



Notes from Emptiness (2018), Jagrut Raval

Dharti Arts Residency
A Serendipity Arts
Foundation initiative

Venue Old Goa Institute of
Management

Dharti Arts Residency
A Serendipity Arts
Foundation initiative

Venue Old Goa Institute of
Management

Dharti Arts Residency

A Serendipity Arts Foundation initiative

Critic-in-residence *Kamayani Sharma*

Programme Designer *Gayatri Uppal*

Artists *Jagrat Raval, Khushbu Patel, Pannaga Jois and Ravi Kumar*

Chaurasiya

Dharti Arts Residency is a three-month artists' residency based in New Delhi. Conceptualised as an intensive, studio-based residency for emerging artists, Dharti provides its residents space and resources to develop their practice, work on a new project, and interact with the broader art community in the city. The residency is held annually between the months of May and August.

In the course of the three months, the four artists selected for the programme participate in a lineup of peer-to-peer conversations, critique sessions, gallery and studio visits, artist talks and presentations etc. Alongside, they will be required to conceptualise and produce a new work. The residency concludes with a week-long open studio.



Does air have a problem passing through
my narrow nasal passage?

Breaking Opacity in Micro Pieces (2018); Khushbu Patel

Loving with Language: Reflections on Writing Alongside Art

KAMAYANI SHARMA

I.

The Internet is acerbic. There exists a website that has been set up to generate random “art criticism” quotes in response to any five-digit number.

http://www.pixmaven.com/phrase_generator.html¹

The sentences spewed out by the algorithm are expectedly pretentious; an obvious joke about the opacity of language that often plagues its own use in the serious discussion of art. It’s funny because it’s true.

II.

A scene in *Velvet Buzzsaw* (2019), a film satirising the horrors of the art world, features a conversation between an art enthusiast and icy critic Morf Vandewalt:

“I heard he was crushed.”

“By the car?”

“Your review.”²

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

It's a telling depiction, one tapping into a stock characterisation, inadvertently echoed by the term "critic-in-residence," as if one were talking about a disapproving, verbose parent, waiting at the dinner table to find faults in the art made in the course of the day. The reality is a lot less contentious. When I took up the role of critic for the Dharti Arts Residency at Serendipity Arts Foundation in the summer of 2018 it was with an interest in reordering my relationship with art. Instead of encountering finished or resolved artworks in a controlled setting—a gallery or museum—I was keen to respond to the often-messy processes they entailed, in the studio.

*

There is a lure to experiencing the unfolding of someone else's art, seeing it transform from a thought to a physical thing. It's a lure similar to the heady promise of the present tense, a temporal register in which the writer tracks events, converting the world into text as it happens, walking the length of sentences to discover how they might end.

My reflections on writing about art that was yet to be created were nourished by those of Grant Kester. He considers the role of criticism in relation to now-ubiquitous "dialogical" social art practices, which are characterised by collaboration, extended duration, simultaneity of production and reception and a lack of predictability about their final form. One of his chief concerns, most relevant to mine during Dharti, is the nature of the conversation between the physical effects of the work and its abstract appeal. Kester's argument in favour of a mutually illuminating dynamic of actual processes and conceptual frames resonated with me. Dialogue becomes a governing principle in a residency space where the critic is present. The shot/reverse-shot model of conventional criticism (recognisable from film scenes in which two characters have a conversation), based on the spatiotemporal gap between the moment of exhibition and that of critique, doesn't apply to the residency.

"When does the work begin and when does it end? What are the boundaries of the field within which it operates, and how were they determined? At the most basic level, can we even agree as to what constitutes the object of criticism? Because we are dealing with an unfolding process, rather than, or in addition to, a discrete image, object, or event defined by set limits of space (the walls of a gallery) or time (the duration of a performance or commission), these questions become decisive in the analysis of the work."³

III.

What are the modes of engagement possible for a critic during a three-month tenure of witnessing the synthesis of art?

Art writing is a broad umbrella, under which criticism huddles. No doubt there is a smattering of opportunity for publication in niche magazines and news outlets but at least in South Asia, the writing itself is often limited to the reportorial, without a strong evaluative component. Perhaps that's because a dedicated reading public is comparatively scant. Within the art world itself, unprotected by the distance necessary for assessment, the art writer cannot be a judge and is often an accomplice. Within this insular sphere, two ready options seem to be: that of a curator or that of a catalogue contributor. Let us consider them, briefly.

The word "curator" comes from the Latin word meaning "to care"; it has an ecclesiastical ancestry, originally signifying a member of the clergy who tended to souls. In its secular sense, it broadly refers to a person who either preserves cultural artefacts or organises exhibitions, developing a proposition and choosing works that speak to it. Girish Shahane has argued that contemporary curators, while powerful in the global market of biennales and blockbuster shows, have become invested in the non-aesthetic claims of art—moral or political, for example—rather than its phenomenal, autonomous qualities. Often the emphasis on the ideas behind the art reveals a commitment to ideology at the expense of "the sensible."⁴

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

"... what has always attracted people to art, and continues to do so, is precisely what critics focus upon, and curators, at least in their writing, frequently ignore: the relationship, irreducible and untranslatable bond, formed between artwork and spectator in the act of viewing."⁵

This "writing" which he playfully calls "curatorspeak" is informed by declarative statements in theor-ese⁶ meant to demonstrate the value of art as mainly a sociopolitical function rather than an expressive one.

Kester supports Shahane's thesis when he points out how much contemporary criticism has become absurdly formulaic, furnishing a sort of mathematical "proof" of what the art is "supposed" to do, rather than its actual effects on the viewer.⁷ In the Euro-American context it has been suggested that this has to do with the turn towards conceptual art. In India, over the past couple of decades and particularly with the growth of the art market in the mid-2000s, there has been a tendency to "legitimise" writing on art for a global viewership through obscurantist text. Usually glimpsed on the walls of galleries, this is the sort of writing that Internet generators lampoon.

This brings me to the second choice of role for the critic in a residency: that of a catalogue contributor.

Besides curators, influential art writers—this includes critics and historians—frequently pen essays for exhibitions in well-known galleries and museums. Having written my share of term papers, I can attest to the academic slant that invariably creeps into this genre of art writing, a close cousin of curatorspeak. There is often a fervent need to explain the works, the writer resorting to a deductive exercise—premise 1- premise 2-conclusion—meant to reveal everything to a presumably clueless reader.

This manages a hat-trick of pedantry: it robs the artwork of its autonomy, subordinates the language of the artist to that of the writer, and infantilises the spectator-reader seeing the work and

perhaps engaging with the discourse around it. Sure, usually some explanation is welcome, especially for viewers and readers who may not be conversant with art history, but ironically, this is accomplished in a language so rooted in its dense, theoretical habitat that it is unable to be grafted into a wider readership. The language of these essays is frequently larded with gatekeeping jargon, causing it to congeal around the art objects and rendering them invisible.

I reject both these positions, of curator and catalogue essayist.

IV.

I am not a curator—I was neither involved in the selection of artists nor can I say that I played a noteworthy role in deciding how the exhibition would be mounted. Jagrut Raval, Khushbu Patel, Pannaga Jois and Ravi Kumar Chaurasiya are all artists with an astute understanding of their relationships to the mediums they work with, as well as the questions they want to ask.

On the opening night of the residency's Open Studio in Delhi, someone compared my involvement with the artists-in-residence to that of an editor. This is a descriptor I am more comfortable with, given that I have both helped edit an art magazine and, as a writer, had the good fortune of working with some excellent editors. Over the course of the three months in which I interacted with the artists at Dharti, meeting them at least once a week for long and thorough discussions, I tried to understand their intentions and gave extensive responses. I suggested tweaks, shared readings and lookings (yes, it should be a word in our line of work, the consumption of images is central) and spent a lot of time asking questions and hearing them out. There are less rewarding aspects to editing that have nothing to do with the people and everything to do with the nature of the craft—it can seem thankless as one's labour might be rendered invisible, effaced before the masterpiece (one hopes!) one has contributed to. This is in no way similar to the "star status" of the curator.

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

But, ironically, also in this sense, the spirit of what I was doing at Dharti was close to the way in which Hans Ulrich Obrist talks about the role of the curator as an enabler.⁸ It's a word that gets pejoratively used these days for those who encourage self-destructive habits, and I facetiously mention this because art can be one too. But since the Dharti studio was not a den of vice, I'll stick to my original use of the word, as someone who supports and helps. It's a quasi-therapeutic dynamic, in that there is a lot of listening and imagining of what's going on in another person's mind.

But as much as I would indulge that metaphor, I also resist it. In doing so, I reject the abstruse approach of the theoriser. I'm thinking of Susan Sontag's eloquent repudiation of the brute interpretive strategies that Freudian psychoanalysis exemplified: "as it excavates, it destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a subtext which is the true one."⁹ This is akin to the rough handling of the art object, in the way it masquerades as donnish attention in the catalogue essay that has all of the curator's spiel and none of their care. In fact, the conversation that should be occurring between the artwork and the viewer is now taking place between the curator/theoriser and critic.

The relationship of love between art and art enthusiast seems to be missing.

I mean love not in the sense of naïve applause but in the deeper sense of attention and care, which does not preclude opinion, even a harsh one. After all, part of love is unflinching candour and authenticity of response.

V.

"...acts of criticism which would supply really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art ...we need an erotics of art."¹⁰

- Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, Part I

The four artists have distinct practices unbound by any framework, and I, choosing to be neither curator nor theoriser, cannot superimpose one on the exhibition. Thus, I must define for myself my task as critic in this specific context, but it mimics the external conditions I have elucidated before.

The question is twofold:

1. In the absence of a curatorial proposition, what is at stake?
i.e.
Why write?
2. What alternative forms can a critical essay take?
i.e.
How to write?

I ask the first question keeping in mind Geeta Kapur's essay for the seminal 1981 exhibition, *Place for People*.¹¹ A survey of abstraction against which the "repressed" strand of narrative Indian art was staged, Kapur's piece acquired the status of a manifesto from a vantage point decades after the moment. Why I bring that specific show up is also because Kapur too disagreed with being characterised as a curator, stating that she was part of the exhibiting group, "the seventh member," she reiterated in a conversation in August 2018.¹²

But unlike the sense of community and ideological affinity that spawned that landmark show, a residency space to which strangers are invited cannot establish relations among participants in such a manner. There is no graph to plot coordinates on; the ground is of a different texture, and the figures disparate. No uniting force exists to artificially structure the show. Further, it needn't be retrofitted with one to derive meaning like some hermeneutic ninja manoeuvre.

Perhaps testament to its vintage, I returned to Sontag's notion of erotics while making my notes and doing my research. At one level, it is compatible with Kester and Shahane's encouragement to attend to the artwork qua itself, before launching into language. On another, it

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

was a felicitous method for the companionate position I had taken up vis-à-vis the artists.

With this in mind, the programme that I created for myself was spread out over two phases: the first was the three-month period of the residency during which I witnessed the artists' processes, and the second was the four months of actually drafting the essays. The chief challenge was developing an approach that would allow me to remain authentic to the artists' vision but also avoid ventriloquism. In order to develop a text that was both record and interpretation, I had to imagine it as a transversal line slicing two parallel ones: the artists and the future spectator-readers. This would allow the essay to have a relationship with both parties while retaining its independence as a piece of writing in its own right.

Love became a vector along which I tried to plot the transversal.

VI.

"(to write on something is to outmode it.)"¹³

- Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 98

In the contemporary scenario, when the connection between art objects and words is tenuous and unconvincing, how can language intervene, acknowledge the loving gaze and effect the mediation?

Rosalind Krauss, doyenne of the very tendency Kester opposes (and this opposition can be a moment of productive agonism), calls this sort of Barthesian move "paraliterary." It "simply cannot be called criticism but it cannot for that matter be called not-criticism either. Rather criticism finds itself in a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides, divigations."¹⁴

The form of the zine became a template because of its collage-like aesthetic that allowed for a range of elements to be orchestrated on

one plane with equal importance. Different categories of texts and images could be excerpted, cited and assembled in one place. This approach let me facilitate conversations between various registers, rhetorical flexes and inspirations that were guiding the artists.

I wove into each essay fragments of conversations, visual and literary references that had informed their work and images of the work-in-progress to challenge the top-down strategy of imposing onto finished works a vocabulary not tailored for it. Over these I tried to spread a cobweb of philosophical and historical analysis, the material of criticism, allowing the artworks to catch the light filtered in through the gossamer, directing the spectator-reader's gaze.

Thus, the Dharti essays were representational in that they indexed the actual artistic process leading to the works—the conversations and labour—while exceeding the limits of the representational to become commentaries on the works themselves. In this sense, the essays were both mimetic and hermeneutic: a translation of the exhibition as well as its exegesis.

While on the topic of translation, I find that much of my work consists of “translating” from one medium to another. The former is variable (paintings, photographs, sculptures, videos etc., all of which were part of the Dharti exhibition) but the latter is always the same: language. The zine aesthetic offered a more “expanded field”¹⁵ for language: annotated, highlighted excerpts, photographs, screenshots of websites, diagrams and scribbles, bits of verse and prose opened up the essay to multimedial, cross-genre possibilities, retaining substantive density while leavening language.

In relation to this, a category of poetics that I found particularly useful was that of ekphrasis, usually defined as “verbal representation of a visual representation.”¹⁶ It is an ancient element in art writing, since description is so central to the act. Through these essays, I attempted to test the limits of what ekphrasis could do as a function of critical practice, and discovering its ambivalent, intermedial potential to

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

transport meaning from one mode of representation to others. Going forward, I am interested in exploring further what W. J. T Mitchell has called "ekphrastic hope": "The estrangement of the image/text division is overcome, and a sutured, synthetic form, a verbal icon or imagetext, arises in its place."¹⁷ The Dharti essays are gestures towards eventually achieving, in my writing, a sort of digital ekphrasis: a hypertextual incarnation of the artistic process and critical commentary.

VII.

Sontag's plea for erotics is realised in Barthes' gnomic treatise on the plot of love. Its fragmentary, loose, sinewy format suggests what it's possible to do with a work of criticism that collapses the difference between the surface and the core—between text and subtext.

The meanings are not hidden underneath a layer but darkened by shadows; critical language then becomes light, a benign technology of knowledge, not a spade or pickaxe, some violent instrument.

Form and content become deliciously inextricable in *A Lover's Discourse*, making it a program for critical writing that is enduring—conceptually dense and light as poetry.

*"I am both too big and too weak for writing, I am alongside it."*¹⁸

- Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 98

VIII.

*"The paintings were perfectly at ease. I had fallen in love and I had no language."*¹⁹

- Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*

During the residency, we read together Jeanette Winterson's essay "Art Objects." The title is a pun on the dual meaning of object-as-thing (*res* in Latin) and object—"as-to oppose." In the first sense,

Winterson conceives of “the art object as an art process, the thing in being.” Closer to the commonly understood meaning of *in medias res*, this gives us the possibility of regarding viewing as a productive interruption—a way of catching the artist in the act, the exhibition as a moment in an ongoing process.

The final exhibition mounted at the Serendipity Festival show is the culmination of a period of many months of work during the residency, and follows years of thinking and making before it. In the second sense, Winterson imagines how art objects to the viewer as she unpacks the experience of being amidst artworks—in *medias res* as literally being “in the middle of things.” Art resists the determinism of an evolutionary theory of life, it “objects to the lie against life, against the spirit” and in that sense, she states, it is like love. We may not live for the purpose of appreciating beauty but, as with falling in love, it makes life worth living.

This thought encapsulates the critical approach to the final exhibition. It is the rhyming of art with love that makes aesthetic objects meaningful, even when we don’t quite understand them. Being affected by the artworks and coaxing them to speak for themselves has an erotic charge.

The critical task is to witness the conversation between the spectator and the works as they reveal themselves to each other. Of this, the essay is the record.

But the adventure is finally the viewer’s—intimate and transformative.

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

Notes

¹ "The Instant Art Critique Phrase Generator," Pixmaven, accessed September 10, 2018, http://www.pixmaven.com/phrase_generator.html.

² *Velvet Buzzsaw*, directed by Dan Gilroy (2019, Netflix and Dease Pictures Inc; <https://www.netflix.com/title/80199689>).

³ Grant Kester, "The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism," *e-flux* 50 (December 2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59990/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/>

⁴ Duncan Thomas, "The Politics of Art: An interview with Jacques Rancière," *Verso*, November 9, 2015, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere>

⁵ Girish Shahane, "Curatorism: In Praise of Folly," *Art India* 17, no. 2 (2012-2013): 33.

⁶ I use the word "theor-ese" to mean language that is larded with critical theory terminology without necessarily benefitting the point being made.

⁷ Kester, "The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism."

⁸ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Hans Ulrich Obrist: the art of curation," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/23/hans-ulrich-obrist-art-curator>

⁹ Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2013), Part I.

¹⁰ Sontag, "Against Interpretation."

¹¹ Geeta Kapur, *Place for People*, 1981. Published following the

exhibition *Place for People* at the Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi and Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay.

¹² Natasha Ginwala, "Geeta Kapur: On the Curatorial in India," *Afterall*, October 3, 2011, <https://www.afterall.org/online/geeta-kapur-on-the-curatorial-in-india-part2#.XJ8fTaavqRs>.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 98.

¹⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," *October* 13 (1980): 37.

¹⁵ Travis Jeppessen, "Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation About Inventing New Languages," *Sleek*, December 2, 2016, <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/hans-ulrich-obrist-zhang-jeppesen-miralda/>.

¹⁶ James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 154.

¹⁸ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 98.

¹⁹ Jeanette Winterson, "Art Objects," in *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).