



A Manifesto for Discomfortable Writing
Antena

Dis-ease is useful to me, or the dis-abling of habituated practices of language. The idea of something not working, something not being sayable or reproducible, (re)printable, carries its own charge.
—Myung Mi Kim

Peoples who do not know each other should get to know each other in a hurry, like those who are about to struggle side by side.
—José Martí

What good is art when people everywhere don't have enough to eat?
—M., member of Revolutionary Autonomous Communities

Seeing things, the alternative seeing of things, the seen and seeing alternative, which a certain deployment of crisis is meant to police, is the crisis of genuine disclosure and generative disruption.
—Fred Moten

- To make common currency uncommon.
- To make us strangers in a place we thought was home. To find spaces for listening inside strangeness.
- To refuse complacency and allow risk to alight inside our own bodies.
- Thinking is doing. Doing is thinking.
- We write uncomfortably because we are probably wrong, yet compelled to learn. To learn from our errors.
- We are language workers in a workspace made of language. We are using language to push language into wild, unsettling, uncomfortable forms. This process might be painful. This process might be joyous. This process will be infinite.
- Language and world are inseparable. Language and action are inseparable. We use language to think about the world: the world being language. We turn our minds and bodies to the language we are using: aware of the constant constraints and impositions of that language upon us. The language being the world, its multiple and multiplicitous brutalities. The perpetual brutalities of an unjust language. The perpetual possibilities of justice in language.
- We use the term “writing” to refer to a range of forms of aesthetic work and practice. If writing is a form of art, then we insist on the cohabitating inverse: art is a form of writing. We embrace the different materials and techniques that various forms of art-making and organizing entail: the uncomfortable welcomes them all.

- Criticality is the seeing of the window and the frame and the smudges on the glass, as well as the landscape, cityscape, or humanscape outside the window. Criticality is the seeing of our own seeing, accounting for our own position, stance, perspective, history, infrastructure, substructure.
- Criticality is not optional.
- Discomfortable writing unsettles the complacent eye and opens it to the unexpected, the real and the hyper-real and the sub-real: the conditions of the world as it is and the potentials of the world as it might be.
- We reject the automatic. Automaticity is unquestioning acceptance of the conditions and brutalities of the world-as-it-is. To automatically act is to automatically collude.
- We embrace the everyday. Repetition, routine, and ritual also contain sparks of discomfortableness. The foundations of daily life are a springboard into the stratospheres of the uncomfortable. The discomforts of daily life are the texture of our resistance.
- We are not averse to good rhythm, but we distrust language that is too fluid, too easeful, too smooth. Without the snags, the surface becomes slick and we slide into so-called comprehension without pausing to question or remember how much we do not know.
- Capital traffics in the smooth, the cool, the easy. Capital is not interested in reminding us that there is more to learn; in fact, capital colludes to soothe us into thinking we already know everything, to produce a sense of normality, expectedness, regularity in a world that is anything but.
- Capital is also famously obsessed with the new and the next. We insist that its aim is not learning, but consumption and assimilation, with its attendant leveling of difference. Discomfortable writing rejects assimilation, preferring to linger in moments of rupture, to dwell in the snags, seeing what we would not, could not see, seeing our own seeing.
- If our work does not question the terms of the status quo, it is the status quo. The murderous status quo. Our context is an avant-garde that has throughout history aligned itself with revolutionary political movements.
- It is our responsibility to make the world as we wish to experience it—to create the conditions of our resistance, our solidarity, and our irrepressible liberation even as we acknowledge the very real and concrete effects of living in a world where injustice is institutionalized and enforced via all kinds of subterranean and overt violence.
- We have no patience for the divide between art practice and political practice. We have endless patience for doing the hard imaginative and practical work of building a more humane and just world. We are here to dismantle the master's house!

- Audre Lorde: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Yvonne Rainer: “You can dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools, if you expose the tools.” Antena: “The master’s house began to collapse on its own long ago. Use any and all tools you can get your hands on and speed the process. Demolish the master’s house carefully enough to recycle the building materials and make tiny houses for everybody. With any leftover materials, we’ll make small books.”
- Discomfortable aesthetic work is necessary if we are to imagine and begin to build a new world. Art is more than graphics to accompany our slogans. Poetry can imagine new possibilities within language. Poetry and other non-conforming forms of writing can create discomfort, manifest expressions of our distress and dysfunction in the context of unjust structures. Our work is made of attempts and failures and further attempts: we will learn to think, dream, and imagine differently and it will not be easy. Our work is ongoing.
- All language is in conversation with other language. Writing is not a purely individual pursuit: it emerges out of communities, movements, relationships. We read and write in order to interact not only with other individuals but also with other formations, other systems of thought, other histories. We need to hear and experience things that are far outside our comfort zone. We need to question the very divisions between zones, between comforts, between persons.
- We want to invoke a curriculum of contemporary and historic discomfortable writing by people of color, feminist and queer authors, and by writers of all orientations and backgrounds who are queering language and dismantling systems of privilege. We believe in a pedagogy grounded in humility, open-source sharing, intellectual instigation, and political activation.
- Our reading practices—and hence our editorial and programming and teaching practices—should reflect the demographics of the world. And if not the world, than at least our neighborhood, our corner of the world. Most corners of the world are more heterogeneous than might meet the unsuspecting eye.
- We advocate for books to be radically available: whether they live on the Internet, in libraries or bookstores, in homes, in kiosks on the street, in free boxes outside infoshops. Wherever. Whenever. For whomever.
- Discomfortable writing should exist in public. With bookstores closing their doors, and libraries shut down due to “austerity” measures, it is up to all of us to get these books into the world, where people can encounter them unexpectedly and be inspired by them. Make pamphlets! Write manifestos! Steal photocopies wherever possible and make books!
- Revolutionary rewritings need radical re-readers anywhere and everywhere. Open source is the only source.

- We stand (or sit resolutely) for the small, the tiny, the little, the under, the refused and the refuse, and also the oversized awkwardly gigantic in this svelte world of normalcies. We reject industrial, commercial models of literary production. We have an anti-industrial complex.
- While enthusiastically intellectual (and against rampant USAmerican anti-intellectualism), we are opposed to gates and their keepers and literary-academic elitism. We prefer to ask forgiveness rather than permission.
- We don't accept or seek to proffer the same old definitions, strictures and restrictions of an inherited, white, USAmerican or European avant-garde. What constitutes "experimental" or "innovative" or "adventurous" work is structured by feeling, by sentiment, by history, by historical oppressions, by networks of communication and legacies of conflict. By place and time and context and the vastly textured skein of what it is to be a particular person in a particular place.
- There is no vacuum within which uncomfortable practice can be judged. There is no judgment that can encompass the uncomfortable.
- We use the term "uncomfortable" to remind ourselves that this process might not feel good. Uncomfortable writing makes us uneasy and functions in un-easy ways. Uncomfortable writing makes demands, posits imperatives. To think differently, it is imperative that we find different language(s).
- We live in a slow space, an insistently snail's pace. Our work with language is necessarily slow, effortful, considered, non-accidental, and not automatic. To work consistently in more than one language and between languages is slow and often awkward. To write something in one language and then take the time to translate it into another language means waiting, means collaborating, means multiple attempts. We believe in this slow process. Labor takes time and we believe in the time that it takes. Uncomfortable time.
- We demand uncomfortable time.
- Participation in a complex intellectual and political dialogue with many different kinds of readers/thinkers/speakers is a slower, less visible kind of change than other forms of agitation. We believe uncomfortable language is its own form of activism or (dis)organizing—disorganizing the structures of institutionalized non-consensual domination and subservience that are embedded in the textures of our language.
- We believe uncomfortable writing and speaking are in fact practiced all the time by all kinds of people. You don't need a college degree to do uncomfortable language. Often, the most uncomfortable language has been marginalized for being "improper" or "lesser" or "slang." All of these forms throw a wrench into the machine of language standardization and dominance.

- We reject the imperialism of English, its constructions and syntax. Discomfortable writing enthusiastically undermines the dominant structures of English and the structures of English-language dominance.
- Language justice work enables us to listen fluidly-not-fluidly to things we cannot readily hear: frequencies that are beyond our comprehension without the tools language justice provides. Discomfortable writing enables us to listen fluidly-not-fluidly to things we do not always attend: the scaffolding of the ways language functions to buttress ideology or silence dissent.
- The space of writing is a laboratory, a place to create unexpected combinations of like and unlike things and explore the results, a place to make attempts and embrace failures and extend investigations without regard to a clear sense of destination or outcome.
- We refuse to rest on our laurels. In fact, we don't have any laurels! We have asses, and we are willing to work them off. We will be stubborn but not intransigent. We will be open to suggestion, persuasion, whim, and acceptance of the errors of our ways. We will look back and we will look forward.
- We are not post-anything. We are and we continue to be, without a clear break; we become complicit and resistant and insist on motion. We believe in interruption, stoppage, open-endedness. Nothing is over. Everything is over. We have barely begun. We are in the midst of the midst.

Sources

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Revolutionary Autonomous Communities, conversation in MacArthur Park, June 16, 2013.

Colophon

Antena is a language justice collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and John Pluecker, both of whom are writers, artists, literary translators, bookmakers and activist interpreters. We view our aesthetic practice as part and parcel of our language justice work. Antena activates links between social justice work and artistic practice by exploring how critical views on language can help us to reimagine and rearticulate the worlds we inhabit.

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