

ESSAYING ART—A PERFORMANCE LECTURE

- 00:05 essay: “a short piece of writing on a particular subject”.
- 00:15 essay: nonfictional prose texts between 1 and about 50 pages with an elusive multiplicity of forms and themes.
- 00:26 essay: to put to proof, to test or to attempt.
- 00:32 assay: adding: to weigh.
- 00:37 exagium: a standard weight type, a kind of weight, piece of gold, a noble, a crowne; examination, trial, testing.
- 00:52 ex: out.
- 00:55 agere: to do, to apply.
- 01:01 age: act.
- ago: act.
- 01:07 go.
- 01:09 go.
- 01:11 go.
- 01:14 The essay as we know it today starts with Montaigne’s bundle of three books. Various versions of his books were published between 1580 and 1588. The last one three years after his death in 1595. He never truly finished his 107 writings. He kept adding, changing, adapting, essaying.
- 01:41 The word *assai* might’ve referred to *coup d’essay*, translating into “trial run, dummy run or first try”. This might’ve referred to a phrase popular in his time: « Faire son coup d’essai, son chef d’oeuvre, pour passer Maitre » meaning: “to make a trial of his skill in order to be made free”. Montaigne could’ve used the word *assai* as an attempt to free oneself from previous thoughts and dominating teachings. He internalizes the arguments and theories of others by embodying their words and appropriating their knowledge. His essays

- are described as: “thoughts in series upon series of thoughts, feelings, desires, actions and reactions”. These sequences of long sentences consist of “anecdotes, quotes, thoughts, emotions and observations.”
- 02:50 The reader follows his train of thought and as thought isn’t linear, its display should be neither. This free structure doesn’t fill in the direct connections between the arguments, but it lets the viewer take part in the interpretation.
- 03:10 Do you know that camera’s used to be pre-set programmed to white skin? A friend told me the actual technique of the equipment couldn’t perceive nuances in dark colors very well. Kodak corrected this mistake after complaints from the chocolate and wood industry. They decided to re-market the new feature as being able to register “a dark horse in low light”.
- 03:44 I remember when I bought my first camera. The most important feature for me was *white balance calculation*. The idea of a pre-set white balance mode was unbearable to me. The downside of this camera was that it wasn’t able to film in nightshot mode. As a consequence this camera can’t perceive light in a dark room very well.
- 04:15 “I have a recurring image of a room. The room is white. Now, despite there being no windows there’s light in this room, but strangely no indication of a source for this illumination.”
- 04:41 Adorno starts his renowned *The Essay as Form* from 1958 with a quote from Goethe’s Pandora: “Destined to see the illuminated, not the light.” The illuminated surface isn’t just influenced by this unseen light source but also influenced by the preset mode of its mediator which perceives the illuminated—not to speak of the object exposed to these perspectives. Adorno’s essay on the essay is viewed as hybrid of science and art, of philosophy and literature.
- 05:22 Claire de Obaldia writes that the essay only becomes literature when losing its touch with the scientific. She describes the essay as *literature in potentia*. The essay’s also described as almost literature and almost philosophy. However, Adorno states the essay’s neither scientific nor artistic.
- 05:52 Essaying as an approach could be fruitful ground for artistic researchers to create growths of *art in potentia* and/or *science in potentia*. An *unmethodological method*.

- 06:14 The essay's closely related to the classical Japanese literary genre Zuihitsu: both the fragmented form and the presence of the author can be compared to the essay form. Both genres are defined as undefinable.
- 06:32 The most famous Zuihitsu is the Pillow book. Pillow book's perhaps the perfect name for a Zuihitsu; like a *lucid dream*, a hybrid state of sleep and consciousness, it's thinking and dreaming at the same time. Not fiction, not non-fiction, but something in between.
- 06:56 In the Zuihitsu, the recorded thoughts of the author are central. It consists of "series of loosely connected essays and anecdotes, as well as disconnected sentences, fragments, ideas, word pictures, poems, lists, and snatches of conversations".
- 07:17 Apart from consisting of many different writing styles, the Zuihitsu also contains drawings and paintings. A modern-day Zuihitsu could incorporate photographs as well as
- 07:32 sounds,
- 07:36 images,
- 07:37 web-links,
- 07:40 and video's.
- 07:44 You know, most horses commonly referred to as *white* are actually *grey* horses. They can be born in any color and gradually grey as time goes on and take on a *white appearance* but the skin keeps its initial color.
- 08:06 *When a white horse is not a horse*, also known as the *White horse dialogue* is a famous dialectical paradox in Chinese philosophy.
- 08:16 *Horse* is that by means of which one names the shape. *White* is that by means of which one names the color. What names the color is not what names the shape. Hence, I say that a white horse is not a horse.
- 08:45 Perhaps a white page is not a page. Perhaps a white cube is not a cube. Perhaps white is not white at all but just the reflection of light on a surface with any color *in potentia*, depending on its observer.
- 09:00 Perceiving this light requires a recalibration of your perspective, a re-adjusting your focus, a reset of the balance, a critical reflection of what's perceived. Perhaps this is what essaying is, it's indeed a balancing of a blank space but not *with walls*, not an *anything goes*.
- 09:37 The students use the performative space for essaying at Café Chercher, and the digital space for essaying on the Research Catalogue show page on the internet.
- 09:56 The digital *bright white space*.

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- 09:57 The research catalogue is an international database for artistic research by the society of artistic research. The platform provides workspaces that can be used for making, sharing, and self-publishing content. I too use this online space for the content of the pilot practice tutorial.
- 10:28 The course spans over the period of 8 months and consists of two meetings each month: one day in a studio or classroom, and one evening at Café Cherher, a platform sharing for unfinished art and research projects.
- 11:00 The subject of the tutorial is “the intertwinement of artistic and scientific research strategies” with a specific focus on the relation between form and content. The aim is to “create an environment in which we can collectively doubt, experiment, speculate and be critical.” Each meeting we reflect on the artistic contributions at Café Chercher and speculate on the next ones.
- 11:32 These artistic contributions can take the form of a try-out, prototype, workshop, lecture performance or video, poem, dance piece, theater piece, music; and each meeting we discuss their pillow book entries. These entries can take the form of a: report, list, essay, diary entry, dream, dialogue, poem, song, video, subtitles, voice recordings.
- 12:20 Each month has one of these essayistic characteristics as a theme with a guest teacher according to the theme.
- 12:29 For instance: on experimenting.
- 12:39 This is the theme’s page. It includes the event and the meeting. I give them my own formulation on the theme; they all have to share their own (as you can see I like to use etymology) and I introduce the guest teacher, in this case Oscar Santillan. Oscar works with archeology and mythology in his artistic practice.
- 13:17 I also use the page as an archive, including video-documentation of the guest teachers.
- 13:29 Last but not least, I include the event. This one was titled: *Opening the year with quilting, collections, archives, things*. During these events the students present alongside artistic researchers from different disciplines, levels and institutes. The event is hosted by VOX-POP Creative space, a platform for pop-up events.
- 14:02 On the page I also include video-documentation of the event and of the students. *Saving* this process is essential for the evaluation criteria.
- 14:22 Like Montaigne, the students share multiple stages and version of their artistic research, showing the process rather than the end

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- result, therefore there is no end assignment. They get evaluated on the process, and on their critical attitude and reflections.
- 14:44 Through the modes of the performative and digital space, the collective of peers, the public collective, and the online collective, they build their own references, context, and sense of what Artistic Research could be for them. With this I hope to stimulate individual artistic research strategies and forms.
- 15:11 Ideally, when combining a collective of individual artistic researcher approaches, this could define the field. Like the essay being defined by essayists writing essays on the essay.
- 15:27 A big, ever shifting, gray area, that isn't afraid of blinding light nor utter darkness.

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