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Opinion /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
02 NOV 2006

Please Release Me

Why do so many galleries and museums describe art in language that sucks the life out of it?

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,  
By each let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
Oscar Wilde, The Ballad of Reading Gaol

It's autumn, the nights are drawing in, the weather's been too weird for words and I'm sick of press releases. They've been piling up lately, heralding the new season of shows, and after reading a hundred or so of them I feel like shooting myself. I could quote some, but it seems unfair to focus on individual cases when there's a pandemic raging. However, before I get too apoplectic I'd like to apologize in advance to those rare jewels of galleries that a) send through a nicely designed invitation sans press release and trust in the intelligence and imagination of their audience to draw their own conclusion; b) allow the artist, if they so choose, to explain their work in their own words, doodles, manifestos etc.; or c) write something about the work that is considered, smart and illuminating, and penned by someone who, to paraphrase Truman Capote, thinks writing is a tad more important than typing.

But I mean really! What could possibly account for the majority of press releases' ubiquitous lack of intelligence and wit? How to explain such antipathy to the nuances and glorious possibilities of language, be it written or visual? Could anything justify these pompous, hollow boasts about subverting, riffing, reordering, dialoguing, deconstructing, investigating and renegotiating; about destroying assumptions, provoking, participating, blurring boundaries or destroying borders, beliefs, poverty, globalism, the World Bank, you name it. (Who do they think they are, Attila the Hun?) I'm so weary of the fact that the thinnest of exhibitions is usually accompanied by 500 words or so of faux-philosophical hogwash employed to bump up a lazy artist's lack of imagination or ambition and irritated beyond belief that good artists have to put up with galleries promoting their work in a way that 'explains' their slippery, complicated and often necessarily untranslatable intentions in sentences that would put an accountant to sleep. Who on earth started this? Why does it continue? Do curating courses and art schools insist that it's essential? And for god's sake, where's the pleasure? After all, no one enjoys press releases or learns anything from them, aside from perhaps the fact that some young sculptor was born in Bedford in 1978. Almost every artist I know expresses both embarrassment and anxiety about the fact that their gallery insists on their having one, and most art professionals worth their salt whimper in distress when confronted at the door of a gleaming space with yet another claim about an installation reinventing space, challenging perception and disrupting the laws of quantum physics. Through the fog of an aching head a simple question occurs to me: what does such a practice say about the dissemination and reception of art today?

Simply put, the press release tendency would seem to reflect a fear that most artists aren't geniuses, or that art just isn't perceived as that important any more – seemingly startling facts from which the innocent press-release reader has to be protected. This is, of course, insane. Most artists aren't geniuses, and it doesn't make them necessarily uninteresting. In these days of dreadful certainties, there is nothing wrong with modesty, reverie, idiosyncrasy, confusion, a lack of conclusions or being interested in something most people might not think 'serious' or valid – after all, this is art, not a science assignment. But going by recent press releases, most gallerists and curators are claiming 'their' artists have ambitions that would make Mahatma Gandhi look like an underachiever.

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What never ceases to amaze me is that this deathly practice stems from a kind of love. When a gallerist or a curator chooses to work with an artist, it's a big commitment and an even bigger – emotional, financial and strategic – gamble. It's fair to assume that gallerists respect the work of the artist they are representing and want to show it in the best possible light. How this justifies what is fast becoming a kind of orthodoxy – one that flattens meaning and intention into a kind of an ideological, wordy, boastful box – is beyond me. When going through the recent glut of press releases, something hit me: the language most commonly employed by galleries isn't that dissimilar from the leaden posturing of communist propagandists in the 1950s – to my mind, not a fun read. Almost 300 years ago Samuel Johnson observed that people 'seldom give pleasure where they are not pleased themselves'. I doubt he had ever read a press release, but it worries me that if he was doing the gallery rounds today, Johnson might, after reading the photocopied piece of A4 he had been so hopefully handed by an earnest minion, mutter the same words now.

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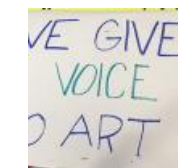
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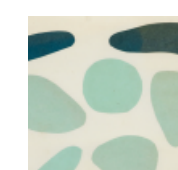
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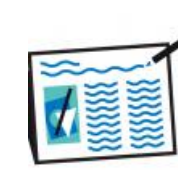
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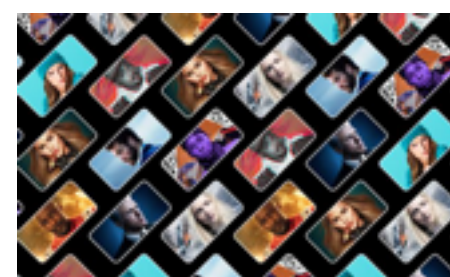
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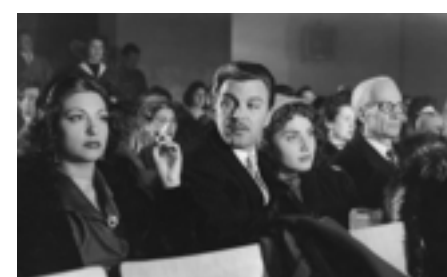
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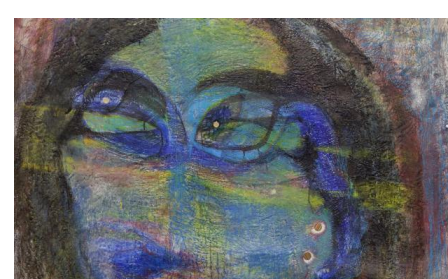
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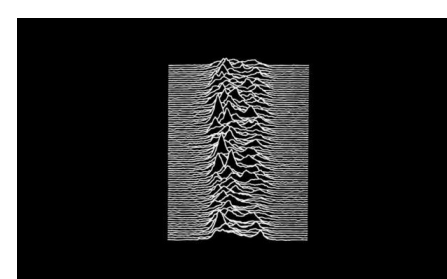
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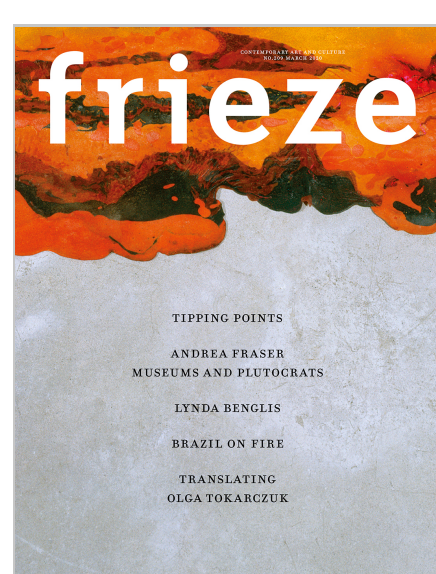


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