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(2977 words)

Editorial

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It started with a conversation. Rachael Miles, Clair Schwarz and I (all contributors to this special issue) were sat in the Visual Culture office at the University of the West of England's City Campus, exhausted from the year's teaching and fantasizing about a publication we wanted to create. We would invite a series of contributors, mainly outside of art and design Higher Education and its associated critical discourses, to address a specific visual artefact through the lens of their own form of writing. What would it mean, for example, to extend beyond the academic essay or critical review into other forms of writing that could be turned towards visual analysis, such as a recipe or a piece of flash fiction? Our sense was not, in fact, that there was anything tired or outmoded about conventional forms of writing about creative practice, but that the available repertoire was limited. Released from the weight of marking and associated admin at the end of the academic year, with exam boards completed and statistics analysed, we let ourselves imagine a project that would be unshackled from the methods by which rigour in academic work is usually evidenced and measured. We talked about the feeling of being immersed in creative practice, and writing 'with' or 'alongside', rather than about, visual artefacts in ways that avoid the tyranny of certainty and the need to explain the work or secure its meaning. This is to treat an artwork or other type of creative practice as a fellow subject, not an object to be written about.

This special issue maintains the spirit of this initial conversation if not the specific form. It represents the overlap between our teaching practice in Visual Culture at the University of the West of England (UWE), our commitment to cross-disciplinary forms of engagement with creative practice, and our desire to experiment with the relationship between writing and/as making. With support in the form of a Research Network grant from UWE, we set up what was originally called the Immersive Visual Cultures Network and subsequently renamed the Ways of Writing in Art and Design Research Network (WoW). The network grew to include those working in fine art, illustration, print, zines and immersive writing, as well as a wider scope of visual culture specialists both within UWE and beyond. We refined the network's focus so that it was rooted in Visual Culture pedagogy and ways of writing in/through/alongside/with art and design. Finally, the WoW network was launched in June 2021 with a series of three workshops created and facilitated by artist, writer and Associate Lecturer in Visual Culture Linda Taylor. It was as a result of these workshops that Julia Lockheart invited us to put together this special issue.

The workshops were held on Collaborate and took place during June-July 2021. Each event felt like a much-needed injection of enthusiasm and creativity in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early stages of our conversation about immersion and writing we could not have imagined that our working lives would be moved entirely online for the duration of the project. However, far from accepting that an online workshop could only ever be a poor relation to its physical counterpart, Linda devised a set of three events that were as innovative as they were enjoyable.

The first workshop was called 'Pandemic Experience: art experiences, research, and writing in lockdown'. It focused on discussion prompted by a series of questions including: how do the pandemic and lockdown restrictions impact on how we experience art and design and how we research, practice, and write? What does it mean to be immersed in art/design experiences, research, and writing? And how do the pandemic and lockdown restrictions impact on possibilities for immersion? We sought the experiences of students as well as academics and were mindful of the incredible achievements of our final-year undergraduates who had surprised and delighted us with their extraordinary response to writing during the first year of the pandemic. Visual Culture at UWE is situated within the School of Art and Design and teaches into all undergraduate programmes within the school: Art and Writing, Drawing and Print, Fine Art, Graphic Design, Illustration, Interior Design, Fashion Textiles, and Fashion Communication. The third-year undergraduates had, like so many others, completed a module called Independent Research Project (akin to a dissertation module) online, whilst often coping with limited bandwidth and inadequate living conditions in addition to feelings of insecurity, loss and isolation as a result of the pandemic. In a break from our previous pattern, we had taught the module intensively from September-November 2019 and been impressed by the high levels of student engagement. In workshop one we discussed the reality of writing during periods of lockdown, for students and staff, and then took part in a collective writing exercise, which is discussed in detail in Linda Taylor's contribution to this issue.

The second workshop was called 'Citation Required?: Modes of critical/analytical writing beyond the academy'. This focussed on modes of writing in art and design

and was prompted by questions such as: What is meant by 'academic' or 'scholarly' approaches to writing about art and design? What are the conventions of academic writing and how useful and/or relevant are these in relation to art and design practice, critique, and analysis? In what ways, if any, do you employ 'non-academic' materials – for example, fiction, poetry, theatre, social media, graphic novels, film and television, computer games, song lyrics, jokes, operas, journalism, zines, and so on – in your own practice and research? What are the benefits/possibilities and/or limitations of presenting critical analyses in forms other than the conventional academic essay or dissertation? This was followed by a second writing exercise, which foregrounded collaborative thinking and is, again, discussed in detail in Linda Taylor's article for this issue.

The third and final workshop was called 'Presentations and Conversations'. For this session Julia Lockheart presented on Writing-PAD, the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, and the new Contextual Practices module she was designing for UWTSD; Mary Anne Francis presented on her visual essay for her Bloomsbury publication *Mixed Forms of Visual Culture: From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Digital Diversity* (see Mary Anne Francis' contribution to this issue); and Clair Schwarz presented on her short film, *Eyedrops: A Monoculogue* (see Clair Schwarz's article in this issue). In addition to the content, which was inspiring and imaginative, there was something about the atmosphere of the workshops that felt important. They were non-hierarchical, generous, supportive and enjoyable; indicative of an inter-subjective approach to writing in/through/alongside/with art and design that we hope to have achieved in the contributions to this issue. Peppered throughout the articles and other types of contribution are illustrations by Suzanne Barrett. The illustrations are

based on the workshop events and provide a visual record that speaks to the time in which the project was developed. The workshops felt more human than online meetings often do, less stultifying and more caring. There was a desire to soften the edges of the online etiquette that was emerging at the time, which is evoked in Barratt's characterisation of the screen space we shared including drawn toolbar icons and indications of activity such as the mute and record icons. The domestic spaces in which we were all working at that time are visible as are the angles from which we viewed ourselves and each other.

We start the issue with Linda Taylor's article 'Sprinkle Lunacy over Legs: A review of WoW workshop writing exercises', which is a reflection on the collaborative writing exercises Taylor designed and facilitated for the first two WoW workshops.

Beginning with an expanded understanding of the workshop as a site of thinking and making, this article reveals a playful attitude towards writing engendered by the exercises. The writing tasks were presented, and experienced, as invitations to play through techniques such as collaging words found in pre-selected texts, experimenting with the impact of different senses on our reading of a cultural text, and noticing the interference of external factors within the domestic environment on our understanding of a shared visual experience. Taylor's article also reflects on the use of the 'chat' function throughout the writing exercises, which elicited a form of writing that is fragmented, partial and at times distracted. Attending to the tenor of the chat enables the author to reflect on the humour and camaraderie of the group, which created a particular kind of atmosphere in which writing experiments can take place.

The atmosphere of the writing exercises resonates with the concept of 'creative allyship', which is discussed in Rebecca Bell's article 'Untrammelled Ways: Reflecting on the Written Text, Nourishment and Care in Online Teaching'. Reflecting on the experience of online teaching during COVID, Bell argues for the possibilities of nourishment through the concept of hope. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, bell hooks and Arturo Escobar, Bell asks if we can use the historical present to encourage us to think in an untrammelled manner. The article considers the ways in which creative allyship is formed between staff and students, with the written text as a start point for expressions of care and emotional openness.

The concept of creative allyship between staff and students takes place in a wider historical trajectory of thinking about the place of writing in art and design education. This contextual landscape is mapped in Jenny Rintoul's article "I came here to do Art, not English": antecedent subject subcultures meet current practices of writing in art and design education'. Rintoul offers a historical mapping of staff and student socialisation through which writing has been erroneously positioned as other to practice as part of a broader division between theory and practice, writing and making. Drawing on Ivor Goodson's work on 'antecedent subject subcultures' (1995), Rintoul discusses the BTEC International Level 3 Extended Diploma in Art and Design (EDAD), which acts as a bridge from school to Higher Education. Ultimately, Rintoul argues that subject cultures are both made and have the potential to be re-made by students, tutors and managers in HE. It is, therefore, a hopeful position that chimes with the desire to think beyond the writing/making binary expressed in different ways by other contributors to this issue.

In the next three contributions the authors challenge, in various ways, the writing/making binary by using forms of writing that are often ignored or considered unacademic. Rachael Miles' piece, 'Desk Job', is a text/image work that invites us to consider the relationship between writing, labour and the material conditions of working-class life. At once personal and polemical, Miles invokes transgressional acts of writing – scoring into a school desk or scribbling on a toilet wall – to raise issues that matter in Visual Culture pedagogy such as honest expression and (lack of) access to material and cultural resources.

Anthony Cartwright's illustrated article, "'But What Are They?": Zine-making and invitational creative practice in an undergraduate Creative Writing class inspired by the work of Lynda Barry', reports on work undertaken by third year undergraduate students on the Creative and Professional Writing programme at UWE. As part of a module called 'Creative Writing and the Self', students created zines that spoke of their experiences during the pandemic. Drawing on Kirtley's idea of 'invitational rhetoric' (2014), Cartwright explores the pedagogical implications of this form of working, which is characterised by observation, openness and provisionality.

The experience of living and writing through the pandemic is the basis for Joanne Lee's illustrated article 'Sheffield in virus time: forms of writing, reading, living'. Lee gives us an insight into her daily practice of writing a journal, which started in the early stages of the first UK lockdown and has now reached 700,000 words. Contextualised amongst the work of a range of creative and critical diarists, Lee positions her own creative journaling as 'an act of thinking in public'. Her entries are interspersed with questions and observations that reflect on her own journaling such

as 'What is this sort of writing? Who is it for? What does it do?'. There are several themes that weave their way through the chosen entries including care, ongoingness, mycelium-like threads between fragments of ideas, and repair, some of which chime with other contributions to this issue (see, for example, Clare Johnson's article for a discussion of ongoingness, Rebecca Bell's article for a discussion of care, and Hat Fidkin's contribution for a scripto-visual discussion of fungal connections). Reflecting on the project, Lee shares her understanding of it as having 'shifted my writing in creative practice to writing as a practice for creating life'.

In the next two contributions our attention is turned to the visuality of writing first introduced in Rachael Miles' polemic. Mary Anne Francis' 'On the visuality of writing: a visual essay' can be understood as an introduction to writing's visual effects, presented as visually arresting sets of examples. As a guide to the visuality of writing, it aims to encourage those writing in art and design to realise that as much as they communicate through the structures of verbal language, this also has a visual dimension that they can use, especially when the verbal takes written form. The text aims to identify the key aspects of writing's visuality as approached through one theory of art (Hegel's aesthetics). It takes its cue from all-too-few predecessors, notably John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), and is indebted to the copy-left movement, which enables a visual essay that uses quoted material to be produced without incurring formidable copyright-related restrictions.

This is followed by Hat Fidkin's contribution, which has two parts. Fidkin was a third-year undergraduate in Art & Writing at UWE in 2020-21. They were part of the first cohort to experience their final year during the pandemic and were the recipient of



the inaugural Visual Culture Outstanding Student Award. Here we have reproduced the essay that Fidkin wrote for the Visual Culture Independent Research Project module and presented at the annual Undergraduate Research Symposium, hosted by UWE's Visual Culture Research Group ([vcrg.co.uk](http://vcrg.co.uk)) in March 2021. 'Matter Poetics, Melange and the Lichenised Posthuman – how artists and writers present visions of an inter-connected life between man and non-human others in the age of the Anthropocene' uses Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and the fictional drug Melange to think through the fragility of the human condition at a time of intense anxiety about the breaching of boundaries. The author thinks with, and writes alongside, a variety of sources drawn from literature, critical theory, film and conceptual art. More rhizomatic than linear, Fidkin's approach is mycelial in form yet never strays far from the precarity of the time in which it was written. Presented to the editors of this issue as a series of image files, the article nods to the visuality of writing explored in Mary Anne Francis' visual essay. This is followed by Fidkin's visual response to their original essay, which was produced 18 months later and is unfettered from the constraints of assessment regulations and institutional expectations of what constitutes academic writing. The relationship between the two parts of this contribution raise questions about the parameters in which students' work is made (institutional and environmental) and assessed.

The final two articles return, in different ways, to the activity of writing as making in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also return to the question of wellbeing and care as part of the thinking/writing/making process and address the complexity of what it means to 'be well' in this process, specifically through the idea of creative avoidance. Clare Johnson's article, 'Searching for Lauren Berlant: reflections on

writing, temporality and loss', is a reflection on the search for insight during a time of intense claustrophobia and failure to write. It follows a journey of thought about attachment, temporal rhythms and the hidden work of lockdown through the lens of Lauren Berlant's work, searching for an aid to understanding and finding it in unexpected places.

In the final article of this special issue we return to one of the workshops that launched the WoW project. Clair Schwarz's article 'Iris in, Iris Out: Reflections on the production, exhibition, and viewing of a bisected-eyeball hand-puppet' discusses and contextualises the making, viewing and re-presentation of the author's short film *Eyedrops: A Monocologue* (2021). The film features a speaking dissected eye hand puppet constructed from everyday household materials such as Amazon cardboard packaging; an eye/mouth entity that voices both the author's anxiety about failing sight and public fears about loss of power in the age of Coronavirus. It was originally made for a project that responded to the health and wellbeing exhibitions at Arnolfini gallery, Bristol, in 2020-2021, but then re-presented at our final WoW workshop in July 2021. In this article, Schwarz puts in motion the essence of the WoW project, writing not *about* the film but *with* and *alongside* it, as if treating the film and the eye hand puppet at its core as a fellow subject, even a trusted friend.

The issue is a collaborative constellation of articles, polemic, reflection, visual essay and illustration. The sequence of contributions has been curated by Rachael Miles and interspersed with visual reminders of the workshop activity at its core through the illustrations by Suzanne Barrett. These serve, also, as a reminder of the overlapping modalities of the domestic and academic through which we have

variously written in/through/with/alongside/as creative practice. Our hope is that the spirit of the project – generous, non-hierarchical and experimental – comes across and that the wider discussion looks towards writing as a practice of care.

## References

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