

# What are Casual Essays?

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WOW HUH, February 17, 2014

Content is Relative is a Los Angeles based design studio comprised of Christine Jackson and Jesse Stecklow. *A Social Portrait in Writing: Casual Essays* marks the duo's first self-published book, consisting of twelve essays from an international roster of young, beginning to mid-career artists, writers, and "cultural observers." The book aims to explicate various topics within contemporary art and culture in what Content is Relative might call a "casual" manner. What this entails is somewhat clearly laid out in the book's introductory text:

*A Social Portrait*... works towards not entirely scholarly modes of representing a contemporary moment... The texts themselves manifest as a sort of ahistorical and disparate approach to accessed cultures that feels highly subjective in both its methods of collecting information and its analysis. It aims not to rely on formerly established realms of expertise or present definitive claims. Instead, the book focuses on documenting a daily meta-narrative that might run concurrent to more general, casual activities.<sup>1</sup>

In the last three years or so, multiple online art writing platforms have emerged that, along with being almost entirely submissions and young author-based, feature writing similar to that included in *A Social Portrait*, that is, art writing that could be said to range from the "traditional to [the] experimental."<sup>2</sup> For example, online platforms such as Alt-Crit, Chicago Art Writers, and my own project, Pool (2011-2012) feature writing of diverse

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<sup>1</sup>Content is Relative, *A Social Portrait in Writing: Casual Essays*, p.7, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Though this is a quote from the Chicago Art Writers manifesto, I think it appropriately captures the spirit of the other projects mentioned. See the manifesto here: <http://chicagoartistwriters.blogspot.com/p/manifesto.html>

stylistic range. Pool, for instance, featured theory laden texts, alongside writing of fiction and non-fiction narrative essays; Alt-Crit includes a more traditional “long form crit” section dedicated to texts that are more expository in nature, yet the scope of its main content is incredibly wide, and includes screenshot documentation of popular Facebook threads and private messages, text message conversations, as well as image macros and other similar content, all of which are to count as legitimate forms of art writing; Chicago Art Writers hosts art writing workshops where inquiries such as the following are discussed: “Can art writers be embedded or relational. . . bloggy or on-the-spot. . . instantaneous or go completely gonzo?”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the blog writing of Arielle Gavin,<sup>4</sup> Keith J. Varadi, Aleia Murawski, and Steve Roggenbuck, as well as the semi-critical personal narratives of Jaakko Pallasvuo, or the Yelp art reviews of Brian Droitcour are but a few examples of writing that can also be comfortably accommodated alongside the projects mentioned.

Many of the aforementioned projects, publications, and individuals, share some common ground. We might already have some intuitions about what this common ground entails, specifically the points at which the motivations and influences of the above examples converge. I think a few of these convergences are clear and can be suggested somewhat uncontroversially: 1) social media platforms, coupled with 2) an attitude precariously directed at contemporary art institutions,<sup>5</sup> as well as 3) the general plasticity of art,<sup>6</sup> have played a significant role in propagating and motivating the art writing platforms, as well as some of the writing styles, above. I want to speak very quickly to 1) under the assumption that the connections to 2) and 3) are somewhat obvious. Textual exchange in social media environments like Facebook, Tumblr, or Twitter, is often terse, personal and spontaneous, privileging and thriving on

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<sup>3</sup>This passage is extracted from the poster of the following Chicago Art Writers workshop “Art Criticism Today and Hopefully Also Tomorrow: A Workshop with Lori Waxman.” Link: <http://chicagoartistwriters.blogspot.com/2013/03/art-criticism-today-and-hopefully-also.html>

<sup>4</sup>See specifically this post: <http://arielle-gavin.tumblr.com/post/52875399013/indecently-cute>

<sup>5</sup>Many of the projects mentioned here consider themselves “alternatives” to institutional, or academic settings and discourses.

<sup>6</sup>I follow Morris Weitz here and consider art an “open-concept” contra to a “closed-concept.” See Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*,” vol. 15 (1956), pp. 27-35; reprinted in P. Lamarque and S. H. Olsen (eds), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 12-18.

rapidly paced, real time communication exchange. It's these same qualities that are often the focal point, or can at least be said to characterize the writing styles of many of the aforementioned examples. For example, *A Social Portrait* acknowledges social media as playing an informative and stylistic role in its content;<sup>7</sup> Alt-Crit seems keen on suggesting that the most potent and relevant discussion is already happening in front of our faces, in our social media feeds; Droitcour uses Yelp as a platform for his own art criticism, reviewing and rating various art and cultural establishments, the same way Yelp users might go about reviewing restaurants. Other contemporary publications I haven't yet mentioned, like, *I Read Where I Am* (2011), Junk Jet, Triple Canopy, or PWR paper (2010-2012),<sup>8</sup> also take cues from social media, weaving the pace and format of online communication into printed matter, attempting a cohesive representation of online and offline. Consider also the "casual observation" *A Social Portrait* advances and prefers; such casual observational output is reflected in the language of our blog posts and personal status updates. Additionally, note the "ahistorical" foundation which many art-write from is also something social media platforms, by their ephemeral nature, exude. In our examples, either social media platforms are treated as new egalitarian contexts for readership, conversation, and writing itself, or the language of social media is adopted as a new form of art writing (often times both of these premisses are involved). Of course, it would be naive to posit social media as the singular source immediately, and solely, responsible for producing the characteristics we have come to associate the above examples with. Basically then, all we want to say about social media in relation to art writing is simply the following: social media has accommodated our own desires or natural inclinations to write, or express ourselves in *a*, *b*, or *c* ways in a more accessible format than before, where *a*, *b*, or *c* is the appropriate/relevant writing style to our discussion.

What's particularly interesting about *A Social Portrait*, is that its introductory text offers a modest theoretical skeleton from which we may begin to understand a certain strain of contemporary art writing. Content is Relative calls it the "casual essay."<sup>9</sup> In the steps of Hito Steyerl we might even be so

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<sup>7</sup>Content is Relative, p.7

<sup>8</sup>Besides their overall excellent publications, see in particular their "Notes" section on their current website: <http://pwr-stud.io/reader.html>

<sup>9</sup>A potential parallel could perhaps be drawn between Casual Painting, the New Casualists, etc., however, I'm not interested in exploring such parallels in this article (nor am I sure how productive such a comparison would be).

inclined to call these “poor” essays.<sup>10</sup> Following *A Social Portrait*, the word “essays” should be “. . . taken lightly, to encompass a subject-specific type of writing that allows for variability in approach and format.” (p.8). If the texts that comprise *A Social Portrait* fit the casual bill (I’m assuming they do) do all of our contemporary examples above, as well? Furthermore, is much of art writing<sup>11</sup> casually done, and if so, what would this even entail? Admittedly, while the projects and publications above yield recognizable differences, I would argue that some are exemplars of a certain approach and style, that is, they qualify as casual essays, or CE. CE don’t necessarily stipulate that texts have to be brief or spare as one might think. (E.g., most of the examples above range from 100 words to 2,000, or from half a page to several.) More precisely then, CE demand content that is in some way or another, preliminary and off-hand: lists and thoughts that one half hazardly tries to salvage on .rtf files, Facebook comment threads, tweets, gchat conversations, and so on. Emphasis also seems to be placed on its authors: those who are not formally qualified experts, scholars, or writers per se. “Casual” shouldn’t be taken pejoratively, nor should it be taken strictly categorically.

What are CE then if we can ask such a thing? As noted, CE usually entail casual articulations and queries, that is, content which may be considered preliminary and under development. With this in mind, the difference between CE and, say, something that is not, something that is the opposite, call it what you’d like, academic, professional, objective, etc. is that, in theory, the former isn’t quite worked out, and that the latter, in principle, is, or more realistically, at the very least, has made a systematically comprehensive attempt at working that something out. (E.g., the former might claim and posit X based only on research A, while the latter claims and posits X based on research A,B, and C, or is more hesitant to posit X in the first place.) Casual then, doesn’t necessarily aim for analytic clarity, breadth, or scholarship of any extensive kind, on an issue<sup>12</sup> but rather for a kind of immediate conversational output, or a continued aggregate of it. For instance, if we consider the language distinctive to social media we’ll notice

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<sup>10</sup>See Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” e-flux, 2009. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

<sup>11</sup>Note that many of the aforementioned projects center around art criticism and the many stylistic shapes it can, and does, take. My aim in this article, however, is more broad in scope, and so I fold all these projects into the more general category of “art writing.” This should not interfere with the content of what I’m speaking towards.

<sup>12</sup>See Content is Relative, p.7

that it is conversationally motivated. And when we say social media has accommodated our own desires or natural inclinations to write, or express ourselves in *a, b, or c* ways in a more accessible format, we simply mean that social media publicizes and encourages our casually observant remarks, remarks that are ripe for the initiation of conversation, as well as conversation that sometimes is only obtainable privately at that. (E.g., remarks exchanged in the bar or party, after the lecture or exhibition.) In this way many CE can be instigative in nature, and dialectically inclined–thread starters and conversation movers. Their contents need not be definitive for the reason that they prompt dialogical exegesis (see Alt-Crit in particular for a clear example of this).

Consider again some of Content is Relative’s introductory remarks: “...The texts themselves manifest as a sort of ahistorical and disparate approach to accessed cultures that feels highly subjective in both its methods of collecting information and its analysis. It aims not to rely on formerly established realms of expertise or present definitive claims.” (My italics). If CE is largely subjective in its approach, can the content of CE be held epistemically reliable, that is, can we hold CE responsible for providing knowledge of a certain kind? Can we even expect CE to do this? Here we might be inclined to ask if casual is a methodology. This is a terribly difficult question to answer, and clearly beyond the scope of this article. However, I have some inclinations to argue that it is not. Here’s why. It would seem that CE, in theory, is anti-methodological, as its analyses and observations are, predominantly, subjectively informed and developed. This runs contra to systematic and formal approaches dominant in “knowledge-seeking” disciplines like the physical sciences, mathematics, or even more empirical strands of analytic philosophy. I should also think that methodology, at the very minimum, entails the intentional application of some method to the analyses and formulation of X. The intentionality of authors behind CE seem to waiver considerably, precisely because there is an absence of methodology, i.e. there is no clear, agreed upon way of proceeding with the analyses of X beyond phenomenological means.<sup>13</sup> I also assume that subjective, or first person, phenomenological experience and observation is a starting point, not an ending point. When we are considering qualifying something as being

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<sup>13</sup>In many ways this discussion concerning “lack of methodology” is one similarly found in philosophy (both continental and analytic), however, we wouldn’t say that philosophy constitutes casual methodology would we? This is debatable and a topic for another occasion.

methodologically informed, one might begin intuitively with some kind of hypothesis or theory but this is then subjected to scrutinization by way of formal systematic development. Perhaps, there is some room to entertain CE as a candidate for a minimal type of methodology, but it seems murky at the moment to see how this could be plausible. Given the above points, I assume that CE qualifies as a style of writing, rather than exemplifying a method in and of itself. Still, some questions arise: Is casual the appropriate stylistic mode for art and culture writing?

If CE are indeed distinguished by “not entirely scholarly modes” then it can also be suggested that appeal to the casual is motivated by relevancy. That is, the casual is an attempt at synchronicity with the feverish rate at which art and culture is produced and distributed online. Academic, or “more scholarly modes” of art writing on the other hand are divorced from this pace of production and coverage. Art and cultural papers of the academic kind, on some topic X, by the time they’re submitted, out for review, turned around, revised, rejected or eventually published, are oftentimes faced with the threat of triviality, determined no longer informative to current dialogues by the very art community they seek to validate. If it’s the academic world that, for better or for worse, runs on a “publish or perish” model—entailing production of three to five published articles a year—CE runs on a “publish everyday or perish” version. “Release early, release often, delegate everything you can, be open to the point of promiscuity.”<sup>14</sup> These remarks by artist Harm van den Dorpel, while directed toward the production and dispersion of contemporary artworks, can be aptly applied to CE. Again, it’s no mere coincidence that CE function in tandem with, or are embedded within, social media—it’s often simply to keep up.

Can we use the outline provided by *A Social Portrait* to map a coherent understanding of CE? I’m inclined to say yes. However, the scope of the queries and comments elicited above are far too encompassing and ambitious for this one article. Rather, what I hoped to have accomplished here, was offer a brief sketch of some characteristics that are seemingly specific to CE. My terminology and account remained cohesive with most of the short introductory remarks laid out in *A Social Portrait*, which I think offers a sturdy and appropriate foundation from which to begin from. While recognizing

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<sup>14</sup>Brian Droitcour, “Assembled Texts by Harm van den Dorpel,” Rhizome.org, 2012. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/jun/12/assembled-texts-harm-van-den-dorpel/>

that the above is incomplete and partial, I think some of my thoughts here develop a fair preliminary account of CE—a good starting point for further discussion and comprehension.