

# Writing as Relation: Reflections on Writing as 'Exhibition' Practice

MADEYOULOOK

We first began to write as part of our work in 2009, when we felt our practice required greater explication for ourselves and for others. Our writing was an attempt to bring publics in and around our work into relation with us, to share our intentions for the work and invite direct connection with the concepts we sought to unpack. This has extended over the years to encompass direct invitations to take part in our work - crossing languages to ensure that no public can become unwitting participants in our projects. Our writing offers a choice to engage, on the basis of a connection with the concepts and arguments we sought to present. We offer invitations in writing in order to enable consent to inclusion, within public spaces or presentations where someone might chance upon our work.

Our writing practice has also grown to include forms of self-reflection, critical unpacking of the emergent knowledges that we create, and consideration of the practices of other artists whose work informs our own. This text is a short reflection on the potentials of writing, and how a writing practice might expand an exhibition practice into a greater sense of relation.

The primary intention of our practice has always been to locate sites of knowledge outside of the conventions assumed as having hegemony over knowledge creation. In particular we are interested in the site of the everyday, of ordinary life practice as knowledge creation. As part of this reimagining of the site where knowledge is formulated, we centre the idea of relation. Relationality is both a subject of interest (black love [1], oral history as memory between peoples [2], relationships between plants, land and humans [3]), and a vital form of practice (through small scale discursive programmes, long term research processes with collaborators who become friends, and in writing).

Writing has the potential to be a relational practice; it helps us to unpack the many nuances and integrated elements of our work and our intentions, and opens this process up to a wider public. In this way we invite others into thinking together with us, and into contributing to the ways our ideas might expand. We write together, methodically and painstakingly, unfurling the multiplicities and intricacies of our work through an ongoing back and forth, and perhaps some friendly arguments. The process of writing itself is therefore a transparent act that invites criticality and reflection.

This self-reflective process can take the form of writing up a project in hindsight, or may be commissioned in the form of project proposals or book chapter contributions etc. Through this process we begin to sharpen our questions and reflect on themes that have emerged as threads across years of practice and many different projects. It enables a closer intimacy with our own practice, and through dialogue with each other, helps us to formulate our ways and reasons for working with much greater clarity and rigour.

Much of this rigour is created through intimate relation with a larger community of practice. In these instances the writing that emerges is the material testimony of practicing and thinking together with others. Oftentimes this writing is our own reflections on projects initiated with other artists, organisers and everyday custodians of ordinary people's memories. At other times we have published and disseminated the writing of collaborators with shared interests in relationality and the everyday as a locus of knowledge. The dissemination of this writing itself is a practice of relation. It has prompted us to share our practice and its intentions, sharing self-published fold-out publications, pocket sized booklets of other artist's texts and single page handouts at exhibitions and events.

Finally, in some cases writing itself has emerged as an important form within our artworks because of the specific capacity it possesses for creating, broadening and holding particular kinds of meanings. Over the years we have come to find that the breadth of everyday lived experience cannot be sufficiently captured by any one medium and as a consequence our work brings together a variety of aesthetic forms to express the full scope of our concerns. Sometimes when these contrasting forms come together they leave gaps in meaning at their intersection. Fissures appear because these media cannot fully articulate the nuances of everyday black phenomena and practices, or when the meanings produced by the individual parts do not seamlessly read as a unified whole. Writing then has been particularly adept at filling these crevices and bringing unlikely forms into closer relation with one another.

Writing in the form of archival letters, historical memoirs and commissioned narratives [4] has brought tenderness and affect to dispassionate architectural drawings in our explorations of black love. However, in their examination of the subconscious calculations couples make in determining suitable corner loving corners, the architectural drawings also find themselves temporally and spatially bound to the present. Contrastingly the writing overcomes these temporal and spatial limitations, and places the contemporary practice of couples meeting in public for a moment of privacy, along a historical trajectory. Whether it be a couple in exile with uMkhonto weSizwe asking their commanders for permission to marry, or a migrant labourer writing a deeply intimate love letter to his wife through an interlocutor, what the writings reveal is that black love in the South African context has always had to contend with certain limitations to privacy. In another project, excerpts from fictional biographies of life in Johannesburg's inner city coupled with sound recordings of the high-pitched whistling one often hears in the city and in townships, have helped complicate our understandings of 'antisocial' everyday practices [5]. The writing is mostly our own, but is also often commissioned or assembled, to bring a certain richness, expansion or texture that would be impossible without it.

Writing is vital to our practice and to how we connect with the people who we wish to engage through our practice. For us, writing is as much a way of making art as any drawing, sculpture or installation we might undertake. It has become a form of relation and connection, of expressing the many facets and nuances that we seek to explore. For us, writing enables a kind of exhibitionary practice that is inviting and intimate, that seeks to make connections. Through writing we have learned more about our own ideas, have explored the ideas of others, and shared these in as many ways as we can. It has become integral to the ways in which we work and conceptualise, and how we imagine our work to live in the world.

[1] [Corner loving](#), MADEYOULOOK, 2014 – ongoing

[2] [Non-Monuments Programme](#), MADEYOULOOK, 2012 – ongoing

[3] [Ejaradini](#), MADEYOULOOK, 2018 – ongoing and Izwe, MADEYOULOOK, 2019 – 2020

[4] [Corner loving texts](#), MADEYOULOOK, 2014 – ongoing

[5] [Whistle in the Wind \(iFluit\)](#), MADEYOULOOK, 2014