

FORMAT AS INFRASTRUCTURE: ANN CVETKOVICH ON LAUREN BERLANT



Ann Cvetkovich
CARLETON UNIVERSITY

Writing as Archival Practice: A Lecture/Writing, Theory/Practice Workshop Hybrid

What can scholarly writing learn from contemporary forms such as creative non-fiction, lyric essay, graphic narrative, or mixed media? Part lecture, part discussion and part group-writing workshop, this event will draw from Cvetkovich's ongoing research projects, including a book on the current state of LGBTQ archives and the creative use of them by artists. These models will serve as a point of departure for collective writing exercises done in the real time of the workshop. In particular, we will focus on the list, series, or collection as models for writing practice. Questions to be pursued include the following: How can one organize an archive or a collection of objects, photographs, texts, or other artifacts in multiples or series to serve as the basis for research and writing? What do various forms of writing—at the level of both sentence and structure—do to represent, describe, or remediate data or evidence, and how can such work place pressure on conventional models of data and evidence? How can developing a writing practice not only address methodological and intellectual/theoretical questions but make it easier to get work done? We will write periodically throughout the event, by ourselves (with our objects) and collaboratively, with each other.

An object can be anything: an idea, a thing in the world, a text you want to engage, a problem. If possible, please bring an artifact, and we will produce ways to think about its place in a larger series or collection (actual or still imaginary) that can serve as a platform for transforming what you and others can think about it.

That's the description, co-written with Lauren, for a collaborative event we did in 2016. I was in town for a lecture at the Art Institute and she suggested I do something at the University of Chicago—but immediately it got complicated—in that way that could happen with her (or me with her). I didn't want to do a full lecture, but she wanted something with more structure than people just showing up for an open discussion. She mentioned that Katie (Stewart) had done a lecture that was segmented with pauses for people to write, and I thought that sounded like a great idea, especially since the relay with Katie would be meaningful (I have liked to keep *Public Feelings* under the radar, working behind the scenes through informal networks of friends and fellow travellers).

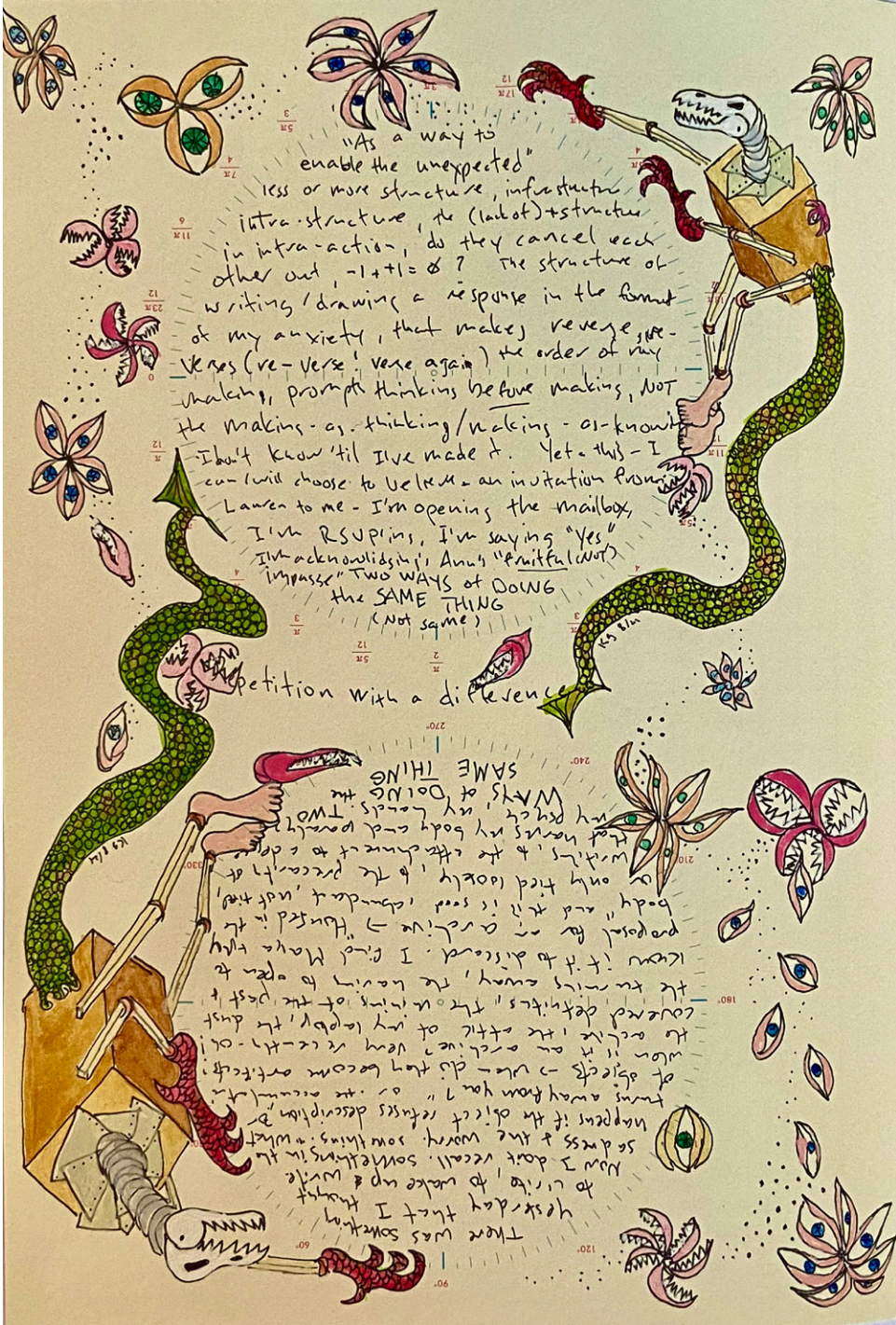
I've never had someone edit the abstract for an event! Lauren insisted we have one—so I managed to write something—and then she revised it. The title “writing as archival practice” is mine, but she came up with “lecture/writing, theory/practice workshop hybrid” to describe the format—trying to find a name for something that didn't yet have a fixed form. The text went through some different iterations as she, never satisfied, kept restlessly revising—my ‘good enough’ in tandem with her ‘not good enough,’ her desire for more structure matched with my desire for less. She also shifted the sentence order to lead with the opening questions—a simple, but effective, cut to the chase. And she's the one who specified that “an object can be anything” and added the expansive list that includes “a thing in the world” or “a problem,” in a gesture towards her own investments in the category of the object—and the nature of engagement or attachment. The workshop's invitation to write ekphrastically in relation to objects led her to ask, what happens if the object refuses description, or turns away from you?, in a version of the anti-social or inconvenience of others that includes objects as well as people. I'm still unpacking that piercing question.

The event itself went well in part because of the provocations already present in the description as a result of our exchanges. Inspired by what I imagined Katie's hybrid format to have been, I enjoyed chunking my material into little 10-minute mini-lectures oriented around clusters of Powerpoint images. I liked the pauses

for writing that allowed me to collect my thoughts. Although, as so often happens in workshops, we didn't have enough time for people to share their own writing, their questions were sharper for the experience of writing together in the same room. And the accumulation of objects that people brought and laid out on the table constituted an archive, or an altar, or a little world, and another collective writing prompt. I've used the same format subsequently in different locations and always acknowledge Lauren's part in making the format into a higher version of itself through her persistence in naming and describing it.

Public Feelings Austin and Feel Tank Chicago have generated many collaborative formats over the years: the MLA panel that started with questions that became writing prompts; the Austin group's panel of 5-minute micro-essays for the 2007 Chicago conference on "Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope"; and, of course, the 500-word writing salons that were a source for *The Hundreds*. I think of these experiments with format as a practice in what Lauren called "infrastructure" — another version of her ceaseless labor to make space for different ways of thinking and being in the world. Format as infrastructure includes facilitation, another kind of affective labor we both cared about—no doubt going back to our early days in graduate school as feminists raised up in an era of consciousness-raising groups that morphed into reading and writing groups. Although I always wanted less structure and she seemed to want more—as a way to enable the unexpected, the surprise, the not-quite event—they were also two ways of doing the same thing.

It seems appropriate to write about this workshop for *Capacious* because the journal and the other forms of infrastructure that Greg and others have created around affect studies lives up to its name in welcoming unconventional and experimental formats. In Lauren's hands, the workshop description is itself a genre of writing that provides opportunities for thinking that isn't just rote or boring. Among the many ways in which we will be able to continue to think with Lauren, even without her tangible presence, will be to follow the unpredictable shapes and lines of inquiry she has left in the form of prompts, formats, and open questions, including "topics we don't know how to write questions for."



Two ways of doing the same thing (eating repetition with a difference)
Kay Gordon, 2021

