

## Working on the partial art of writing

Ylva Gislén

### Everyday poetics:

Scribbles and sketches on graph paper. Drawings and barely readable words on the back of receipts and to-do-lists, found again in the middle of a book read long ago, or amongst keys and coins in an unbelievably messy handbag. Key words on post-it-notes, multicoloured. The complex mapping of thoughts on the wall, or a serendipitous collection between pages and under book covers...

quotes, why them, not others?

assorted reminders

drawings

clippings

postcards of too expensive paintings

a mysterious piece of a newspaper article

advanced hermeneutics of the open-ended plots, the multilayered narratives

### Critique

For several years I taught a course in 'critique' for design students, the idea being that designers' work would benefit from learning to express judgement on the works of others (and articulate the arguments behind it), situating and discussing it in relation to a larger cultural context. The course became an exploration of the tacitly of descriptions, the materiality of values, the hard labour needed in making oneself understood across the paper. One of the more productive (and perhaps frightening) prospects of the crafting of artistic knowledge through writing, is the furthering of an internal articulation of arguments and judgements. A possible empowerment. And as always: possible risks, possible losses.

### Scenarios

Usually useful but boring, illustrative, descriptions of persons going to the office, using a range of mobile services, no surprises.<sup>1</sup> But then instead: scenarios coming to life, inventing themselves through fictive eyes borrowed from non-existing persona. People refusing to behave as expected, pointing to unforeseen needs and wants, or to the non-existence of those presumed. Seeds of short stories or multiperspective

1. Scenarios and personas are well-established design methods, see [http://www.design-cruX.net/firms.com/designex\\_storyboard.html](http://www.design-cruX.net/firms.com/designex_storyboard.html) and <http://ldt.stanford.edu/~gimiller/Scenario-Based/scenarioIndex2.htm> for examples and explanations of use.

novels, feeding design with empathy and contradictions. The amazing force of tales weaving themselves, to let them happen.

### Attempts on her text

Armed with analytical tools, and many years of experience in writing, the dissertation still proved to be a harsh, faceless enemy, always threatening to shape my voice into a non-recognisable part of it's strange choir pretending to be a historical continuum.

"*It's moving*" Like a monster invented by no one and all, swallowing places, situations, and bodies in its hunger for a timeless space, a spaceless time.

"*It's timely*." Oh no.

"*It's distressing*." yes, yes, yes.

"*It's funny*" Sometimes, often involuntarily.

"*It's sick*." Should we diagnose it?

"*It's sexy*." In your dreams!

"*It's deeply serious*." Well, not really...<sup>2</sup>

### "What comes to my feet during walking"<sup>3</sup>

For many years a Claire Brétecher cartoon has been hanging on the wall over my desk in different places, named *to create*. In a series of drawings a woman walks, wobbles on her chair, cleans a cup, walks again, plays with a pencil, sweeps the floor, brings another cup of coffee, in between maybe three of four images of her actually producing something tangible. Writing craves movement, handiwork and sometimes long walks. Thinking spaces towards, and before diving into the flow of words. Making continuous explorations of the to and throughs, the in between.

### Let sight be troubled by your eye<sup>4</sup>

Feminist philosophers of science point to the necessity of situating knowledge production, anchoring knowledge to bodies, situations, context and traditions, sometimes also suggesting linguistic strategies for creating, such as embodiedness in the academic text corrupted by its absence. Sharon Traweek's account on ethnographic field work among Japanese particle physicists is clear and simple in its way of showing

2. The quoted lines in italic are from Martin Crimps play *Attempts on her life. 17 scenarios for the theatre* (first performed at the Royal Court in 1997).
3. This beautiful line is a translation of a typical quote in Swedish of Harald Stjerne, professor in film writing and directing (and a gifted walker) at Dramatiska institutet.
4. Allusion to both August Strindbergs *Dreamplay* where the author lets Indra's Daughter exclaim "I feel my sight weakened by an eye" when earth bound, and to Donna Haraway's discussion on vision and notions of objectivity in the chapter "Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" in her book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. London, Free Association Books, 1991, pp183-201

how the body could be kept intact, *or* how it could be withdrawn, making the knower invisible. Finally it might not be about being subjective or personal, not even necessarily about messing with the form that much, just about being there, taking responsibility for your vision and understanding.<sup>5</sup>

### Taking notes

The simple fact of making participants in a discussion carefully take notes when listening to someone talking, and then reading them again, proves a simple and effective way of slowing down judgement, complicating and clarifying thought.<sup>6</sup> The huge leap in thinking styles between oral and writing culture is still there and worth exploring from time to time: the creative forces of our memory at work when listening and remembering, versus the complex web of associations spun in reworking the understandings in the moment caught by the notes. Writing as careful listening.<sup>7</sup>

### A plea for essays

Reading Siri Hustvedts collection of essays in *A Plea for Eros*. First person explorations, autobiographical and sociological comments on themes and motives explored in her novels, and on others, just touched upon in her stories. Ease of mind, ease of style. Like the essays of Virginia Woolf, for example, writings that enrich the experience of reading the fictions. But also writing for its own sake, joyous wanderings with the reader.<sup>8</sup>

### Aphorisms and anecdotes

As a supervisor, just watching where all those pieces of text want to go, Maria Granhagen's Masters' thesis in acting became a collection of aphorisms and anecdotes. Wit and wordplay. And it all made sense. An empowering look at, and reconstruction

5. Sharon Traweek, "Bodies of evidence: Law and order, sexy machines, and the erotics of filedwork among physicists" in Susan Foster (ed) *Choreographing History*, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp 211-225
6. I owe the observation of the actual radicality of taking notes in an otherwise mainly oral culture like for example the theatre to Kent Sjöström, researcher and teacher at the Theatre Academy in Malmö.
7. The most often referred to discussion of the difference between oral and written culture is found in Ong, Walter J, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London & New York, Routledge, 1982, see also Finnegan, Ruth, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1988, for a further discussion on and questioning of these differences
8. Siri Hustvedt, *A Plea for Eros*, 2006

of, the House of Lore she had become a part of during her training.<sup>9</sup> Hippocrates once founded the discipline of medicine with the help of aphorisms, remember?

### Annotated rooms

A whole room covered with paper. Barbro Smeds walking and talking about it, in her slow and gentle improvising manner. People's names, concepts, ideas, circles, and contours of bodies and movements on the floor: all drawn with big letters and lines, different colours. The space getting crowded by shared experience, a collective placeholder of thoughts, memory, analysis<sup>10</sup>

### Pictures at play

The academic genre is already full of pictures and representations apart from the ones appearing metaphorically in and between the lines of words. From ethnographic snapshots over maps, and graphs to morphological drawings. From abstract circles and squares representing concepts and models, to the assumed realism of a blurred photograph. But when the author is waving at the reader from the bottom of the first page in Otto von Busch's dissertation *Fashion-able: Hacktivism and Engaged Fashion Design*<sup>11</sup> something else is happening. Suddenly the pictures and the sentences start waving and talking to each other in slightly new ways all through the book. Maybe it's all about a new humour and seriousness, visually trained artist bringing the awareness of the possibilities and problematics of representation to a new genre?

### Being edgy

My ears suddenly wore out of the concept of reflection. Is this it? The possibility of writing, in artistic research, reduced to artists 'reflecting' upon his or her own work? The choreographer Rasmus Ölme put the question eloquently when asking "Am I researching my own choreography or am I not rather researching choreography through my artistic work?" Rhetorically comparing himself to an ethnographer,

9. Granhagen, Maria, *Picknick på scenfältet eller Vad är det frågan om?* Master work at the Theatre Academy in Malmö, Lund university, 2006, The reference to a practitioner's knowledge as a House of Lore is developed by North, Stephen M in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, Boynton/Cook, Portsmouth, 1987
10. Barbro Smeds is a dramatist and professor in the development of artistic knowledge at the Dramatiska institutet, University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre. For photos and accounts from one of her workshops, with an early exploration of an annotated room, see Elkjaer, Lisbeth (ed) *Re.Searching. Om praksisbaseret forskning i scenekunst*. Nordscen, Köpenhamn, 2005
11. Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Design at the School of Design and Crafts (HDK), Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg, published 2008.

where the ethnographic field work is a way of investigating certain aspects of the world, not the research area in itself.<sup>12</sup> How then to put writing to use, as part of artistic investigation and knowledge production?

Donna Haraway points out that the optical metaphors of reflection evokes a mirroring of the subject of knowledge to the object of knowledge. She suggests the concept of *diffraction*, the process by which a beam of light is spread out as a result of crossing an edge or passing an aperture (often creating interference patterns between the waves produced) as a potentially more productive optical metaphor for knowledge production. Creating knowledge is always about highlighting some things and not others, about interfering with the world.<sup>13</sup> Diffraction as a metaphor points to the action of spreading light, to intentions, to foreseen and unforeseen consequences of that action. Writing on the edge.

### Circulating references

In a text on cross-disciplinary field work in the Amazon, the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour, explores the notion of "reference", contradicting the common notion that scientific texts and facts make more 'direct' reference to the world than other text and facts. Through the description of geologists' and biologists' work he shows the meticulous work involved in creating a series of matters, forms and representations, together forming what he calls "circulating references" between the final conference article and the world. And he stresses that the many series and steps involved do not make the distance farther between the world and the word, rather it ties them more and more closely to each other, enabling us (when the web is well spun), to move back and forth between grains of soil and syntactic matter.<sup>14</sup> This idea of 'circulating reference' applied to the different processes and forms of artistic work, and a continuum to the writings and rewritings that might or might not take place in artistic research, makes much more sense to me than concepts such as 'documentation' and 'reflection' often attached to writing. Knitting the word and the world together in new ways has always been harder work than that.

12. Rasmus Ölme is currently a PhD student in coreography at the University of Dance and Circus in Stockholm, the quote from a conversation during the Colloquium on Artistic Research in the Performing Arts in Helsinki 19-21/11 2009
13. Haraway, Donna, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse... Feminism and TechnoScience*, Routledge 1997, p 16.
14. The discussion can be found in the chapter "Circulating reference. Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest." in Latour, Bruno (1999) *Pandora's hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, pp 24-79

### Missing references

Among Deleuze and Guattaris tags or the Foucault cuts to the artist's newly tailored academic suits, something tends to go missing. Artistic references, crafts and knowledges, the chains of transferred altered negated strokes and chords, colours and concepts, stances and approaches over centuries and across borders, how are they articulated? Artists come to the academic writing party with depths and widths of already existing knowledges, that for several reasons seems to be left in the dissertation wardrobe. Don't they fit the footnotes? Well the footnote was once upon a time a useful invention to pattern knowledge structures, time to embroider new ones?

### Paradise lost?

As if artists haven't been there before? When we could be following the Blake-snakes and be eating the apples from centuries of books and drama, novels and novelties, literary inventions and investigations, meters and metaphors, experimental essays and intelligent tales.

### Syntactic(s) matter

Piles of paper. Notes to think with. Ink on finger tips. The joy of handwriting. Frustration and creative leaps in interpreting the results. Blanks. Messing with words and sentences. Aching shoulders and tired thumbs. Impossible meanings and surprising narratives. Stretching legs. Exclamation marks. Shuffling the paragraphs. Deleting the nonsense. Breathing. Hopefully making sense.