

## Notes on the Language of Art Writing

With thanks to Scott MacDougall

Kenna Manos

While browsing through the current issues of art magazines, I once again found myself in the mud of needless abstractions, the slush of pretentious mumbo-jumbo, and the tangle of highly-specialized jargon. My anger and perplexity about this kind of writing arise because language and art matter deeply to me. Both have always been personally important; now, after I have taught English at an art college for six years, they are at the centre of what I am and do.

I claim little originality for my views here; many writers—George Orwell most notably[1]—have attacked pretentious language. I simply feel bound to speak out against those examples of inflated, wooly writing that are nearest to me, because bad writing obviously does spread by example. Articles containing excessive jargon and muddy phrasing encourage and legitimize more of the same. I fear there is much truth in the immodest advertisement printed in the November issue of *Vanguard*: “Artforum determines what will be important tomorrow.” I am concerned that magazines like *Artforum* might have a correspondingly great influence in determining the language acceptable for discussing “what will be important tomorrow.” Indeed, much current writing about art seems composed according to the principle expressed by a former editor of *Artforum* when he rejected a submission of Les Levine’s: “... don’t you know we’re an art magazine. We publish lots of pictures of artist’s work with a lot of remarks written in bad English (somewhat latinized to gain a pompous and serious effect).”[2] The following examples, which appeared in the fall issues of art magazines, exhibit various faults, but all are kinds of “bad English.”

...

The next example, in which the language is even more abstract, presents worse difficulties:

Eccentricity and difference escape and thus implicitly deny identity and totalizing structures. Eccentricity and difference are aside, peripheral; they are an issue, an acceleration towards dissolution and exacerbation of the same, the same which is not identical.[4]

I can make no sense whatever of this passage. The abstractions are free-floating; they have no base in any concrete detail or illustrations that would give meaning, validity, or even vitality to the abstractions and generalizations. Unfortunately, a lot of current art writing consists of similarly windy prose. Writers who find themselves thus tempted might do well to remember Max Beerbohm's pointed remark: “Good sense about trivialities is better than nonsense about things that matter.”[5]

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Philip Monk 2016-7-26 8:10 PM

**Comment [1]:** Maybe you want to reduce this slew of adjectives to make your point less mixed metaphorically. Beyond the mud, slush, and tangle, on the one hand you have an adjectival series (needless, pretentious, highly specialized), and on other hand a noun series (abstractions, mumbo-jumbo, jargon) that implies that a specialized language is inherently elitist, intentionally misleading, and obfuscating, which perhaps is a commonplace view until you make a fuller argument—a cliché, let's say.

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**Comment [2]:** “Inflated” and “wooly”: choose which one you want to use because they really don't work together.

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**Comment [3]:** I fail to see the punctuation errors here you refer to in your note in what, after all, is an informal, personal letter! If it is the failure to capitalize “latinized” perhaps this complaint is pomposity on your part.

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**Comment [4]:** Muddy, slush, windy: we are getting very atmospheric in this text!

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**Comment [5]:** Right on! Thank god for traditional English writers to save us from the Latinized nonsense of French-influenced writing! I am glad that you are not tempted. We thought the fight was against bad English when it is also a fight against the bad French.

## Notes

1. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."
2. Letter of John Coplans to Les Levine, 22 April 1973. The punctuation errors are Coplan's. Levine reproduced the letter in his photo-etching entitled *Language + Syntax* (1974).
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4. Philip Monk, "The Death of Structure," *Parachute* (Autumn 1979), p. 33.
5. S.M Behrman, *Portrait of Max* (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 283.

From *Retrospective 4: 1979-80 Documents of Artist-run Centres in Canada*, ed. Victor Coleman (Toronto: ANNPAC, 1980), 147-148. Reprinted from *Article*, 1 February 1980. Courtesy of Eye Level, Halifax.

I am the second egregious example discussed in this essay. Ironically, it was exactly on the basis of this article that I was invited to lecture at NSCAD (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), perhaps to the chagrin of this lecturer there.