

A Different Art: An Interdisciplinary Conversion between Lindsay Illich and Iris Kumar

Lindsay Illich and Iris Kumar

In the context of implementing a new general education program in which general education courses can apply to meet the reading and writing enhancement criteria, the authors, a fine arts professor teaching visual arts courses and the director of the college writing program, discuss assignments in the visual arts that would support learning outcomes for reading and writing across the disciplines. Written in the form of a conversation between practitioners, the discussion highlights how rhetorical knowledge (especially genre knowledge) can be part of a cohesive visual-arts curriculum; how issues of multimodal composition are treated in writing studies that may support learning outcomes in the visual arts (the ekphrastic and photographic essay); affinities between the literacy narrative and artist statement that may bridge discussions of process in both fields; and finally, some artists and writers who could be included as case studies in such a curriculum. The tradition of the dialogue as a device will serve the authors' desires to model curriculum development as a process that depends on listening and mutual understandings of the goals and perspectives of faculty from seemingly disparate disciplinary backgrounds and the new ideas that emerge from the collaborative process.

LI: Friedrich Schlegel observed that “in the works of the greatest poets there often breathes the spirit of a different art.” Writing and making art *are* different arts, but when I think about the Greek word for making, *poesis*, I realize that conceptually we may share more affinities than we’re aware of. In that spirit, I want to start with some ideas about process in response to your gallery talk yesterday. Being a curator of words and things, I was excited to learn several new, fantastic ones during your discussion: lauan wood, medieval relic boxes, Chine-collé, ferric acid, burr, and intaglio. You demonstrated how central to your field discussions of process are, especially in mediating works of art for a wider audience. It reminded me of Kathleen Yancey, the former National Council of Teachers of English President, who challenged writing researchers to be careful documentarians of writing processes, especially processes that may have changed given the material changes in the way we write (how we use databases, composing in electronic environments, multimodal situations). And in our historical moment, the writing process and the way people talk about it in writing studies has shifted from considering the solitary figure of

the writer, critiqued early on by Linda Brodkey (1987), to ideas about process that are grounded in the material and social: the writer is part of an ecology of resources (to borrow Marilyn Cooper's term) from which she curates, reimagines, and tinkers to make something that works for her rhetorical situation—that is, her specific audience and purpose. Yancey et al. (2015) research, for example, how *assemblage* and *remix* might be useful metaphors in students' understanding of this process. Recently, Kristopher Lotier (2016) describes this shift as part of the “externalization of cognition.” In the visual arts, it seems like there's a sharper awareness (or perhaps a tacit awareness) of how works of art are not only shaped by the materials you're working with.

IK: In just the language you use, I see some obvious crossovers in terms of process: especially with the word *assemblage* but also with the words related to curatorial judgment. There is a sense that in art we sometimes start with materials rather than an idea. For a group project in mixed media, for example, I give students Color-aid paper. Color-aid is a wonderful material to work with because of it has varying levels of saturation of color and a velvety texture. And I encourage inventive use of materials, including charcoal, Sharpies, paint, magazine-collage elements, digital-collage elements, pencil, and found objects. The work emerges from the happy accidents that occur when these things collide.

LI: I'm thinking about your gallery talk as an example of a thing an artist does with language that mediates their artwork. Besides the gallery talk or artist talks, are there other kinds of things visual artists typically use words for?

IK: Artist statements, to start. Artist statements accompany an artist's work, articulating its meaning and documenting the artist's process of creating it. To help students with this kind of writing, I start with a visual art assignment that's broken down into discrete steps to make process more transparent to students. The first step is for students to identify their source of inspiration, align design elements conceptually in association with their source of inspiration, and determine what they want their artwork to communicate. Students are encouraged to consider ideas presented in class as sources of inspiration such as working from a poem or literary source, a response to a social or political issue or historical event, or a response to music. The next step is for students to create a series of prints in response to their source of inspiration using symbolic content and metaphor to create a powerful visual message and using design elements identified in the first step to strengthen the communicative properties of their prints. They are encouraged to allow “happy accidents” to happen, to allow their series to evolve and develop through the process of creating it. Even though art doesn't always happen this way, the scaffolding of the assignment helps to make clear the structure of the artist statement.

LI: The way you talk about artist statements leads me to think about them as a “wild genre” in your field (Soliday, 2011). In other words, artist statements take on a special duty of performing disciplinarity and are used for real-world

audiences. In other words, there's an expectation that artists must be able to talk about these issues as part of a suite of skills that make up what it means to be a professional artist.

IK: The artist talk you heard me give is another genre of professional artists. I see the two as related genres, and when my students prepare to write them, my colleagues and I give artist talks and hand out sample artist statements. One colleague discusses the social/political nature of some of her prints and artist books, as well as how she has incorporated music into her work. I discuss my own sources of inspiration in my prints at different points in my career as an artist. In my current body of creative work, I strive towards communicating how natural cycles of the world around us correspond to life experiences. I take what I know, what I have learned from living with a chronic illness, and translate it into a more universal language that steps outside of my experiences. The work focuses on capturing different stages of growth and renewal within an environment that exhibits elements of decomposition and decay.

LI: For a person who studies composition, the word "decomposition" invites all kinds of considerations for the work we do with students. As writers, I see this process as a making and unmaking. When you talk about your work, tracing your influences and experiences, I can see that your analysis is performed in retrospect, the work of recovering how it is you are standing in front of a piece of art you've created and working backwards to trace its nativity. When I ask students to think about the kind of readers and writers they are, or to describe their writing process for something they've written, students are sometimes hard-pressed to come up with anything. The work of reflection is coming to terms with the way a writer—a person—approaches a task, which has everything to do with the way they were taught, the attitude in their families toward reading and writing, and how they see themselves as learners. In a sense, they are using themselves as case studies, but the point extends beyond accounting for how and why they do things the way they do at the present moment. Reflection pulls us into the future and asks us to consider who we want to be, what practices may be worth shifting. In artist statements and artists talk, I see similar work going on. Yes, the artist is developing a vocabulary for process in writing these genres, and reflecting on procedural knowledge that they have gained, but also there's identity formation going on. When my students write literacy narratives about their own experiences with literacy and language learning, often very powerful work is accomplished simply by composing a sentence that starts with, "As a writer . . ." Students usually don't come to college identifying as writers, which make writing literacy narratives even more powerful.

I also want to point out the special learning opportunity afforded by the genres you mention. I was reading about an artist, Nick Fortunato, who created an artist statement generator program (<http://10gallon.com/statement2000>) that parodies the genre. When I filled in the blanks like a Mad-Lib, the program generated this:

Through my work I attempt to examine the phenomenon of She-Ra as a metaphorical interpretation of both Amy Sillman and rutting.

What began as a personal journey of bootyism has translated into images of cheese and clavicles that resonate with people to question their own semi-automatic-ness.

My mixed media glaze embodies an idiosyncratic view of Walt Whitman, yet the familiar imagery allows for a connection between Stephen J. Gould, cords and muffins.

My work is in the private collection of Dick Clark who said "O!, that's some real perspicacious Art."

I am a recipient of a grant from Folsom Prison where I served time for stealing mugs and tie clips from the gift shop of The Prado. I have exhibited in group shows at Taco Bell and The Menil Collection in Houston, though not at the same time. I currently spend my time between my kitchen sink and Berlin.

What this program is poking fun at is the superficially generic ways that artist statements sometimes fall short of being meaningful, but more important for this discussion, the program highlights a misconception about genre, which is that genres are stable and arhetorical. Jennifer Liese's (2014) description of the artist statement is helpful here to think about how the genre should take into account audience and purpose: "the artist statement, as we know it today, is produced to meet an explicitly professional occasional need, such as accompanying the artist's work in a magazine, exhibition catalogue, grant application, or on the artist's website."

IK: It's true that writing is necessary for mediating an artist's work for a wider audience, but I think it's tough because my students fear writing. Many of these students have a visual acuity, so they gravitate towards the arts, but the predisposition toward visual expression sometimes means that students come to us lagging in other kinds of expression, like written and oral communication. At the College Art Association conference this year, I spoke at length with a professor from a different institution about how beneficial it would be to have a panel discussion on writing in the arts because of this challenge. I'll give you an example from my own classes. In Digital Art, I had a student who excelled in the visual projects at such a high level that he did not submit a written component for his final project, but he was able to receive an A in the class because he met the other outcomes.

LI: I hear similar concerns from faculty in other disciplines as they struggle to make writing meaningful in their general education courses and in upper level courses in the majors. For your students, and their particular acuity for the visual,

I think you should think more expansively about what is considered *writing*. Your field uses the term mixed-media to refer to what writing studies would call *multimodal composition*—the kind of writing that results when writers draw on different modes of communication, including page layout, font, images. I think designing writing assignments that allow students to incorporate these elements in their writing will help them draw on prior knowledge and expertise they have of visual design. An example of this working in a secondary school setting is described in Hrenko and Stair’s article “Creative Literacy: A New Space of Pedagogical Understanding,” in which the authors found that the mixing of text and image promoted critical thinking and risk-taking. Also, and you may already be doing this, think about incorporating lots of low stakes mini-assignments—one-off activities in class or as homework that ask students to write very small amounts (one or two sentences) with a focused purpose, such as demonstrating knowledge of a concept.

You mentioned that the concept of texture is important in your courses. Is writing a way to demonstrate that a student understands the concept?

IK: Texture is a formal element of art and design that I have students explore in a variety of assignments in many different courses. In a course called Three-Dimensional Design, the first assignment I give focuses on surface and how that can relate to form and cause the viewer to interpret it in different ways. They experiment with textured surfaces and inventive materials to create a sculpture that uses texture to create emphasis and enhance meaning. The learning objectives for the assignment are: to explore the relationship between form and surface, to use texture and rhythm/repetition to enhance meaning, and to create emphasis. In the Design Fundamentals course, the learning objectives are similar; however, students are working two-dimensionally and with different materials, which cultivates a different experience of creating work.

I introduce the assignment by talking about texture as an element that is experienced in a very visceral way. One has an immediate reaction. They want to touch, to stroke. It can be soft and inviting. Or it can be repulsive and make you want to pull away. It is only after this immediate reaction that the more cerebral interpretation begins to take place. One of the artists that I show my students when I introduce this assignment is Isabel Barbuzza. The two sculptures that I discuss the most are *Alas* and *Embrace Me*. I talk about the feelings I had when I first saw *Alas* (Figure 11.1) installed on a large museum wall in the University of Iowa Museum, how from a distance it glistened in the light, ephemeral, and such large scale, representing what looked to me like a giant pair of angel’s wings. Then, when I got close, I realized that the entire work was made of razor blades. My emotional response was immediate and intense. When I tell my students this story, I can see on their faces that some of them start to understand just how powerful texture can be.

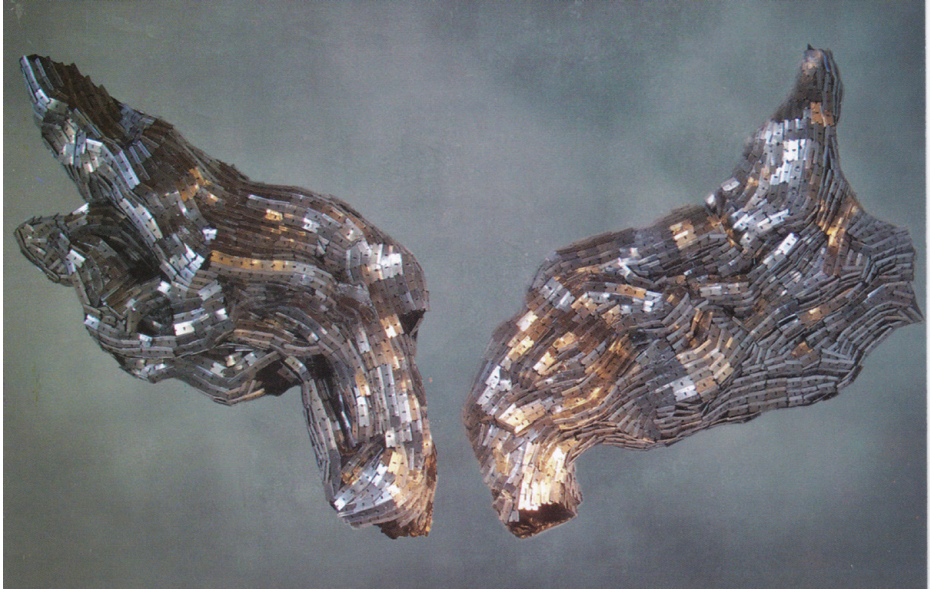


Figure 11.1. Alas III, 2009. In Private Collection Mendoza, Argentina (courtesy of Isabel Barbuzza).

This is also why the concept of texture is so important to me. It can powerfully communicate mood and emotion. It is provocative and enticing. It can entice a viewer, but also repel.

Whether a student's understanding of texture conceptually is evident to the student and to the class during the critique process. During critique, I will guide the discussion by addressing the learning objectives of the assignment. We discuss both what is successful in meeting learning objectives and what can be improved. For texture assignments, I have the class simply react to the works on the wall rather than give an explanation before a critique begins. If the work visually communicates mood or emotion, it is successful for enhancing meaning or creating emphasis.

I am interested in exploring ways I could integrate writing into texture assignments. Some of my immediate thoughts are to have students begin their projects by researching the work of other sculptors and examining the use of materials and its connection to enhancing meaning. Or to come up with a process writing assignment that could help them connect specific textures and surfaces to emotions before they even start making. I am also interested in using writing reflectively in an assignment to capture the kind of discussion that takes place in a critique and to help better prepare students for writing artist statements in the future.

LI: It's tempting to talk about style as a textual texture, here. Another day! But I do want to wrap this up by sharing some research from Dan Melzer (2014), the

Reading and Writing Coordinator at California State University, Sacramento. In his book, *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing*, he reports that of over 2,100 writing-across-the-curriculum assignments he collected from 400 different courses at 100 different institutions, only 3% of assignments were for expressive purposes. He saw a dearth of opportunities for students to engage with language in imaginative ways and made recommendations for more of this kind of writing in composition courses and WAC/WID courses. Thinking about the particularities of art program and art students' proclivities, ekphrastic writing may be an opportunity for you to incorporate writing that isn't threatening and that students may find highly engaging. Ekphrasis is writing about a work of art, and the tradition has a rich history that extends to the present day. One example is Mina Loy's poem about Brancusi's sculpture *Bird in Space*.

A mistake would be to read the poem as an homage to Brancusi's sculpture. Yes, the poem responds to the visual elements of the sculpture, but more importantly, the speaker of the poem is giving an alternative account of artist genius, an alternative to the masculine, hypersexualized version of genius that Ezra Pound was using to describe Brancusi's work in the literary magazine *The Little Review*. Loy's attitude toward the work is one of a philosopher concerned with the sculpture's social and historical significance, but that's only one way of approaching a work of art among many. Gregory Pardlo, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, has mapped these approaches graphically on a grid that describes the speaker in a poem's relationship to the work of art. The speaker can be a translator of the artwork, for example, or "confidential informant," in which the speaker of the poem gives away a secret about the work of art (Pardlo, 2012). These possible subject positions for writing about a work of art could be used as a writing toolbox for assignments that asked students to respond expressively and poetically to work in your classes.

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