

Double Trouble The Ambiguous Question

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The minds of artists have always been curious and knowledgeable. But it is only since our recent admission to academia that our texts have started to be seen as notable reports of intelligence. Artist texts have inspired many academic disciplines, and science has become a substantial part of art. It is because of these mutual advances of art and academia that we now have much more access to a pool of ambiguous questions than before. Artists have always had an interest in science, and scientists have always had an interest in art, but the recent intellectualisation of artists and hybridisation of scientists has simply rendered those questions more visible.

An ambiguous question is the kind of question that one picks up with both intuition and reason. It sits solidly between a topic that can be discussed and a matter that needs to be worked out. It's what sets writing artists apart from artists who don't, as many artists who are more practically oriented are not urged to formulate a question at all. The writing artist carefully carves out an area of interest derived from his personality and oeuvre. At the same time, artists who work with a question are often aware of the fact that their question exceeds the individual perspective and is necessarily linked to the (art) world in general. Perhaps that is my favourite asset of an ambiguous question: it allows for the outside world to be engaged.

The beauty of it all is that none of the possible answers to an ambiguous question completely please an academic scholar. When I was in the Artistic Research Master Programme at the University of Amsterdam, an

academic programme designed for artists, I sometimes felt like a bully around students from Golden Age or Medieval Book studies, as I was inviting them to think about my questions to make them realise that they would never know the answer. But forcing academics to be more imaginative is just one side of the double trouble of the ambiguous question: its artistic twin sister never fails to upset the conditions of presenting art as we know it.

The ambiguous question sprouts from a mind that produces both the art and its critique. But its two-faced meaning is not necessarily a burden. I found that it could also be a relief, allowing me to grow into an amphibious creature that knows how to swim and walk the unexplored lands. Because ever since I was a child, writing has come more naturally to me than making objects. I believed for a long time that writing was the only way of knowing something. Even art school could not convince me of any other method the way I was sure of writing. Practical tools strangle me to paralysis, as I never seem to know how to answer my questions with them. But even though my intuition tells me otherwise, I sometimes push through this technical hesitation, driven by the promised land of the exhibition, the rare possibility to be in the presence of art. An ambiguous research question then proves to be a powerful instrument for me to keep both sides of the coin, theory and practice, evenly activated.

When you dive into the niche of artistic research, ambiguous questions start to pop up everywhere. There is a perfectly hybrid question in the way Brussels-based artist Henri Jacobs explored the visible front and hidden back of surfaces in 2009. His question is simple and complex, theoretical and practical. The question 'what is a surface made of?' reassured him of a context for his art and at the same time dictated the direction of the things he was reading and writing about. Henri Jacobs' ambiguous question of surfaces was presented in the Rietveld Pavilion at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy (2009) as a project called Surface Research. He made Epson photographic paper draw-

ings with black ink using a ruler, a Rotring technical drawing pen and compasses. These drawings were constructed, drawn with straight, efficient lines as if by an architect rather than an artist. By scratching, erasing and destroying the paper Jacobs felt like he encouraged young art students to sit down and start, even when there was no concept by which to get a better grasp on the question. At the same time, Jacobs wrote about surfaces like Velasquez' Las Meninas, L'Or et L'Argent in de Pont in Tilburg, and an Abel Grimmer painting of gardeners. He formulated rules for himself, like the rule that his surfaces are palimpsests: manuscript pages from a scroll or book that have been scraped off and used again. Both his surface drawings and his writing are pierced with the double consequences of his question: to do research on a surface he had to sit down and start but not before he got up and went to analyse the surfaces that the art world and the natural world offer.

It is this 'get up and go' component, the part of the question that can only be explored by moving around, that makes it so difficult to take the ambiguous question to university halls. When I was in the academic research programme I was confronted with the consequences of my double position. I've been trying to turn over convictions of overreaching rhetoric, lack of argument and an absence of conclusions. And I even think that these trials might be valid after all, but at the same time I think artists cannot spend too much time carving out a hypothetical position. Moreover, I think artists who write need to frame their questions in such a way that their answers don't fall into historiographies of the artistic discipline. In other words, the artistic practice itself is always at the heart of an ambiguous research question. There is a self-critical tendency to ambiguous questions that pushes artists to their full resistance with the current art world and academic scope.

To give an example, I have been completely obsessed for some time with the phrase 'repetition is a form of change'. Even though this is

not technically a question, it is only a question mark away. For me its double meaning is in the idea that repetition is a current theme in art and curatorial practice and at the same time, the phrase opened up my own work to experiments with re-enactment, redistribution and remodelling. It was at once an invitation to 'sit down and start' researching the current state of exhibition histories and to 'get up and go' interfering with the presentation of objects from the past. I got the phrase from Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's list of strategies to break through an artistic impasse. So from the start, the project was supposed to activate me. The struggle with this question of repetition ultimately led to – this should no longer come as a surprise – two pathways.



Brenda Tempelaar: The Other Figure, 2014, close up

The first was a research project concerned with the remake of Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (1969). The outcome of this project is a selection of four essays that all deal with a specific artwork and the way it was restaged by the Prada Foundation in Venice (2013). The second pathway was a confrontation between Giulio Paolini's L'Altra Figura, an artwork he made in 1984, and a contemporary exhibition space.

I struggled most with this second trajectory, as I was sure that the image of Paolini's work was waiting for my creative reply as soon as I saw it. Again, I was lured into the whole thing by hallucinations of the exhibition. But when it comes to acting in an exhibition space I tend to have my guard up. What was I thinking anyways, trying to compete with a celebrated artist like Paolini? I ended up copying Paolini's work with preconceived amateurism, as this seemed to be the only way to respond to Paolini without either ironising or iconising his artwork. It was this self-image of an amateur, as I experienced in the Paolini project, that helped me imagine what Germano Celant, Miuccia Prada and the rest of the curatorial team of *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013* must have felt like on the eve of their re-enactment project. The balance between ironising and iconising the past can easily be tipped over. For you don't restage a Harald Szeemann exhibition to make a clean copy; art historical references always come with either a kind of tribute or a sense of superiority.

Staging art for the public is a troubling playground for ambiguous questions, but it is also a vital part of trying to formulate answers. Like how Henri Jacobs' description of a surface never managed to replace the way our eyes trace its reliefs and trajectories from up close. Like how the intentions of Prada and Celant could not possibly match the experience of wandering through Fondazione Prada at Ca'Corner Della Regina in Venice, over the summer of 2013, looking at the manifold traces where Prada's wishes proved unmanageable, undesirable or simply overruled by the spectacle of the exhibition. And I don't blame her for it, because the promise of the exhibition is a powerful thing. Whether on the eve of the exhibition or on the verge of a publication, the moment that you decide what to do is when the ambiguity of the question should be kept closest at heart. When it comes to posing a single question in two different environments, art and academia, the ideas and the presentation of the ideas need to be constantly adapted to the circumstances and the public to keep it alive.

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for "We Write, Right?" a project by gold extra