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**Sprinkle Lunacy over Legs: A review of WoW workshop writing exercises**

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**Abstract**

*In the summer of 2021 I organised and facilitated a short series of three online workshops to launch the Ways of Writing in Art and Design Research Network (WoW). This article reviews the collaborative writing exercises I devised for the workshops, designed to explore potential approaches to writing in/on/about/beside/with art and design beyond the conventional academic essay and in relation to the condition and experience of living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The article adheres to academic convention in its presentation and format, while gently pushing against academic orthodoxies in its playful execution, as the text is interwoven with anecdotal asides, subjectivity, description, and metaphor. Alongside familiar staples of academic art writing, such as Barthes and Csikszentmihalyi, I draw on a broader range of resources that include poetry and song lyrics. Rather than set out to efficiently argue or prove a point or position, the writing takes a more meandering approach (it is littered with the academically maligned word ‘perhaps’). In this way I hope it has more in common with the ‘carrier bag’ approach of the gatherer, rather than follow the spear trajectory of the hunter (Le Guin, 2019).*

**Keywords**: workshops; writing exercises; writing in art & design; senses; COVID-19 pandemic; immersion.

**Introduction**

That a single word has multiple meanings according to the context in which it is used and to the subjective experience of its speaker, writer, listener, or reader, is no great revelation and constitutes one of the slippery joys of working and playing with language. Entries for the word ‘workshop’ in the *OED Online* are relatively modest in scope but include a concrete noun: ‘A room, small building, etc., in which goods are manufactured or repaired’ (OED Online 2021), a figurative noun: ‘a (notional) place in which things are produced or created’ (OED Online 2021) and a transitive verb: ‘To develop or improve (something) by means of a workshop’ (OED Online 2021). The French equivalent for the word workshop (‘atelier’) doesn’t appear in Roland Barthes’ list of amphibologies in his unconventional autobiography, *Roland Barthes* (2010), but when I encounter the word used in its academic and pedagogical sense (as figurative noun and transitive verb) I, with Barthes, resist allowing the context to force me to ‘choose one of the […] meanings and to forget the other[s].’ (2010: 72) and, instead, ‘insist on keeping both [or all] meanings, as if one were winking at the other’ (2010: 72). So, although I’m familiar with the concept of workshopping in an academic sense, the word for me still retains the ‘wink’ of a palpable physical space, a space containing workbench and tools, in which something is made or repaired. It’s a sensory affair, this winking workshop of mine and, perhaps, a little quaint with an abundance of roughly hewn wood, heavy canvas, and shafts of fizzing sunlight sharpening varied blades of steel. The air, fragrant with sawdust and resin, carries the strains of Bach, perhaps, or the indecipherably soothing tones of longwave cricket from a crackling and battered transistor radio.

So when I was asked to organise a series of workshops for an initiative originally called the Immersive Visual Culture Research Network (IVCN), now renamed Ways of Writing in Art & Design Research Network (WoW), the idea of physical making remained in the peripheries of my thinking. The ‘winking’ meaning of ‘workshop’ told me things should be cut, measured, chiselled, hammered, honed, disassembled, and reassembled. Fellow workshoppers, of course, might come along with their own versions of the word in mind – indeed this was the hope – there might be blasting, piercing, welding; hot showers of arcing sparks and revving engines keeping time with an arena-grade sound system pumping out Industrial Hardcore. Or the theatrical sense of workshopping might come into play. Shuffling scripts, improvisations, last-minute rewrites and discords and accords between word, voice, and body.

In line with the winking meaning of workshop as a site of making I devised two collaborative writing exercises for workshops one and two. I make no claims to originality for these exercises – they are largely versions of exercises I have encountered elsewhere customised to address key concerns of WoW. I was keen that the exercises not be too arduous, as the workshops took place on the heels of degree shows, marking, moderation, exam boards, etc., a year and a half into the Covid-19 pandemic and many, if not all, of us were close to exhaustion. More pertinently I wanted the exercises to be accessible for all levels of writing confidence – not a test of prowess. I also had in mind the potential for these exercises for use with Art & Design students in HEIs who are frequently (although not, of course, universally) underconfident in their writing ability and resistant to the mandatory ‘academic’ element of primarily studio-based degrees. I hope these exercises might introduce, expand upon, and try out approaches to writing that are, in some ways, analogous to studio practice (incidentally, ‘atelier’ can mean both workshop and artist’s studio). The aims for these exercises, for the workshops, and for the WoW network more broadly, coincide significantly with objectives set out by the Writing Purposefully in Art & Design (Writing-PAD) initiative, founded by Julia Lockwood and John Wood in 2002, and the ‘official organ’ of Writing-PAD, the Journal of Writing in Creative Practice (JWCP), launched in 2007, which ‘offers art and design institutions an arena in which to explore and develop the notion of thinking through writing as parallel to visual discourse in art and design practice’ (Writing-PAD, 2016).

**Exercise One: Collage/Montage Writing: Steal, Cut, Paste**

Exercise brief:

Below are links to three texts. There is no necessity to read these in advance nor, indeed, to read them in entirety at all – but it would be useful to have these texts available in an accessible form during the workshop. Participants will be invited to collage words and phrases from these texts to produce their own short texts, in any form (they might, for example, resemble (or be!) poetry, prose, or simply comprise lists of words and phrases) that in some way reflect their own experiences of the past year.

We may also use the ‘chat’ function to type in words and phrases we find particularly arresting/evocative/amusing/etc. to produce a group text.

[Patricia Lockwood, *London Review of Books* diary, 16 July 2020](https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n14/patricia-lockwood/diary)

[Juliet Sear’s sourdough lockdown loaf recipe from *This Morning*, November 2020](https://www.itv.com/thismorning/articles/juliet-sears-sourdough-lockdown-loaf)

[WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the Member State Information Session on COVID-19 10 June 2021](https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-member-state-information-session-on-covid-19---10-june-2021)

For the first workshop, *Pandemic Experience: Art experiences, research, and writing in lockdown*, held on 22 June 2021, the writing exercise employed an approach rooted in twentieth-century avant-garde literature and latterly adopted in various art writing practices. That is collage/montage writing or, in the words of Susannah Thompson, ‘Burroughsian ‘remixes’ of existing sources’ (2017: 102). Thompson’s article for the *JWCP*, ‘The dress of thought: Form and Style in contemporary art writing’, charts and analyses developments in styles of art criticism and art writing, within and beyond HEIs, in recent decades. It is interesting to note, with regard to the objectives of WoW and Writing-Pad, that although many HEIs have developed expanded approaches to writing in art & design (Susannah, for example, talked us through a module she designed that incorporated a range of writing genres and approaches into critical writing for art students), the dominant model in UK HEIs adheres to an approach that gained traction in the 1970s and 80s in which ‘the overtly politicized agenda of critics and historians […] and the growth of academic disciplines such as cultural studies, visual culture and media studies combined to establish a kind of critical orthodoxy’ (2017: 99). As someone who has worked as a Lecturer in Visual Culture, as Communications Manager at a public gallery, and as a freelance critic/art writer, I am often struck by disparities in style and approach between these three, nominally related, arenas. These exercises, I hope, take a small step towards thinking about how writing in HEI art and design courses might be more congruent with developments in art writing practices beyond HEIs.

The exercise related to two questions addressed in the first workshop pertaining to individual pandemic/lockdown experiences and the value and/or limitations of ‘non-academic’ research resources and writing outcomes:

* There has been a tendency in the media to assume a universal ‘we’re all in it together’ experience of the pandemic and lockdown (i.e. zoom meetings in pyjama bottoms and a surplus of free time in which to bake sourdough, learn Mandarin, and write your novel). What is the reality of this? How do individual factors, especially during lockdown, impact on the ability to immerse oneself in creative/academic practices?
* What are the possibilities, benefits and/or limitations of using ‘non-academic’ materials – e.g. fiction, poetry, blogs, graphic novels, film and television, computer games, journalism, food writing, jokes, song lyrics, zines, etc. – not merely as objects of analysis but as critical/analytical tools

I selected three non-academic texts – a diary excerpt, a recipe, and a transcript of an Information Session – as source material, or found objects, to be cut and spliced. Patricia Lockwood’s diary excerpt seemed relevant in its account of Lockwood’s experience of the Covid-19 virus and its impact on her reading and writing faculties – ‘Sentences were sometimes as clear as if they had been blown by bugles; at other times they were dribble that barely stayed fastened on the page’ (2020) – and in its playful irreverence towards that world-renowned institute of academia, Harvard University: ‘“Damn,” I said. “It never even occurred to me that Harvard was a guy.”’ (2020). (I was introduced to Patricia Lockwood, incidentally, at a series of online close reading workshops organized by *The Stinging Fly* magazine in 2020 – an experience that proved, had I previously been in any doubt, that the word ‘workshop’ may be interpreted in myriad ways according to the sensibilities and experience of its leaders and participants.)

Juliet Sear’s ‘sourdough lockdown loaf’ recipe was selected with a tongue-in-cheek reference to a media-wide assumption, in the UK, of a homogenized lockdown experience in which everyone suddenly found themselves with excess time on their hand in which they might take up new hobbies and embark on time-consuming baking enterprises – an assumption that failed to acknowledge the many whose workload, and/or risk of infection, radically increased during the pandemic. The jovial introduction to Sear’s recipe exemplifies the all-in-it-together narrative as she suggests that ‘Along with banana bread, it seemed sourdough saved our sanity earlier this year, as the nation baked their way through a long lockdown at home’ (2020). The issue of ‘sanity’, or mental health, became a growing concern (and something of a political football) during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The impact on mental health, nationally and worldwide, is yet to be fully understood. I hazard a guess, however, that it will take more than banana bread and sourdough to repair the damage.

I selected the transcript of the WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the Member State Information Session on COVID-19 (2021) as an acknowledgement of a widespread, frequently frustrated, need for reliable information on the progress of, and projections regarding, the pandemic.

I was delighted by the enthusiasm that met this first exercise. Participants joined the session with an array of quotations, poems, alternative recipes, and comments. The title of this article is stolen, in part, from a short contribution I found particularly memorable, funny, and strangely apt: ‘Sprinkle lunacy over legs, feet, arms and face until bubbling mush’ (Rintoul, 2021). Stickiness, (in)sanity, mush, and the taste of ‘a foreign penny’ (Lockwood, 2020), dominated the ‘chat’ responses. Below, two sample contributions begin to demonstrate the creative and critical potential for this relatively simple exercise and mode of approach:

All that was solid melts into the gooey and smooshy,

The viscosity of lungs, rising and falling, sticky with cells.

Icebergs float on soupy seas, the tip showing data which hides the truth beneath,

Podiums shelter the jagged truth,

slide shows abstract the human into numerical symbology, the inhuman script a rise and fall, a shipping forecast of stormy weather (Schwarz, 2021)

symptoms kisses streamed tears, a foreign penny, like a swamp thing.. mysterious powders like a lead apron. The bathtub, the first wave, wings like black leaves.. A red tide, along with banana bread. 100 grams. Leave to cool, a mixed picture across the world, for this exercise to be successful. (Anon, 2021)

**Exercise Two: Screening the senses**

Exercise brief:

We will show a short video clip with the sound muted. Participants are invited to respond to this clip in the ‘chat’ function in any fashion that comes to mind. At the same time we might note our awareness of our immediate, non-virtual/screen, environment. What else, as we watch the clip, is competing for the attention of our senses?

Following a group discussion of our responses we will repeat the exercise – this time with sound – and discuss ways in which the addition of sound and knowledge of each other’s responses impacts on our experience of the video.

The exercise I devised for the second workshop was, in terms of written outcomes, less productive than the first. It raised and emphasized, however, a number of issues around the experience of workshopping and communicating in cyberspace. This exercise also addressed the question of immersion that was key concern in the inception of the research network:

* What does it mean to be immersed in art/design experiences, research, and writing? And how does the pandemic and lockdown restrictions impact on possibilities for immersion?

Returning to the *OED Online*, the entry for ‘immersive’ is due an update as it is classified as ‘obsolete’ with only two example quotations cited, both from the seventeenth century (OED, 2019). Its current frequency of use is stated as very low (band two). Those who regularly read gallery press releases, exhibition guides, and catalogue essays, however, will know that claims for immersive art experiences have become increasingly prolific over the past two decades. Developments in technology, such as virtual reality, digital projection, and holography, have also effected an increased frequency of use in other sectors such as gaming, entertainment, and museology.

In the course of the workshops we discussed the appropriateness, or continued usefulness, of the words ‘immersion’ and ‘immersive’ to denote states of profound engagement with research, writing, art & design practice, and art & design experience. Its recent proliferation, and its increasing association with virtual reality, augmented reality, holography, and other digital technologies, may diminish the scope of its meaning in the same way that ‘virtual’ is now understood predominantly as belonging to the realm of cyberspace. My subjective response to the word ‘immersive’, especially in relation to virtual or augmented reality, is wary. Having experienced episodes of psychosis, I know my consciousness is fully capable of augmenting reality without digital assistance. ‘Immersive experience’ implies, and frequently entails, a takeover of the senses and my instinctive resistance to such attempts on my person, frequently deters the possibility of meaningful immersion as my consciousness adopts a defensive stance of alertness.

A preferable word may be ‘absorption’ – the pleasure of a dissolved superego drawn into, and merging with, the task or text in hand –analogous or congruent with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ which is primarily characterized by:

(a) clear sense of what has to be done moment by moment; (b) immediate feedback as to how well one is doing; (c) an intense concentration of attention; (d) a balance between opportunities for action (challenges) and capacity to act (skills); (e) exclusion of irrelevant content from consciousness; (f) a sense of control over the activity; (g) a distortion of sense of time – usually hours pass by in minutes; and (h) a feeling that the activity is intrinsically rewarding, or worth doing for its own sake. (2000: 381)

Although usually associated with a deep sense of enjoyment (happiness itself, no less) and creativity, Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that flow is ‘morally neutral’ and that it’s equally possible to experience flow in ‘destructive activities such as warfare or various forms of addiction’ (2000: 381). Like immersion and flow, my idea of absorption is not unambiguously positive. Returning to the *OED Online* the first entry for absorption, now obsolete, is ‘The action or process of swallowing up or engulfing a material thing’ (OED, 2021). And, winking ominously at its meaning as a state of engrossment, is its third entry: ‘Disappearance through incorporation in or assimilation into something else’ (OED, 2021), which, like certain immersive experiences, has parallels in psychosis – as a blurring or sensed disappearance of the boundary between self and world is experienced by many people diagnosed with psychotic conditions. The easy bleed between creative and profound immersion and psychotic experience needs to be taken into account, I believe, when considering the accessibility and inclusivity of pedagogical approaches driven by the concept of immersion.

Serendipitously, subconsciously perhaps, the video clip I selected for the exercise, Judy Garland performing the song *Get Happy* in the film *Summer Stock* (1950), refers to an older definition of immersion – ‘The administration of Christian baptism by the dipping or plunging of the whole person in water’ (OED, 2019) – in the lines ‘We’re heading across the river/ Throw your sins away in the tide’ (Koehler, 1930). The song also posits a promise of happiness gained through the surrender of the self to an external entity that is, in this instance, the Christian God Himself.

While I adore it, the Garland clip is not as unambiguously uplifting as one might wish. Knowledge of Garland’s struggle with drug and alcohol dependency impacted on the group’s reception of the clip – suffusing the artificially pink-hued positivity with an air of despair. Superficially the performance appears controlled, spontaneous, and vibrant, but our workshop group noted some jarring edits that suggest a more arduous and fragmented process that was mirrored, in some ways, by our execution of the writing exercise, which felt less spontaneous and more exposing than the first exercise. In contrast to the first exercise, for which time was available to ‘rehearse’ and hone written responses ahead of the workshop, the results of this second exercise were more hesitant, fragmented and uncertain, yet somehow more eloquent of pandemic/lockdown experience for precisely those qualities.

The first thing the exercise highlighted was the impact of context on the experience of consuming/viewing/engaging with cultural texts. *Summer Stock* was made to be viewed on a large screen in the communal and specialized space of a movie theatre – conditions that ensured a certain degree of parity of experience for the audience. Our workshop group, by contrast, watched a truncated clip of from a variety of separate locations, through variously sized, relatively small, screens and with varying degrees of technological audio/visual capacity and broadband reliability.

The first showing of the clip was shared with the soundtrack muted to leave greater space for interpretation and conjecture. The absence of sound also emphasized the impact of all senses on our reception of cultural texts and allowed us to consciously note the impact of our immediate surroundings, so far removed from movie theatre conditions, on our ability to focus on the clip and find something to say or write about it. Mostly participating from our own homes, various distractions such as children, neighbours, tweeting birds, barking dogs, snoring dogs, electricians, and a low-pitched hum, competed with the screen for attention.

The omission of sound was also in response to the impact the pandemic and lockdowns had on day-to-day sensorial experience. Our sensorial worlds, during lockdown, were significantly reduced. Sensory losses may have included the presence and touch of friends and family; the smell of the studio; the sound of the underground; the taste of Brick Lane bagels; and the sight of a loved one’s face unmediated by screen or window. The symptoms of the virus itself, of course, impacted the senses. I was fortunate to not catch COVID-19 until after the roll-out of the vaccination programme for my age group (in the final workshop I could be seen catching it ‘live’ as I sat in a hotel room with my microphone muted and camera angled to hide the sight and sound of my coughing teenage son prostrated on the other side of the room). The loss of my senses of taste and smell impacted on my sense of reality far more than I would have anticipated. Familiar objects, rooms, the garden, and even my cat, felt distant and estranged without the scent, that I had previously not been conscious of discerning, that surreptitiously announced their presence. The world without scent appeared as if through the wrong end of a telescope or rendered with the uncanniness of a Hitchcockian dolly zoom. A sense of vulnerability ensued as I could not easily discern the freshness of my food or the possibility of a kitchen fire. Honeysuckle and sweet peas had bloomed in the garden, their beauty diminished by their lack of fragrance.

Technological glitches in individual computer set-ups disrupted the possibility for parity of experience in watching the Garland clip, as some of us watched out of sync or frozen images with various qualities of sound (in the second viewing). Barthes’ winking amphibologies are brought to mind once more as one comment in the ‘chat’ transcript declares ‘I’m frozen’ (WoW, 2021), leaving me to wonder whether they meant their screen had frozen with Judy mid-kick or hat-tilt, that they couldn’t think of anything to write, or whether they were physically very cold.

A section of the ‘chat’ transcript below demonstrates some of the fragmented, out of sync, partially distracted, responses to this exercise. The partiality of the transcript, which omits spoken and visual communications between participants, further emphasizes a sense of disjointed fragmentation. It also, however, hints at the compensatory resourcefulness and camaraderie of the group and of the humour that imperfections, interruptions, and gaps in expectation and understanding, afford:

Hopefully everyone can see the video!

I can

Yes I can

Yes all good

It’s quite jerky which makes it seem even further away in time and space

I can I can I can I can-can

its so PINK

Staccato motion is interesting

I use a delay. To write somewhere else before the chat.

Think pink – a number from another favourite musical of mine – Funny Face

I have an electrician working in my house so there’s a different soundtrack!

my dog is snoring beneath me so they are dancing to the beat of his breath

I’m frozen.

a longing to be doing it

Or Material Girl by Madonna

Legs

Very legs focused

How funny (WoW, 2021).

**By Way of Conclusion**

I conclude with an unexpected association evoked by the concluding pages of the online workshop ‘chat’ transcript – the prolonged thanks and goodbyes – that recall a celebrated instance of creative quotation/appropriation/theft that spans centuries, from Shakespeare (2008: 300), to T.S. Eliot (1974), to Lou Reed (1972):

HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

(Eliot, 1974)

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**Illustration:**

Suzanne Barrett, *WoW Workshop Judy*, 2021. Digital painting. © Suzanne Barrett 2021

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