**Editor’s Introduction**

Sarah Horton and Judith Stewart

In 2016 one of our recent graduates from MA Fine Art submitted a proposal to JWCP. Jed Hilton’s proposal asked whether contemporary art could exist without language. There followed an invitation to become guest editors of this special edition, focusing on the place of writing within our institution, Norwich University of the Arts (NUA). As artists and academics, our focus throughout the process of selecting articles and submitting them to peer-review has been the question of how artists use writing within their practice and how visual practitioners can use writing within academia.

Arts practitioners’ primary means of thinking and research is not normally writing, yet many artists inside and outside of the academy use writing as a means of thinking. Within the Fine Art Department at NUA, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, students have long been encouraged to use different forms of writing: as practice, as critical evaluation, as critical reflection and as a way of underpinning their practice. Within these genres, in supporting the development of individual approaches and voice, the results sometimes challenge the accepted norms of academic writing. What is also likely to strike the reader is the collaboration and crossovers between the writers, which has emerged as the result of the emphasis placed on dialogic practice at NUA.

Had these articles been written by academic writing specialists readers might expect to find new insights into the vast field of literature on this topic. However, artists are primarily concerned with making art and their research quite rightly prioritises those things that support that activity. In the context of this journal, we present a collection of examples of how artists use writing, how writing helps or hinders that primary purpose, and of how at times it becomes difficult to negotiate a path through academia and the art establishment without writing. Visual practices are too untrustworthy to stand alone and, just as art has had to conform to the uncomfortable model of the traditional university structure of education, in starting to speak for themselves, artists are pressured to adapt to conventions and modes of working that do not always facilitate their practice.

Seen as a whole the articles offered here reflect this ambivalence. Whilst clearly advocating a role for writing, in the later articles there is some discussion [skepticism?] about the formal way in which this often has to be presented in academia.

The messiness and instability of language and writing is addressed by **Karl Foster, Kimberley Foster and Victoria Mitchell** in their article *Pears, pistachios, pencils and punctuation: performative encounter and the art of conversation.* In this they map the roles that speech, language and writing play in their collaborative practice, drawing attention to the different forms words take. Importantly, words are not merely a tool of communication between the three, but another way of embodying the practice. In this they speak of how the words themselves attain a materiality and become inseparable from the visual work.

**Sarah Horton** takes up this theme to write about the way the ‘verbal’ and ‘non-verbal’ elements of an artwork inter-relate in understanding the work of art fully. In her paper *The “penumbra of the non-verbal” in the context of a practice-based Ph.D.***Horton** begins with a quote from Sarat Maharaj to explore the complex relationship between writing and making in the context of her own practice-led Ph.D., though this could apply to any practice-based research project. She describes the way writing can provide understanding of the theoretical elements of a work of art for both the artist and the viewer of the artwork. However, the penumbra - or shadow - of the non-verbal elements of the work of art cannot always be described in words, which is why works of art often have to be experienced at first hand so that their tactile, haptic and ‘non-linguistic’ elements can be fully appreciated.

Like Horton and Foster, Foster and Mitchell, **Juan Jose Guerra** uses his article, *Layering lines and thoughts: A study of musical time through drawing,* to discuss the way that writing and practice are intertwined. Guerra’s research into the work of the composer Pierre Boulez, draws on Wittgenstein’s statements regarding the relationship between the verbal and the non-verbal to explain how ‘drawing leads the text’ and thereby creates new possibilities. Just as he has developed his understanding of Boulez’s music through drawing, so he argues that not only is writing itself a musical score, but that the artist interprets text through drawing.

Concluding this first section, **Mark Wilsher’s** *The phantom “practice only thesis”* discusses the unfeasibility of a Ph.D. award in art or design that exists without a written exegesis. He argues that not only is this an unrealistic expectation, but that it is not representative of contemporary professional practice such as museum and gallery interpretation, and art and design criticism. This goes straight to the heart of the argument for whether or not art needs writing to ‘explain’ it or whether it can exist autonomously. Wilsher maintains that without language the artwork fails to exist because it is only through entering the discourses within the contemporary art world that the work will be recognised.

Throughout the second section, dialogue and conversation are dominant themes and, as might be expected from people who are used to creative problem-solving, some of the authors propose value in finding alternatives to more formal academic forms such as the ‘messy draft’ (Joseph Doubtfire). The authors here argue that there is a need to find the voice of the artist – in whatever form this may be – that is authentic and accessible.

As readers of this journal will know all too well, it is inevitable that today’s art and design students are obliged to demonstrate understanding of their own and others’ practice through any number of texts including essays, reflective journals, reviews, dissertations and so on. Almost without exception these are required to be written in a particular way that conforms to ‘academic’ conventions and expectations. **Joseph Doubtfire**, in his paper *It’s Just a Draft: on the messy, the unfinished, and the speculative in writing*, urges an acceptance of more speculative types of writing where the thoughts of the student are articulated in alternative formats that might encourage a more questioning, and ultimately more critical, response. Such an approach anticipates, acknowledges and appreciates the role of testing and failure within the creative process and for a writing practice that more closely mirrors the “messy” but purposeful meanderings of the making process itself.

Whereas Doubtfire is exploring and questioning the hierarchical nature of formal writing styles that accompanies a student’s artworks, **James Quinn’s** *Reflecting on Reflection – Exploring the role of writing as part of practice-led research* takes a more personal approach to reveal the role that writing plays in his own doctoral research. In providing extracts from his reflective journals and from his collaborative writings, Quinn studiously avoids presenting his writing as exemplars for other visual researchers. Instead, he stresses the importance of developing an understanding of how writing operates between and alongside the visual practice and academic expectations and of the importance of multiple approaches.

The final article, *All the Better for Being Vague? The Authority of Text* picks up several of the points made by Doubtfire and Quinn to propose a form of writing that is closer to visual practice. **Judith Stewart** argues that when, as artists, we convey our ideas in visual form they usually enter the public realm full of doubt and ambiguity. However, when we write in and on art practice, we often impose on ourselves a more rigid, authoritative form that is often at odds with the way that language operates for artists. This, she suggests, reinforces existing hierarchical power structures, and that we need a space for more dialogical, less definite, forms of text where the writer does not always have to be ‘right’.