

Inevitably Making Sense: An Introduction to the Writing of Ian White

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Ian White performing *Hinterhof* feat. James Richards *Untitled Merchandise* (*Trade Urn*), 2008, KUB Arena, Kunsthaus Bregenz (2010)

Anything made is a lie. I want to be a problem. A generous snare.

Ian White, from an unpublished notebook

I still remember being at the Tate Triennial in 2003 and hearing Ian White's voice on the soundtrack to Oliver Payne and Nick Relph's video *Gentlemen*, asking, rhetorically, 'Where do you end and Prince Charles begin?' The script was Payne and Relph's, but the voice was very much White's – an inimitable voice, witty, warm, camp, and more than a little querulous.

That sentence comes back to me now in another tenor, because I would struggle (like many others, I know) to say precisely where I end and Ian White begins. Editing this book, writing this introduction, I'm faced with the fact that I am to some degree the product of the writings here – of the arguments and ideas they transmit, of the person whose voice they recollect. This is a personal observation of sorts; but it is also a simple recognition of the character of White's own life, which was lived furiously in collaboration, dialogue, argument.

In the earliest text collected here, from 2002, White writes that the work of the late New York artist David Wojnarowicz 'mounts as radical a challenge to the containment of commentary as it does to personal and cultural commodification'. White's own work, his own life, perhaps represents a similar challenge – not least because, like Wojnarowicz, White died absurdly young (Wojnarowicz was thirty-seven, White was forty-one). White's practice as a whole still seems uncategorisable. It included, amongst other things, scores of curated film programmes and events, a series of solo and collaborative performance works,

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a hugely influential teaching career and a substantial amount of writing. The process of thinking, collectively, about what this body of work might mean – or whether it can even be reconstructed as ‘an integrated whole predicated on biography’, as White suggests in Wojnarowicz’s case – has barely begun.

Writing was integral to White’s work. He never merely recorded or commented upon; rather, his writing was catalytic. In the words of his essay ‘Foyer’ (2011), ‘it is where things happen(ed)’.¹ His texts were also enormously important for others, but they had been published in very diverse contexts, sometimes in quite ephemeral forms, so the idea of a collection seemed obvious. White and I worked a little on this book in the last year of his life, whilst he was being treated for lymphoma; but he was busy with other projects and we planned to revisit it later. In the event, when later was no longer a possibility, we spoke about the principles of selection, and he suggested some of the texts which might be included. The final selection and all of the detailed work of editing I have done without him. I have tried as much as possible to follow in the direction we had mapped out, but I am under no illusion that this is the book we would have made together had he been able to work on it longer.

This account – this introduction, this book – is, then, as White noted of his account of Wojnarowicz, ‘doubly partial’. Firstly, in the obvious sense: it is a selection, compiled posthumously, which omits a number of perhaps equally important pieces of his writing.² The selection was driven by a desire to show both the variety of White’s writing and the development of his thinking around a particular constellation of ideas about theatre, cinema, performance and politics – a constellation which seems important to me as a continuing challenge to our present. But it is also partial in the sense of partisan: the choices I made were inescapably subjective, based on a shared history – of curating, teaching, writing and making together; of friendship and conversation – extending from when White and I first started working together at the Lux Centre in London in 2001 until his death in 2013.

I will not attempt to give a detailed account of either White’s life or his artistic practice here; both of these tasks would feel impossible

for different reasons. Instead I am going to try to trace one selective path through his writing and to read these very various texts – written at different times, for different reasons – through the prism of my experience of his work, and of him. In doing so, I will suggest that the writing’s often varied terminology refers, ultimately, to the same thing – that there is a coherent and tightly woven net of ideas behind what may appear to be quite different kinds of texts. What follows is, therefore, avowedly and unashamedly a construction: ‘something made’, a readerly speculation, a shoring of fragments. A desire, mobilised.

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In notes for an artist’s talk he gave at the Ruskin School of Art at Oxford University in 2011, White addressed how he inhabited the roles of artist and curator. He speculated that while there are valid reasons for distinguishing them – biographical, economic, ethical – ultimately,

... they are both the means by which I am personally able to get through life, to navigate, think, be – they are processes of negotiation... they are indivisible.

The texts in this book reflect that indivisibility. Spanning just over a decade, as of 2002, and organised chronologically, they are drawn from a wide variety of sources: magazine articles, texts for exhibition and film festival catalogues, blog posts, talks, press releases, etc. They are slanted somewhat more towards the curatorial and critical side of White’s work, and many focus on artists with whom he worked in his groundbreaking film programmes, beginning in the mid-1990s, at, amongst other venues, the Horse Hospital, the Lux Centre (later LUX) and the Whitechapel Gallery in London; the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen; and Kino Arsenal in Berlin.

White’s own artistic practice developed in parallel to his curatorial projects, and traces of his performance work – at least half a dozen solo pieces as well as his collaborations with Jimmy Robert, Emily Roysdon and others – are to be found throughout his writings. Although I have not included his performance scripts, for example (three are already published in another volume),³ the writings here

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offer numerous reflections, whether in passing or in detail, on the ideas and influences behind his own work. They include the texts of two performative talks ('A Life, and Time' and 'Hinterhof', both 2011) and two collaborative texts related to performances developed with others (Martin Gustavsson and Jimmy Robert). Moreover, White's texts themselves tend to render such distinctions irrelevant and demand to be considered as a whole. As the late text 'Division' (2013) puts it: 'Any extraction is a picture, a story(line), lies.'

For the reader of this book, the indivisibility is likely to manifest itself more immediately as an experience of form: these texts constantly collapse critical distance and insist instead on a kind of present tense of writing and reading, an active encounter in which something is being *produced* rather than transmitted – a performance, in other words:

I am writing this. You must be reading this, but you do not have to.
(‘Yet But If But If But Then But Then’, 2003)

This gesture of readerly interpellation recurs frequently, in different forms, but always as a claim on (and about) us, as singular or collective readers – readers who are not being offered an idea or a programme to assent to, but are rather being solicited to become actively complicit in the making of meanings. ‘Complicity too is participation’, White writes in ‘One Script for 9 Scripts from a Nation at War’ (2008). That demand simultaneously ‘lays US on the line’, as the Wojnarowicz text puts it, which also means a constant need to negotiate what kind of ‘us’ we are or might wish to be.

White's style is idiosyncratic in other, related ways. It is often dense and grammatically complex, with peculiar emphases, nested quotations and counterintuitive formulations. For example, there are the slash signs which constantly threaten the proliferation of (sometimes incompatible) meanings: ‘is/was’, ‘a/our condition’, ‘the/her body’, ‘art from/of this life’, ‘a problem solved/exposed’, ‘installed/dismantled’, ‘wrong/right’, ‘other than/as well as/because of’... As a result, sentences become like electrical circuits, rerouting and flipping the currents of thought: present, past and future oscillate wildly; causality flickers like a promise, the fragile product of his/our interpretation.⁴

In some ways, the writing here is a kind of ‘museum without walls’: a catalogue for a virtual collection of works, a partial record of White's enormously influential curatorial projects ('Kinomuseum', 2007, being a case in point). It should already be clear, however, that when White writes about artists, artworks, ideas, lives, etc. that there is never simply exposition or transmission of knowledge – information is never neutral or merely given. Rather, for White writing is radically productive and the category of ‘information’ is always to be treated like the promptings of a gallery wall label: partial, selective, prescriptive, authored.

In the script for his performance *Black Flags* (2009), White draws on phrases from his interview with a Curator of Interpretation at Tate about the function of museum wall texts and audiences' supposed desire for ‘neutral’ information about artworks. Through White's script, this emerges as the defining institutional fantasy of ‘bodiless information’:

[...] unobtrusive, unnoticed expressions of institutional authority/their invisibility defines institutional authority which functions by not being seen or felt: it is nothing.⁵

For White, this fantasy – of authority that functions *because* it is not consciously experienced – is both ludicrous and dangerous. Information is always bodily, factitious, intentional, something that only comes into existence when it is thrown or projected: ‘Look at a reel of film, a tape, a hard drive and you cannot see with the eye alone the information’ ('Foyer'). Nor is any content or information stable and pre-existing; rather, it comes into existence contingently each time it is enunciated or performed. Only the recognition of that – of our own agency as viewers, listeners, readers – allows for ‘change beyond that which occurs through information’ ('Palace Calls Crisis Summit', 2003). The phrase which recurs in differing formulations in White's late writing, and which gives this volume its title, seems to condense this idea into an imperative: ‘Here is information. Mobilise.’⁶

The form of such a mobilisation might start from the recognition that, as White puts it in relation to the work of Gerard Byrne, ‘context... becomes content’ ('The hole's the thing...', 2011). This formulation is not esoteric, and White suggests what it might mean in a number of

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other ways, from his account of how the TV news he has watched in a film festival hotel room affects the films he subsequently sees ('Palace Calls Crisis Summit'), to his allusions to John Cage's silence,⁷ or his various readings of Morgan Fisher's radically site-specific film *Screening Room* (1968–). It is there, too, in his account of 'expanded cinema', a term which is normally an art historical label for a particular set of performance/film practices from the 1960s, but which he expands in turn to encompass something more utopian:

expanded cinema could be considered as a practice that extends or multiplies the frame of the screen to incorporate what is happening in the screening room itself, to include space, movement, live speaking, to incorporate the corporeality of the spectator as also constituting the work itself through relative, physical positions in space.

('Performer, Audience, Mirror', 2012)

White is clear on the genealogy of this idea: it begins, in essence, with the polemical appropriation of critic Michael Fried's 'brilliantly unsuccessful denunciation' of Minimalist art as 'theatrical' in his famous essay 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), which inadvertently 'defines what it attempts to denigrate'. Byrne's multi-screen video installation *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010) – which White describes as a 'continuous representation, examination, extension of and participation in' Fried's text – becomes an occasion for White to explore this ('The hole's the thing...'). Elsewhere, White spells out more precisely how he understands this inversion of Fried's argument:

What Fried denounces we might celebrate as a liberating self-reflexivity: the viewer becomes the activating agent – simultaneously a player and an audience – in a theatre without stage, props, costumes, etc. The meaning of these indivisible shapes is entirely constituted by their equal indivisibility from the room which surrounds them and their relationship to the viewing body which sees – experiences – both these things and itself.

('Death, Life and Art(ifice): The Films of Sharon Lockhart', 2009)

Throughout the course of White's writing, we can see the gradual elaboration and complication of this basic argument, his mapping of a series of transpositions from theatre and Minimalism (read in Friedian terms) onto the conditions in which we experience artists' film and video – or as he puts it in 'Wishful Thinking' (2012), his essay on the work of Oliver Husain, 'the political imperative of theatricality, of theatre, of cinema read as theatre for the sake of new social formations'.

White draws on an extraordinary range of thinkers – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Yvonne Rainer, Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes (on Racine), Dan Graham (on architecture), etc. – in order to develop a genealogical concept of 'theatre' which perhaps relates less to most of what is currently produced under that name and more to a certain history of performance art. Another way to think of it might be in terms of camp, as in White's provocative description of Fisher's *Screening Room* as 'a theatricalising (camp) gesture' ('Wishful Thinking'). This is certainly not, however, the kind of camp that Susan Sontag could insist was necessarily 'depoliticised', a sovereign aestheticism.⁸ Instead, White's camp theatricality mobilises an apparently formalist, tautological conceit like Fisher's (the audience watching a film of the space in which they are sitting) to create a flash of insight into our bodily present, the psychic-physical conditions of our own spectatorship. For White, such camp would be less a question of the 'failed seriousness' of any particular artwork, as Sontag would have it; rather, it would be a name for our experience of the ultimate failure of the institutional frames for *all* artworks, and the process of discovering, each time anew, that perhaps it is *we* who are in fact producing the work – together, here and now, in the auditorium. Hence the task becomes, as 'Recording and Performing' (2008) urges, 'to replace the question about where the meaning of a performative artwork might be located by reconstituting this "location" as the question itself'.

This leads White to make some very unexpected conjunctions: the unities of classical Aristotelean theatre, for example, can come to rhyme with a certain kind of austere filmic structuralism through their shared insistence on a conspicuously unbroken time frame. This paradoxical affinity is expressed most clearly in 'Death, Life and Art(ifice)',

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his incisive account of Sharon Lockhart's films, and how what might appear as a kind of literalistic minimalism – for example her fixed-frame shots, held for the length of a reel of 16mm film – becomes, oddly, a device which heightens the viewer's awareness of the constructedness of the image and, crucially, their own relationship to it. Formalism at its most rigorous and rarefied sometimes flips into something entirely, shockingly familiar – or vice versa. White describes this reversal elegantly, for example, in a comparison of Yvonne Rainer's dance works with Chantal Akerman's films in relation to their apparently untheatrical 'everydayness':

By definition, the everyday would seem to be something done which is not thought (as in planned). But by definition also it is something that is repeated to an extreme degree – every day, in fact. ('Death, Life and Art(ifice)')

What becomes apparent is that this is not simply a question of art and spectatorship. In White's writings, 'theatre' is a term which implies a whole set of political subjectivities, a way of figuring individual and collective agency in the production of the present – and this idea is one bridge between his more evidently critical/theoretical writing and the more diaristic texts, such as those from his blog *Lives of Performers*. It is why, for example, he can describe a hospital, in a post written during the period of his treatment, as being 'theatre of the worst kind' – because hospital is a kind of perverse and alienating stage for the isolated patient, who is figured as a passive non-performer, with 'no audience or no one who wants to be one' ('In. Adequate. Time. (Prisons 1)', 2012).

In order to begin to conceive what another kind of theatre and another kind of audience might be, White asks us to think about our bodies, assembled, in space. The physical and conceptual space of the auditorium becomes key because, in relation to the body of works White is interested in, it represents 'context' in its most concrete, historically and socially specific terms. (In a different formulation, in 'The Projected Object', 2004, the auditorium becomes a 'social metatext'.) Part of the presupposition of an auditorium, in both theatre and cinema, is a single, unitary perspective – but this is belied in reality, for example by

the deceptively obvious fact that we are distributed around the space with different sightlines, often with a hierarchy of perspectives based on the price of the seats. Discussing how the theatre director Robert Wilson 'organises his stage as a picture designed and choreographed to be viewed from the middle of the stalls (from where it was directed) for optimal impact', White remarks that 'sitting at the back of the auditorium, on the end of a row – in a cheap seat – throws the picture into radical relief. The power structure breaks down because the lines of persuasion effected by perspective are broken'⁹ ('Performer, Audience, Mirror'). In other words, the embodied experience of the auditorium viewer is no less divisible from what they see than that of Fried's spectator of Minimalist art. One important imperative then becomes to examine precisely the 'aesthetic, economic, critical and political' determinants of the auditorium in all its forms, from the Greek amphitheatre to the modern museum's screening space.



Audience for Ian White's project *Richard Serra's Hands* at lab.oratory, a Berlin gay sex club, in 2011. The event involved several of Serra's 16mm films of his own hands, including *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) and *Color Aid* (1970–71), being sequentially projected onto paper screens stretched over the club's furniture.

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White explored this idea throughout his curatorial work in many different ways, the traces and implications of which are everywhere in this book. If the project is to devise forms which dramatise what White calls the ‘unstable present’ of performance for the audience – to present the work so that they become aware both of its physical/institutional framing and their own agency in deciding the value of that framing – then I think we can find a number of different names for that ambition throughout these texts: ‘Kinomuseum’, ‘artists’ cinema’, ‘differentiated cinema’, ‘the foyer’, ‘liveness’...

What all these concepts point to is a form of radical production and exhibition which refuses any simple distinction between those two terms – or between an inside and an outside, whether that refers to what is within/without the frame, or what is within/without the art historical canon. The (cinema) auditorium becomes the fulcrum for this, and, in White’s understanding, the auditorium becomes activated when we realise how continuous it is with everything we think it excludes, so that

the frame of the work is multiplied and extended not only into the room where the work is viewed but also disintegrating these physical limits to occupy the world at large – life, itself, material. (‘Performer, Audience, Mirror’)

In this way, the space of viewing – that paradoxical space we are supposed to forget when the lights go down, where we go, in Jean-Luc Godard’s phrase, ‘(together) to be alone’¹⁰ – becomes something else, something more: ‘a productive limit or a dialectical location’ (‘Performer, Audience, Mirror’).

The limit becomes productive, for White, when we realise that ‘LIMIT IS MATERIAL’ (‘F R E E (Prisons 2)’, 2012); that is, when we become conscious of the limits imposed on our experience by framing, of whatever kind, then those limits can be made into the material (content) of our experience.¹¹ This, I think, is why White returns repeatedly to the image of ‘occupation’, conceived – as he puts it in ‘I and I/12 to 12’ (2005), his text on the Copenhagen Free University – as ‘the occupation of a form conducted to make its organisational and operational

principles apparent’. White does not advocate a turning away from compromised forms – whether political, social or artistic – but rather a conscious attempt to occupy them, to inhabit them, in such ways that their limits could be revealed and challenged, and perhaps overcome.

Occupation is necessarily something provisional, tactical and temporary; it turns what it occupies (theatre, cinema, the auditorium) to use. And in case this sounds too militaristic, perhaps it is simply an attempt to redeem another militaristic concept, that of the avant-garde, by virtue of a gesture of (camp) appropriation – not forging ahead to seize new territories, but rather trying to rescue a productively ruined present. Meaningful political agency is to be sought by claiming and inhabiting the ruins of institutions or ideas, or what the filmmaker Lis Rhodes called ‘a crumpled heap’:¹² the disorder of hierarchies and histories in the moment we refuse them. One of White’s favourite words is ‘collapse’, as in:

The collapse of: political regimes, private ownership, ‘passive’ reception (being told), narrative, hierarchical order, the Institution, exclusion, lies. (‘Foyer’)

Possibility resides in ruins. That is why occupation is linked in White’s writing to ‘evacuation’, which functions both as occupation’s opposite – an institution or convention which is no longer legitimate, whose meaning has been hollowed out – and its condition of possibility – the way in which the self-conscious *experience* of evacuation might become the productive experience of a limit: ‘evacuation is made material’ (‘The hole’s the thing...’).¹³ Perhaps this idea marks the beginning of a politics we might call queer?

It is the emphasis on forms of fleeting, fragile, negative freedom which makes this politics so radical. White’s model of occupied ruins and permanent provisionality resists even the fatalistic comforts of Robert Smithson’s idea of entropy. In his 1967 essay ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey’, Smithson famously imagined a sandbox neatly divided into white sand and black sand, mixed into grey by a child running clockwise; if the child is then asked to run counterclockwise, ‘the result will not be a restoration of the original

division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy'.¹⁴ White offers a simple response to Smithson's allegory:

Seen in this way, all systems are processes of disintegration, the circulation of parts towards their indivisibility, invisibility. This degenerative spiral into sameness is erasure, producing an inertia even in the act of looking. But move closer. Get really close. Step into the box and bend down. What is there is not what you saw before. The individual grains of sand in Smithson's pit are not grey, but still black and white. The analogy only holds for as long as we occupy a fixed position of inviolable, immaterial perception. 'Greyness' is the impression of a colour from a fixed perspective. Only in this way does looking become blindness. ('What is Material?', 2012)

In White's writing, the collapse of divisions, the dissolution of the frame, the abandonment of a unitary perspective – however momentary or provisional – is a negation which functions as promise. The/our world in a grain of sand.

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One marker, perhaps, of the effect that White's writing and thinking has had on me is the realisation that I cannot conclude this introduction without allowing a little for its possible collapse. Because there is a problem here – a trap White himself named, repeatedly, insistently. As he succinctly puts it in the text written with and about the painter Martin Gustavsson: 'narrative is an inevitability'. We lay things end to end and want to call them a story, a train of thought, a life. Especially now, with his death still relatively recent, I find myself tempted to search for a single thread of meaning on which all of White's ideas and practice can be neatly strung – to want him to have been one thing. This is what he called, in relation to Wojnarowicz, for example, the 'common cultural lie of consistency' – and yet it is also, as he says, unavoidable. 'Inevitably making sense.'

White prized fidelity, but not consistency. Talking with me about the rationale for this book, when it was still at an early stage, he stressed the need for it to acknowledge repetition and failure – the way in which

the texts might contain redundancies, or, conversely, might try, and fail, to repeat themselves. (The passage on Smithson's sand, for example, occurs twice.) This is perhaps one way of naming the searching, compulsive quality of White's writing which, as he emphasises about Wojnarowicz's work, 'DEFIES ASSIMILATION' and demands that the reader engage it without any guarantees, in the present tense of an act of reading.

It is important not to underplay either the very different tones of the texts included here, or the degree to which White's ideas were often developed polemically, in the process of attacking unthinking orthodoxy or intolerance. The later texts, particularly those written in the last year of his life, necessarily take different risks than the earlier ones and often adopt very different voices. Their preoccupations are more explicitly personal; or rather, they attempt more radically and explicitly to expand the frame of the writing until it becomes coterminous with 'the world at large – life, itself, material'. More than any other writing here, they make a mockery of any too clean or conceptual account.

White's writing is often savagely funny, too, as in his reviews of an experimental film conference or a Jack Smith seminar, or the camp observational comedy of 'First, Six or So People' (2012, shades of Kenneth Williams's diaries). There is a failure to suffer fools gladly, and an occasional waspishness, which those who knew him will recognise instantly, and which are just as characteristic as the more considered critical judgments. But equally, many of these texts are really a kind of indexical record of the love he felt for colleagues and friends, or of the mark that certain works had made on him. He makes himself vulnerable, wonders if he has gone too far. And sometimes the voice that we hear from this writing can be heartbreakingly simple and direct, as in some of the very last texts.

Conversely, I have passed over some parts of his texts which remain enigmatic to me. To take just one example: the extraordinary page of capitalised terms that concludes 'Performer, Audience, Mirror' (a text he once described to me as his favourite amongst his own writing). The subheading has an underlined blank between the ellipses where we might expect the final term to appear, the 'solution' to the question of

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cinema/theatre/liveness (the ultimate term to unify all those disparate concepts I have been trying to insist are secret homonyms). Instead we have this strange, compelling, tabulated list of terms ending with

WITHDRAWAL.

His text has reached this point by a series of deft and cogent steps, and it draws, in particular, on a text I had written in relation to the artist Lee Lozano and her notorious withdrawal from the art world. And yet every time I read it, I have the same sense of vertigo, of an ecstatic insight which I experience powerfully in the moment of reading but can't quite crystallise. The nature of White's thinking and of his writing resist capture or paraphrase.

So it's simple: in the face of withdrawal, we will have to occupy these terms, these texts. To put them to use ourselves.

Here is information.

Stuttgart, August 2016

A note on the text

The original context of publication is given at the beginning of each text included here. Wherever possible, I have checked the texts against earlier published versions. In one case, the essay on Ruth Buchanan called 'What is Material?', I have reconstructed, at Ian White's suggestion, an earlier and longer draft than the one first published.

The footnotes that appear at the end of each chapter are White's, unless marked by square brackets, in which case they are my own clarifications.

In copy-editing I have tried to strike a balance that respects White's idiosyncratic grammar and usage and my desire to correct for any obvious mistakes, malapropisms, etc. that were not picked up by his original editors (often texts were written quickly to meet deadlines, or edited by non-native speakers, or not edited at all). I have tried to keep a lighter touch in particular for the texts drawn from the *Lives of Performers* blog, in order not to smooth off too many of their characteristic edges. My experience of working with White to edit several of his texts for previous publications gives me some confidence that, here at least, I have not departed from the spirit of his writing.