

Work stories

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A work story is a written or oral narrative about the forming of materials, immaterial units, situations, relations and social practices, that is, or leads to, an artwork. The concept emphasizes *the process* and *the methods* of art, giving a value to the account of the sequence of makings, but also taking into account the considerations (theoretical and practical) and the biographical elements. In conceptual art, the work story is not only crucial for the understanding of the work – the very order of the sequence of the making and the action have symbolic, metaphorical, metonymical, political and even epistemological meanings and cannot be excluded from the presentation or the physical form of the work.

In this text and, more extensively – in my dissertation *You Told Me: Work Stories and Video Essays* – I try to propose and examine different forms, functions and possibilities of the term work story (rather than give coherent definition). Basically I consider the work story to be an integral part of an artwork. Firstly, it is a sequence of doings, a latent story of the process that can be deduced or extracted from any artwork, regardless of media. Secondly, as a meta-activity, it is performative and during the contingent and shifting orbit of its social existence, the work story aggregates meaning that becomes a part of the art work to which the story refers. As an *emplotment* of experience (Paul Ricoeur)¹ it gives the storyteller a sense of continuation, coherence, connection and meaning. Here lies one of the many resemblances with the functions of the narratives of life stories. Furthermore, work stories can merge with life stories to make an inseparable unit.

In this text, work stories are also connected to *post-construction* [efterkonstruktion]. Besides being a narrative of an account of sequences of doings and considerations, a work story can function as an *instruction*, or a score, which was the term in Fluxus art. Post-construction is a tool of the work story, and as such, has dimensions of self-reflexivity, self-alienation, mythologization, while also reflecting the contingent nature of work stories. Post-construction as a narrative is also directed to our selves; as acts of promises or as invocations. The two directions – to others and to ourselves – share the ethical dimension, and are implied in the last of the hermeneutical statements: “This is where I am going.” In this text I also discuss the collectiveness of the process of post-construction, for instance with the example of Gordon Matta-Clarks work, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (a work story examined by Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi and Frances Richard).

According to my description, a work story is basically an account of action, a series of makings, but the story often also contain accounts of considerations and relational

1. See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 1, The University of Chicago Press 1984.

moments (to the situation where the actions were performed). A work story is constructed, shaped and maintained in a system of talking, staging, performing, dissemination and circulation, as well as re-contextualization. Adjacent to the mediated story of the making of art, are the stories of reception, reaction and consequences of the work. Told and retold, these stories become a part of the work; i.e. fragments of the reception of the work are internalized in the work.

In an extended form, a work story disseminates meaning rather than capturing it. This is the essayistic form of work story to which I have devoted myself in my dissertation – an “extended work story”. The essayistic mode permits the artist to wander off and touch upon subject as if when passing by, and at the same time, paradoxically, giving them a detailed attention, reproducing their neglected genealogy and destiny in the detailed materiality of the work story. The essay is the study of the detail, the unnecessary detail: a detail that is supposed to be ignored in the documentary reporting of an event.²

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In terms of narration, I believe there are three different forms or layers in artistic practice. The first layer is concerned with the motif of the work, to the extent that the work is telling a story (something not all works do, obviously) or is suggesting a plot. “Motif” may be a suspect term here when considering the fact that many of the artworks of today do not operate primarily within the means of representation, but function as events, social interactions or as communicative acts. But even these works, sometimes inscribed in relational and participatory practice, seem to create models of the world where the demarcation of the work (through the art context) creates what resembles a “motif”.

The second layer is the factual orbit of the process. It is the very making of the work, the *potential narrative of the methodology* that can be deduced or extracted by observing, or by other means taking part of, a work. As described before with the examples of drawing, here the technique, combined with the performance, as well as the sequence of actions that has led to (or constitute) the work, forms a self-sufficient narrative (which, as mentioned, also has mimetic and aesthetic dimensions). The methodology can be detected by cognitive means, for instance by observing the strokes of a brush or the style of lines in a drawing, and the ability to understand or capture the methods is very much due to the experience and knowledge of the viewer.

The third layer is the meta-layer. It is an account of the second layer, reconstructed and/or post-constructed. This is the *work story* which is performed by others and/or the artist him/herself. This third form is in constant transformation, it is remodeled, displaced, reduced or extended. Biographical contents are often added with various levels of mythologization. The second and the third layer are naturally at work in the discipline

2. I am indebted to Irina Sandomirskaja for this description of essayism.

of artistic research.³

One starting point for the idea of the work story is my own acknowledgement of the fact that I lack first hand-experience of many of the art works I know of and believe I have a relationship to. I know many of them from images and text in printed material, but several I have only heard of in conversations, lectures, discussions and seminars. Nevertheless many of these never seen works are active in my mind; they are imagined and visualized, sometimes probably also idealized. Through the medium of storytelling I have my own “experience” of these art works (although I, in the process of reception, interpretation and imagination, sometimes might have partly or totally misunderstood their intention or physical appearance, distorted their concepts, and of course added or reduced meaning to them.)

The fact that the art world to a large extent is a place for stories points to its folkloristic aspect.⁴ In other words, the art world is a place for transmission: someone has seen or heard of someone who has done something. The story is told and retold. As in any other oral culture there are misunderstandings, details, displacements and falsifications. In this “talk-talk community” there is a heavy dependence on “what is on everyone’s tongue”. Works that are difficult to talk about, for instance, run the risk of being neglected and disappearing. Sometimes an art practice escapes omission because of stories about the artist himself.

Whatever one may think of the oral circulation of art (often connected to the work story) – not least through chatting at bars and cafés – the narration could be recognized as a “place” for art distribution, that is as important as the exhibition space and printed matter. A similar “place” has actually been recognized in literature and examined as an element in a hermeneutical analysis by Gérard Genette. A key function in his analysis is the term *paratext*. Paratext is informed by *peritex* – which consist of spatial and material aspects of a book as format, layout, title page, paper, cover design, etc – together with *epitext* which consists of the author’s interviews, conversations, correspondence, diaries, seminars, presentations and retrospective comments. *Paratext* is supposedly what Joseph Kosuth called an artist’s “total signifying activities.”

According to Genette, there is no clear border between the inner (text) and the outer (the world’s discourse surrounding the book). In analogy with paratext, he uses the expression of Philippe Lejeune: “/.../ a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls

3. Mieke Bal speaks about three layers in narration (which are not easily transferred to the three layers I use in this text): the fabula, the story and the (narrative) text. A narrative text is a story told by an agent in a medium (composed of language signs). Mieke Bal speaks about two types of fabula: a series of logically chronological events that are caused by and experienced by actors and a memorial trace that remains after the story has been received. See *Narrative Theory: Major Issues in Narrative Theory*, ed. Mieke Bal, Routledge 2004.
4. See also Bengt af Klintberg’s text on the connection between *Fluxus art and folklore; Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore: On the Non-individual Character of Fluxus art*, *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 1993.

one's whole reading of the text.”⁵ This fringe, which always brings a comment of the author, “/.../ constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it /.../.”⁶

It is within different spaces of a similar “zone” in the art world that the oral tradition is happening and the stories that artists tell about their own work are delivered. It is under the pretext (or epitext) of collegial conversations, lectures, presentations (to curators), studio visits and meetings with the press and audience that artists are constantly telling their stories.⁷ The stories of the artist are always changing to fit the present situation and audience, as well as his professional and personal development. The oral text of the artist is also changed with the spirit and tendencies of the time, including and excluding elements, emphasizing some parts and adding comments absorbed and internalized from the surrounding discourses. It is a continuously changing story: contingent and re-examining. Already in the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne wanted to incorporate such a *slight narrative* (Paul Rotha)⁸ in his writing process:

I must accommodate my history to the hour: I may presently change, not only by fortune, but also by intention. This is a counterpart of various and changeable accidents, and of irresolute imaginations, and, as it falls out, sometimes contrary: whether it be that I am then another self, or that I take subjects by other circumstances and considerations /.../”⁹

The term “paratext”, used by Genette, and my own term “work story” both point towards factors and circumstances that effect the reading of (or viewing, or talking part of) a work, and become an integral part of it. My own term is grounded in methodology, in making. The “instructive” stories about the making of an artwork are strongly connected to the history of Conceptualism and performance art. The story about the making of a piece is, as mentioned above, crucial to the understanding of works in the conceptual and neo-conceptual tradition (as in the given example of *Flaga* by Simon Sterling, later on in

5. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 2. He refers to Phillipe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Seuil 1975, p. 45.

6. Ibid. See also Jonas J. Magnusson's objections to what he finds static and hierarchical of this concept: “(R)Ed. Est”, *OEI* No. 37 & 38 2008, p. 194.

7. A number of artists have transformed the public speaking about art to performance. Andrea Fraser made famous artist talks as performances with different communicative strategies and different adopted roles. British artist Carey Young focuses, in the filmed performance *Everything You've Heard is Wrong* (2008), on the very act of communication. Dressed in an impeccable business suit she gives a impassioned speech about successful corporate communication at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park – the symbol for free speech, although today with an aura of anachronism.

8. Paul Rotha, “Some Principles of Documentary”, in *A Paul Rotha Reader*, ed. Duncan Petrie and Robert Kruger, University of Exeter Press 1999, p. 149. The essay was originally published in 1935.

9. Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, the beginning of chapter XIV (“Of Repentance”) : <http://oregon-state.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/montaigne/montaigne-essays--4.html#XIV>, (15/3 2010).

this text) as well as process-based art of all kind. As in Fluxus art, the series of actions and makings that constitute a piece could be told as an instruction, or as a score, which was the common term among Fluxus artists. Work story here seems to be identical with the score. But a work story is a meta-narrative, a commentary track, and includes elements of post-construction. Work story is not the orbit or trajectory of the making itself, it is a storytelling activity, something under construction and only partly controlled by the artist. Out of the hands of the artist, in circulation, it starts to live its own life.

Hence a score of Yoko Ono, for instance, is on the one hand a work story in the most “archaic” form (since it simply tells about the making of an artwork) and on the other hand an utterance that outwrites a work story and makes the meta-function redundant. The Yoko Ono scores have colonized language to the point that nothing else needs to be said, and they occupy the temporal conditions: they predict, offer, announce, inform, at the same time as they have an aura of document. Paradoxically, the most humble and ethereal Fluxus piece becomes the most “total” art. Yoko Ono’s *Fly piece* (1963), consisting of one word, consolidates this: “Fly” (followed by the words “Summer 1963”).

An institutional shift has opened up for a range of discourse-staging events within the public and private art institutions (often inspired by self-organized structures and artist group’s initiatives outside the institutions): workshops, seminars, screenings, discussions, think-tanks, debates, lectures, residency programs, etc. These activities sometimes function as side events, as main attractions of the exhibitions or as “replacement” for exhibitions. They are most often public events, but not always. This institutional turn is often placed somewhere in the 1960s. With the advent of minimalism and conceptual art museums and other institutions “/.../ had to take the double process of the dematerialization of the art object on the one hand *and* the so-called expanded field of art practices on the other hand, into account.”¹⁰

In fact, many of the institutions have just recently started opening up for working processes that do not just want to pose the question “What am I doing?”, but also: “When am I doing? Where am I doing? And for whom?” (After having closed the structure by the end of the 1970s). The movement of the institutional structure towards the platform-function has enabled those artists whose work is content-driven (roughly speaking) to bring in expertise, to become involved in an interdisciplinary practice and deepen or widen the discussion of their subject-matter.

Others artists have come to work exclusively on the institutional structure itself. Institutions are here simultaneously able to incorporate institutional critique (and thus paradoxically institutionalize institutional critique). Yet other artists – Tino Seghal is a paradigmatic example – create performative works that play exclusively with the institutional structure, however not primarily as a critique, but rather as a way of

10. Simon Sheik in *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder, Binna Choi, BAK/Revolver 2008, p.187, p. 184

rethinking and re-inventing the structures and the agents acting there. Tino Seghal's work is completely dependent on oral transmission in the art world since he doesn't allow any of his performative actions to be documented.

The discourse-staging activities have become something much larger than an epitext. They must, as Simon Sheikh has pointed out, be considered a cluster that constitutes a genre in its own right. Being a panellist is consequently “/.../ almost a possible occupation, besides curatorial and academic work.”¹¹

Regarding this development we have to remember that the art world—or the art worlds—historically have been “talk-talk communities”. Many of the art historical and sociological studies of Modernism, for instance of the Surrealist and the Dada movement, make it clear how these movements evolved around the social. What is seen as a contemporary dilemma: nepotism, male social bonding, elitism, is often viewed through a filter of romanticism when it lies in the past (“The circle around Breton”, “the circle around Picasso”, and so on). But the change of institutional policies in line with the expanded field of art practices, the increasing number of events for staging discourses¹² (including artistic research) at institutions and at alternative spaces, the semiotisation of art, the increased level of theory and discussion in art education—together these factors have enhanced the social aspect of art (making) and art reception. Thus the basis for narration on art processes has become even more important. We encounter “/.../ the question of transmission and orality evoked to the reference to conversation” and also the question of “/.../ the nature of the human environment in which this transmission is produced.”¹³

Except for sketching these historical structural changes, I have no intention of analyzing the “new sociality” in art. My main interest has been the act of talking and writing about processes of art-making. With some examples from the history of conceptual art, I want to show a certain history of talking and telling about art from the artist's perspective over the last 50 years. The video essay (and the essayistic film), just like the lecture or the reading, here has the role of an event, certainly with an absent living body, but nevertheless with the imaginary, situated body of a narrator in a place.

Work story and life story

A story of *my art*, which consists of a line of *work stories*, has a lot in common with the story that you tell about your life. Both narrations share the same propagandistic

11. Ibid.

12. Unfortunately many of these events function more like group shows in theory and discourse and therefore favour the gathering of a winning team for a certain discourse than answering to keywords as “heterogeneity”, “criticality” and “conflictual positions”. Irit Rogoff writes in her essay “Turning” (*e-flux journal* No 11 2008): “And so the art world became the site of extensive talking – talking emerged as a practice, as a mode of gathering, as a way of getting access to some knowledge and to some questions, as networking and organizing and articulating some necessary questions. But did we put any value on what was actually being said? Or, did we privilege the coming-together of people in space and trust that formats and substances would emerge from these?”

13. Clementine Deliss, in *Knowledge Production*, p. 58.

and idealizing features. Disturbing/inconvenient elements are excluded: sidetracks, “unproductive” details, slips, episodes that are too odd and the elements and events threatening one’s investments in an ideology or one’s principal identity.¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur uses the term *emplotment* for the process in which stories achieve and maintain intelligibility for an individual:

/.../ an event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot. A story, too, must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the ‘thought’ of this story. In short, emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession.¹⁵

Work stories have various auras. Some seem to be mythological and other documentary, and both of them must have some verisimilitude to interest people. But work stories not only lay claim to represent reality, they also form the reality and the idea of the truth. And since work stories create imaginary works the moment they are told, they have a possibility both to stage and reenact works of art into new shapes (works that even might be materialized or performed later on by the receiver of the story).

In the case of Joseph Beuys, it is evident how the life-story or biography became a fundament for the understanding of all his diverse activities as an artist. The life story merges with the *work story*. In the often re-told mythology of his plane crash as a fighter pilot during World War II, one finds the key objects and themes reenacted in his performances and installations: felt, stretcher fat, milk, cold, death, survival, rescue, primitivism and nomadism:

Had it not been for the Tartars I would not be alive today. They were the nomads of the Crimea, in what was then no man’s land between the Russian and German fronts, and favoured neither side. I had already struck up a good relationship with them, and often wandered off to sit with them. ‘Du nix njemcky’ they would say, ‘du Tartar,’ and try to persuade me to join their clan. Their nomadic ways attracted me of course, although by that time their movements had been restricted. Yet it was they who discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had given up. I was still unconscious then and only came round completely after twelve days or so, and by then I was back in a German field hospital. So the memories I have of that time are images that penetrated my consciousness. The last thing I remember was that it was too late to jump, too late for the parachutes to open. That must have been a couple of seconds before hitting the ground. Luckily I was not strapped in – I always preferred free movement to safety belts [...] My friend was strapped in and he was atomized on impact – there was almost nothing

14. This propagandistic feature also concerns the production of texts for artists – monographs, exhibition catalogues and press releases. The texts that accompany exhibitions move from description to admiration and applause. Even though art, in its self-image, appears as self critical, questioning and open to what is complex, nothing that could be interpreted as negative or questioning towards the artist’s work and his intentions, would ever be included in these texts.

15 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 1, p. 65.

to be found of him afterwards. But I must have shot through the windscreen as it flew back at the same speed as the plane hit the ground and that saved me, though I had bad skull and jaw injuries. Then the tail flipped over and I was completely buried in the snow. That's how the Tartars found me days later. I remember voices saying "voda" (water), then the felt of their tents, and the dense pungent smell of cheese, fat and milk. They covered my body in fat to help it regenerate warmth, and wrapped it in felt as an insulator to keep warmth in.¹⁶

Tris Vonna-Michel, a contemporary storyteller in art, uses elements in his life story as starting points for longterm research and mythologization. In his audiopoems certain narrative phrases, which seem to be autobiographical, are repeated and linked together. During performances an egg clock gives a temporal frame and his voice is hectic, although the stories go in circles and after a while become objectified. As "materialized" entities these stories are given a modular character, they can be used over and over again in different combinations, and they come to exist in a peculiar state between the discursive and non-discursive.¹⁷ The obscure sound poet, printmaker, painter, filmmaker, etc, Henri Chopin was Vonna-Michel's neighbor during a short period of his upbringing in Essex. When asking his father about the reason for being an Essex-boy the father's response was: "Don't ask me – ask Henri Chopin. All you need to know is that he loved quail eggs and lived in Paris..."¹⁸ In slide shows and monologues on speakers, the audience in his installations are offered to take part in his "journey and evolution of Finding Chopin".¹⁹ In the work and life of Chopin, he comes to seek the clues for his own work and life. Tris Vonna-Michel finally meets Chopin, brings him quail eggs, but he doesn't seem to get closer to the mystery.

Another similarity between work story and life story is that the possible meaningfulness of the narrative is based on the acknowledgement of the limitations of the continuation of the narrative *and* the infinite number of entry points. If the field or material for artistic interrogation is too wide or open, the artist is terrorized by all the possibilities. At the same time, the actual material has to be as open as it allows a work or adaptation to be.²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre points out these limitations and the importance of a situated narrative in *After Virtue*:

I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I answer the prior question

16. Beuys in Caroline Tisdall: *Joseph Beuys*, Guggenheim, 1979, p.16-7.

17. Massimiliano Gioni connects Tris Vonna-Michel's work (together with artist like Keren Cytter, Luke Fowler, Patricia Esquivias and Ryan Trecartin) with what literary critic James Wood has called "Hysterical realism" – ".../ a form of narration peculiar to our time, based on an excess of storytelling and a hyperconnection between characters, stories and substories." See Massimiliano Gioni, "We Are Too Many", http://mediaspace.newmuseum.org/ytjpressmaterials/PDFS/WHAT_THE_CURATOR_ARE_SAYING/04_Gioni_Essay.pdf (12/4 2010).

18. Leaflet at his exhibition at Tensta Konsthall (10/10 2009 – 23/1 2010).

19. Ibid.

20. See Zagorka Živković, "Etik som reflektion och avgörande", *Diwan* No. 3 1991.

“Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.²¹

Mika Hannula discusses in a similar mode the concept of narration-in-life in *Politics, Identity and Public Space—Critical Reflections In and Through the Practices of Contemporary Arts*. A life story is here treated as something that is becoming a place in itself – “/.../ a place made and shaped within the structures of the social and political space of a process of an identity.”²² Life story is, according to Hannula, a strongly situated and process-based concept, always involved in “/.../ negotiating and constructing its connectedness to where it comes from, where and how it is located now and where it wants to move on.”²³ Hannula speaks about the process of negotiating these hermeneutical questions of temporality (past, present, future) between individual and society. The interpretation of this negotiation profoundly affects the choices and routes we are able to picture and try to follow, choices that are activated in the social imagination.

But according to Hannula, something is missing in MacIntyre’s concept of (or aim for) narrative unity and Ricoeur’s idea of permanence in time, which “/.../ still remains attached to the hope and goal of unified life.”²⁴ “But why unity?”, Hannula asks. Why not allow “the plurality, the messiness and the multiple stories to evolve and collide?”²⁵

The life-story is not a linear story, Hannula says. Life stories do not make sense and guarantee no goodness. “We are emotional hooligans. We want more, and we are never satisfied. We are driven by our lack of balance and our inability to slow down.”²⁶ Our life story “/.../ is about navigating and negotiating through the mundane daily cruelty and stupidity, the ways of trying to learn how to lose, how to come to terms with one’s mistakes, shattered dreams and lack of energy /.../ it is more defined by its collapses and failures rather than by its victories and pleasurable closures.”²⁷

The “propagandistic” is fundamental to the conjoining function of narration – for instance being tolerant of incongruence and interlacing of different time planes – but it is at the same time also its “neurotic element.” The life story (as well as the work story) struggles to keep the self (the body of work) together and make it meaningful; Montaigne, on the other hand, deconstructs the ego into a manifold of possibilities (“I am then another self”). But actually, as Mika Hannula says, the individual’s struggle to

21. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press 1984, p. 216.

22. Mika Hannula, *Politics, Identity and Public Space – Critical Reflections In and Through the Practices of Contemporary Arts*, Expothesis, Utrecht Consortium 2009, p. 69.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

24. *Ibid.* p. 74.

25. *Ibid.* p. 75.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

keep the egological narrative together most often takes place in a more disadvantageous position. The mythomaniac not only invents an impressive arsenal of armor, weapons, and divertive maneuvers to maintain the coherence²⁸ of a narration-in-life, for example to blame fictive versions of the self by claiming that they have acted independently (the use of the ventriloquist's puppet, a character in a blog or in a novel). Some people who sense the approaching loss, change their strategy and split openly, i.e. become schizophrenics or constitute multiple personalities. MacIntyre says: "When someone complains – as do some of them who attempt or commit suicide – that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any points, any moments towards a climax or a *telos*."²⁹

On the other hand, for those who manage to keep the responsibility of the different egos, there are new structures of meaning to be developed from a polyphonic story of the self (and their body of work), a story in constant revision. American writer Lyn Hejinian wrote the first version of her autobiography *My Life* (1987) at thirty-seven. It consisted of thirty-seven texts, each of them with thirty-seven sentences. By the ages of forty-five and sixty-five she wrote new versions with chapters and sentences according to her age. Her biography and the mediating of a self became an ongoing project, a work in progress.³⁰

For many others, the models of life stories seem magnificently demanding. But it doesn't mean that they are meaningless or impossible. Hannula proposes that we are cherishing the procedural character of the activity and thereby somehow realizing that the life-story is performed in "/.../ the grey area of where things can become a place /.../" – the third space. It is important that we allow our self to see the incompleteness in the aim of achieving completeness. We can do so if we "/.../ find ways to stay closer and to stay put with the details of those small gestures within the daily life."³¹ We need to get closer to our practice and we need to "/.../ emphasize the necessity of defining the content of these aims and concepts in and through your daily experiences and the practice of what do you do when you do what you do."³²

28. Mika Hannula speaks about the classical criteria for an utterance's validity: 1) coherence and dissonance; 2) truthfulness; 3) ethical and existential commitment; 4) open and creative strategy; 5) authenticity. To these criteria one can add Maeve Cook's metaphor of self-authorship as ethical activity: tentatively *responsible* and *accountable*, *independent*, *purposive-rational* and as a *strong evaluator*. "All this is enough to make any of us dizzy." Hannula says. "These are requirements that clearly nobody can fulfill, which any of us can only hope to have a slight chance to approach – and hope that something get transmitted and pushed forward." Ibid. pp. 82–84.

29. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 217.

30. Furthermore a reader created a blog where her text is fragmented and distributed as daily notes in a diary starting 31/8 2003 (<http://mylifebylynhejinian.blogspot.com>, 10/8 2009). Lyn Hejinian, *Mitt liv*, Modernista 2004.

31. Hannula, Politics, Identity and Public Space – *Critical Reflections In and Through the Practices of Contemporary Arts*, p.88

32 Ibid.. p. 89.

The dissemination of a life story and a work story is a sharing process that is directed not only to different more or less defined audiences but also back to the one telling the story. Work stories in combination with life stories are active in the context of artistic research and practice-based research since the sharing of and aim to create a transparency with the work process involve our biographies at the same time that it forces us to undergo an act of self-alienation – to look at oneself as another.

Work story and post-construction

In the ontology of narratives lies the retrospective character, even though we are always already part of stories, as McIntyre claims. The mediation of a story takes place afterwards, after the events are retold. It is a reconstruction, or rather *post-construction*. In Swedish art school, the word *efterkonstruktion* [post-construction] was previously used as an accusation of adding values and ideas to a finished artwork (“when it is already too late”). But post-construction is an artistic method and a natural part of artistic practice, from my point of view. In other words, post-construction is nothing to be ashamed of (as many artists are) but should be regarded as belonging to the domain of afterthought and as a fundamental part of the self-observation and reflection on one’s own practice. As mentioned above, it is a process that also includes self-alienation, a capacity to see oneself as someone else. In everyday life, such reconstructions are considered a form of prudence: an ability to draw conclusions from, and find a way in one’s own life, thus giving it an ethical dimension. This does not mean that post-construction is not a matter of manipulation. To tell work stories and life stories means to adjust, to remedy and “put right” – in other words to be involved in the process of post-construction. Paul Ricoeur writes in *Oneself as Another*:

/.../ we never stop rectifying our initial choices. Sometimes we change them entirely, when the confrontation shifts from the level of the execution of practices that have already been chosen to the question of the adequation between the choices of practice and our life’s ideals, however vague these may be, and yet at times even overriding the rules of a profession we have considered up to that moment to be invariable.³³

Within the procedural and relational nature of post-construction as a storytelling activity lies the narrative’s function to direct social actions and, as in the case of art making, activities are given certain directions. Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson have, in a similar way to Paul Ricoeur, theorized the term “narrative identity.” Narrative is an ontological condition of social life, they say, and discuss how the narratives form our identity but also how this forming is made in the line with existing narratives:

Stories guide action /.../ people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories: that “experience” is constituted through narratives; that people make sense

33 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, The University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 178.

of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available, social, public and cultural narratives.³⁴

Ricoeur's text points to the collectiveness of post-construction. But the collective process is fully at work even with an absent subject. One example of this is how narratives are often formed into "idealistic" directions by the forces and needs of the art market or art-ideological investments. Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi and Frances Richard show in *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*,³⁵ how rumors, hearsay and wishful thinking retrospectively re-configured the intentions of Gordon Matta-Clark, and finally, most probably from the pressure of the market, created a series of work as sellable artifacts. Kastner, Najafi and Richard researched the work story of *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (one of several circulating titles of the work) and realized that this work came to enter the canonical art history after a trajectory of ".../ numerous informational contingencies and gaps /.../ scholarly and economic pressures /.../" as well as distortion ".../ by mythmaking and hearsay".³⁶

Gordon Matta-Clark purchased fourteen small bits of land in Queens and one on Staten Island in 1973 and then moved on to other projects. This was a period of decline of New York and the bankrupt city wanted to get rid of land, including inaccessible and unusable lots, and sold them on property auctions. The price range for the parcels Matta-Clark bought was 25–75 dollars. Some loose photographs, deeds, maps and related material were after his death (1978) found in a cardboard box as a memory of his ownership (tax payments on the lots had fallen into arrears long time ago and ownership had reverted to the city). For a retrospective show in Valencia, Spain 1992, his widow Jane Crawford was encouraged to make a series of collages of the found material. By the mid-nineties these entered the art market as "posthumously assembled works" by Gordon Matta-Clark.

When interviewing Crawford and friends about Matta-Clark's reasons, intentions and plans for the purchased lots, Kastner, Najafi and Richard realize the degree of post-construction of the series of works that now can be found in important museums and private collections. *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* was somehow the perfect Gordon Matta-Clark work that he never did, but with help of the machinery of the art world it came to existence.

The space for improvisation and creative history writing was established already in

34. Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, "Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other': Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity" in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. C. Calhoun Blackwell Publishers 1994, pp. 38–39.

35. Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi and Frances Richard, *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*, Cabinet Books 2005.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the fruitful chaos of the SoHo art scene in the early 1970s, where artists had two-hours exhibitions in their studios and constantly worked together and shared thoughts and ideas. I presume this was the sort of culture in which art is created in conversations, a place similar to that which Michel de Certeau speaks about, a place with “/.../ verbal productions in which the interlacing of speaking positions weaves an oral fabric without individual owners, creations of a communication that belongs to no one.”³⁷

Matta-Clark's widow Jane Crawford recalls: “Well, people were always around and things circulated, usually with a new story and title each time.”³⁸ And a friend, Jene Highstein, describes Matta-Clark's mode of talking and acting in this environment: “If he couldn't talk about it and play around with language in defining it, then it didn't proceed very far.”³⁹

He knew a lot more about art history than most of us. That was his upbringing. And not just art history, but the workings of the art world: how things get translated, how information moves around. His father was a great storyteller, and Gordon was a great storyteller. One of the things about being an artist is that you have to be a storyteller. He had mastered that at an early age. He knew, which is something that the rest of us didn't know so well – although a lot of us were very good storytellers – he understood what that function was for an artist. The mythmaking that an artist does is a very important part of the artist's career. What's left of an artist when he goes mostly is the myth.⁴⁰

Reality Properties: Fake Estates have ended up in private and public collections. Guggenheim Museum bought one version (*Reality Properties: Fake Estates – Little Alley Block 2479, Lot 42*) dated 1974. Already in the mid 1990s these works were sold in galleries for 20 000–30 000 dollars. But it is still unclear if Gordon Matta-Clark ever decided to make the work and he was definitely not responsible for the titles that have circulated. One may say that he created this work by talking about it (there are witnesses and records of that) and that the elements of the work so well fit within his body of work – dealing with site and non-site, left-over spaces as well as with ownership, use-values and inaccessibility. But the ratification process of his diverse and hectic activities into the status of canonized art must be seen as an example of a transformation from an ontological narrative to a conceptual narrative, to use narratological terms. The work that now exists with the title *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* has been collectively produced, one could say, even though the classical notion of the single authorship of Gordon Matta-Clark still dominates the institutional and commercial frameworks.

Perhaps one may object to my narratological perspective on art processes and insist that a great part of the works presented in exhibitions rarely contain narrative elements

37. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press 1988, xxii.

38. Kastner, Najafi, Richard, p. 53.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

and is not born out of any storytelling tradition whatsoever (on any of the three levels I discussed earlier). Many works in museums, for instance from the minimalist tradition, look like physical statements, pure materiality, something unmediated existing in space, yet affecting our senses. One could perhaps claim that many works are alternatives or countermoves to narratives. And maybe an artist just “does his/her thing” and then refuses to comment on it. Not all artists are into language games as Gordon Matta-Clark was, some may even harbor a deep hatred towards any statement and narrative relating to the artwork. Such an attitude is not uncommon. But such artists seldom hesitate to offer their media description (although many media descriptions go much further than “oil on canvas”),⁴¹ they hardly ever complain about all the texts about their work of art which are written by others (critics, writers, colleagues), nor do they resist the *epitext*: titles, press releases, interviews, etc. Under normal circumstances, these artists do not object to passing over biographic accounts which connect the work to the artist’s life and œuvre, inscribing it in a chronology where the parts are viewed as results in a course of evolution, nor do these artists object to the oral accounts and rumors that surround the work and become an extension of its physical or virtual existence. These artists have just passed on the narration to others. And also, from a more general view, if we follow Somers and Gibson: their activities and “experience” must be considered constituted through narratives.

When works of art, for different reasons, get media attention the work story often becomes a contested and sometimes crucial issue. The work story is sometimes scrutinized in ethical committees and courts, when a sequence of the making or performing infringes on the law or is ethically disputable. Depending on the agent of the story, it may have totally different structure, accent and tone which gives it different direction and destination, ethically and legally.⁴² The structuring of the narrative elements, the relation between the plot and the *fabula*, the inclusion and exclusion, becomes crucial and will determine its supposed purpose and thereby its ethics. Media stories of works of art that are seen as provocative often fall into preconceived patterns. They are often transmitted from media to media, overtaken and repeated by journalists, and, as hermetically self-referential, they begin to live a completely life of its own, loosing the connections to the event that started the media discourse. These stories become the source on which debaters and analysts build their arguments, without at any instance questioning the validity of the story or the interests behind it (for instance the ideological and political investments). The same

41. Beside a sculptural work by Petah Coyne (at ARS-06, Kiasma) one can read the following text: “Untitled #1111 (Little Ed’s Daughter Margaret), 2003-2004, specially formulated wax, fiberglass cast statuary, velvet, satin, ribbon, thread, steel understructure, PVC pipe and fittings, tree branches, fabricated tree branches, chicken wire fencing, wire, silk flowers, pearl-headed hat pins, tassles, feathers, pumps, irrigation tubing, water, black spray paint, black acrylic paint”

42. In the few Swedish court cases of artists prosecuted for their works of art the purpose of action is highly considered.

stories might be used by populist politicians who use the occasion to build alliances with “the people” in order to find scapegoats or to direct general hatred towards culture in times of political and financial regression. No matter how vulgar, simplified or false these work stories may appear from the perspective of the artist who “committed” the work, an established work story in the media (an “abducted” or “hijacked” work story) is almost impossible to adjust or correct.⁴³

Yet another artist would deliberately use media reactions to build the narrative of the work. Intentionally or not – every new reaction from the media becomes an added element in the plot of the work story. The major meaning of making, is here displaced from the act of producing a representation or event, to the making in terms of collaborating with, acting in front and informing the public media.

There will probably always be someone deducting or extracting the work story from an artwork. The questions of the work story remain (and most of them are not answered in this text): What are the means and purposes for the construction of this narrative? What words and rhetoric are in use? To what extent is it the artist’s story or someone else’s? What are the reasons for inclusion and exclusion of elements in the work story? Can mythical elements be distinguished from truth? And how do these narratives relate, adjust to and integrate with the available, social, public and cultural narratives: the grand

43 As a professor at the art department of Konstfack (University College of Arts, Crafts & Design) in Stockholm I took part of the debate in media about one of our student’s examination works during the spring of 2009. This debate became one of the most intensive and widespread debates on the role of visual art in Sweden ever. On the 21st of January that year the student Anna Odell simulated a mentally ill person on a bridge in Stockholm. Police was called by two passer-bys and she was taken to the emergency psychiatric unit of St. Görans hospital in Stockholm, where she was admitted, put on medication, and placed in a restraining belt. The following day she told the staff at the clinic that she had simulated the event and that all was a part of an ongoing art project that she planned to present at the graduation show at Konstfack during the spring. Someone from the hospital contacted the media shortly after and a debate of unique magnitude broke out. We teachers knew that the performance at the bridge was not meant as a performance in its own right, but rather a method of research, which she after serious consideration found out to be the only way to enter the hospital from the position of a vulnerable patient. The performance was in fact a reenactment of an incident thirteen years prior when she was taken to the same clinic in a psychotic state. From the perspective of the work story, the media alarm 2009 was highly problematic. The work was not finished, she was in the middle of the process. She had filmed the event at the bridge with the help of two fellow students and she had tape-recorded the conversation at the hospital during the moment she revealed the nature of her behavior. Journalists from all media demanded an explanation of this “scandalous” incident. But neither Anna Odell, nor any of us in the teaching staff – which were well informed about her plans – wanted to give the media any details. We said: “Wait until the work is exhibited.” The only work story in circulation was a story about an art student mimicking a suicide at the bridge, being taken care of by the police under violent kicking, and, when entering the hospital, spitting and swearing on the nurses. The tone of the media story indicated that the “spectacle” was driven by narcissism or for the sake of fun. Each of the contents in the story where sensitive: art, psychiatry and tax money (since this was an examination work at an art school), together they turned out to be explosive. A wave of hatred was directed towards the school. During this phase intellectuals, debaters and bloggers built their opinion solely on the story that originated from the hospital and most of them condemned the school and the student. During a frustrating process, we defended our student in the media, at the same time as we expressed our understanding for the reactions of the nurses involved at the hospital who felt fooled and ridiculed in their duty. >

narratives, the meta-narratives and the dominating ideologies and forces of the art world and the society as whole?

In the practical work of my artistic research, I focused on two questions: if it is possible to work with an extended, essayistic work story. And if the video essay as genre activates some of the reflexive and critical possibilities of a work story, at the same time as it stages a storytelling situation.

> When the work was shown at Konstfack in May (with the title *Okänd kvinna* [Unnamed woman]) the media interest was at its peak. Anna Odell had to be accompanied by hired bodyguards 24 hour a day during the days of opening due to anonymous threats against her. Now she gave long interviews in all media. Her reasons and own version of the actions and events were revealed in the *epitext* as well as the *pretext*. The work was a three part installation: the first room showing her research, i.e. interviews with a psychiatrist, a lawyer and the head of a psychiatric clinic, the second room showing the video documentation of the quite brutal actions of the police taking her into custody, and the third room with the sound of the conversation at the hospital. The installation, together with her interviews radically changed the work story. The audience now understood that the acting out was a reenactment of her own history and a part of an investigation of the role of the patient in psychiatry. Several debates followed with different focus points: one as a critique of psychiatry, about the role of the artist ("is this art?"), and about the legal aspects of her work. But still the first media story continued to be the ground story. Not until Anna Odell was prosecuted could the more fact-based work story be told and get full attention. In the courtroom, in front of the law and under oath, the policemen and the employees at the hospital had to correct the story about her violent behavior. She had not spilt on anyone or hurt anyone. In front of the law she was allotted a generous amount of time and tremendous attention from everyone, including the media (the trial was broadcasted directly on the national radio) when delivering the work story. Outside the courtroom, a group of relatives of mentally ill patients demonstrated in favor of her cause. Anna Odell was convicted on two of three points: violent resistance [våldsamt motstånd] and "fraudulent procedure" [oredligt förfarande] – a sentence that was considered historic and caused a lot of arguments in media (and gained very little support in the established media). Several journalists declared openly in articles that they had changed their opinion after learning about the background and seeing the work. And the events in the courtroom became an integrated part of her work, represented in the following versions of her installation. (Two of my own articles during the debate: Magnus Bårtås, "Laganda", Expressen, 1/6 2009 and Magnus Bårtås, "Ur fas med folket", Expressen 10/3 2009 (<http://www.expressen.se/kultur/1.1590001/laganda>, <http://www.expressen.se/kultur/1.1492869/ur-fas-med-folket>, 20/3 2010))



The dialectics of the art text

Bart Geerts

Maybe that's what writing
is all about, Sid. Not
recording events from the
past, but making things
happen in the future.

Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*,
2004:189

Abstract

In "From Work to Text" Roland Barthes develops a rather challenging view on the status of the literary text. His final statement "The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing." is central to this paper. I will examine the importance and relevance of writing for practice-based research based on my own ongoing experience. A close reading of Barthes' article will lead me to propose the notion of an art text which functions as a discursive counterpart to the actual work of art. In order to show how fictional strategies can serve as a fertile methodological basis for artistic research and writing, three influential works of literature will be briefly explored. The spatial dimensions of these works and the disruptive reading patterns they provoke, give a clear outline of how an art text could interact with the work of art, and how it could discursively open up that work of art to critical readers.

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Preliminary observations

When I embarked on my practice-based PhD, the question of how to go about writing a dissertation was not my main concern. I was more engaged in thinking about the notion of artistic research and the kind of knowledge that it could, or was supposed to produce. Probably because the ontological research problem is a tricky and sticky one to solve, I didn't bother to think about writing a text. I had already completed a Master's thesis