

Preface:

The Performing Observer

When I first began writing, I certainly had imposter syndrome, having no sense of actually being a writer, historian or critic; at that time feeling simply like an art student playing a role. That role increased in its scope as my aspirations as an artist diminished. I in effect ‘became’ the mask I had donned. So, performing a role, I *was/am* that role. Whether our masks help us tell the truth, as Oscar Wilde famously claimed, or not; that became a key theme in my book examining art, life and our performative subjectivities. A text that took a lengthy amount of time in its gestation and writing up and was in turn informed by my semi-regular critical contributions to magazines, journals, exhibition catalogues, blogs and other rather ephemeral and fleeting settings.

The current volume is an attempt to selectively bring together what amounts to a two-decade journey of writing on deadlines, initiated both by myself and others. I learned much in the process, indulging and investigating my specific cultural interests, among them performance, photography, conceptual art, (post-)modernism and popular culture.

In titling this book *Performing Observer*, I am alluding to the fact that I am indeed performing as noted above when observing and writing about the field. I am also trained in art, having earned two studio practice qualifications. And although I did not pursue an art practice beyond some early and preliminary attempts, my time spent within studios and darkrooms, in addition to observing my surroundings with the aim of recording, documenting and interpreting them informs my writing to this day.

Critical responses to exhibitions require a certain openness from the outset. As Baudelaire noted as early as 1846, ‘criticism must be partial, passionate, political [...] it should be written from a point of view that opens up the greatest number of horizons’.¹ This credo could still effectively apply today, particularly with all the cultural and social shifts, transformations and upheavals we have been confronting globally. And ever-expanding notions about the role of representations, the

definition of art and what artists might aspire to accomplish in the contemporary world.

And what lies ahead for art and artists? As well as those who provide much needed support for the same, and ways that art might continue to extend far from the museum and into varied community settings? I am far from addressing many of these huge questions in the writings in this book, but I hope to look at art with an open spirit and all the intellectual tools I may have accumulated over the years at my disposal. The great critic Lawrence Alloway described his own work as ‘art criticism with footnotes’.² That is, historically informed but still engaging in a lively, embodied way with the present.

Questions persist regarding the relevance of art criticism, whether it is in the midst of a crisis, and indeed whether it merits existence at all. My own (perhaps self-serving) view is that we would encounter an extreme impoverishment of the arts without the manifold discourses and multiple voices critiquing the field. Whether one calls it art history, visual culture, art criticism or as is more frequently used today, ‘art writing’, I would argue that it assists, acknowledges and often dialogically interacts with the work of artists and that is no small accomplishment. If the work here contributes to any small part of that, I am pleased.