

Socialising in artistic research

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I.

Although writing as art and about art is a part of my practise, I do feel some alienation in relation to writing from inside the academy. The reflective text of the dissertation has a tendency to become a stranger, like someone from outside who tries to force him- or herself into the familiar room of artistic practise. On the other hand this can be understood in an opposite way: That artists are strangers forcing themselves into the university. I do think that one should invite these strangers in and socialise. And one of the spots for socialising is the reflective text in the dissertation of artistic research. Even the whole field of artistic research can be regarded as a meeting place for different kinds of skills, ideas and traditions.

Most artists are not trained to write traditional, standardized academic prose. On the other hand, it seems odd for artistic researchers to write in a totally different way from the academic tradition. To write pure fiction, as a reflective text in this context for example, seems wrong, or at least problematic to me. I have no problems with fictive ingredients or grey areas, but a reflective text must also clearly argue, discuss or make propositions. There must be someone to blame, so to speak. If artistic research is to be regarded as a meeting place, artists have to attend the meetings. Artistic research cannot be just a process; it has to reflect a process. If we are socialising with the academy, we have to regard some basic ideas related to research (I avoid using the notion of science on purpose). And as I understand it, transparency is one of the major aspects of research, including artistic research. Transparency means things like references, contexts, clarity of argument, information on the working process and facts about art works. But transparency can also exist outside the academy. But, the demand for transparency is what differentiates artistic research from artistic practise in general.

At the University of Gothenburg, we apply for a PhD with our experiences as artists. This means that we have certain knowledge about artistic practises. One of the fundamental ideas in artistic research is to bring knowledge of artistic practise into the academy. So there is no use in pretending to be someone else, whom would you fool anyway? Therefore it seems reasonable to connect the history of artists and the tradition of artists' writings, when writing the reflective text. A common example of 'artist as researcher' is Leonardo da Vinci. But the calculation (art + natural science = artistic research) is wrong. Da Vinci might have been doing artistic research, but not because he was doing two things at one time. Artistic research means, as far as I can understand it, research based on artistic practise. We do not have to lean on natural science, and we should not do it.

There are different good or acceptable ways to write in our field. I have, like many of my colleagues, chosen to write essays. Beyond philosophical arguments, this way of writing a dissertation is close to my and others artistic practises. Not only because essay writing is a part of my practise, but because the idea of trying out things is typical for working in the field of arts. It has been argued that the essay is becoming a standard in artistic research, and that this is bad. The argument is that artistic research should be as open as possible, and that this standardisation is narrowing the possibilities. While this is fair enough, I have never read a reflective text in artistic research where this way of writing has been a problem. The reason for this is probably because the essay is such an open form in itself. It is definitely much more inclusive than exclusive.

There are, of course, many different ways to define what an essay is. Aldous Huxley's classification of three main types of essay is very useful in this case: 1. The personal and the autobiographical (This fits telling about the process of working with an artwork within a dissertation, the 'I' in the text.), 2. The objective, the factual, the concrete-particular (For both the facts about the piece of art and its concrete context.), 3. The abstract-universal. (This fits theory and how artworks express and relate to it; the contemporary and historical context of the work of art). These three characteristics do not have to be contained in one essay, says Huxley, but if so, the better. He stresses the quantitative aspect, that the essay is short and limited. But, he argues that a collection of essays can cover a lot, almost anything.

Another important aspect of the essay is that it does not pretend to give a complete answer, but emphasizes the fact that it is a try (and that, now and then you might lose track). Trying, includes by definition, a potential for failing, at least temporarily. Failure, and all kinds of obstacles, are not only important parts of the creative work, they point out the importance of the process. And the process seems to be of fundamental importance in the arts, especially in artistic research. When you meet obstacles (or fail completely) during the working process, they are like a mirror placed in front of you, forcing you to look back and study the process you went through on your way to this specific point. A failed piece of art does not have to be a bad piece of art, and the same goes for an essay.

This focus on process, not only connects the artistic work with the essay, but with the idea of discovery-led research. Therefore this method seems useful in artistic research. Sarah Rubidge, a PhD in artistic research, defines discovery-led research in a very useful way:

...two main types of research have become evident. The first is what we might call 'hypothesis-led' research (practice-based research), in which the research interrogates or tests pre-formulated questions and/or hypotheses. The second is 'discovery-led' research (practice-led research and research into practice, through practice) in which the researcher enters an initially inchoate field, at most having a barely formed speculative question or hypothesis, then using his or her professional

experience, insights and skills, embarks of a research journey in which initially even the research pathway may not be clearly defined. In this type of research, although apparently without direction at its commencement, as the research progresses underlying research questions make themselves known and the research gradually focuses its attention on those questions.

Artistic research is like a ship being built whilst sailing. It seems appropriate to artistic research both as a whole and to specific PhD-projects.

In the reflective text of my dissertation – the essays – I include dialogues, e-mail conversations, comments by different people, and quotes from literature. In this way the sources for my writing and artistic work becomes quite clear, and the whole project becomes more transparent. I am open with whom I socialise with, so to speak. It makes it obvious that the texts, and the works of art as well, are meeting places for ideas, traditions, genres, coincidences, conflicts, hang-ups and theories. Not by coincidence, this is a view on language expressed by Mikhail Bakhtin, who is an important philosopher in my PhD-project. For him, the novel is a way to dialogically understand the world by ordering and simplifying it. Language and being, are for him, events between men. Bakhtin regards language as being social, and so why not understand it as a meeting place? I do understand language in a broad sense as something taking place. Hence an artwork of any kind, including the essay – being language – could be regarded as a moment of order, like a film still from a Central Station open twenty-four hours a day, in constant flux, people arriving to a new place, others returning home, groups of people passing by, drunk people, angry people, smiling people, old people, buses, taxis, trains...

II.

The reflective text in artistic research can include various kinds of texts. And this also goes for works of art. I will give three examples of texts that form a part of my dissertation as a whole.

The first example is from the reflective text, and includes the invented character Q. Q is not found everywhere in the text, but turns up on certain occasions. Q is not nice, more of a super-ego. Mainly I argue with Q and it gives me the opportunity to include a critical level sometimes forgotten in artistic research. There is a tendency to protect artistic researchers from critique. It might come from a wish to defend a new or vulnerable field, but could result in an opposite effect. Sometimes it is fruitful to socialise with the enemy, or at least to invite some critical standpoints.

In my case, Q has a positive effect on my writing. Instead of hesitating at critical points, I include the critique and try to make creative use of weak spots. This way of writing has a pedagogical impact, the text hopefully becomes more interesting to read and easier to grasp. It also makes the writing process much more pleasant.

Authorship is an important issue in my text and is here discussed:

The author can be said to be both present and absent. The author is not there, inside the work. He is situated on a border, balancing between the work and the world, if you follow Bakhtin. It sounds close to something Derrida talks about: there is no centre of a structure in a conventional way, not any origin or any definitive presence. He argues for this in a quasi-logical manoeuvre: a centre that per definition gives a structure its nature, finds itself located both inside and outside a structure. This is the case because a centre organizes the structure and because of this, it is not a part of it. I understand the writers', artists' or curators' activities to be an organizing activity like this. Being there, but not being a part of the structure; organizing, but not being organized.

Q: It sounds like playing with words. You could as well say that Derrida doesn't use the concept centre in the way it is ordinarily used.

Andreas: Instead you could say that the concept of centre is misused and that Derrida redefines it so that it corresponds better to the present situation.

Q: But to claim something like, "The centre is not the centre", is mumbo jumbo! Or does he mean that the logic is false?

Andreas: If you want to misunderstand, it is easily done. Derrida is of course using a rhetorical gesture. What he means is that a centre, if you look closely, isn't what we usually think it is.

Q: All this relativity!

Andreas: I would rather say 'all this historicity'.

The second example is taken from an art project within my dissertation: Sleeper. A sleeper is an agent, deployed in an enemy country, who lives in the guise of an ordinary citizen until he or she is activated. This project has its origins at a stay in Russia as part of my doctoral education. I stayed two weeks at a Dacha for artists with some colleagues and art students from Gothenburg, Frankfurt and Moscow. The food served in the cantina was of traditional Soviet style, and I gave myself the task of coming up with an alternative, a tasty and cheap dish that was easy to prepare. The answer was a Tuna fish casserole. I wrote a recipe – not an ordinary one, but a micro essay on each ingredient, and information on how to prepare the casserole. These essays included topics like: the colonial history of curry dishes, an explanation of the distinctive odour of garlic, the depletion of tomato cultivation, basic culinary physics, the meaning of 'dolphin-safe tuna fishing', the history of canning technologies, basic culinary physics and how to avoid crying when peeling or slicing onions.

Out of reasons embedded in the project, I decided to add meaning by secretly giving away the texts. I wanted to do the opposite of stealing. So I made a sole, exclusive, copy, with the texts translated into Russian. It was carefully designed with a discreet, poor cover. Then it was secretly placed in a special section in the Lenin library, (Moscow and Russia's major library). There it may be found by accident, it might be read and it might be activated; the dish might be prepared. The dish could become a meeting point not

only for the ingredients but also for their contexts, pointed out in the essays, and one could imagine the dish shared by some people. The recipe is for ten people. (The cookbook seems to be a perfect example of conceptual art.)

In this specific context – artistic research and text – the main point is that in some respects the essays in the book have the same character as the essays in my reflective text. I use the same kind of language, the same structure and use of different sources. What differs is that I do

not use theories in the way I use Bakhtin, and others, in the reflective text. The general theory can be regarded as being replaced by the general structure of a work of art. And by this I would like to argue in this case that the division between reflective text and art projects in artistic research is blurred. And the device, is the meeting place, namely an essay. Here is an example from one of them:



[...] The tomato, the fruit of the tomato plant, is strictly speaking a berry. Nevertheless, at the end of the 19th century the US Supreme Court declared that tomatoes were vegetables. It did so not only because they are used in the same way as vegetables but, above all, because this was a way for the US authorities to include tomatoes in a customs treaty. Growers in South America were thus prevented from selling their tomatoes in the US before the domestic ones had ripened. A latter-day version of this creative definition of the tomato was that of the Reagan Administration in the 1980s: it declared that ketchup was a kind of vegetable to enable school managements to fulfil at low cost the vegetable quotas for school food.

The third example, *Spin-Off*, is a spin-off from the video *Thessalonica Revisited*. It is a short story read by an actor and video taped. From this seventy-minute video I cut out a six minute long curse and called it *Spin-Off*. This is an example of how a literary text (printed, video filmed, or performed live) can be a part of a dissertation in artistic research.

I would like to make things more complicated by using a quote from Samuel Beckett, of an anonymous voice from *Texts for Nothing*, quoted by Michel Foucault in his essay *What is an Author*: "What does it matter who is speaking, someone said, what does it matter who is speaking." Foucault argues that Beckett's point is to be ignorant of who the author is. It might be the case, but what strikes me is that Beckett so easily moves from one author and event, to another one. In the first part of the sentence you believe that someone actually, at this very moment, is questioning the importance of who is



speaking (at the same time questioning the status of the performance of him or herself.) Then it turns out that the person talking is quoting someone else. As I understand it, the main point is not that the author/speaker is irrelevant, but that the sentence, the language, is disloyal to the author/speaker. And that an author or speaker can easily borrow, copy and steal. Language is on the run, but can easily be caught and used, at least temporarily.

In *Spin-Off* it is unclear who is actually speaking, and about whom. It is a curse or litany that, as Bakhtin has pointed out, has no clear direction and hence becomes universal. The curse is also a kind of traditional practice where the task is to repeat the same content varying the language. That is to make something repetitive and boring into something elaborated, striking and even amusing. It is a monologue intended to be dialogical in the way that it is a meeting place for all curses, and for different voices. Even though the actor who is reading the monologue has a tendency to plunge into dramatic possibilities losing the intentionality, the text points back to him as being a tool, not for mediating a text or cursing, but for acting.

Emma Corkhill performed the text live during The Art Text seminar in Gothenburg. Someone was speaking. Did it matter who it was? Please, read the following:

I am bloody well going to put that bastard on the rack. He should be hung upside down by his genitals. I am going to beat the shit out of him so that he knows what his name is. He is an abject liar who is prepared to sell anyone in order to satisfy his own greed. What an extraordinarily base fellow he is, a person with no depth who simulates honesty. What an f-ing non-entity, a tasteless, stupid, mindless idiot. He is going to pay with interest for his odious wiles The little shit. I am going to make pulp of that ingratiating grin on his face so that it will never return to that stupid, affected expression. His face will cease to be when I have finished with his damned smirk. He will bloody well wish he had never been born. That shit. He will regret all his damned evasions, his prevarications and his slippery lies. Finito. This is the end of his cunning rackets, the end of the road. If only he knew in his miserable little reptilian brain what I am planning on his account, then his filthy body would tremble and the sweaty rolls of fat would jump with terror. I see his paralyzed expression in front of me, the urine stain that spreads across his crotch, the trembling flabby lower lip, his sausage-like fingers that fruitlessly try to protect his swollen nose, the phlegm and saliva. And all this is just the beginning of the inhuman torture that he is going to be subjected to which will cause him to re-evaluate every damned decision he has ever made in his repulsive life. He is going to have every reason quite simply to regret his own existence. He is going to want to rewind the tape, to start all over again, to do things differently. He is going to want to be a good person,

a solid citizen, but it is too late. The only thing he can look forward to at this moment is the horror he has collected during his miserable life. Now it is payback time with compound interest. The passing years have not led to anything being forgotten, but have increased his debt which is like dough rising that has run over the edges of the bowl and down onto the floor, that has filled the room, forced its way out through the gaps in the windows



and pressed its fat shiny lips against the insides of the windowpanes. I shall chase him through the streets, I shall haunt him for the rest of his life. I shall make sure that he understands that every second may be the last one of his miserable existence; that all the terrors of the earth are hiding behind each street corner, that in every dark room dwells a tormentor, that every mouthful of food may be poisoned, contaminated, infected, mouldy and rotten. That every smile may conceal a conspiracy to further reduce this miserable life, that each person who approaches as he walks down the street may be armed with a weapon or with taunts, that on railway platforms there are people who are potential murderers who will push him onto the tracks in front of a train rushing into the station, that every car he encounters is a potential kamikaze vehicle with the mission of ending his pathetic life, that every promise made to him is merely an occasion of deceit, that every contract that he enters into merely exists to be broken, fall to pieces, be torn into bits before his eyes. That for every millimetre he manages to climb up the sides of the hole that contains his trivial existence, he will be pushed back twice as far that when he desperately wishes he were dead, the duration of his life will be extended many times over. The bloody cunt is going to have to eat up every ounce of the shit that he has spread around him. He is going to go down on his knees and apologise a thousand times over. Mercy is a word that he can only dream of, this abhorrent creature who has forfeited all human rights, who has done his bit once and for all, who has reached the point of no return, where there is no room for regrets, no possibility of undoing what has been done. At each moment he will be reminded of his swinish existence. His sleep shall consist of endless walks to Golgotha in a world of terrible nightmares, interrupted by panicky awakenings in which, bathed in a cold sweat, he screams at the distress of having been born at all. His waking hours shall be tightly held in a vice of constant illusory executions; Russian roulette will be a regular feature as will Chinese water torture. At any given moment anything at all may happen, not even the ground that he walks on will be stable. Behind every door will lurk a surprise that is so unpleasant that he will merely want to stand absolutely still, but he will be forced forwards towards the unknown with shoves and blows. Mad dogs will chase him towards precipices, out onto dense fields of mines and into spider-webs of trip-wires. He will be tied up and left among poisonous snakes and starving predators.

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Working with other people in art projects clarifies in a pedagogical way Bakhtin's philosophical and aesthetical claim that language (and being) is a social event. In this case of the video *Spin-Off*, an actor is included. The Swedish actor in the video has a classic dramatic style and I asked him to suppress it, calculating that even if he were reading the text as reading aloud from a novel, some dramatic effects would leak out. And this would emphasize the orphanage of the text, so that it would oscillate between, being letters read, to an idea about authorship that further reveals the actor's constitution and finally connect with the viewer's specific context. I think it worked that way. But because the conference in Gothenburg was in English I decided to ask someone to read it aloud for me. I also wanted to point out text as performed, as a part of artistic research. As said, Emma Corkhill (editor, graphic designer and one of the organizers of the conference) was kind enough to help me out. She, not being an actor, was in a different position to the man in the video. I had to ask her to be a little bit more dramatic when we rehearsed, trying to make her get closer to the point where the video actor was situated. The performance was fine and the reading became less an art performance and more of an account. But it had some small dramatic events when Emma Corkhill seemed to identify with the text. In this sense it did matter who was reading.

Literature

- Mikhail Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minnesota, 1984: *Rabelais and His World*, 1984: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Texas, 1986
- Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, 1980
- Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, New York, 1977
- Michael Holquist, *Bakhtin and his World*, London, 1990
- Aldous Huxley, *Collected Essays*, New York, 1923
- Sarah Rubidge, *Artists in the Academy: Reflections on Artistic Practice as Research*, www.ausdance.org.au/resources/publications/.../Rubidge.pdf

Translation into English of *Spin-Off* by Clare James