

# Propositions: Estrangement through Art, Learning and Curatorial Frameworks

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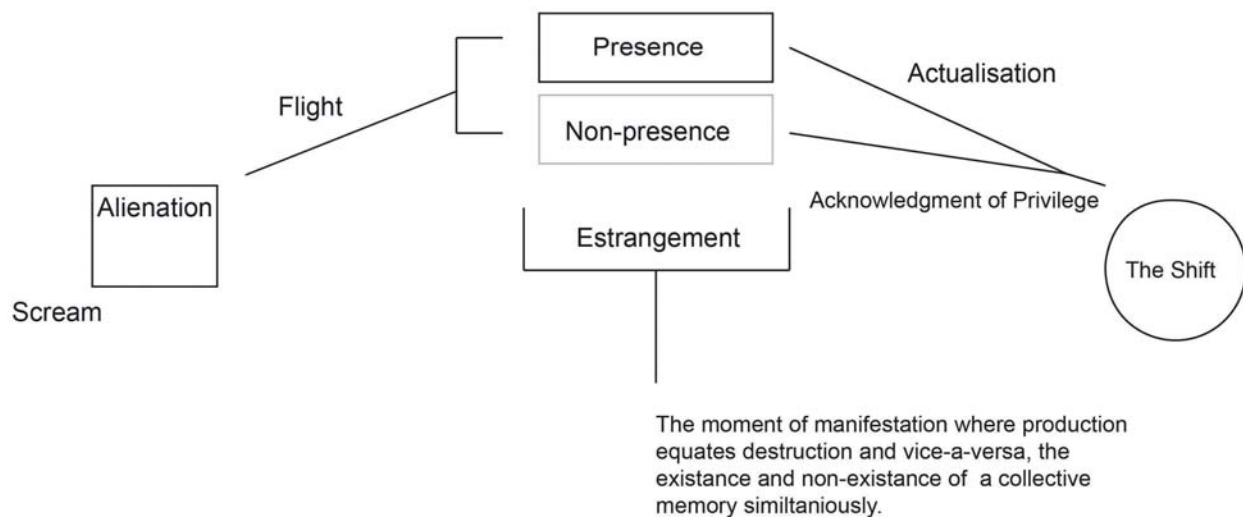


fig. 1: Paul Stewart, *Scream to Shift*, 2015.

*The rationale of these propositions is to explore the role of the artist in relation to applying estrangement to different practices and environments in an arts context. Some of the propositions focus on the production of learning environments as artistic practices relative to curatorial programming; others look to the position of cause and effect and to ideas of over-identification.*

*The responses are anecdotal and in a variety of formats: theoretical, poetic, and reflective. Practitioners, artists, and curators were asked to create short propositions to the loose idea of applying estrangement into their own work context after being presented with the diagram above (fig. 1). Each takes a different stance or starting position to question if estrangement is able to work in his or her own practice or how it might work in practice towards a larger idea.*

**Creation of work as an instrument of change.**Paul Stewart**Talking of Aesthetics**

Aesthetics is "a hamster in its wheel."

It is the constant repetition and reproduction of the same act, never learning from the same mistake until replete. Over and over and over and over and over and over again, repeating the same actions until the wheel breaks. Making the intellectualised unintelligible.

But broken wheels can be sexy.

**Talking of doing**

How do we speak of thinking politically about how we respond to criticism and to praise? We talk about the process of doing in terms of the precarious artist, and, looking towards a commitment of practice to disfigure the status quo, we produce our own negativity as we entrap ourselves in our own doing.

Design creates depoliticised design.

Does that even matter?

If the answer is "no," move on.

**Talking of collective**

Rethink how we work collectively: Are we supposed to work? We usually think about collaboration as a process of compromise and negotiation. But what does it really mean?

**No compromise, no middle ground.**

Aesthetics is sexy.

**Aesthetics is a cage without borders.**

**Long Live Aesthetics.**

**Uta Barth's Distrust of Narrative Cause /  
Effect and Agnes Martin's Surrendered Perfection**Jared Pappas-Kelley

Lately I have been enamoured with artist writings, and the notion of the artist as thinker and theorist amid a sort of intimate estrangement or derailment that takes place. In some cases these types of writings only obscure an artist's work, but at their best, they give voice to individuals occupying and making sense of their world.

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Writing is most alive when directly engaged in the experience—as a cartography of an encounter or inner space. In an interview, photographer Uta Barth was asked why narrative annoyed her. Barth's response captures a lot of what I have been thinking:

Narrative holds out for a certain inevitability, it places deep faith in cause and effect. Narrative is about reconstructing a chain of meaningful events based on a known outcome. I'm curious about visual art that's about the visual. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* is the title of Robert Irwin's biography. Originally, it was a line in a Zen text. Narrative in art makes

us think about all sorts of interesting things, but it derails the engagement with a visual experience.<sup>1</sup>

However, how does this translate over to writing, which is essentially narrative? I am interested in this engagement as an enlivening experience that allows the text to break down this ordering of cause and effect. As a writer I have been obsessing about narrative, and how it can often feel stogy and forced. It cuts away appendages for the sake of logic and stacking a synthetic sense of cause and effect. Plotting. Without meaning to, writing tends to become more linear/narrative than necessary. This might give the work a thrust, but I am also interested in going back and re-developing the more non-linear feel of writing centred in engagement—like now that I ate my vegetables, it's time for pudding.

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Agnes Martin's *Writings* read like art-torah, striving towards an inner perfection and finding a place of honesty in one's efforts. Through these collected texts, Martin parallels her painting—lines in grids with subtle colour—attempting to illuminate her process while offering advice for young artists. Her ideas are profound; yet they resonate with the daily-ness of life as she seeks an underlying awareness of perfection. I find myself wishing I had some sort of Agnes Martin microchip installed in my head (keeping these ways of thinking at the forefront of my thoughts about art and writing)—with her foregrounding of the engagement with perception and a falling away of false expectations. She is wise in exactly the way I am not.

At the centre of her ideas are notions of Truth and Perfection. Both concepts were historically at the centre of art, but nowadays seem sidelined as old-fashioned or outdated, or maybe just too big. Art has become mired in a network of contingency, but Martin's ideas elucidate a path of engagement—hinting at universal guiding truths that acknowledge the uniqueness of experience and individual consciousness. She warns that other “people's lives will look better to us than our own, more interesting and more rewarding”<sup>2</sup>, but that this leads away from the truth of our own work. “To correct this state of mind you must say to yourself: I want to live a true life”<sup>3</sup>. I often get caught in a process of disappearance where experiencing gets lost in the concept of how things ought to be, and it is here that Martin reminds that one must always return to a singular engagement with what is at hand.

At work in Martin's writings on art is a notion that our world is an approximation of an idealized perfection. At its heart is the idea that creating art is a process of translating ideas from our minds into an imperfect world that mirrors this model. Here the task is to break the mirror in order to remove the gap between the idea and what we experience. Martin states that happiness is found in the brief instances when one becomes aware of this perfection, moments of insight. It comes through courting inspiration in our work, but our vocation is in the striving to perceive.

We must surrender the idea that this perfection that we see in the mind or before our eyes is obtainable or attainable. It is really far from us. We are no more capable of having it than the infant who tries to eat it. But our happiness lies in our moments of awareness of it<sup>4</sup>.

Perceiving for Martin is of the utmost importance, and in this perceiving one must be vigilant in the truthfulness of how one sees. Engaged in the moment and open to inspiration, this is not an intellectual pursuit, but one of seeing.

Thinking; we consider that which we perceived. It is a secondary experience. Thinking compares everything that we have perceived with everything that we are perceiving at the moment<sup>5</sup>.

As someone who is frequently accused of thinking too much and over-thinking, Martin's ideas are a useful balm. I need more engagement in the process of perceiving the clarity in the work I create, while cutting loose intellectual prattle and constant second-guessing. I am enamoured with her assertion that all true art needs to fail in order to succeed, because through this collapse, honest work emerges. Illustrating the tug of fear and pride on the validity of creating, Martin leaves us with this image:

For those who are visual minded I will say: there seems to be a fine ship at anchor. Fear is the anchor, convention is the chain, ghosts stalk the decks, the sails are filled with Pride and the ship does now move.<sup>6</sup>

### Turner's corpse lies on a chaise-longue green

Adrian Shaw

Turner's corpse lies on a chaise-longue green. His death mask face hangs open in front of his last painting. His hands can no longer draw or paint. His fingers are soft and limp. Are we there? Present? Who is present? Who was present at the moment of death? The paint dries. Curating is silly. Every little girl loves a story. And I mentioned to him that "Curating is so over!" Be yet more modern! More mobile! More fluid! Etc, yep!<sup>7</sup> How do you consume this moment? Let us wrap it up a series of infinitely thin moments. Thin delicate memories. Let's draw the fire, draw the memories up and in a flash, devour and consume! Turner's death mask is hiding in the Tate archive. A copy of John Keats' face hides at Keats House, at 10 Keats Grove. Sit with the corpse for a while. Sit in the archive with the death mask, mouth open for the world, for history. What are you learning? Between the body and Turner's last painting, moisture lightly evaporating in the September sun. Learning with art is at certain times also quite silly. Go and learn with a lamppost. A rock. A corpse. Climb into a bucket full of pungent bile. Swim around. Swim around. Around and around, like a good little frog until it solidifies and forms a little mountain of red crystal. Jump onto the bile island and leap out into the world and go tell the world. Go tell it on a mountain. Between the damp white paint drying on the front step, between the t-shirt hanging on the washing line drying in the last gasp of summer wind. Between the drying slither of bird shit and next door's cat. Between the apple tree and the gently pulsating breeze-soaked net curtain. Between all these and the corpse. Turner's canvas flapping in the Margate wind. What are you learning? Curating supposedly incarnating modernity. In a series of little anecdotes. Oh, I am so honoured to have your knowledge bestowed upon me, into me, washing all over me soft and gentle like a Timotei waterfall. I've never felt so alive! A static camera frames and streams this tableau live. I lean in to be in shot. I wave. Then I walk away and fall into the abyss.

**Please rate your quality of estrangement**Lilian Cameron

Estrangement happens regularly in the gallery and museum, and it is a key part of many a visitor's experience, yet it is curiously absent from the lexicons at hand in these places, particularly in learning and public programmes.

**Commonly, the aim is to offer enjoyment, to welcome in, and for the visitor to leave with a sense of positivity or fulfilment that compels them to return and, above all, to participate again. Visitors are asked not only, "Did you enjoy your visit today?" but also "Will you wish to take part again?" and "Are you satisfied with what it offered you?"**

In such contexts, estrangement feels remote and far removed, but it is an experience we would do well to listen better to audiences, and not only because it is everyday and commonplace. In estrangement, we experience ourselves as separate, and there is a possibility for independence and critique in such experience—for the knowledge of a perspective outside a framework. A perceived negativity about the word might be the hinge-point to something positive: an experience of difference or otherness in an environment, the realisation of a personal, subjective critique.

There are different kinds of estrangement in the museum and gallery: gut-instinct dislike, physical discomfort, offence or outrage, and a speculative sense of outsidership or disregard. Each has a varied impetus and comes from a distinct place, with the potential to open onto forms of differentiation, some of which may be more familiar than others.

How might recognising or allowing space for estrangement look in practice, in a context of learning or curatorial programming? Recently, learning has occupied a certain edge in listening closely to audiences and reflecting critically on this practice, but is increasingly beholden to temporary or external funding that seeks—practitioners fear—particular outcomes and evaluations, as well as benefactors who don't necessarily see virtue in estrangement.

**Curating has at times remained free of this responsibility, particularly in the more elitist contexts, and this a freedom [that] populist sites might wrestle back for themselves and make a part of their lexicons, but on their own terms.**

What if galleries and museums were **to create space for estrangement** by listening to it when asked, or by recognising its value, from a distance? What if we were to advocate for a radical unknowing of participant experience, allowing it room to breathe in the gallery and museum?

**“Infelicitous” Participatory Art Speech Acts and the Educational Turn:  
The failed promises and hopes of participatory arts for democratisation  
of society on the neoliberal stage**

Suzana Milevska

I want to point to certain paradoxes within the so-called “participatory shift” in the arts and its promises for democratisation of society. The promise of “enhanced participation” often creates new hierarchies and differentiations of audiences, and political correctness—as one of the promised principles of such practices—can result in de-motivating effects among artists who belong neither to the activist circles nor to the underprivileged or minority groups<sup>8</sup>. This ironically induces a vicious circle that recuperates and perpetuates the elitist and commercial art system that is initially the main target of participatory art.

The fulfilment of a promise was dubbed a “felicitous act” by J. L. Austin. According to Austin, the difference between what one says and what one does depends on the context and circumstances, and subsequently the context can substantially affect the fulfilment of the promise<sup>9</sup>. Participatory art practices cannot fulfil the promises for democracy and emancipation, since from the outset they are linked to the contemporary neoliberal social contexts in which they operate. Therefore, I’d rather locate the main reason behind the failure of such a systemic “mission impossible” in the inner contradiction of contemporary democratic societies than in the structure of such art projects.

Participatory art projects appear to establish a new and more productive context for such estrangements and open up new potentialities for a bigger societal impact of contemporary art practices in general. On the other hand, it became obvious that by organizing participatory art projects, art institutions often compensate for the lack of establishing and developing a profound and long-term relation with their audiences (only turned into numbers and statistics for further grant applications for funding). Through such a subtle transfer of their programming and societal responsibilities to the artists they instrumentalise, participatory art acts as a kind of “liability reserve” in relation to their societal role.

Participatory art practices often bring the artists to civil society-related activism and collaboration in solidarity with existing and newly established activist organisations in order to overcome the paradox of democracy in neoliberal times<sup>10</sup>.

However, authors such as Jodi Dean and Slavoj Žižek have already pointed out the fundamental contradictions between democracy and stamping neoliberal societal developments. For example, Dean argued that while the left attempts to develop and defend a collective vision of equality and solidarity, the ascendance of “communicative capitalism”, the consumerism-driven gridlocks, the privileging of the self over group interests, and the embrace of the language of victimization constantly undermine such attempts<sup>11</sup>. Slavoj Žižek went so far as to announce the split between the two: “The eternal marriage between capitalism and democracy has ended”<sup>12</sup>.

Participatory art projects aiming towards democratization could be linked to the older philosophical progressivist assumptions proposed by John Dewey, mainly in the realm of the critique of education as a social change instrument<sup>13</sup>. The “participatory turn” and the “educational turn” are often interlinked through

artistic and curatorial contemporary art projects that engage with critical education and pedagogy, mostly based on the ideas of the alternative and critical pedagogy of Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Jacques Rancière, but yet they happen within established institutional “walls.”

*Most of these projects are welcomed by society as a preferred mild social critique, which eventually recuperates the critiqued institutions, since most likely it perpetuates the status quo rather than focusing on delivering a more direct political critique of social inequality and injustice.*

To conclude, the paradigm shift from objects to subjects in participatory art cannot be discussed apart from the general societal context and without taking into consideration its pedagogical effect on all involved parties (governmental policies, economic changes, institutional interdependence of cultural policy, decision-makers of real politics, local governance deliberation, etc.). Nevertheless the wider socio-political and economical context in which art is produced and practiced inevitably over-writes the ambitious goals of participatory art. This calls for further critical distinctions between participatory art projects depending on the different concrete historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts where they promise the change towards democratization and induce a certain hope, and for a discussion how different participatory artists have positioned themselves in societal and political contexts.

#### Notes

1 Lee, P.M., Higgs, M., and Gilbert-Rolfe, J., *Uta Barth*, Phaidon, London; New York, 2004.

2 Martin, A. & Schwarz, D., *Agnes Martin: Writings*, Hatje Cantz; Art Books International [distributor], Ostfildern-Ruit; Portchester, 2005. p. 113.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

5 *Ibid.*, p.74.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

7 Châtelet, Gilles, *To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies*, Trans. by Robin Mackay, Urbanomics, 2014.

8 Thomas Nagel, *The Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1979, pp. 91-105.

9 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Ed. by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. 2nd Ed.,

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1975, p. 100.

10 Paul Clements, “The Recuperation of Participatory Art Practices,” *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, No. 30.1, 2011, pp.18-30.

11 See: Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2009.

12 Nicolas Duent, 2013. “The eternal marriage between capitalism and democracy has ended,” Interview with Slavoj Žižek, Trans. by Harry Cross, *L’Humanité* (English edition), 2 September. Accessed 02.04.15. <http://www.humaniteinenglish.com/spip.php?article2332>.

13 John Dewey, “Education and Social Change,” in F. Schultz, *SOURCES, Notable Selections in Education*, 3rd ed., McGraw-Hill Dushkin, New York, 2001, pp. 333–341.

**Lilian Cameron** is a writer and researcher in the arts who is currently based in the UK.

**Suzana Milevska** is an art historian and theorist of visual art and culture. Her research and curatorial projects focus on postcolonial critique of hegemonic power regimes of representation and various institutional policies and representations of marginalized communities in postsocialist transitional societies, feminist, participatory art practices, and artists with a Roma background. In 2004 Milevska was a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar at Library of Congress. She holds a Ph.D. in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths College London. She was the first Endowed Professor for History of Central and South European Art Histories at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and a visiting professor at the Visual Culture Unit of the Technical University Vienna (2013-2015). In 2015, she curated the symposium and edited the reader *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation and Agency* (Sternberg Press, in print) that offers a postcolonial analysis of the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and race. In 2012, Milevska was awarded the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory.

**Jared Pappas-Kelley** is a curator, researcher, and visual artist based in the UK. Much of his current work focuses on ideas of an instability in the art object and the intersection between practice and theory—examining art as a method for understanding an object's coming together through its undoing. His forthcoming book, *Solvent Form*, examines art in relation to destruction and looks at the warehouse fire at Momart in 2004 and works indirectly destroyed by art thief Stéphane Breitwieser.

**Adrian Shaw** is an artist, curator, and producer based in London.

**Paul Stewart** is an artist, curator and writer based in the UK, currently a PhD by practice researcher funded by IDCA (Institute for Design Culture and Arts), focusing on the role of the gallery as a site for learning. His work has been shown recently as part of the Edinburgh Artist Moving Image Festival 2015, and at Bank Street Arts Gallery. Stewart was the curator of the 'Situation Unit' commission series at mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), 2015. His next book chapter, *Art and Commitment: Galleries Without Walls*, will be published this year in a book collection on Adult Education by Sense Publishing.