existence of work. I am not interested in historicizing the work. There are people who do it, who write in a more traditional way, historians, newspaper journalists and commercial critics who do that job quite well. It is no longer so important to me to historicize, and, to contradict myself, at the same time, I want to make sure the work stays alive. My goal now is to write something people take pleasure from reading; I want them to desire to see what I have

written about.

Milthorp: I think that comes back to what David was saying about the audience, there is room for all of those aspects, they have to be there. There is a real plurality of writing here.

Perron: But it is significant that in a place (Calgary) where there is not much writing about art we have people trying to make non-traditional texts. Perhaps it goes back to what was said about making a parallel text. Any discourse becomes part of a work, and because in visual art criticism the work is not there in front of you, the text becomes the different 'memory' for that work. This could explain the wish we have to write differently: because this visual work won't be there for your reader, you would like to give them a kind of structural equivalence, or put them in the same atmosphere. This is something historical texts won't do. Can I provide something that will put them in that same atmosphere; backing up the same kind of position that is in that work?

Garneau: Much recent writing has been a response, not just a record; an attempt to put the reader in a space similar to that of our space of reading: an emotional space, an intellectual space, rather than just a historical space.

Gogarty: A lot of the writing that I'm interested in actively deconstructs that historicizing notion that is so rooted in the academy—historicizing that seems to engulf, take over and co-opt any art work. I almost see it as this grey immanence that is coming out of the academy. It is as though the only way any art work will be seen is if they will legitimize it. I actively write, and promote writing, that works against that sort of criticism, that opens up the possibility that there are other ways of writing about art.

Falk: The link between art history and art criticism has historically been really close. They are in collusion, or in the same bed. And art history has been one of the last disciplines in the academy to respond to the theory soup of the last 15 years. One of the things that astounded me when I went back to school in the mid-80's, was a course I took, 'The History of Art Criticism.' Well, I found out that there was one, [pause] one written history of art criticism, by Venturi in the 1940's. And there was the suggestion that Victor Burgin's tiny book, *The End of Art Theory*, might be a second. So when you look at art criticism as a field, you say 'we're babies.' There has been so little critical / historical examination of this area, and most of what has been done has come to us from other fields like literature, philosophy and feminism. Suddenly you find out you are a little bit behind, that there are other ways to look at and write about art. And if you miss these influences and come right out of the art history academy, you wouldn't even think of it.

Perron: There is something perverse about the link between art history and art criticism. They needn't have been so related. Art criticism could have been linked with, say, psychoanalysis. The perversity lies in art history's

foundation in connoisseurship and connoisseurship is indifferent to any critical position.

Garneau: Art history was invented as a means to ensure a canon and trace provenance. Art history constructed a body of information upon which collectors could secure their investments. In the late 19th and early 20th century, when art history was invented, the connection between money and art history was so close that people like Berenson were both art historian/authenticators and dealers—with the predictably corrupt results.

Gogarty: The connection has been very powerful. It has had control and access and complete ownership of that discourse. Anyone who has tried to come from outside has been delegitimized.

Falk: One of the things that occurred to me as I looked at how to change my writing, was 'who am I writing about and what work am I writing about.' They were challenging all sorts of doctrines and conventions. If I don't do that in my writing, I'm going to be subverting their work.

Perron: When we have creative writing about a work of art, one argument could be that we are losing our critical positioning toward that work of art. That we are just offering another work of art, a literary work of art. The question is, 'As visual artists/critics, why should we feel obliged to produce a literary work of art?' Personally, I would always believe that there always is a lot of criticism in art, visual criticism. The answer of one work by another is how we practice visual criticism all the time.

Garneau: I wonder if at this stage we can allow our pleasure as writers to over-ride the critical needs of the art community. I feel critical writers have a responsibility to communicate to a public that is not necessarily at your readerly/writerly level. Many of our texts have such a small readership because they are academic, texts written by and for academics. I worry about that as a position; it seems to be driven by a writerly rather than a readerly desire.

Falk: You mixed up a bunch of things that I'm inclined to challenge. You suggested that speculative criticism is somehow associated with an academic audience. For me, in fact, it has to do with reaching more people. The art writing of the past 15 years, which has mostly come out of the academy, the theory soup and the visual discourse that also came out of theory, has been very narrow. It has alienated much of the art community, much less the public. My motive for going toward a speculative kind of critical writing, is a way of saying that I desire a larger audience—for, not only the writing, but for the work I'm writing about.

Garneau: But it seems to me that the same people who were writing out of theory are moving onto a new bandwagon and it doesn't seem to be the case that the new texts are any more popular than the older ones. If the text has a responsibility, that text should be written in accessible language, whether

accessible theory or accessible fiction.

Falk: I'm sceptical about the notion of public. But the proof that speculative criticism is reaching a broader audience, which I would prefer as a word, is evident right here in this room: we got this 'dude' from the literary world who wants to have us talk about writing about art for a literary journal. Something has attracted your attention.

Garneau: But it also seems these sorts of writing have come from that place.

Falk: To an extent.

Milthorp: I think there is a danger of being too categorical. As a writer and a reader I like to read both. I don't see an either or.

Perron: You can have a dry form of writing in any category. When I teach art theory, my experience is that if give a dry text, the students will appreciate it far less than something well written, creative, about the same subject. Barthes will always be an easier read than Adorno. You have to be a masochistic reader to read Adorno [laughter]. I do think that if the mandate of a magazine is to reach a creative audience, then it would really be appropriate to have more creative material.

Garneau: I agree with that and as an editor of an art magazine, I have to be concerned about what this text is for, what should it be for readers? When the text becomes a work of art parallel to a work of art it may get away from its being for readers.

Falk: I'm hoping that when I write something that is parallel to a work of art, it functions as a mime or a graft of the work of art. This has to do with the problems and questions that the work of art is asking, the trajectory it's on in the course of an artist's practice. It make a critical statement of the work that is useful and not simply strategic. The text should do all the things traditional work has done. It is not helpful to drop all the functions of traditional criticism, but to find ways to loosen them up and make them effervesce again.

Wah: Lorne has a piece in *This* magazine about Vincent Trasov. So let me get this straight, you're saying that you are writing this piece in order that some of that discourse will effervesce, become clearer?

Falk: This is the notion of 'who is writing does matter.' I've had the privileged position of talking to the artist who made that work, about his interests, ideology, and about that particular work.

Wah: But you are doing more than just reporting on the work.

Falk: Yes. Reporting on the work is like scientific rationalism: 'in order for this work of art to exist, we have to measure it, describe its colour and characteristics, and if we are lucky we can photograph it and therefore say that it exists.'

Garneau: I think we are moving toward a desire to communicate and away from a period where both art works and criticism were illustrations of theory.

Wah: How is that different from the way writing about art has always been?
Falk: You could map critical writing in Canada in the last 15 years as it became enthused with the theory soup. Then it had to digest it: the critics didn't stop writing about art while digesting, and so the writing from this period reflects the digestion process. We are shifting; now more people have digested than are digesting. As a result there is a desire for something else. People are tired of theory wagging its finger.

Wah: *Vanguard Magazine?*

Falk: *Vanguard, C, Parachute*; all the magazines.

Perron: But the desire for legitimation is the same. I think we fool ourselves if we think there is no desire for legitimation. Only now, the strategies are different. We want a consensus about spheres of interest. Instead of going through authority, we're using seduction. And that is a visual strategy. Visual work usually solicits you through seduction. Traditional texts about art usually relied on authority rather than seduction.

Milthorp: I like to think about that as a form of negotiation that is embedded in the work. I think both the visual art and the writing that I like engages in the open-ended process of negotiation for meaning. What intrigues me is that the written work and the visual work are not sufficient unto themselves, they negotiate with the next step. That frees the critical text from reflecting the work.

Perron: And frees it up from judgement. Negotiation rather than judgement.

Gogarty: Many of the texts we at Texts are interested in are artist-generated texts. In many of those cases the artists do not see their writing as reflection of art, but as working in another medium.

Falk: This is a very interesting dynamic, the artist as critic is consistent, in Canada, with the history of the artist-run network. Where they also became the artist as organizer, as curator, as fundraiser, as a whole bunch of things that weren't being done well by the cultural scene in Canada. The artist as critic is an important vanguard in this kind of writing, especially since there is a great resistance to the critic as artist; even by the artist who says, 'excuse me, but I really want you to legitimate my work in a historical context, no matter how radical an artist I've been. Don't start fooling around with that creative stuff.'

Perron: Many artists empower themselves to write, even if they do it with fear, because they are inter-disciplinary and used to trying other forms. I often use video even though I am not completely comfortable with that medium. I have to give myself permission. When I decided to write, I had to give myself a justification to overcome my anxiety. I told myself that this is just another medium, like photography is to me, as video is to me, as clay is to me, like prose is to me. Perhaps this shows in the way we use those mediums.

Wah: This is quite an opposite position that Lorne and David were discussing, in which the writing is there to communicate something about the art. The catalogue you've written for your upcoming exhibition is a fiction. People are going to say, 'what does this have to do with the show.'

Perron: Yes. And one could ask, 'where is the critical position?' But this is more complex: I did the writing, it is a parallel to the visual work in my own show. However, the same principle could work for writing about someone else's work. Here is a difference between written and visual criticism: let's say I see each of your works, my answer to it visually will be how I react to it in my next work. If I decide to let it take a written form it is the same kind of negotiation; it is like a reaction or an integration.

Gogarty: This process is a denial of direct communication, and asserts that obtuse meaning is as important as obvious meaning.

Wah: But Lorne wants a larger audience.

Falk: I also want to maintain the critic as artist. It's very bizarre that we would think that critical writing about art should simply be in the service of the work and the artist; that writing should submit to those subjects. I don't always write about an artist or a work, I might write about discourse in art. In Barcelona, for example, the text became about the relationship between language and power in western culture. That's of interest not only to visual art, but to literature, political science and so on. I think critical writing about art has been conceived so narrowly that it has choked itself. It should just loosen up. It can be a creative practice, move across a wider audience, and it can perform its tradition functional if it must.

Garneau: You're never just writing about the work, you're writing about your ideas and feelings about the work. And I think that many writers are moving toward writing about their own processes with the work—so that does alter the written text. The context is also determinate: I know I write very differently for *Artichoke* than I would for a catalogue.

Perron: One practical problem raised when we write as artists, is the problem of skill. I am interested in the notion of interdisciplinarity. Take the example of installation art, say one that has a film or video component. Embedded in the structure is the fact of its being an installation, something that tells you that, although the film is not Hollywood cinema, it is alright for the purposes of the installation. What is the equivalent in the text? What will tell you that this text corresponds to another set of criteria, not necessarily the criteria of a professional writer, but of an artist writing? Just as the film has a different quality in the installation as opposed to Hollywood cinema, so the artist writing may have a different way of writing from a professional writer.

Milthorp: I think there have been a number of formal strategies that have been devised and that have shown up in *Artichoke* and *Texts*. Where, for example, writers write in several voices, signified by a change in text: some

text is in a block of italic, some text is bold. That creates some of the structures, some of the atmosphere that would be in an installation.

Wah: Does this have to do with the embodiment that Mireille was talking about earlier, embodying the art into the text?

Milthorp: Yes. I think it can; I think about Charles Cousins and the catalogue he designed for Denis Lessard. It has small photographs in between quotations and pieces of text—it becomes an installation of word and image.

Garneau: That's happening more and more. I've just been looking at Charles' design for a catalogue for Carroll Moppett I wrote. We have Carroll's text intertwining with my text; several of my paragraphs question my reading/writing position, they efface the text and are set aside, written in another voice, another type-face. Instead of footnotes there are numbers that refer to photographs. The texts are self-conscious, they pull apart from one another, and pull together, but never so far apart that they are unreadable. I think these texts are opening up, but I am suspicious of totally open texts...

Wah: What do you mean, you don't like the idea of totally open texts?

Garneau: Well I don't think there is such a thing. Every writer is writing and reading from within a position, a limited range of possible readings. I certainly value more a text that does not try to mask its reading position. I value a text that occupies a position, or several positions, that are owned by the writer. Parts may fly off and contradict or challenge each other. That's fine. But it seems to me that even though we are artists, there is a certain amount of mastery involved in making texts work, so that they can be read. As an editor you often see texts that try these strategies only to produce something that cannot be read. It's not just a matter of 'doing it,' there are skills to learn.

Falk: I bet none of us would say that we were a writer first.

Perron: Oh, definitely not, we are visual artists.

Falk: Visual artists or curators. When you look at writers about art, you are looking at a segment of society that doesn't do it full time, as a living.

Garneau: And being this sort of semi-professional writer/artist is an awkward position. I feel very self-conscious about putting my texts forward. I'm not sure how, say, someone with a literature background, who uses similar theory, who is reading all the time, is going to see my text.

Perron: So, why did we allow ourselves to publish? The reason is that those ideas would not otherwise be diffused. If I were to find creative writers who were already writing about everything that is of interest to me in the visual arts, I might not write that often.

Garneau: Those vacancies are one of the things that make this such an exciting field.

Perron: Yes. But to be honest, writing is pleasurable. But it is only one tool in my tool box and not my specialized tool. I'm sure that all of us at one

time decided to write because we knew that otherwise nobody else will do it. There is so much in our milieu that is important to share.

Garneau: It would be interesting to see if there is any strategic difference between people who started off in visual training. I could imagine a day in the not too distant future where literary critics begin to abandon their crowded area and discover art's wide open field with unlimited possibilities. I think that their skills and strategies would have great currency in the art community.

Wah: I'm getting really bothered by the paricalization you people are imposing. You're talking about critics, about literature, about artists and interdisciplinarians, and I guess what's bothering me is that none of it seems really true.

Garneau: We are a group in that we do similar kinds of things: we have similar training, education, we read similar kinds of texts, we write for the same audience, mostly composed of people like us with similar educations, interests, reading and viewing habits. And we have buildings that we regularly congregate in. We are a community.

Wah: Okay, a very definable community. Fine, and the recognition of that community is a fairly important moment for anyone working in any area: whether they be an academic, recognizing their community, or an artist, or whatever. I'm not questioning that it exists. But when you work within any of those communities, those boundaries disappear, they're just not true. We go out there and get what we need when we need it. If I happen to be a poet and I run across a book by Victor Burgin and it shifts me somewhere that doesn't mean that I'm immediately going to shift into some kind of Burgin art critique and aesthetic that is going to change who I am as a writer, or as a teacher, or as an academic, or as a critic. It's going to inform those roles.

Garneau: But it is interesting that you chose a text, rather than, say, going into a gallery and seeing an installation.

Wah: Same thing.

Perron: No, I think this is what we don't share.

Wah: Those communities are there, but they overlap and spill out; in an interdisciplinary way one can move between those communities with a great deal of ease.

Perron: But one doesn't. It has been a one way street. For example, when we at the Alberta College of Art teach visual artists, we use literary texts from all sorts of fields. Do people in English do the same thing with art? No? Most of the time their visual literacy is pathetic. In Canadian academic circles, visual art has never been taken very seriously.

Falk: A good example would be Arthur Kroker and David Cook's book *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (1986). His using Alex Colville as an example of Canadian Postmodernism makes you

wonder 'where the hell is this person coming from.' The reason they have used Colville is because he has intersected a part of the visual art world, that I would ascribe as contemporary Canadiana, and there is a strong community of people and they include: Tak Tanabe on the West Coast, Geoffery Spalding in Lethbridge, Tim Zuck in Toronto, and Alex Colville on the east coast. And somehow Kroker found out about these people and he says 'wow, this is radical stuff.' And we say 'What? This is Ovaltine!'"

Garneau: Another example is the cover of Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* where a fashion photo, co-opting some 'conventions' of postmodern 'style' is displayed as an example of The Canadian Postmodern.

Wah: When Arthur Kroker or Linda Hutcheon does that, they do it for their own agenda. Their action says that postmodern culture is really homogenized.

Falk: When you read these people, Kroker, Hutcheon, Baudrillard, you may say, as you did earlier 'hey this is really useful stuff.' But when you see how they relate to visual culture, you have to ask yourself if your enthusiasm for their theory was appropriate or not. For example, I'm inclined to think of both Baudrillard and Kroker, not as postmodernists, but as operative Modernists. Their visual literacy is poor.

Garneau: If you compared the eclectic work art magazines discuss and the galleries show, with examples of what these literary or theory books use, you would see a huge discrepancy. The problem is that the second type of book has the wider circulation, they become postmodernism's textbooks. These textbooks fulfil an academic need, a need to digest the visual culture.

Wah: Let's talk a little bit about the problem of Hutcheon, Kroker and other academics who use visual art material. You're saying that they are not doing it right. How are you going to deal with that.

Garneau: I don't think that there is a problem with people from other disciplines using visual art; there is a problem when they canonize, or when they re-present some of the worst examples, or older works as though they were contemporary.

Perron: Especially when they are chosen because they simplistically illustrate their theories.

Garneau: What Kroker, Hutcheon, Cheetham and others seem to be doing is making claims on visual art that are not beneficial in the context of the art world. Often they tend to choose examples that are simply more easily reproduced: painting, photography, a single video still if we're really lucky. But usually painting.

Perron: Especially painting, which is the most obsolete way to approach art today.

Garneau: Hey, hey, hey! [Garneau and Gogarty are primarily painters. Laughter]

Perron: I mean to favour painting over what is challenging the traditional

forms.

Garneau: Yes. Especially if the discussion is postmodernism. I think that their decisions are pragmatic: 'I can look and choose from this slide or that slide.'

Wah: Do you think the problem is that Kroker, Hutcheon, Cheetham are working within/for a discipline that proports to be cross-cultural?

Perron: No. They are legitimizing by authority instead of by negotiation: they are looking for the canon of postmodernity.

Garneau: When Mark Cheetham came here to speak about the exhibition he curated (at the Glenbow) and the book he wrote, *Remembering Postmodernism*, only a handful of artists or critics showed up. The audience was a general public and Cheetham was speaking to them of, speaking for, 'postmodernism,' rather than 'isms.' He was here to canon build, to write art history. Legitimation from another field can be more powerful than from your own.

Wah: What is the solution?

Perron: While you could spend a lot of time criticizing what they do, I think the positive solution is simply to do something different. I really hope that *Texts* survives for a long time. We have the example of *Parachute* in Montreal, whether it is liked or not for its theoretical line, the community would have been much different without it. We need to continue to construct and diffuse something that is completely different from what we are saying we don't like. What I mean is that *Texts*, or *Artichoke*, are not using those strategies we find problematic ... or they try to avoid them as much as they can.

Wah: So, *Texts* and *Artichoke*, then wouldn't let Kroker be an interloper.

Garneau: Interchange between equals is wonderful, there is a concern though when a strong, already authorized, voice is appropriating and speaking for less established voices. I am thinking here about Calgary's community, where we are just learning to talk; our first job is to just get about the business of writing texts as best we can for and about this space.

Wah: So would we see some fire power coming from either *Texts* or *Artichoke* directed at Kroker or Hutcheon?

Garneau: I am writing a review of Cheetham's book, only because his exhibition was here, was important and needs to be examined for this community. But generally I think that kind of attack is a wasted volley.

Perron: And while you're writing about that you're not writing about something you think is important.

Garneau: Here in Calgary we have two magazines that are exclusively about art. *Artichoke* is the more conservative of the two. Conservative in that the three editors are wanting to reach a general audience as well as an academic and art world community. We want to build a visual arts vocabulary.

Perron: We'll have to wait five years or so to measure its impact, to see if

the magazine has been able to seduce its audience to think differently.

Wah: So this is a self-conscious tactic, you're going to be conservative in order to create a community.

Perron: Perhaps conservative is not the right word, *Artichoke* is more journalistic.

Garneau: We started with the idea that there was something textual lacking in this community. Six months before *Vanguard* folded, a bunch of writers were called together to consider starting a magazine. Out of that group myself and two journalists remained (Mary Beth Laviolette and Paula Gustafson) and became the editors. Circumstances dictated the form: having two experienced journalists as editors already defined the magazine as being less theoretical. We publish a range of articles to reach a range of readers. So people read the more accessible articles and then gradually move to the more theoretical.

Wah: But you see your magazine as really serving that function that Lorne was talking about earlier of reaching out.

Garneau: Yes. That is really important to me; that is, as an editor here. Now, as a writer, I am happy to have other sorts of opportunities as well.

Wah: Since this conversation comes partially out of the idea of 'intervening the text,' and here about the possible strategies about writing about art, I wonder if we could get back to that. Back to some of the instances of intervention. We know that you are trying to intervene the documentary, the history, the theory soup, what are some of the specific examples. For example, what about Mireille's catalogue.

Perron: That text (a series of very short stories, made by a collaboration of three artist/writers—two real, one fictive) is an element of the exhibition. I am tempted to collaborate on a text with other writers, because in my studio work I often collaborate with other artists. It is a direct importation from my studio practice.

Falk: In the past, I would write about a show, in terms of a review or a catalogue essay, would have been to have one session with the artist and spend a lot of time with the work, or I would look at the show, maybe look at it twice, and get to writing. My methodology has changed quite a lot, in the direction of collaboration. I would call it 'relational.' My primary source is not the library but the studio, where the work of art is made and exists before it goes into a gallery—and the artist who makes it. I negotiate a relationship with the artist and the work right from the very beginning. So I will say no to an essay unless I can spend at least six sessions over several months with the artist and the work. The next step is then to negotiate feed-back. Not only to find out if I am lying, but also because I don't get feed-back after publication, except to say, 'I really enjoyed your essay,' or 'It really got me thinking.' Well, none of that's useful. If I'm going to

support the artist's work, then why not ask the artist to support the writing.

Perron: That's interesting, it parallels the methodology of a curator. And you are a curator. As someone who is not a curator, sometimes I need a relationship with the artist and their work in order to make an interesting text, and other times it is the least of my concerns—I don't need it. That is not to dismiss your position, it is only to show that most of our writing methodologies are really closely linked to those other visual aspects of our life. And this is what I like, it comes from our art practice.

Gogarty: Sometimes I have written about exhibitions, not to slight the artist, but I have found in the work something that may have raised a passionate question, even a dispute, and the review has taken the form of a dispute. A particular work may become the focal point of an issue raised in the art community. I am thinking especially of the Garry William exhibition and its references to Joseph Beuys; I have a lot of questions about how Beuys has been picked up as a sort of mythical cult hero figure, uncritically, by many people in this community. That issue just happened to crystalize around Garry Williams, I know for myself I felt almost in bad faith and really had to negotiate that with Garry and say 'If I'm going to write about this work, I'm going to have to bring this up; if you can't deal with that, don't have me write about the piece. Because I can't write about this piece and not bring up this dispute. I think that is an interesting way for a review to function. Again, it may not be as great for the artist, I don't know, that may be an ethical question.

Garneau: Two years ago I wrote an article on the work of John Hall (well known Calgary photo-realist). It was what might be called a materialist reading of his work. The primary intent was to challenge the traditional reception of his work. As far as I could see he was written about in the same laudatory, unchallenging way; and yet many people in the art community had unpublished criticisms of his pictures. That text had a strategy that certainly had nothing to do with pleasing the artist, but everything to do with intervening previous criticism. Since then I rarely talk to artists about the work I am about to review. But I do talk to them about themselves, their procedures, reading, interests, so that I can appreciate the conditions within which the work was produced. I would like to bring their atmosphere to my reading, but not their readings. I want my written discussions of someone's work to be a reading, not a transcription of their thoughts about their work. I am not interested in journalistic descriptions authorized by the artist. No small part of the critic's job is to read the work back to the artist.

Perron: What is interesting is that this milieu is so young: I liked the phenomenon that happened to the John Hall text: in Calgary it was like the 'Urinal' of Marcel Duchamp—the text was just to test the context of the art milieu. And you now see that the context at that time was not ready, there

were not enough texts of that sort here yet. So because John Hall is a well-known artist, people were not used to seeing something that could be critical of it. It's not the time yet. When we have 150 well-known and famous artists here, well then it might be time.

Wah: How important is it to write about art? You have said that most shows don't have catalogues, is it important that they do?

Milthorp: I think that critical reviews are more important to the artist than a catalogue.

Wah: If they are important you could Xerox, you could make some cheap productions.

Garneau: I think the problem is still one of population, we haven't yet a large amount of critical visual art writers. And hey, I don't know about you all, but it takes me forever to put together a thoughtful review.

Perron: At a commercial gallery in Montreal, the owner didn't have enough money to produce a catalogue for every exhibition, but because she thought it was important to have an interesting discourse around the work, she paid writers a fee to write about the shows, hoping down the road to collect and bind them into an anthology.

Garneau: One importance of these texts is that, for students, it is an introduction to our discourse.

Perron: It is one of the many doors for the viewer/reader to come in. Visual art is often extremely sophisticated and not always easy to access.

Wah: Do you think that a person could be trained to write about art? Or should be trained?

Falk: I think they should be as smart and practical as anybody who wants to write well. They should be paid well to do it and have a good relationship with editors. If you were to look for the generic biography of the visual arts writer in Canada, my guess is it would be someone who comes out of the University, usually with an M.F.A. or M.A., who has somehow been tied into their community through an artist run organization, and thereby becomes involve in organizing events for visual art. They decide that writing is important, so they begin working their butts off to do it for a period of about five years, and at some point they desire to become an art critic and simultaneously discover that they are likely to make about \$750 a year at it. And as a result they stop writing and do something else. That's the pattern because that's what the Canadian milieu will bear.

Garneau: Part of your biography would include that fact that most of these people are hyper-actively involved in the art community. As writers, then, they need to be paid so that they can afford the time to write.

Perron: I would love to write an article a month, but because we are not being paid for it, and are already holding down a job or two to keep our studios, when I do write it ends up being a personal project, an extension of

my artistic practice, not a review.

Falk: At some point you have to take an ethical position on this. If Joan Stebbins from the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge phones up and wants me to write a catalogue essay, even though we've worked before, I'll say, 'That sounds very interesting, but what does it pay.' She'll say 'well what do you want?' and I'll say 'A dollar a word.' (laughter). And she'll laugh at me because most people are lucky to get 15 cents a word. But I think that everyone should get a dollar a word. I make a point of declaring that, and then I'll write anyway.

Perron: Sometimes we write less than we want because we can't afford the time. I think the reason we are bringing up the issue of money is because the majority of those who write for art magazines are not academics, certainly not full-time.

Falk: Personally, what's going to be interesting is to see whether or not I can start to publish in the literary community. Not with necessarily changing what I am writing about, but simply expanding the potential audience. Which might be a way of finding out if there is an intersection between these communities—which is already occurring on a theoretical level.

Wah: But the literary community is also a very nebulous one. If you were to ask, 'Could I write within the literary community here in Calgary, that would be more tangible. Certainly you would be able to write within a community, within a magazine like *Open Letter*, which is a particular community. But to say you want to write within the literary community of, say, *The Malahat Review*, that's a different proposition. In other words, its possible, the literary communities, like the art communities, are very specific.

Perron: I am not so interested in going into another field, what I would like would be to create an interdisciplinary community.

Garneau: To that, I hope next Fall to start an interdisciplinary magazine, *Post Age*. It would be a subscription container, an envelope with a variety of self-contained small texts, which could also include addresses of writers so they might correspond with each other, beyond or within subsequent envelopes.

Wah: Writers, I mean prose fiction writers, poets, outside the academy are in the same positions as visual artists. They write reviews, discuss texts and make statements very much along the same lines as our discussion this afternoon. When artists write about their art they'll run across similar problems. And I think there are a lot of strategies that could be shared. There is no literary community.

Garneau: Well, if you are suggesting a parallel assertion that there is no art community, I'd have to disagree. There are art communities.

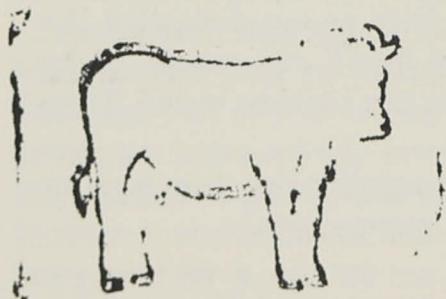
Wah: Oh ya, there are art communities.

Garneau: Yes but I'm worried about atomizing the art world. The surprising

fact of our general agreement here, on so many issues, speaks about our shared concepts.

Perron: It also speaks of the delicacy of our social and historical position at this moment: better to agree than disagree! We only go somewhere together, or we just don't go.

This panel discussion was transcribed from tape by David Gameau.





ISSN 0048-1939