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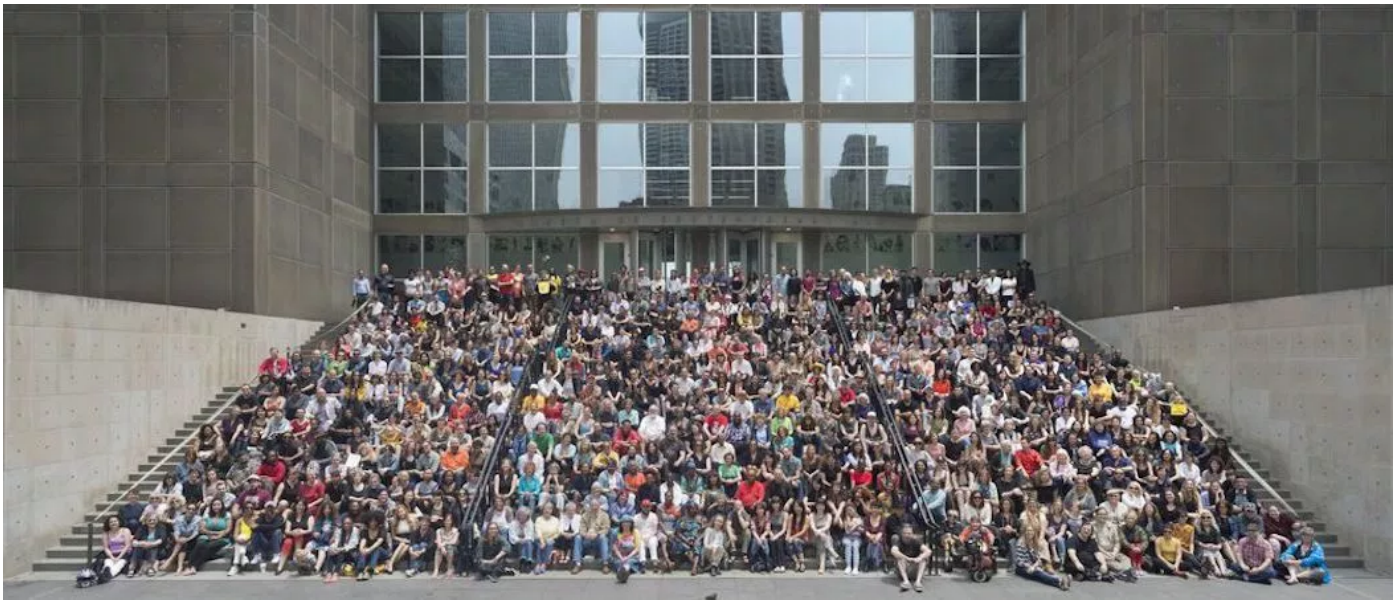

Open Channel: Commoning Institutional Voices

BRIAN DROITCOUR on August 1, 2018 at 12:20 PM

PREFACE

As a critic, I have a duty to take a skeptical, even antagonistic attitude toward art institutions. It's my responsibility to ask why they are showing the art that they're showing, why they present it the way they do. Sometimes I have a feeling that institutional practices are encouraging antagonism, or that they're antagonistic toward me. There are wall texts that don't tell me what I want to know, that envelope the art in a fog of verbiage to convey an aura of importance. I've wondered—and written about—what institutions might do to change the way they talk, primarily by pointing to visitors' interactions with (or responses to) institutions on social media. But until recently I have not tried thinking seriously about alternative approaches to institutional writing and how they might be implemented.

The Luminary's residency program on "Commoning the Institution" offered an opportunity to explore the topic and devise some better modes of communication from within an institution. I had been critiquing institutions by describing their problems; The Luminary is committed to critiquing by creating, by giving form to what they see as missing from the world. I organized a series of workshops with Alison Burstein, a curator whose residency coincided with mine, and who was pursuing research on the museum visitor survey as a site of institutional critique. We called the project "Open Channel: Thinking about the Dialogue between Art Organizations and their Audiences." At five meetings over the course of June, Alison and I talked about institutional goals and how they are communicated with an invited group of administrators, educators, and artists. We did exercises inspired by the creative writing workshop—drafting speculations about the authors of institutional texts, collaging readymade surveys, rewriting texts from other perspectives. We used websites of organizations that no one in the workshop, including ourselves, had ever been to, trying to understand what these organizations do and how they could communicate their activities more effectively. The exercises mattered because in conversation it can be easy to revert to talking about what you know, to reiterate familiar complaints about the institutions you visit and work at, to bring up the problems that you have encountered but don't know how to solve. The exercises helped see things with fresh eyes. The advice below is based on the observations that came out of the resulting discussions, and is addressed primarily to small artist-run spaces.

How can this document be used? If you run an art organization, you can think of it as a set of editorial guidelines to be taken into consideration when writing texts for and about your space. Some of the sections here direct attention to problems of communication that often go unnoticed because they are so habitual. Many of the suggestions here are phrased as questions—the sort of questions that I, as an editor, might pose to a writer who is having a hard time determining how to say what they want to say. As an editor, I try to avoid telling people what to write, instead trying to steer writers toward the most effective articulation of their own ideas. With this document I hope to do something similar for people who run organizations. While I'm suggesting a number of

alternative practices, I realize that they are not for everyone. I know that the standard ways of writing will meet the least resistance, and this can be a good thing—it means your texts will be easy to navigate for a wide range of people. But it would be pointless to write a document encouraging people to stick with what they already know. Accepted formulas are easy to use, but if they don’t adequately convey what you actually do, they will distance you from your public, and obscure your intentions and activity. Other, more idiosyncratic ways of writing may pose a challenge to readers. But in overcoming that challenge, your public can become more engaged with your organization, and get to know you better.

COMMENTS, QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS

Joi T Arcand,ᐁᑳᐎᔭ ᐋᑲᔮᓰᒧ, (Don’t Speak English), 2017. Photo by Scott Benesiinaabandan.

1. ALTERNATIVES TO ABOUT

When I go to an art organization’s website and I want a general description of its activities, I look for an “About” link. This is a commonplace. It makes navigation easy.

But “about” is a circular preposition. It supposes a view from the outside—from the periphery. It reinforces the distance between the organization and its audience.

Here are some possible replacements for “about” that suggest a similar purpose for a text but state more directly what it wants to do. Each one implies a specific approach to writing, as indicated by the questions that follow.

“Manifesto”: What does your organization put into the world? What does it make manifest? What do you want it to do? What are you actually doing?

“Mission”: What message is your organization sending to the world? What have you set out to do? How are you accomplishing it?

“Values”: What do you believe? What do you believe in?

“Vision”: How do you imagine a better world? A better art world? What do you want to create?

There is a reason why your organization exists. You felt a need to make it. What’s the nature of that need? Talking about what your organization does under one of these headings makes it less distant, more immediate, more personal.

Reframing and revising your “about” section can also be an opportunity to reflect on what it is that you do, and what aspects of your work you think are the most important. Do you provide resources to artists, like a print shop, or other studio equipment? Do you mount exhibitions? Do you provide services to the community? Which of these activities matter most to you? Exhibitions are often prioritized in the hierarchy of organizational activities, but that doesn’t mean you have to. Giving artists space and time and attention from a public is important but it’s not the only thing an organization can do for artists.

2. PRONOUNS AND PERSONS

Talking about your institution means making a decision about how you talk about it: how you imagine it existing in relationship to yourself. Are you a part of it? Is the organization a separate entity, one that your nurture and steer but see as distinct from yourself?

The answer to these questions will indicate the pronouns you should use, the person that you speak from. Don’t take your position for granted. If you’re saying “we,” specify who constitutes that we. Who are the individuals that make up the collective? “We” is often vague, and makes assumptions about other people, what they know, believe, and understand. “We” can be exclusionary: it sets up a dynamic of “us vs. them.” If you indicate who your “we” comprises, you leave the reader without doubt as to whether or not they belong to it.

Are you writing about your institution in the third person? If so, why?

Putting the institution in the third person can be a way to reduce the presence of ego, to communicate that the organization is more than the people who started it and run it. In the case of a small institution, this anonymity can look like inclusivity. But it can also come off as an avoidance of responsibility. The impersonal third person can keep things from sounding corny or pretentious. But the risk of personal speech can pay off in more transparent and earnest text.

Statements of belief sound more powerful when they come from the first person. Plural can work (i.e. “we believe”), but the singular—“I believe”—is even stronger. Experiment with polyphony. If your institution is run by a number of people, their voices can be represented through multiple authorship—where different parts of a mission statement are written by and attributed to different people—as opposed to the collective authorship that makes a “we.”

3. WRITING WITH AND ON ARTISTS

Give artists a chance to speak about their work in their own voice. Find out what they want to say, and help them say it, if they need help. Make artists a part of your organization by including them in the process of authoring organizational language. Attribute the text accordingly.

Some artists are inclined to talk about their work. Others aren’t. Some readily speak on certain aspects of their work, while other aspects are better addressed by others. You can provide an array of points of access to the work by offering interpretive texts with multiple authors, written in more than one voice, perhaps in the form of a conversation.

For the press release, or exhibition statement (the genre of the press release may not be relevant if you don’t have a reason to expect extensive press coverage), the following outline can be followed (and tweaked, of course, as necessary):

1. Some answers to these questions: Why this artist? Why now? Why do you think this work matters to your audience? (or, what audiences do you think this work matters to?)
2. A description of the contexts (social, artistic, historic, etc.) that the artist is working in.
3. A description of special moments in the experience of the work. (This is especially helpful for people who are interested in the exhibition, or your program in general, but for one reason or another can’t make it to the space, and will only read about the project on your website.)

4. WHAT BIOS DO AND WHY

The bio is a standard format for communicating an artist’s achievements. Who is this for? Why does it matter to your public?

For a long time I chafed whenever an organization asked me for a bio. These requests seemed to indicate a lack of interest, or care: I was being invited to speak or participate or do a program and yet the organization didn't know enough about me (or care to learn enough) to write about why they think I matter. Maybe this comes from being a writer and being in the habit of researching my subject, not relying on the info available in a press release, or thinking I can ask someone else to provide my text for me.

That's the strange thing about bios: they are almost always written by the subjects themselves in the third person. Artists write them as if writing about someone else. It's the uncanny power of the third person: if other people are talking about you, it means that you are interesting, and so as the author of your own bio you are ventriloquizing an organization's voice to create a sense of your own importance.

The other strange thing about bios is that they reduce a person to a list of the institutions that they have been affiliated with. This ends up reinforcing the power of these institutions more than saying anything about the bio's subject.

So again, when requesting a bio, ask: who is it for? If your public trusts your organization, you don't need to list the names of other institutions to back up your choices. Tell your public what you think they want to know or need to know about the artists you're supporting.

5. KNOWING YOUR PUBLIC

As off-puttingly bland as the voice of a big museum can be, it arguably makes sense for an institution with a broad audience to speak as neutrally as possible. There are practical considerations that go into the choice of voice: often, many people in many departments need to agree on a final version of a text, which means it needs to be as impersonal as possible.

A small institution is not catering to a large public. It doesn't have to be for everyone. Its language doesn't have to be generic. Neutrality is sometimes confused for inclusivity—the possibility of being open to everyone. That's a good goal, but it's better to think of it in terms of access rather than inclusion. In other words, you're providing ways for a public to access your work, rather than writing for a possible, anonymous multitude.

What to do with jargon—the specialized vocabulary, the subtle references to beloved theorists and schools of thought? Sometimes people get so used to speaking about art in the jargon that's used around it—in schools, in panel discussions, in journals—that it just feels comfortable for them to use those words. It's not always a bad thing. It's bad when jargon becomes a substitute for the thing you're talking about, when it becomes a crutch to make something important when

you're not sure what to say about it. Art can be complex. It can require complex language. Jargon is good when it's specific, and when its user is confident that their reader will know what it means.

If a first draft is jargon, try writing a translation into another, simpler register. Both could be provided, as different points of access.

Reasons to write simply: Your audience includes youth and students. Your audience includes people who speak English as a second language.

6. THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF EVERYTHING

In our workshops at The Luminary, we often struggled to stay focused on questions of voice, style, and language. These are elusive topics, especially when you don't have a specific text to read and examine. It's easier to discuss the concrete environments that frame an organization's texts: exhibition design, museum architecture, web design. Language is slippery. But it's also sticky. It attaches itself to everything. It doesn't exist in isolation. An organization's language describes what is happening in the organization, and new approaches to voice and style can only work if they are aligned with what the organization does.

Transparency and honesty should be priorities in organizational texts. But writing needs to be thought of as an organic part of a practice that is realized in everything the organization does.

Language can describe an organization's relationship to its public, but that relationship has to be cultivated and sustained through outreach and care.

You can't write about why an artist matters now if that was not a factor in your decision to show their work.

In our workshops, we talked about texts at history museums and art museums, and compared the position of text in the hierarchies of attention that these institutions construct. At the history museum, the text is the primary focus; objects are there to illustrate it and provide opportunities for engagement or interaction. An art museum shows unique objects to be contemplated, and the texts are meant to be supplement the process of viewing them and thinking about them. Exhibition design in both cases follows this hierarchy. What would it mean for an organization to make relationships its primary focus, and think of both texts and objects as supporting them? What would it mean to write from that position?

I am happy to talk to anyone who is interested in applying these guidelines at their organization. You can contact me at brian.droitcour@gmail.com.

I'm grateful to the workshop participants who volunteered their time, their insights, and their feedback on an early draft of this document: Betsy Brandt, Marissa Dembrowski, Victoria Donaldson, Jose Garza, Kristin Fleischmann-Brewer, Katie Hasler Peissig, Yowshien Kuo, Brea McAnally, James McAnally, Marina Peng, Katherine Simone Reynolds, Elizabeth Tucker, and Paal Williams.

Featured image: Chicago Artists' Group Portrait, 2015. Photo: Jason Lazarus, assistants: Aron Gent and Patrick Putze.

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Brian Droitcour is a writer, translator, curator, and associate editor at Art in America. Recent projects include editing "The Animated Reader: Poetry of Surround Audience," a poetry anthology that accompanied "Surround Audience," the New Museum's 2015 triennial, and Klaus eBooks, a digital imprint for artists' books published by New York's Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery. Previous criticism has spanned from artforum.com, The New Inquiry and Rhizome, to a critical engagement with Yelp.

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