

# Valid Fictional Contributions to Non-Fictional Debates: Fictocritical Writing in Artistic Research

David Maroto

Rotterdam, The Netherlands

davidmarotostudio@gmail.com

Fictocritical writing has been defined as an interdisciplinary practice that seeks to “blur the boundaries between the fictional, the factual and the theoretical.” As a mode of experimental writing, it holds a great potential to reinvigorate the current state of critical art writing – specifically, artistic research. The present paper sets out to investigate the usefulness of venturing beyond the constative function of the text and discusses the performative nature of writing employed at the service of artistic enquiry.

To that end, I examine three key case studies that shed light on the intricacies of fictocritical writing: Bert Danckaert’s *The Extras*, Barbara Browning’s *The Gift*, and Katrina Palmer’s *The Dark Object*. They all constitute artistic research projects written as novels (two of them are also PhD theses) that, at the same time, are inscribed in an art project. Furthermore, I offer a practice-based example, an excerpt from my novel *The Fantasy of the Novel* (also part of my PhD thesis), with the hope that the reader will be able to apprehend the effects of fictocritical writing directly, rather than just their description.

*Keywords:* Fictocritical writing, artistic research, hybridization, literature, visual arts, performative writing.

In the introduction to the anthology book *Creative Criticism*, Stephen Benson and Clare Connors claim:

No wonder that many critical essays sound dry, robotic and somewhat ventriloquized. And no wonder, either, that literature and arts students and academics often feel alienated by the language of the very subject that they chose – out of love, interest or at least aptitude – to pursue.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation encapsulates a general feeling of uneasiness that, in recent years, has been traversing the field of contemporary art. A sense of exhaustion of the critical language that we use to write in and about contemporary art is reflected in current debates about the crisis of art criticism, the phenomenon known as International Art English, and the emergence of voices that demand a reassessment of “curatorial writing.” In this paper, I will focus on a particular strand of critical art writing, namely artistic research, and I will discuss fictocritical writing as an alternative able to open new possibilities that can reinvigorate the production of knowledge in the visual arts. What can we learn from fictocritical writing? How can we use writing methodologically? How can we retain cognitive value through the use of fiction?

By subsuming artistic research under the larger notion of “critical art writing”, we might object that artistic research does not belong to the same area as art criticism or curatorial writing. Yet honing critical thinking is crucial to avoid research being merely descriptive, because criticality is key in transforming the gathered information into knowledge. And as I will argue below, it may be desirable that a critical attitude is complemented with other cognitive faculties, such as imagination and identification. Research is a process of self-learning, where we proceed from a position of not-knowing and the answers to the questions do not exist beforehand – hence the fact that all research is always *original*, which means that it is fundamentally creative work. Treated the right way, creative work can generate detectable research outputs,<sup>2</sup> producing new knowledge or expanding the

- 1 Stephen Benson and Clare Connors, eds., *Creative Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
- 2 Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, eds., *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in The Creative Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 5.

existing body of knowledge in a certain area (enlarging, disputing, or revising established notions).

From this viewpoint, fictocritical writing would be a perfect match with the creative spirit that animates artistic research. However, although fictocritical writing has been developed and theorized in other disciplines such as history, ethnography, anthropology, philosophy, and sociology,<sup>3</sup> and its application could have a great impact on our current understanding of artistic research, it has received scant critical attention in the field of the visual arts. There is evidence that loose fictocritical experiences are happening in the art world, within and without academia, but they are usually treated in isolation.<sup>4</sup> As a result, there is a lack of expert knowledge to situate them in the contemporary art landscape. To my knowledge, there has not been any attempt at studying the work of these authors as a common field of practice.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify what is meant exactly by “fictocritical writing.” Gerrit Haas, one of the few European scholars who has researched fictocritical writing strategies, explains that

The name “fictocriticism” is often evoked to subsume motivated experimental writing practices that confound, and thereby problematise, the generic distinctions between fiction and criticism, between fiction and non-fiction, between philosophy and literature. Fictocritical texts are usually playful in tone and experimental in attitude. ... Bringing fictional means into the realm of generic academic writing, for example, fictocriticism augments the conceptual relation of such nonfictional texts with the more affective relation of a literary reading.<sup>5</sup>

- 3 For a thorough genealogy (whose discussion would exceed the limits of this paper) across disciplines, discourses (feminist, postcolonial, queer), and countries (Canada, Australia), see Gerrit Haas, *Fictocritical Strategies: Subverting Textual Practices of Meaning, Other, and Self-Formation* (Bielefeld/New York: Transcript Verlag/Columbia University Press, 2017), 7–42.
- 4 Jeanne Randolph, Chris Kraus, Lynne Tillman, Mark von Schlegell, Francis McKee, and Maria Fusco, to name but a few of the most salient authors. Some additional examples will be discussed later in this paper.
- 5 Haas, *Fictocritical Strategies*, 7. Whereas many authors speak of “fictocriticism”, I prefer the term “fictocritical writing”, which conveys the sense of a practice, rather than a genre.

Furthermore, he adds that

A fictocritical text would blur the line between the kind of primary texts we read (literature, fiction) and the kind of secondary texts we are taught to write on them (criticism, theory, nonfiction). In this sense, *fictocritical texts are valid fictional contributions to non-fictional debates*.<sup>6</sup>

According to Professor Carl Rhodes, “Fictocriticism can operate reflexively in the nexus of academic writing, academic freedom and academic subjectivity, while also enabling a different form of engagement with the world that it is written in and about.”<sup>7</sup> In his view, fictocritical writing’s interdisciplinary approach seeks to “blur the boundaries between the fictional, the factual and the theoretical.”<sup>8</sup> It can therefore be assumed that fictocritical writing is “less a defined style or genre, and more of a sensibility through which one writes.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to retain that fictocritical writing is eminently experimental, by which I mean that it is defined in and by practice – a practice that is essentially genre resistant. There is no book of style that teaches us how to write fictocritically; rather, it is an approach to writing that (as will become clear when discussing the case studies below) usually appears as a solution to a problem.

In my teaching experience in different MFA programs in Europe, I have observed that for an increasing number of students, text occupies different positions within their practice: the same piece could be the script of a performance, a chapter of their master thesis, or a work of literature in its own right, depending on the context where it is situated. In order to understand fictocritical potential in academic writing, it will be useful to refer to Donna Maree Hancox and Vivienne Muller when they contend that

Fictocriticism affords students a way to write beyond the abstract concerns of critical theory and cultural studies that they are sometimes overwhelmed by and to question, challenge and internalise the ideas in a new way. It is

6 Haas, *Fictocritical Strategies*, 14, my italics.

7 Carl Rhodes, email to author, 22 March 2016.

8 Carl Rhodes, “Writing Organization/Romancing Fictocriticism”, *Culture and Organization* 21, no. 4 (2015): 294.

9 Carl Rhodes, email to author, 22 March 2016.

the combination of creative and critical modes ... that gives the discipline its strength.<sup>10</sup>

In traditional academic style, writing is employed as a means to express the contents of the research. A fictocritical approach, on the other hand, is open to experimental writing practices where the text works performatively – it not only expresses the research but in that expression becomes the research itself.<sup>11</sup> As Anna Gibbs claims:

It is *writing as research*, stubbornly insisting on the necessity of a certain *process* in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow *after the event*, a simple “outcome” of a research which always takes place elsewhere: in the archive, in the field, or the focus group, on the web, etc.<sup>12</sup>

I had a conversation with Carl Rhodes where he stated that fictocritical writing “is methodological, but it is about blurring the traditional distinctions between style and content as well. The text not being a neutral conduit of meaning is central to the method and the object of research, in that sense.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the introduction of fiction becomes more than a question of style. The text not only examines, analyzes, or discusses a given state of things in a constative manner – it performs its contents by means of traits traditionally ascribed to literature. The knowledge conveyed by the fictocritical text not only based on the information that it contains, but also on its effects on the reader by way of notions such as imagination, fiction, and identification.

If imagination is the ability to make present things that are absent,<sup>14</sup> fiction’s capacity to stimulate imagination must be first activated by the

10 Donna Maree Hancox and Vivienne Muller, “Excursions into New Territory: Fictocriticism and Undergraduate Writing”, *New Writing* 8, no. 2 (2011): 153.

11 Brad Haseman, “A Manifesto for Performative Research”, *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture and Policy* 118 (February 2006): 102.

12 Anna Gibbs, “Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences”, *Text* 9, no. 1 (2005): paragraph 4, italics in the original, accessed 18 April 2022, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm>.

13 Carl Rhodes, email to author, 7 June 2016.

14 Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2012), 61.

reader's identification. Identification is closely related to narrative empathy, which is the ability, induced by narrative means, to share the feeling and perspective of being in another's situation and condition.<sup>15</sup>

Naturally, a question arises about what sort of knowledge is produced by this methodological introduction of literary traits in critical writing. When discussing the cognitive value of literature, Catherine Wilson argues that "A person may be said not only to know, (e.g.) *how* to play chess or ride a bicycle, and *that*, (e.g.) the War of the Roses began in 1456, but also *what it is like to*, (e.g.) fall suddenly in love, lose a child to death, or undergo religious conversion."<sup>16</sup>

From this viewpoint, the examples that follow below share the intent to entice the reader's identification through narrative empathy and emotional investment to comprehend not only how certain events defined the contents of their research, and that certain vicissitudes happened at some point in time, but also *what it is like to* engage in the processes and experiences at play in the authors' respective artistic research projects. Due to its experimental and practice-based nature, fictocritical writing is best understood in its examples. In the next paragraphs, I will aim to explain the most important aspects of its application in the field of artistic research with three salient case studies: Bert Danckaert's *The Extras*, Barbara Browning's *The Gift*, and Katrina Palmer's *The Dark Object*.<sup>17</sup>

Bert Danckaert is a photographer and associate professor of photography at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. In 2014, he received his PhD from the University of Tilburg, with a research project constituted by the fictocritical artist's novel *The Extras* and a photography book called *Simple Present*.<sup>18</sup> Afterwards, he published *The Extras* as an autonomous paperback edition. In it, the author gives a semi-fictional account of how he arrived at a film set in Bollywood with the intention to photograph its décors. However, a series of incidents prevented him from producing the

15 Suzanne Keen, "Narrative Empathy", in *Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid, 2nd ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 530–539.

16 Catherine Willson, "Literature and Knowledge", *Philosophy* 58, no. 226 (1983): 491–492, italics in the original.

17 Bert Danckaert, *The Extras* (Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2016); Barbara Browning, *The Gift* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017); Katrina Palmer, *The Dark Object* (London: Book Works, 2010).

18 Bert Danckaert, *Simple Present* (Tielt: Lannoo Publishers, 2013).

photographs he wanted. Danckaert uses this occurrence as a springboard to reflect on the incorporation of failure into the analysis of art practice, by way of the philosophy that sustains aikido, a martial arts discipline where a person uses the negative energy of an attacker and turns it around to their own advantage. Danckaert applied the same principle to his research project when faced with the inability to obtain the desired images and decided to turn it into something productive: the critical narration of his own failure as part of his PhD thesis. Admitting failure as an important element in the artistic process gains further significance when considering that it tends to be programmatically erased from the critical examination of art, which rarely engages with the discussion of failed, compromised, or discarded ideas.

I carried out an interview with Danckaert where he explained that “the written essay, or the novel, is about the picture I couldn’t make, so there is no illustration at all; it’s only text about the absent image, if you want.”<sup>19</sup> The possibility for a visual artist to relinquish the production of images in order to evoke them in the reader’s imagination made Danckaert interested in narrative fiction’s ability “to create this kind of mental idea of what your work is about without actually showing it.”<sup>20</sup> He also expressed an interest in introducing process and subjectivity in his writing and a resistance to using critical language to reflect upon his practice. As a result, he decided to “write a subjective, novel-like essay” in order not to become “the art historian or the art philosopher” of his own work. Instead, he opted to experience the artistic process “in the middle of it and trying to describe it.”<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to notice how Danckaert defines *The Extras* as both essay and novel, signifying its hybrid nature and the difficulty of classifying his own writing project. When I asked him if he was familiar with other similar alternatives to a conventional academic essay, he responded with a negative answer. The motivation to turn his PhD fictocritical was not inspired by any previous example; it emerged as a response to a need intrinsic to his research.

Artist, writer, and scholar Barbara Browning is an associate professor and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Performance

19 David Maroto, “The Artist’s Novel: The Novel as a Medium in the Visual Arts” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2018), 201.

20 Maroto, “The Artist’s Novel”, 202.

21 Ibid., 203–204.

Studies at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. She maintains a performative practice, often collaborative, and she has written three fictocritical novels. One of them, called *The Gift*, is based on her extended collaboration with two artists (real or fictional, it is hard to tell). One is Sami, an autistic, virtuoso musician living in Germany; the other is Tye, a New York-based, trans conceptual/performance artist. The central theme revolves around mediated intimacy in the time of digital communication (a good part of the novel is made up of email and voice message exchanges). It also analyzes the gift – how it is received, how it is interpreted – from an anthropological and philosophical perspective (Marcel Mauss, David Graeber, Lewis Hyde). In the novel, such theoretical references are intertwined with the narrator’s experience so that the personal becomes a vehicle for critical reflection. From this viewpoint, the contents of Browning’s research are performed through the narrated events and apprehended through the emotions of the narrator.

There are many descriptions of performance art pieces accompanied by critical assessments that are integrated in the narrative flow. They implicitly demonstrate the unsuitability of conventional art criticism to engage with certain forms of contemporary artistic production in a meaningful way. When speaking about how an art critic was misrepresenting Tye’s work in his article, the narrator says, “The guy was talking about a piece he’d only seen a fragment of on YouTube, it was decontextualized, and he was being ‘reckless’ in talking about Tye’s transness, like it was a buzzword, and it wasn’t just irritating; it was actually hurtful.”<sup>22</sup> *The Gift* acts as a fictocritical alternative that engages with the works on the basis of a long-term dialogue and an honest and close relationship with the artist (not exempt from mistakes and contradictions).

Expanding the narrative beyond the space of the page is here an important creative strategy. Some of the performances narrated in the novel can be found in actual YouTube videos, blurring the line between reality and fiction, or perhaps more exactly, bringing up the question about the performative effect of fiction on reality. Indeed, the issue of the performativity of fiction is central to Browning’s work, who defines her fictocritical



experiments as writing that does not merely describe or analyze its subject matter – but *enacts* it.<sup>23</sup>

Katrina Palmer is an artist and associate professor of fine art at the Ruskin School of Art. During her PhD at the Royal College of Art, she submitted samples of her writing to London-based publisher Book Works, which resulted in the division of her text into two different but interconnected projects: her PhD thesis and the fictocritical artist's novel *The Dark Object*. As a result, certain portions of *The Dark Object* appear in her thesis, whilst conversely, her research project informs the contents of the artist's novel.

The narrative of *The Dark Object* takes place in an art school ruled by a conceptual dogmatism that forbids the making of objects. As a consequence of this extreme idea of purity, the school remains empty save for one single student, who finds his way around the prohibition of making art objects by means of fiction writing. In the stories that he imagines, he interacts with characters such as Slavoj Žižek and conducts tutorials with (the corpse of) Hegel.

According to Palmer, her thesis “relocates sculpture in narrative writing. It creates and describes its own form and produces its own spaces in order to make the writing an artwork.”<sup>24</sup> For her, *The Dark Object* operates simultaneously as an artist's novel, a research project, and an artwork – one which, in its narrative form, problematizes the notion of the “thesis.”

One of the elements that “confounds and thereby problematises” the conventional idea of thesis is of course fiction. From this perspective, Palmer also states that “Fiction naturally raises questions about what's real or not. ... I'm particularly interested in that paradox: how it produces something that we invest belief in, that operates as part of the everyday but that simultaneously declares itself a fabrication.”<sup>25</sup> This quotation serves as a reminder that the administration of fiction in research must be carefully considered because an excess of fabrication in the fictocritical balance could in some instances lead to undermining the research value. It is important to

23 “Barbara Browning: Professor”, NYU Tisch, paragraph 3, my italics, accessed 18 April 2022, <https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/performance-studies/3015339>.

24 Katrina Palmer, “Reality Flickers: Writing with Found Objects and Imagined Sculpture” (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, London, 2011), 3.

25 Jamie Sutcliffe, “Interview with Katrina Palmer”, *The White Review* (September 2015): paragraph 10, accessed 27 April 2022, <http://www.thewhiterewiew.org/feature/interview-with-katrina-palmer>.

retain that fictocritical writing, insofar as it proceeds without the safety provided by academic conventions, brings about its own problematics, which are specific to each singular case and must be treated with attention not to miss the necessary critical rigor.

Although they originate from different contexts and motivations, these three case studies serve to outline some of the most important implications of fictocritical writing in the field of artistic research:

- Browning's and Danckaert's projects share the refusal to adopt an analytical distance in order to study their respective areas of research (performance, photography). The critical element emerges from an immersive point of view, leading to an emotional investment that becomes crucial in the performative apprehension of the contents of the research.

- In both cases, fictocritical writing appears as an answer to certain limitations of conventional critical writing. For Danckaert, it is a more appropriate means to introduce failure as a creative factor. For Browning, it is a suitable way to engage with current forms of contemporary artistic production.

- Imagination takes a vital role in *The Extras*, when the image that should be at the center of the research project is absent because of a failure to produce it. Similarly, in Palmer's *The Dark Object*, a sequence of mental images replaces the art object, though this time due to a prohibition to create it.

- In the three cases, the text operates performatively, offering the possibility to relive (if vicariously) experiences and emotions that shape the course of the project, so that the contents of the research are actualized each time by the reader's work.

A paper that discusses fictocritical writing and does not offer an example that shows what it actually reads like might feel somewhat incomplete. Because fictocritical writing is best grasped in its effects, I would like to end with a sample from my own writing, an excerpt from my PhD thesis. Before proceeding, it is important to contextualize my research project: in 2014–18, I carried out a PhD at the Edinburgh College of Art with a thesis titled *The Artist's Novel: The Novel as a Medium in the Visual Arts*. The goal was to research the artist's novel, not as a literary genre but as an artistic medium, exactly as, for example, video or performance. It was divided in two

parts: first, a theoretical essay that examined four case studies, called *A New Medium*, and a second part, called *The Fantasy of the Novel*, which is a novel about the process of the creation of an artist's novel.

Together with curator Joanna Zielińska, I am part of a collective, The Book Lovers, which is a practice-based research project on the artist's novel. Joanna was working at that time as the head of the performance department at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, an opportunity that we used to launch an open call for the creation of a new artist's novel, which would be produced by the art center. From 230 proposals, we selected Alex Cecchetti's project, called *Tamam Shud*, which consisted of five episodic performances and an exhibition, all at the service of the creation of a murder mystery narrative that would then be written up as a novel.<sup>26</sup>

One of the arguments that I developed in my PhD is that the contents of the artist's novel lie in the process of its creation as much as in the text that is printed on its pages. It seemed congruent, thus, that I would use *Tamam Shud* as a key case study to research how that happens in real time. For more than two years, I accompanied the process as a co-curator (thus not at the center of the art project, since I was not the artist – Alex was – nor as an external observer, but in the midst of it), accumulating a large amount of notes and archival material from which a narrative account of the events emerged as the most appropriate way to convey the process. Fictionalizing the art project (real people were turned into characters, conversations into dialogues) enabled access to areas of experience where other research methods could not reach. By writing fictocritically, I could examine the informal elements that are part of the creative process in any art project but which are rarely committed to writing, namely, intersubjective relationships and other unmeasurable factors that dictate the actual conditions of production. By stimulating subjective faculties such as imagination and narrative empathy, the reader of *The Fantasy of the Novel* will not only apprehend the critical examination of the art project, but also *what it feels like* to create an artist's novel by means of the identification with the characters' points of view, the context, and situations narrated.

26 The relationship between art project and artist's novel was significantly more complex than that, but there is no space in this paper to explain Alex's artistic strategy in depth. For a detailed examination of the project, see David Maroto, *The Fantasy of the Novel* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2020).

This paper set out to raise fundamental questions about the introduction of fictocritical writing in artistic research. Fictocritical writing is not a style or a genre, in the sense that there is no set of conventions through which one can master it. It is an approach to writing that is eminently experimental and hybrid in nature. I have argued for the application of the cognitive value of literature at the service of artistic knowledge production. In so doing, the text ceases to be a “a neutral conduit of meaning”, and the writing process becomes methodological in that it influences the way the research is conducted and the contents are organized – it is writing as research. The performativity of fiction opens the way to new creative possibilities in the field of artistic research. It is important to retain, though, that the use of fiction must not come at the expense of the necessary critical and analytical rigor. Further work needs to be done in order to establish the emergence of a textual practice where theory and practice, fiction and research, literature and the visual arts, merge.



1. *When Everything Is So Clean It Is Difficult to Remember Something.*  
 Countertenor and contralto.  
 Illustration by David Maroto.

### *What Is Hell for Many Can Be Heaven for Some*<sup>27</sup>

Episode 1, titled *When Everything Is So Clean It Is Difficult to Remember Something*, was about to begin. The Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art’s black box where the performance was going to take

27 Excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Fantasy of the Novel*. At this point in the plot, Alex has been selected after the open call and is about to carry out the first performance, the first “episode” in his two-year-long plan.

place was a large room with no elevated stage, just a sizeable empty space in front of a metallic grandstand that the audience had to walk around upon entering the room, before reaching the central space. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were painted black; the lights had been carefully configured in such a way that everything but the central space remained in darkness.

The 35 or so members of the audience gathered together in the middle of the room, whilst the grandstand, where they should normally have taken their seats, was occupied by two standing figures escorting a man hanging upside down. It was Alex on the very top of the structure, surrounded by the singers: a countertenor and a contralto, the former being the highest pitch in a male voice, the latter the lowest of the female vocal range, so that they met somewhere in the middle. Indeed, when they began singing the melancholic Henry Purcell's *O Solitude*, it was difficult making a distinction between their voices. The countertenor was wearing make-up all over his face, dark blue with purple tones and plenty of glitter. The contralto had the same colours on her face, though her design was shaped in the form of an inverted triangle.

Apart from the musicians, the grandstand, and a large black bean-bag, the room was mostly empty. In the absence of actual props the space was filled up with sound. Episode 1 was a performance based on Alex's narrative, music, singing, and light design. Above the grandstand, in twilight and out of public sight, Ola and the light and sound technicians followed each sentence uttered by Alex on the script. It was essential to keep a perfect coordination between his cues and the operation of the stage lights, which shifted between the different scenes.

Alex was still hanging upside down, changing positions and smiling while the notes of *O Solitude* continued to sound. It was the first time I saw him in person, he was shorter than I expected. I recognised his outfit as reminiscent of the clothes worn by the Somerton man at the moment of his death: a white linen suit with a green undone bow tie around his neck. His awkward posture reminded me the picture he included in his application to the open call, in which he posed lying upside down over the steps of a spiral staircase, playing dead, his legs crossed in the shape of a number four.

Knowing his fascination with Tarot, I guessed it was no coincidence that the inverted composition in the application picture and now in Episode 1 was evocative of card XII, The Hanged Man. It was a bit too early for me to make sense of what the repetition of this visual motif would signify for the project, so for the time being I limited myself to making a mental note.

As the song came to an end, Alex abandoned his weird body position and, standing in front of the audience, said through a hands-free microphone attached to his face:

“Yes, I died here. I know it’s uncomfortable but I guess you have no choice when someone kills you. ... I died here, look at this.” He went down to meet the audience, lay on the floor, arms stretched and legs wide open, and said, “I died here, very frontal. Now, it took two weeks for the cleaning lady to understand I died.” Alex got up and walked around, swinging his arm, “BFFFFFF – this is her, passing the Hoover – BFFFFFF. Then my leg was bothering her.”

He gestured as if lifting a leg on the same spot where he had been lying down just a minute ago.

“BFFFFFF, paf!” He imitated the sound of his leg dropping with a thud.

“Then my arm was bothering her, BFFFFFF, paf! And you know what – my head was bothering her. And the next week she did the same: BFFFFFF. I think she understood I died when I finally couldn’t pay her anymore. Poor lady. Detectives said that they found nothing in my pockets. They asked the cleaning lady, she said she found nothing in my pockets as well. But I think she checked. I mean, how did she know?”

He kept walking around, very close to the audience. “The strange thing about detectives is that I died there, and they check other people’s pockets. I died there and they follow other people’s steps. I died there and they check your pockets, your fingerprints, your bank account. “What for? I hate microphones. What for? To know who I was and how I died. Who I was, I have no idea; how I died ... neither. See, this is a crime scene. Usually, in a crime scene there’s blood, hair, dust, little pieces of skin, nails, body fluids, like sperm and shit like that. But here, someone is used to cleaning everything twice: the cleaning lady. See? She comes twice a week, it’s

so clean you can lick the floor.” He lay on his stomach and proceeded to demonstrate it. He got up and said, “That’s why it’s so hard to remember anything when everything is so clean”.

Alex moved around ceaselessly, now shouting, now grabbing a spectator by the shoulders, now making up another one with glitter, or playing mother and son with another one. His continuous changes of tone kept the audience’s attention focused on the narration. The story was filled with what I suspected were clues that would be developed in future episodes. For example, through most of the performance, Alex was dragging the black beanbag around, which he called “a couch”. *Surely this object can’t be irrelevant*, I thought. It could become an important element later on in the project, perhaps as a piece of evidence that the detectives had missed when searching the crime scene. But even I, who had more background information than the rest of the audience, couldn’t be sure. At some point, he lay down on the beanbag and said:

“I don’t remember much about dying, but I know that, for some strange reason, my first memory and my last one collide. For some cosmic reason, they are the same: first and last one, the same memory, more or less.” He invited the audience to get closer around him. He then described the experience of being a baby in a pram, “I was lying down. And then, right there [he pointed upwards] there were these trees. And on top of these trees there were green leaves. And they were trembling, and going backwards. And the sun behind the leaves was flickering, making light games, very beautiful. Everything was going backwards. Everything was so beautiful. Sometimes someone feeds you. Sometimes you sleep and someone sings to you. Sometimes you shit and someone cleans you up. And life at that time was beautiful, really beautiful.”

I could identify what we were listening to as a description of the video that was going to be projected on the ceiling of the Death Room in the future *Tamam Shud* exhibition. He stood up again:

“Now, if it was possible to die twice in a lifetime, I really would like that my last memory was me in my mother’s arms.” He reaffirmed his words with energetic nods. “Just me in my mother’s arms ... and my little bow,



2. *When Everything Is So Clean It Is Difficult to Remember Something.* Alex and the audience. Illustration by David Maroto.

aiming proudly at a faraway haystack.” He gestured as if holding a bow and arrow. “Come on boy, shoot. If you shoot, mommy will give you the thing that you want so much”, he said, impersonating his mother’s voice. “I don’t remember what that thing was, but I think I really wanted it, because I shot. Fuck, I shot.”

He rearranged everyone to stand in a semicircle.

“You ask about my father – I mean, you didn’t, but this is part of the text. Death is really funny. Death is a little bit like: Boo! You see, I’m not funny, but when death does it, people are scared to death. Bad joke ... I don’t want to speak about my father. What happened to my father is not important. I mean, what happened to my father’s leftovers is not important. I cut him in little pieces and put them in little plastic bags. Blue. Now, he was a big boy.”

Next, he gave the floor to the singers, who interpreted Rossini’s “Duetto Buffo di Due Gatti”. It was an uplifting moment, everyone enjoyed it, and some even danced with Alex. Close contact with the audience, making comments on their actions and reactions was part of the performance. In his speech, Alex alternated the fictional narrative with intentionally



humorous remarks addressed at particular spectators, following the method that he had referred to as *canovaccio*, leaving a lot open to improvisation. It enabled him to mingle Alex Cecchetti, the fictional character who told his story post-mortem, with Alex Cecchetti, the artist and author of the performance. It blended past (the time of the narrated events) and present (the observation of the immediate reality around him), death (the narrator's) and life (the performer in front of us). This strategy created a playful and enticing confusion between him, the artist, and the fictional character as victim, investigator, and narrator.

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Santrauka

## Kaip literatūrinis rašymas gali prisidėti prie neliteratūrinių diskusijų: fiktokritinis rašymas meniniame tyrime

Davidas Maroto

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* literatūra, meninis tyrimas, hibridizacija, vizualinis menas, performatyvusis rašymas.

Literatūriškai kritiškas rašymas yra apibrėžiamas kaip tarpdisciplininė praktika, kuria siekiama „ištrinti ribas tarp literatūriškumo, faktiškumo ir teoretiškumo“. Šis eksperimentinio rašymo būdas gali sustiprinti esamą meno kritikos, o ypač meninio tyrimo, diskursą. Patirties šioje srityje įgijau literatūrinę kalbą naudodamas savo daktaro disertacijai ir suteikdamas jai romano pavidalą. Akademiniėje literatūroje dar nėra tyrimų, kuriuose būtų aptariamas kūrybinio rašymo principų naudojimas meniniam tyrimui (literatūriškai kritiškas rašymo būdas yra plačiai naudojamas ir studijuojamas kitose humanitarinėse disciplinose, jis itin populiarus Australijoje ir Kanadoje). Šiame tekste analizuojama, kaip rašymui gali pasitarnauti išėjimas anapus konstatyvinės teksto funkcijos, ir aptariama, kaip performatyvioji rašymo prigimtis gali būti panaudojama meninio tyrimo labui.

Čia aptariu tris kūrinius, kurie padeda atskleisti literatūriškai kritiško rašymo ypatybes: Berto Danckaerto *Priedus*, Barbaros Browning *Dovaną* ir Katrinos Palmer *Tamsiąjį objektą*. Visi šie kūriniai yra romano forma parašyti ir į meno kūrinius integruoti meninio tyrimo darbai (du iš jų yra daktaro disertacijos). Drauge šiame tekste pateikiu ištrauką iš savo romano *Romano fantazija* (jis yra ir mano daktaro disertacijos dalis) tikėdamasis, kad skaitytojui tai leis susidaryti aiškesnį vaizdą apie literatūriškai kritiško rašymo poveikį ne iš aprašymo, o iš konkretaus pavyzdžio.