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Introduction to Art Writing Workshop at Nottingham Contemporary (April 26, 2018)



For the third meeting of our *Introduction to Art Writing* group, a series of four exploratory workshops jointly organised by Backlit Gallery (<http://backlit.org.uk/>) and Nottingham Writers' Studio, we were delighted to have Sam Thorne, Nottingham Contemporary (<http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/>)'s director, lead us in a 'mobile discussion' of the role played by writing in the making of the gallery's current exhibition, Linder's *The House of Fame* (<http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/art/house-fame>). With a group of around 25 participants gathered at the Nottingham Contemporary reception, a mix of both regulars and first-time attendees, we set off into the galleries to explore the exhibits and hear from Thorne about the role played by written correspondence in the process of curating the show and the many literary influences and connections on view in the works themselves.

We began in 1981, the date (then 25 years into the future) represented by Alison and Peter Smithson's *House of the Future*, a theoretical design made for the Ideal Home Exhibition in March 1956 and installed at the Olympia Exhibition Centre for the duration of the show that month. Thorne noted that the

Smithsons' proposal had interested Linder for many reasons, not least the coincidence of its theoretical future with the importance of 1981 as a date in her own life and career, this being the time when her collage and performance works – ranging from record sleeve designs, photographs and the wearing of a meat dress while performing with her own post-punk band Ludus (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkDH6iKP9bw>) – were all laying the foundations of her subsequent career. That the Smithsons' speculative future and Linder's actual past converged on the same date had given the exhibition a suitably layered starting point for its overview of Linder's work and influences.



Thorne also noted that the connections between the art-works that interested Linder, which she wanted to include alongside examples drawn from her own extensive 40-year body of material, and the evolution of her own works since the 1970s, were explored in a very extensive, wide-ranging and 'in-depth' email correspondence, a few excerpts from which featured in the exhibition's broadsheet newspaper format publication (<http://shopcontemporary.bigcartel.com/product/house-of-fame-exhibition-catalogue-linder>). Even before their first formal meeting in 2017, he and Linder had, he explained, exchanged a large number of emails – so many, in fact, that there were around a hundred pages of them already printed out by the time their first face-to-face meeting to discuss the potential exhibition and residency at Chatsworth House (<https://www.chatsworth.org/events/artist-in-residence/>) came about.

The stage set feel of the Smithsons' *House of the Future* display was echoed by other representations of Linder's interest in performance and shifting identity, from Linder's own 1970s photographs of men presenting as women in Manchester nightclubs to Madame Yevonde (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2011/may/08/madame-yevonde-goddesses>)'s 1930s images of aristocrats and debutantes posing as mythical Goddesses. The presence of Inigo Jones set and costume designs for Ben Jonson's Jacobean masque *The House of Fame* had given the exhibition its title, grounding Linder's own activity in a long tradition of work in which visuals, costumes, music and text were combined. As Thorne pointed out, one of the touchstone phrases that arose in the correspondence was Moki Cherry (<https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/moment-moki-cherry/>)'s comment, "*The stage as a home and the home as a stage*", hinting at the intentional transformation of everyday living into art.

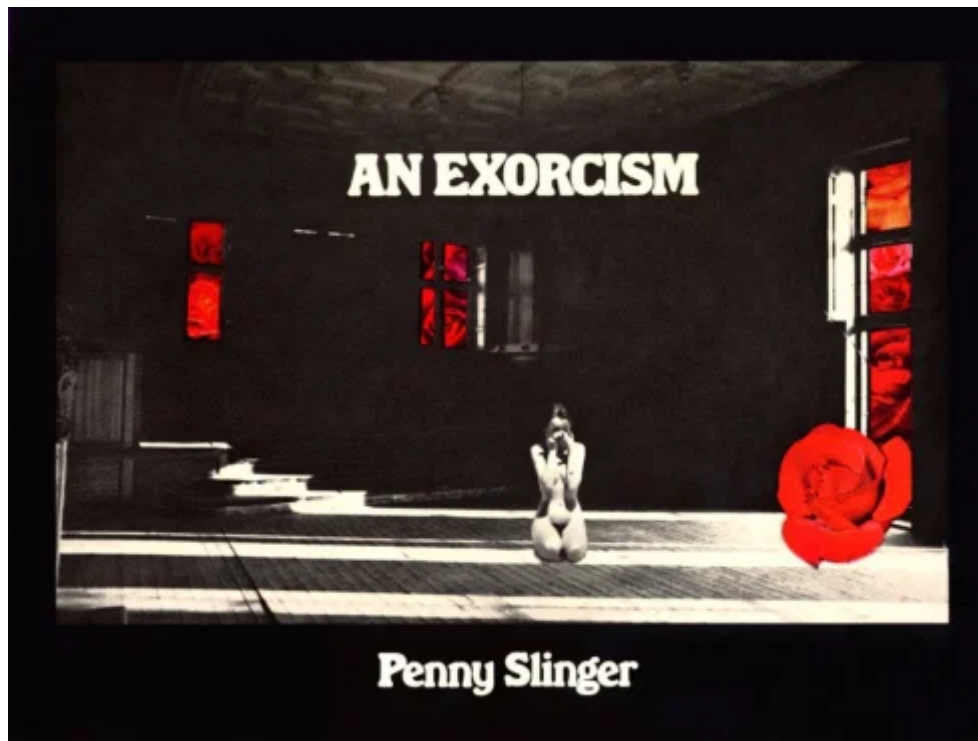


In other galleries, this was refracted through Linder's interest in spiritualist photography, seances and other occult and memorial practices, ranging from mid-twentieth century archival photographs of mediums generating ectoplasm (often using lace, collaged faces and double exposures to achieve their effects) to Mike Kelley's tongue-in-cheek (<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/ive-got-strange-feeling>), re-enactments of these same images in his *Ectoplasm* series made around 1977/8. Thorne noted that lace-making had been another 'thread' in the correspondence, with the structure of the exhibition devised around an idea of 'weaving together' many elements to create a whole pattern. This had, in its turn, brought in many images and objects that touched on these ideas, such as the pioneering museum photography of Isabel A Cowper (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/factory-presents/international-womens-day-historic-women-va>) at the V&A in the mid nineteenth century, an example of which featured here – naturally presenting a specimen of lace.



We also touched on the ways that text shadowed much of the other work on display, from Aubrey Beardsley's illustration (<https://www.wikiart.org/en/aubrey-beardsley/birth-from-the-calf-of-the-leg>) for Lucian's second century satire on outlandish travellers' tales *The True History* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_True_Story) and Max Ernst's 'collage novel' *Une semaine de bonté* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Une_semaine_de_bont%C3%A9), to such substantial presences as Ithell Colquhoun (<http://www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk/>), an English writer, artist and occultist responsible for such literary works as *The Goose of Hermogenes* (<http://www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk/goose.htm>) and *The Living Stones* (http://www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk/living_stones.htm), and Penny Slinger (<https://pennyslinger.com/>), whose own 'psychosexual feminist autobiography' *An Exorcism* (<https://pennyslinger.com/Works/an-exorcism-2/>) appeared in 1978. These were all obliquely represented in the various rooms of Linder's exhibition with small gatherings of paintings, prints and collages by the artists.

The intimate connections between the visual and literary aspects of the exhibition were clear enough, though Thorne revealed that one omission had been a reconstructed model of Charles Babbage's *Difference Engine* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Difference_engine), partly conceived and designed by Lord Byron's daughter *Ada Lovelace* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ada_Lovelace). This was a machine that could have made a direct connection between the card-programmed machinery of 19th century lace-making and the punch-card systems of 1950s corporate and scientific computers. Its absence hinted at the complexities behind putting together exhibitions, where curators and artists are not always able to get everything they wish to show. The process, as Thorne noted of Linder's approach to the curatorial task as an extension of her collage work, could often be as intuitive, surprising and rewarding as the making of artworks themselves.



Following this tour of the galleries, we moved on to one of Nottingham Contemporary's meeting rooms, where Thorne had agreed to answer some questions about his own route from studying English Literature at university, to writing for magazines about art and music, and eventually taking up an associate editorship at *Frieze* (<https://frieze.com/>) and beginning his curatorial career. Subjects ranging from the commissioning process to editors' interest in writing from regions outside the main (London, New York, Berlin) centres of the art world were discussed, and members of the group spoke briefly about their own interests, confidence levels in terms of writing, and current activities.

Once again, these covered a broad range, from specialisms in fashion and social practice to current activity running small scale curatorial and exhibition projects (<https://cropupgallery.wordpress.com/>) in the city. Several participants spoke about the difficulty of moving away from academic styles and approaches in their more personal writing, and others wondered whether their particular specialist interests should or shouldn't be made clear in the context of a review. The general feeling was that such specialisation *can* be a limitation, ensuring writers might be sought only to cover the niches their particular interests suited, but where relevant and appropriate this could also generate its own opportunities. Thorne mentioned that one of his own specialisms at *Frieze* had been the developing art scenes of the Middle East, so being identified with a specialism was not in itself a bad thing.

Other questions followed, such as a discussion of markets for art writing and reviews outside the core art magazine markets; the changes in publishing's economics that meant there were more high quality publications but these were generally more narrowly distributed than in the past; the influence of fashion cycles on the reputations of particular artists and the coverage given to them by editors; and the desirability, or otherwise, of writers' opinions being potentially swayed by meetings with artists at openings and events. Was this something to embrace or avoid? This latter point was considered something of an inevitable problem in a relatively small social world like the art scene, where the paths of writers and artists are always likely to cross at some point.

Thorne mentioned press reviewers visiting previews of Linder's show at Nottingham Contemporary who, during its opening weekend, had sometimes avoided Linder herself as they navigated the galleries, sometimes sought her out. It was probably inevitable that attaching an actual human being's presence

and feelings to the work might influence a writer's opinion, but this was never going to be easy to escape. And the flipside of this, that a chat with the artist might open up fresh perspectives and deepen or complicate a writer's viewpoint on the work, was also worth bearing in mind. In the end, though, Thorne noted that he wrote much less since embarking on his current job at Nottingham Contemporary, partly due to time constraints, but perhaps also because his dual roles, as independent writer *and* director of a public organisation committed to supporting artists, might be *seen* to clash even where they didn't.

Next Introduction to Art Writing session takes place on May 17 from 6.30 – 9pm at New Art Exchange (<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/introduction-to-arts-writing-by-backlit-gallery-at-new-art-exchange-tickets-45345224788>). (39-41 Gregory Boulevard, NG7 6BE). We will convene for curator Renee Mussai's **talk and walk through** (<http://www.nae.org.uk/event/curators-tour-rene-mussai/586>) of Zanele Muhole's exhibition *Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness* (<http://www.nae.org.uk/exhibition/zanele-muholi-somnyama-ngonyama-hail-the/136>) from 6.30pm, then at 7.30pm will be joined by NAE's Programme Director Melanie Kidd for a discussion. **Booking** (<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/introduction-to-arts-writing-by-backlit-gallery-at-new-art-exchange-tickets-45345224788>) is free and all are welcome.

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