

01 Corpus of Research & Doctrine

Language as Custody — Writing Without Harm in Post-Interpretive Criticism

15 Oct 2025 3 min read

Permanent Record Omeka Library Publisher Museum of One Journal Post-Interpretive Criticism
Series Foundational Archived By Library & Archives Canada

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Written at the Threshold

A Training in Reverent Speech for Those Who Would Dare to Speak of Art

I. The Premise

Every sentence is a trespass, unless it's written with permission.

And permission is earned, not assumed.

To write about a work of art isn't to describe it. It's to touch it with language. And like all touch, it leaves a residue. Some hands hold gently. Others bruise.

II. The Sin of Spectacle

Modern criticism, bloated by cleverness, often mistakes performance for precision. It dresses in metaphor too quickly. It leaps toward grand theory before kneeling at the work. It names before noticing. It concludes before confessing.

And in doing so, it wounds. It wounds by flattening what it cannot carry. It wounds by performing knowledge before earning intimacy. It wounds by speaking louder than the thing it claims to hold.

It's not the content of language that commits violence, It's the *posture* behind it.

III. The Three Languages That Harm

Let us name the trespassers:

1. **Clinical Language** — That which dissects a work like a cadaver, sterile and cold. "This piece is an example of post-minimalist abstraction rooted in transnational feminist theory." Nothing has been felt. Only filed.
2. **Sensational Language** — That which decorates trauma, weaponizes metaphor, or seduces the reader with spectacle. "Her body becomes a battlefield; her silence, a scream." The work is now stage. The critic, actor.
3. **Ironic Language** — That which distances itself with wit, sarcasm, or clever detachment. "The artist seems to say, 'I'm not here to make you comfortable' — but don't worry, she doesn't." Art becomes accessory. Criticism becomes performance. Reverence vanishes.

IV. A Model of Custodial Language

Now let us step into another tongue.

One not of mastery, but of mercy.

Let us take a single sentence:

“She does not perform grief. She preserves its silence.”

This isn’t metaphor. It is positioning. The sentence holds the artist’s dignity intact. It honours the work’s boundary. It speaks *with*, not *over*.

The tone is intimate, but not invasive. It offers proximity, not possession. This is language as *custody*.

V. Three Postures of Custodial Writing

1. Precision over Poetry

If you must choose between sounding beautiful or being exact, choose exactness. Beauty will follow if it deserves to.

2. Restraint over Reach

Don’t say what you *could* say. Say only what the work would allow if it could speak for itself.

3. Confession over Conclusion

Instead of “what it means,”

try: “what I noticed.”

Instead of “this is,”

try: “I found myself moved when…”

Witness, not judgment. Custody, not conquest.

VI. Training Exercise: The Rewrite

Take this sentence:

“The work is a visceral representation of the artist’s trauma following political displacement.”

Now hold it beside this one:

“The paper looks as though it remembers being handled by someone who had to leave.”

Which one bruises?

Which one kneels?

Try rewriting a sentence from a previous review of your own. Not to erase your voice, but to re-discipline its reach. Let your adjectives confess, not control. Let your verbs carry weight, not noise.

VII. Benediction

To write is to approach the altar. And some works, like the woman standing still, or the word written in a vanishing tongue, don’t ask for comment.

They ask not to be harmed.

And the critic, if they are to be worthy of the role, must learn the art of sacred speech. Because sometimes the most powerful sentence you can write is the one you decide not to.

Museum of One — Written at the Threshold, 2025

10.5281/zenodo.17077653

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