

# WRITING ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS: CHALLENGES, PRACTICES, AND COMPLEXITIES

*University of Surrey, 20–22 October 2017*

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### General Conference Summary (Aims)

Writing about living or recently deceased figures presents unique challenges for scholars, journalists, and creative practitioners alike. This conference seeks to nurture dialogue between a range of different artistic fields concerning writing about contemporary artists. It encompasses disciplines including music, dance, theatre, film, digital arts, and creative writing as well as biographical, analytical, socio-contextual, promotional, ethnographic, and other types of discourse. It will focus upon the act of writing and the strategies, ideologies, and assumptions contained therein, as well as the boundaries as to what constitutes “writing” about contemporary artists in its multifarious forms, considering creative practice approaches alongside more conventional representations.

All types of artists, from all styles, genres, and cultures, may be considered under the aegis of the conference, including (but not limited to): classical, popular and world musics, contemporary dance and theatre, musical theatre, biopics and documentary film, digital media, and creative writing. The conference views writing about all artists – performers, directors, choreographers, conductors, etc. – as being of equal importance. The expectation is that the majority of papers will address innovative, distinctive, or otherwise leading work by living or recently deceased artists active within the last c.25 years.

### Event themes

*‘Writing About Contemporary Artists: Challenges, Practices, and Complexities’* was an international, multi-disciplinary three-day conference hosted and sponsored by the University’s Institute of Advanced Studies from 20-22 October 2017.

The event brought together scholars and practitioners in fields including musicology, theatre studies, dance and choreography, literature, film, digital media, and the visual arts. Its 70 participants represented a strongly international delegation drawn from North and South America, Australia, South Africa, and across Europe and the UK.

The conference comprised three days of keynotes, tie-in performances, parallel paper sessions, roundtable discussions, and other activities, including the following:

- Keynote addresses by Lorraine York (Professor of English and Cultural Studies, McMaster University), Paul Allain (Professor of Theatre and Performance, University of Kent), and Björn Heile (Professor of Music since 1900, University of Glasgow)
- A Keynote Concert and Dialogue by MusicArt London, featuring the distinguished painter Christopher Le Brun (President of the Royal Academy of Arts) and pianist Dr Annie Yim (St John’s Smith Square Young Artist in Residence 2016/17), with additional contributions by composer Richard Birchall

- A complete performance of Morton Feldman's three-and-a-half hour work *For Christian Wolff* (1986) by Nancy Ruffer (flute) and Ian Pace (piano/celeste), incorporating dance improvisation from in-house student dance company Actual Size
- Launch of the book *Plays in Time: The Beekeeper's Daughter, Prophecy, Another Life and Extreme Whether* (Intellect, 2017) by Professor Karen Malpede
- Three roundtable discussions, together with over 30 single- and co-authored papers encompassing a range of artistic disciplines.

Discussion points addressed in the course of the conference included the following:

- Interactions of biography, analysis, and cultural context, reconsidering the 'life and works' paradigm
- Artists writing about (and influencing writing about) their work
- Internet and social media in relation to writing about contemporary art and artists
- Creative practice as research and self-reflexive research around practice
- Constructing artists through writing, and uncovering 'hidden' aspects of their lives
- Autobiography and self-narration
- Biographical methods in relation to the enduring legacy of the testimony of the artists and surviving witnesses
- Reciprocal relationships between the biographer and subject, self-definition and self-reflexivity
- Conflicts of interest, ethical and legal sensitivities in relation to writing about contemporary artists
- Writing about subjects who are representatives of minority groups on grounds of gender, sexuality, race, etc.
- Contemporary artists explored through documentary film-making or biopics
- Different modes of writing about artists e.g. traditional biographical narrative, personal documentation, the creative arts as biography, arts criticism and journalism
- Radical paradigms for writing on contemporary artists

For further information, please see the conference [website](#):

The full conference programme, including abstracts, is available online at the following [link](#):

The conference garnered a voluminous amount of positive feedback, which has been shared in full with the Institute of Advanced Studies. Its multi-disciplinary nature, and the opportunity for discussion to flow freely across disciplines, was identified as a distinctive feature, while the strength of the organisational team was repeatedly praised. A representative selection of anonymised feedback follows.

- 'Over 35 years of attending conferences I have rarely found a conference to be so exciting, so productive of exchange, so truly ground-breaking. [...] this conference brought into the foreground conversations we have been having informally about the specific conditions of writing about and collaborating with contemporary artists in our daily working lives. [...] What I particularly appreciated about this conference was the opportunity to watch scholars and practitioners in other disciplines at work [...] And this conference was particularly rich in its fostering of such cross-disciplinary discussions, not simply involving scholars but also scholars and artists, not to mention scholar-artists. Your organization of the conference was exemplary. [...] I thank you for the care you all took to make this an exceptional experience.'

- ‘Thank you very much for putting together such an inspiring conference. I’d never been to an interdisciplinary event before and was very stimulated to see, hear, and experience what other scholars and artists are doing. [...] This also makes me realize how free I felt to express many of the most difficult aspects of my work in the context of this conference.[...] many thanks also for providing such a “safe space” to be able to do so.’
- ‘I must thank you for the incredible effort you put into this stimulating event. Rarely are conferences so interdisciplinary and unpredictable. With a good balance between panels, roundtables, and performances, I think you succeeded in creating an inspiring conference ecosystem. [...] It truly sparked refreshing thoughts and stirred up some of my own work into new directions.’
- ‘hearing a variety of papers from different fields of studies was a stimulating experience. Also I learned a lot from other senior music scholars’ papers. I really enjoyed some of their presentations not only because of the quality of their research but also because of the clarity of their delivery.’
- ‘I thoroughly enjoyed the conference, filled with lovely people with sparkling ideas, real knowledge of artistic practice and ways to reflect on the making and on the experience of art. It was joy to be part of so many conversations and to listen to so many insightful papers. And I appreciate, of course, the mix of academic discourse with concerts, dance and theatre.’
- ‘Advance info/conference pack/venue/programme schedule and timing/lunch/conference dinner: all very good. [...] The spirit of the conference was convivial and collegiate. I met so many lovely people and, in that regard, the conference exceeded my expectations. The content gave me plenty of new ideas to think about and I enjoyed meeting scholars and researchers whose subjects I know little about. [...] The conference was a rewarding experience and an opportunity for powerful professional development.’
- ‘this was one of the first conferences I have been to where I genuinely felt welcome and listened to. Often I find that there is a lot of posturing or performing at conferences, and it felt that at this one everyone was genuinely interested in dialogue, and genuinely aware of the power structures and authority embedded in institutions. It was a truly enriching experience, and I felt honoured to be part of it.’
- ‘that it was such an excellently organised, thought-provoking and friendly conference, with some interesting ideas and connected threads of thought throughout. As I know many have already said, the multi-disciplinary aspect was particularly beneficial to the discourse, and for meeting people working in similar fields of writing.’

### **Next steps – Outcomes**

This conference is likely to prompt a number of follow-up research events, the first of which will be the study day *‘Beyond “Mesearch”’: Autoethnography, self-reflexivity, and personal experience as academic research in music studies’*, to be hosted by the Institute of Musical

Research in association with the School of Advanced Study, University of London on 16 April 2018 at Senate House, London.

Two volumes co-edited by Christopher Wiley and Ian Pace will be developed from the conference. One, *Writing About Contemporary Creative Practice and Practitioners*, will explore the nature of practice as research and research as practice, comprising a series of both traditional scholarly essays and more innovative modes of writing about contemporary art and artists, such as interviews, shorter roundtable-style responses, visual essays, creative non-fiction, and publication of the artwork itself. The other, *Writing About Contemporary Musicians*, will be more discipline-specific and structured more conventionally with a series of equally balanced chapters grouped together under themes such as advocacy and hagiography, censure and criticism, and methodological concerns and solutions. 20 authors have expressed interest in contributing to the former, and a dozen to the latter.

In the longer term, the conference organisers are contemplating the establishment of an international research network bringing together scholars globally with interests in writing about contemporary artists, as well as approaching a major publisher with a view to proposing a book series on '*Writing about Artistic Work in Theory and Practice*'.

### **Acknowledgements**

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- Actual Size Dance Company and MusicArt London for the tie-in performances
- All the performers, keynote speakers, and the panellists for the three roundtables
- All those who spoke at, and participated in, the conference both in person and via social media
- Ian Pace (Conference Co-chair), Tom Armstrong, and Patrick Duggan, and all the Conference Committee: Shantel Ehrenberg, Lucy Ella Rose, Kirk Woolford, Bella Honess Roe
- The Conference Administrator, Rachael Barnes
- The IAS Administrator, Mirela Dumic

Main organiser: Dr Christopher Wiley, Department of Music and Media, University of Surrey

November 2017



Christopher Wiley introduces the Keynote Concert and Dialogue with Christopher Le Brun (President of the Royal Academy of Arts) and Dr Annie Yim (MusicArt London)



Conference Dinner at The Weyside, Guildford





Delegates awaiting the start of the conference



Roundtable with Seth Josel (Orpheus Institute, Ghent), Joanne “Bob” Whalley (Plymouth University), Rosalie Wahlfrid (University of Surrey), Shantel Ehrenberg (University of Surrey), Ian Pace (City, University of London), and Kirk Woolford (University of Surrey)



Members of Actual Size Dance Company (Guildford School of Acting)



Flautist Nancy Ruffer and keyboardist Ian Pace (City, University of London) in a rare performance of Morton Feldman's *For Christian Wolff*





Delegates continuing the discussion during refreshments



Roundtable with Ian Pace (City, University of London), Dr Katie Beswick (University of Exeter), Professor Björn Heile (University of Glasgow), Dr Christopher Wiley (University of Surrey), and (via Skype) Philip Clark (classical and jazz critic)





Dr Patrick Duggan (GSA) introduces Professor Karen Malpede at the launch of her new book *Plays in Time*, with readings from actress Alia Butt