

Remarks on the essay

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What a wonderful opportunity to come together and to consider the essay – already a wild, lively textual form and here in this gallery expanded further through space and time and into less common objects, images, and affects.

A question that returns to the foreground of my own research and practice is a basic one: what is the essay? Another question that has become more urgent recently: Why do they feel good to read?

Let's start with the first question. An essay, from the French *essai*, is an attempt or trial. Its attempt is not merely to answer a question or solve a problem, as is often believed to be the case. Its attempt is very simple: to think in the act of writing; to engage a broad, readerly attention to some aspect or detail of experience and to think it through in language. Quite literally, an essay tries to make new ideas, to form new relations, to orient thought towards new objects. Because it constructs, rather than represents, knowledge, it is always a gamble. When we try, we are at risk of failure.

And this begins to answer the second question: Essays 'feel good' because they stage a small, public drama. An essayist makes a wager, inviting their readers into the intimate space of their thinking-effort. An essayist shows the process - laying bear the errors, judgements, failures, and small triumphs that cohere as writing. But an essayist doesn't show *everything*, and the reader registers the subtle joins and hinges left by the act of editing. This dialectics of disclosure and discretion produces the sublime affect of an essay: when we read writing, we read its writtenness - and so we encounter not only the ideas themselves but the conditions of their making, a poetics of thought.

Often, in the classroom, we inherit the notion that an essay is rigid and formulaic, based on the operations of reason and logic. We unlearn this notion by encountering the essay in its more transgressive forms. And in this process of unlearning we realise that the essay was always transgressive: the essay has always transgressed other forms of writing by emphasising the thinking body and the social world of the writer, by being willing to reveal the very mechanisms through which language becomes thought and therefore also ideology, desire, and action. Essays have long centred an imperfect, partial subject, both empowered and made vulnerable by the publicness of writing. In this sense, essays are closely allied to poems, which, with their unabashed artifice, index the labour and material of writing.

This exhibition asks what the essay does when it enters the gallery: when a public forms to look, listen, and move around as expanded forms of 'reading'; when the speculative, suggestive, and discursive practices that converge as the essay come into contact with histories of the object, the image, and the event.

Our historical moment brings with it an extraordinary array of entangled threats, betrayals, risks, and devastations. As we face apocalyptic environmental destruction, creeping fascism, exponential wealth disparity, global white supremacy, and many other small and massive injustices, the need to form contingent and temporary, as well as large-scale and lasting publics is urgent. The essay is one way to try out mode of thoughts that might be used as a diagnostic tool, a call to arms, a promise of solidarity, a mantra for survival. An essay is an attempt; its success or failure rests on the readers who find it and put it to work, test its boundaries. We must read each other carefully, hold each other accountable, point out the errors or violences, learn collectively. Whatever the essay attempts, there are consequences to that effort. A vigilant readership will asks that promises made in writing are made in the service of hope, care, and freedom.

So let's look at this work and think about how are implicated in its efforts, and how our generous reading can take up, modify, and enact their promises.