

Why Write?

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For the last fifteen years or so I've not participated in any exhibition—group or one-man shows—without writing some sort of text (explanatory or otherwise), a few lines or a few pages long, *a priori* or *a posteriori*, concerning the work done for that particular exhibition. I've also written other texts that weren't to do with any particular show. I've already spoken of the need for such texts, notably in "Why Texts? or: The Place I'm operating from."¹

I'd like here . . . to explain why it is that I normally write them myself.

First of all, writing about my own work has never been and never will be a fast principle. And nor do I feel that a piece of visual work should automatically be accompanied by a written piece—far from it. But it seems that art can't do without it. At least, that would seem to be confirmed by the abundance of literature that the plastic arts spawn. The fact is that that literature, often more of a nuisance than a necessity, is nearly always the work of the people who are interested in the visual arts, but rarely the work of the people who actually produce the objects.

But the artist isn't necessarily an idiot or an illiterate—why shouldn't he write as well? As far as I'm concerned, there are several reasons for this "literary" activity, reasons such as necessity, urgency, reflection, commissions and/or pleasure.

Each of my texts is the result of one or more of these five reasons:

1 *Necessity* was the driving force of my first writings. It was a question, first and foremost, of palliating the defaults and the obvious mediocrity of available criticism (which, for me at the time, was Parisian). Defaults and mediocrities which I later discovered were widespread and which seem to perpetuate themselves without fail from one (spontaneous) generation of critics to the next (and not only

in the Parisian region). So I felt the need to take the floor, trying to reclaim it from the critics who had been shamelessly usurping it for ages, knowing in advance what possible havoc their prose could provoke, especially for new work, and a havoc from which some work never recovers, especially if the prose that swamps it is eulogy. So, the necessity of trying, by means of my own texts, to escape that discourse so as not to be its object and consequently the victim of its rhetoric.²

2 *Urgency* is the reason for other texts, demanded by specific circumstances. Replies to this or that, or to different people, for which the written word seems the most efficient and apposite way of thwarting some unacceptable action or other.³

3 *Reflection* provokes texts either about work in progress or work planned, or more often about work finished—sometimes old work—and about which one takes the time to ask questions over again or to formulate them in a different way. Texts, then, which allow me to weigh up more accurately what has been achieved and the deeper implications of the work. Reflection which, thanks to a certain step back and a distance maintained, allows me better to understand what's been done, or what can eventually be reintroduced into a present context.⁴

4 *Commissions*, an old custom still in favor, allowing me to turn to problems or think about ideas which, initially, weren't my own, or to which my attention hadn't necessarily turned before. A commission can also constitute an opportunity to arrange scattered notes into some kind of order if their links hadn't been obvious to me before. So a commission produces writing of a different order because it is initially provoked by someone else's desires.⁵

5 Finally, *pleasure* in writing, which is by definition something personal, and all the more so in this case since I have neither the literary pretensions nor the necessary talent to make the pleasure communicable. In another more general way, the pleasure to be had in doing something—whatever its level of intensity—cannot alone justify the final nature of the product, nor can it oblige or enable someone else to rediscover whatever pleasure I feel. So it's a personal pleasure that I take, which unfortunately means that it isn't automatically rendered or communicated.⁶

The fact that these and other reasons have made me and continue to make me take the floor doesn't mean that any given one of them has a monopoly or has necessarily to be employed.

On the other hand, *writing*, for someone whose main activity is *showing*, does not mean and never has meant that these writings release the "truth" of their object, still less that they intend to impose such a truth—certainly no more than the works upon which they rely. My writing shouldn't obscure the fact that my main activity is tied to the ambition of making visible the "not-yet-seen": the two activities can neither be isolated or confused. Although the one has the mad desire of flushing out the "not-yet-seen," the other could never aspire to express the "not-yet-said." Writing and words are obviously the most usual and immediate way of expressing thought (banal or special), but that shouldn't obscure the fact that in the domain of the visual it is the object that must be thought of as intrinsic, irreplaceable and irreducible by writing, words or any other medium.

If simply speaking about a plastic work were enough to make it exist, I wouldn't be much interested in such an enterprise—and it's easy to see these days where some people have been led by such inanities. On the other hand, nothing seems more natural than to speak or

write about a plastic work. It's through writing that we find what we might call the visual work's "baptism of fire." An essential baptism for "silent" works insofar as only those which can emerge intact or reinforced manage to prove that they have something to "say" beyond the written word. Conversely, writing which debilitates the work to the point that, after reading it, we find there's nothing more to be seen, proves that the work in question about which so much has been said, has in fact, nothing else to say. What a visual work has to "say," if anything, cannot be reduced to any other "saying." That's why all the talk in the world, all the possible texts, will end up saying very little about what is essential to the visual domain. And it's around that very problem posed by the uncrossable and impossible distance between two ways of saying, that the best, the most sensitive and the most comprehensible writings about the visual arts constitute themselves.

Because if we admit as a possible axiom that to be an artist means showing the invisible, we can also claim that as soon as the invisible is seen it becomes unsayable. We can also admit that if visual "saying" is fundamentally and essentially "silent," that doesn't stop us talking about it—in the same way that we can talk about a good meal but it would never be enough to fill our stomachs.

Finally, it should be understood that even if I express my own point of view about my work (and if I keep on doing so), that point of view isn't exhaustive in its dealings with the problem; nor, of course, is it the only possible point of view. But that doesn't mean, either, that just anyone can write about anything, because if I put time and care into my writing it's because I feel that words have a certain strength, and their power shouldn't be monopolized by so-called specialists, but should be shared. If, as someone once suggested, the art of warfare is

too serious a matter to be left in the hands of soldiers, writing about the visual arts is a much too serious occupation to be left in the hands of the critics alone.

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Notes

1 First published in: *Five Texts*, published in English by Jack Wendler Gallery, London and John Weber Gallery, New York, 1973.

2 The following list of several texts and their reference to any of these categories is obviously not complete. Only date and place of their first publication have been indicated.

a) "Art is no longer justifiable or points on the i," interview (in French) with Georges Boudaille in November 1967, published on March 13, 1968 in: *Les Lettres Françaises*, Paris.

b) "Mise en Garde No. 1" (Beware), published as a contribution to the catalogue *Conception*, Staedisches Museum Leverkusen (West Germany), October 1969. (Since this text has been re-edited on several occasions the reader should consult the publication *Five Texts*, mentioned above, for more precise information.

c) "About Biography," catalogue contribution for the exhibition *Using Walls*, Jewish Museum, New York, April 1970.

3 a) *Open letter against the Paris Salons*, January 1967 (in collaboration with Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni).

b) Reply to Michel Ragon in: *L'Art Vivant*, No. 2, Paris, 1969.

c) "Au sujet de . . ." in: *Werk*, Zurich, October 1969.

d) "Autour d'un détour," in: *Opus International*, Paris, May 1971.

e) Reply to Diane Waldman, in: *Studio International*, London, July/August 1971.

f) Open letter to *Clé pour les Arts*, Antwerp, June 2, 1972.

g) Open letter against those galleries who

—without prior consent—use artists' names without representing them (with Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Bob Mangold), Paris, January 1974.

4 a) *Limites Critiques* (Critical Limits), pamphlet published by Yvon Lambert, Paris, December 1970. (French).

b) *Position-Proposition*, Catalogue published by the Museum Moenchengladbach, West Germany, January 1971. (German).

c) "Functions of the Museum," Catalogue-text for my exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England, March 1973. The text, written in French in 1970, had not been published previously.

d) *Rebondissements* (Reboundings), book published by Daled/Gevaert, Bruxelles, 1977 in English and French.

5 a) "Faut-il enseigner l'Art?" in *Galerie des Arts*, Paris, September 1968 (written in June 1968).

b) Non Nova Sed Nove," in: *Publication*, edited by David Lamelas, published by Nigel Greenwood Inc. Ltd., London, England, August 1970.

c) "It rains, it snows, it paints," in: *Arts Magazine*, New York, April 1970.

d) "Notes sur le travail prises entre 1967 et 1975," recollected for *Studio International*, Special Issue on architecture, London, September/October 1975.

6 The reader may kindly excuse the fact that I do not give any references here that conform to what is said in the paragraph relating to this footnote.