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"Artists Writing"

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Working as I do in an art school, I'm often uncertain to what extent the trends I see are school phenomena, eddies in a bay, as distinguished from waves and currents in a broader art world. I'm about to describe a kind of writing I see in use among artists who generate text for their bookworks. This description will be a query, a speculation, a hello-out-there to see what ripples might come back from other shores. This is what I see, situated amid art students in bookmaking and writing and MFA thesis classes, going to Bay Area book shows and Califia and friends' studios, getting to Cameraworks and WPA and Dia and Granary every so often. Is this anything like what you see?

There is a certain kind of first-person narrative I've come to associate especially with artists' writing and artists' books. It's usually autobiographical, grounded in memory and personal experience, often from childhood or family or relationships; direct and simple in prose style, neutral in tone, almost anonymous in voice, controlled with respect to deep or volatile feeling. Page bites of one to three short paragraphs are more common than continuous text. Narratives are often fragmented.

It is accessible writing. It is not gimmicky, or self-conscious, or pretentious, or obscure. It is reader-friendly in ways much literary writing is not. For that matter, it isn't often motivated by literary theories or histories, and only slightly more by art discourses. I think it has roots in the practice of personal journal writing (though it addresses a wider readership), in feminist theory and practice which has done much to validate personal writing (though it is practiced by men as well as women). It overlaps with literary subgenres of autobiography and personal essay as well as oral traditions of personal storytelling, but its characteristic lengths and rhythms have been shaped by the artists' book context. I'll try out a hypothesis: text which genuinely shares page space with images on equal or subordinate terms tends to get less autonomous vis-à-vis images, less continuous in itself, shorter in length, larger in point size. We see this also in childrens' books. Another hypothesis: the text forms we see in artists' books wouldn't (couldn't?) occur in more predominantly textual books. Distinctive genres of text are emerging from artists writing in the artists' book context.

Searching my bookshelves for examples, I'm surprised at how few I find. There is Keith Smith's Bobby, which is more or less the kind of narrative style I'm describing though visually it's poetry. There is Richard Nonas's Boiling Coffee, a vintage 1980 offset edition from handwriting and cropped photos, in which the first-person narrative fragments are repeated and collaged. There are many Susan King books, in which the first-person narrative is almost always interspersed with found or researched text and positioned on a multiple text page. Nancy Holt's Ransacked, Jim Miller's Poison Pen, Joan Lyons's My Mother's Book present someone else's first-person narrative; they are primarily documentary/biographical rather than autobiographical. Several artist's books I remembered as first-person aren't. I'm finding as many literary writing examples as artists' book examples. I get sidetracked by second-person narratives like Philip Zimmermann's High Tension. I rediscover some favorite writing, mostly third-person in a variety of quite individual styles, by Johanna Drucker, Alisa Golden, Jacki Apple, Paul Zelavansky, Frances Butler. Once again I notice how many artists are interesting writers. And then there are the dream-based artists' books I've been collecting for an exhibition series I'm curating: most of them fit my description. It occurs to me that what I "see" is strongly affected by the dream writing genre I practice and by the narrative conventions of the psychotherapy writing that is my chronic junk reading.

Examples are humbling. Setting out to write what I saw artists writing, I found a lot of myself in what I thought I'd seen, and I began to see differently. Stet. I'll let it all stand, for its potential value in raising questions (how do artists write?), generating dialogue (what do you see?) and pointing toward my subject of the moment: personal writing.
At the Council of Book Arts Programs Conference at Mills recently, Ken Botnick said something to the effect that artists are drawn to the book currently because it is a great medium for personal work. His remark had me turning over and over like a riverbed pebble the term “intimacy” which I hear so often when visual artists are explaining why they want to do a book. I think hands: a book in my hands: the permission to touch. Handmade books. Gifts by and for the body. I think of the perennial forms of personal bookmaking: diary, journal, sketchbook, scrapbook, album. Gifts for the inner circle of self, the personal circle of family and friends. My thought pathway has not yet reached the kind of autobiographical artists’ writing I was trying to describe. A giant step outward. The artist/person doing “personal work” is an “I” whom you-the-reader do not personally know. You-the-artist are an “I” telling the stories of your life to people you’ve never met. In an “intimate” gesture of holding, someone touches the book/person. A gift (commodity?) from I who have become somebody, anybody, nobody, to you who could be anyone. Is it too personal? artist bookmakers ask over and over as we take up the evanescent I and try to understand what becomes of me when I’m a book and could just as well be you. Or am I?

When personal life becomes The Personal, issues of privacy come out of the closet, public personae step in, barriers are thrown up, questions are asked. What’s going on? Who’s who? What’s the point?

I pack a set of tentative answers to the recurrent is-it-too-personal question. Most of them are versions of no, maybe, or try-it-and-see. Is it too personal if I think no one else would understand? No; chances are, quite a few people will understand. Is it too personal if I couldn’t let my mother see it? Maybe; what might the consequence be? Is it too personal if some people don’t want to read it? No; those people don’t have to read it; others will. Stories more often feel too personal when held back than when told; the act of telling seems to make the personal less personal.

In conversations with people whose training (like mine) is in literature, I still occasionally encounter that old term “confessional” with its negative connotations of sin and guilt. On one such occasion recently, I got past my usual irritation at the prejudiced lock-step devaluation of personal writing and for once started exploring the metaphor further. If the “confessional” writer is a guilty sinner seeking expiation for his-or-her (usually her) transgressions, is the reader then the priest? Surprised to find my empaties engaged by this second person in the metaphor, this reader-priest(ess?). I drew close enough to realize that what I liked was imagining the reader participating in an act of understanding. I caught sight of a therapy metaphor encapsulated within the religious metaphor. I understood that I feel repelled and obstructed by the metaphor when (as its usage in literary discourse suggests) it characterizes writers like me as penitent sinners addressing an unwilling priest, but that I can more comfortably participate in the metaphor when I extend it to characterize readers like me as ready listeners, willing to understand, absolve, heal. Personal writing and bookmaking can create a relationship of understanding, with a healthy transformative energy that I value. And then the buts kick in: but the sin, but the crime, but the judgment in that term “confessional”!

I’ve already given away the metaphor I prefer for imagining the exchange between writer and reader in the context of personal work: gift. It implies generosity in the maker, appreciation and gratitude in the receiver. I am mindful of Lewis Hyde’s description of gift cultures,* wherein the gift (the personal experience, story, book) accrues value and creates bonds by being passed on. What was personal now creates community.

I’m telling my own mythology of choice, of course, and can’t pretend to be simply describing a kind of artists’ writing. I’m speaking for myself, addressing you whom I may or may not know, looking for response. By now, the people who thought this was getting too something have probably quit reading, and I’m skipping stones alongside whoever’s left, hoping you’ll put a good spin on your turn.