

Pre-study #1 SARAH'S Director



First presented: 11.9.2020

CIRCUMSTANCE / FACT SHEET / #1

Place: Online (Karlsruhe, Germany & Tversted, Denmark)
Time: 4 weeks in June & July 2020
Collaborator: Sarah Sandeh (actress)
Materials: "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams (1947)
"Dogville Confessions" by Sami Saif (2003)
DCTP Alexander Kluge's work for television (since 1987)

SCORE

Given and imagined circumstances. (The set-up)

Today, on the 2nd of June 2020, my collaborator Sarah Sandeh and I start the first practical study of my research project.

It's a fictional rehearsal of which only the documentation will be available.

The documentation consists of daily video diary entries by my collaborator and me, assuming the roles of "actress" and "director" in alignment with our actual professions.

The format of the diary entries is loosely connected to the format of a Roman Catholic confession booth and the way it has been appropriated for the "making of" of Lars von Trier's "Dogville".

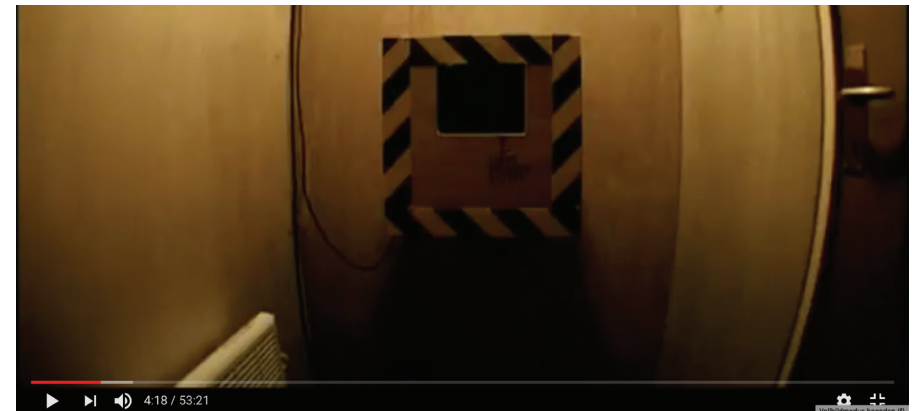
In the fiction, Sarah and I enter the booth one after the other at the end of each rehearsal day.

In the fiction, our video entries are thus private to ourselves, while in reality we have an online workflow allowing us to see each other's daily "confessions".

While our backgrounds are made to look like the same booth, in reality, we are recording in two different locations (north of Denmark, south of Germany). The program we are using to record is the photo-booth app on our computers.

The fictional world outside of the booth is a hybrid of theatre and film production circumstances. We imagine the text we are working on to be produced in a setting similar to the one of Lars von Trier's "Dogville" and "Manderlay"; that is to say: a Brechtian, anti-illusionist approach to set-design in combination with acting techniques from the tradition of realism.

The text we are working on is Tennessee William's "A Streetcar Named Desire" from 1947.



While the imagined circumstance is a filmization of the play, the process being documented is the one of a four-week rehearsal. Here, we are borrowing from a luxurious convention of old day's Hollywood movie making, where the script was rehearsed extensively before the film was shot.

Caption: Screenshot of the inside and outside of the booth in the work of Danish documentary film maker Sami Saif: "Dogville Confessions", 2003

My collaborator Sarah is casted for the part of the protagonist Blanche (which, in the world of "Dogville" and "Manderlay" would be: Grace.)

If the diary entries make it necessary to mention fictional colleagues, we use the first names of the cast of Elia Kazan's film adaptation of the play from 1951.

Stella - Kim
Mitch - Karl
Steve - Rudy

Pablo - Nick
Eunice - Peg
Stanley - Marlon

The actor of the Young Collector is called Martin.

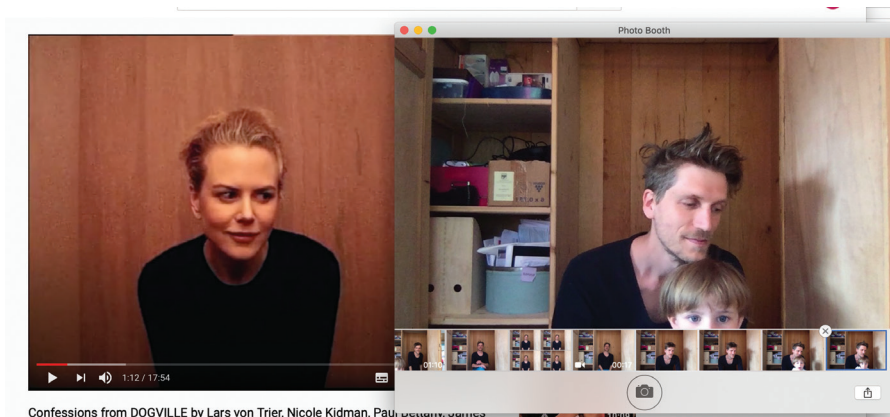
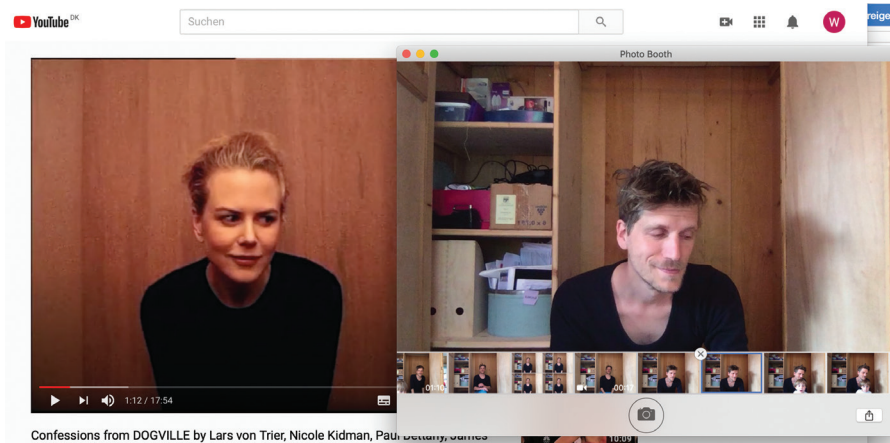
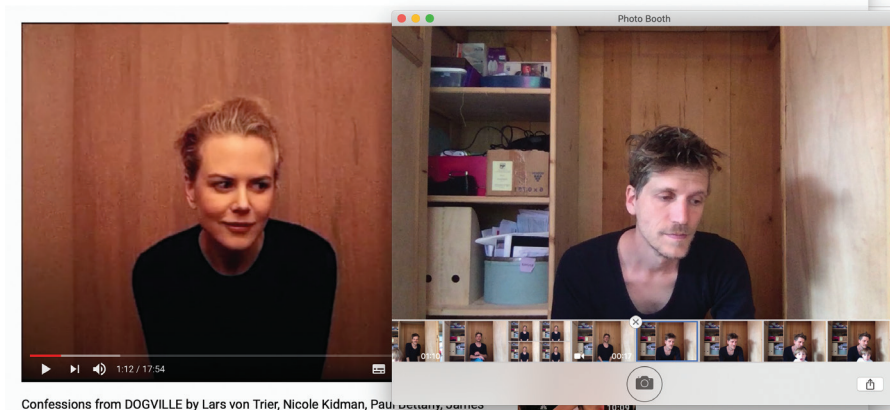
INDEXICAL TRACES/ RELATIONAL ARTEFACTS

Protocol 13.5.20 - Zoom Conversation Johannes/Sarah

- * We've agreed on a timeframe: 1.6.-1.7.
- * We allocate around 3 hours a day for making a video diary entry.
- * Sarah agreed to an hourly wage according to Level 3, following the prefect's recommendation.
- * We'll be making entries daily, except the weekends.
- * The working language will be English.
- * Johannes gives Sarah access to the Research Catalogue page, where the videos will be uploaded.
- * Johannes sets the conceptual frame. He adjusts it as necessary.
- * We're 'rehearsing' "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams. Sarah has the role of Blanche DuBois.
- * The first entry to the diary is already made by Johannes and available on the research catalogue. It will not be part of the final documentation, but only be used as a starting point for Sarah's "response".

Conceptually:

- * Sarah will always identify / respond from the position of the "actress"; age and identity will vary.
- * We're looking for dilemmas. That is to say, situations where both "the director" and "the actress" is right.
- * We're both "combing" through past situations from our professional lives to find these dilemmas.
- * As makers, we will watch each other's diary entries daily. But the "director" and the "actress" in the box will not "know" of the other's "confession", whereas the makers have the overview.



Try-outs for the booth.
(Pandemic times)

To be figured out:

- * Daily workflow
- * Should there be a "Rehearsal Plan"? What scene what day ?
- * Fictional setting (Johannes defines the situation of rehearsals)
- * Informed consent form (possibility to drop out?)
- * Set design
- * Acknowledgements; Sarah co-author or participant; to be figured with uniarts
- * Feedback during the study? How is the professional contact between S. and J. formalized ?

Informed Consent

For Sarah Sandeh,

hereafter: Collaborator

The Informed Consent - an interesting document on the tipping point between formality and the very content of the research; halfway between the actual work contract and a possible symbolic one.

Aim of PhD-project

The overall aim of the research is to examine the professional relation between actor and director in the performing arts; the project looks into alternative models of consent between those two agents by focussing on the mutual transgressions that shape the process.

Aim of practical study & Method

The overall aim of the specific study is to generate material by which the professional relation between actor and director can be analyzed. The PhD-candidate (Johannes Maria Schmit) and the collaborator (Sarah Sandeh) therefore engage in a fictional rehearsal process, using a format of video documentation as to render this relation visible.

In this set-up the PhD-candidate takes the role of „the director“ and the collaborator the role of the „actor“.

Responsible

The PhD-candidate sets the conceptual frame and adjusts it during the process, if necessary. He is the overall responsible for the study.

The PhD-Candidate also decides how to further use the generated material in the research project. Whether in transcription, as an edited video or the likes.

Risk information

The PhD-candidate has given the collaborator a clear picture of the framework and offered her the chance to ask critical questions about it; as well as to make adjustments before the start of the study.

Possible risks and benefits have been discussed and awareness has been raised on the side of the collaborator around the levels of access and availability to the documentation, that differ from regular artistic productions; the material generated will stay publically available for a very long time and cannot be altered after the publication of the PhD.

It will also not be anonymized.

Voluntariness

The Collaborator has the right to withdraw her consent at any time and with immediate effect. No reason needs to be provided when leaving the study. Any material produced already may, however, still be used in the research.

Publication

The project does not deliberately ask for sensitive personal information (such as for example political or religious convictions, health issues, ethnicity etc.), but if such comes up in the artistic process it will be part of the documentation.

The documentation will be stored according to the procedures by which SKH (Stockholm University of the Arts) follow the GDPR rules (EU General Data Protection Regulation). That is during the whole process of the PhD project.

The study will be presented in relation to the PhD-project in academic and research contexts.

In case it should be presented in other contexts – during or after the PhD-project is over – a new consent has to be obtained from the collaborator.

Those parts of the documentation that are included in the presentation/exposition of the project will appear among other things on the Research Catalogue, and DiVA (swedish research database).

The parts of the research that the PhD-candidate choses to present will be publically accessible and stored for long time.

Acknowledgment

In all publications the Collaborator will be acknowledged by her name and her function.



Sarah and Johannes in the fictional booth; with the video diary entry to the right presenting an indirect response to the proposition on the left. In the course and in the interest of the study, we reduce our private communication to one weekly phone date on Sundays. Interpersonal irritations are, if possible, not discussed, but processed in and through the work.

I've tried something today. Something that I don't do, usually. And that is that I tried to work with my mood. That is the mood I was in, when coming to the rehearsals. And that mood was very much based on my state of health. I've been feverish yesterday, so we couldn't rehearse. For the longest time of the day I was lying in bed, in some kind of delirium, dreaming of rehearsals of course, mostly. And what I did today was to start the rehearsals by telling a long dream I had had. There was no obvious connection between the dream and the play and I could see the ensemble getting frustrated, because I took a lot of space ... I took a lot of time ... with that dream that went ... that meandered somehow ... and it was not what it was about, it was about telling a dream and getting us on that level of communication. Then we started rehearsing and there had been these cakes delivered for the birthday scene again ... and today for the first time we got to have these cakes that will be there eventually when we come out ... and they are very beautifully done... you can see the effort that the props people have put into it ... my guess is it takes an hour to make the decoration ... and when we were rehearsing, Sarah was being ... her suggestion today for that scene was acting ... acting like a small child on her birthday party ... one can say that even a 4 year old has more patience and decency at a birthday dinner, at her birthday dinner, than Sarah was showing as Blanche today ... So she kept on eating these cakes, cutting them up so we had to use new ones every time, and she was sort of throwing her lines and throwing her pieces of cake at Marlon... and he didn't like that ... and Kim didn't like that either... I think they both felt some kind of responsibility towards the people who had made those cakes ... maybe also, in more general terms, some sustainability sensibility of a millennial that feels awkward wasting things ... maybe of an East German that feels "here goes the West German again" - Sarah in that case - just not having any idea of what resources are, and that they are limited... so that produced some strange irritation that fed into the conflict between Stanley and Blanche. I myself was of course ... There is that position that comes with the director's position that is being a judge; a judge that is supposed to judge on an aesthetic level... give sort of my judgement of what's within the law of that production or outside of it... But here it turned very much into ... I was sort of asked to judge from a moral perspective, because Kim and Marlon, they kept on looking out - while they were playing, seeing Sarah - they kept on looking at me, signaling: Is this what we're doing here ? Is this how it's supposed to be? ... And I tried very very hard to not assume that place. I ignored them or I tried to not pick up on their "cries for help" ... and I just let myself be dragged by that kind of only-child energy; which is a fate both Sarah and I share ... we're the single children of our parents. And I just went ... tried to just go and have her take the lead on that and let that be the root of the setting. And yes, that made for a bit of a strange entrance into the weekend. My hope was of course that we would go into the weekend with a good feeling, for the whole production... but it didn't happen now. We're going into the weekend with a shitty feeling, I guess... Let's see where we'll meet on Monday.



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Q and the director - he was a little sick

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needed that to play the scene, but she also needed that to feel a level of respect - she needed to feel the more experienced colleague embracing her. And that's what happened. We let it run. It was a very long SESSION of looking at each other for a while. And when we were done, Sarah took back on her glasses. I ended the rehearsal, also given that we had reached to some point, I think we had only rehearsed 2 hours today. and we went home. that was the day.

DAY 5 / SSF

There are 4 words in this play and they are really important to me. THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS. If you don't believe in god it's quite smart to believe in the kindness of strangers. This is not a religious play, none of them seems to be religious. so for Blanche to believe in the kindness of strangeness is beautfiul. It's a substitute for god. I really think that blanche believes that. And I don't think that the other character's do. Today when I entered the room, I noticed that MY director, he is a little fragile and this made me KIND. And we repeated the scene, that we did on our first day; and I was sitting with my back to my audience - the audience that wasnt there. and Kim was sitting with her face to the audience. And I was just playing with my back, with my neck. It was only the view of the director that moved me. He was the only one that was there. So I could just do, what I couldn't do the day before. And I really enjoyed looking at Kim. There was a similarity between this rehearsal and the one with Marlon when he was really acting. And today Kim

9736 words

Constellation and Purpose (University = Universalization?)

The overall purpose of the study is to create material by which the professional relation between actor and director can be analyzed.

Clearly, there is no way to universalize from the very specific constellation presented here: Sarah and I are close friends; we got to know each other in 2008, when we were hired as director and actress in the same theatre. Back then we worked together once, making a piece that we are both still fond of.

Despite the specificity of our constellation - especially when it comes to the level of pre-existent trust - there are factors that might nevertheless be extractable for the sake of their "structural truth". Namely our generational position, somewhere halfway between the aesthetic paradigm of "Regie-Theater" and an emerging cohort of theatre-makers articulating legitimate doubts around monopolized authorship / the mandate of the director.

This in-between status of ours might mirror itself in our phantasmatic rehearsals as well as in the modes of real interaction when making the „documentation“ of it. (In our present artistic dialogue, as it were.)

While there is an emerging sensitivity that aims at establishing the rehearsal situation as a safe space - where director and actor actively maintain each other's comfort zones - we are as much part of an older concept; where consent is reached by means of mutual challenges and transgressions.

Within this generational-political situatedness of our own practice, the study tries to cast light on the bigger research questions of my project: what are models of consent genuine to the actor-director relation? How do they work? Which of them are ethically sustainable? Which of them aesthetically?

The reality within the fiction. Reflection at the midpoint. 22nd of June 2020. Fragment.

Sarah and I are now half-way into our fictitious rehearsal process. Yesterday we met for a professional conversation, (instead of the usual friendship update, that we have set as a Sunday routine for the duration of the study); we talked about how things were going and what adjustments might still be made.

In our fiction, we have reached the point where Sarah, the actress assigned with the role of Blanche DuBois, grows more and more unsatisfied with the director's egalitarian ambitions during rehearsals („People get happy and gay, but the theatre collapses.“). Within the reality of the project, that moment coincides with me suggesting to Sarah, my collaborator, that she shall take the lead on creating the daily fictional settings from here on; so I would - as well - be able to react to an imaginary circumstance that wasn't fully in my control. Interestingly enough, this proposal for a more shared agency was met with a certain level of resistance from my colleague, who was arguing her case very well: why such level of devising was not serving the purpose of the "piece".

After the initial refusal, it took us some arguing and shared thinking to pick apart the roles and constellations at play here (actor/director vs. artistic researcher/collaborator) and get to see how authorship and agency apply in those different realms. And - paradoxically? - it was by me assuming the imperative authority of - was it me as artistic researcher/ the one responsible for the project or me as director? - that I was finally able to "convince" my collaborator to take creative control for the duration of the coming week. - (Note the compromise in terms of duration!)

I'm very happy that this moment of negotiation occurred within our fiction, as well as in the reality of our collaboration. As it is quite an accurate mirror of a certain point in time that I have often experienced during actual rehearsal processes - and rarely resolved.

Put as a question, I would describe it like this: what is it, that - at a given point - has me as a director wish for a higher level of authorship in actors than they might actually be able to or even want to provide?

Is it a sense of boredom, the experience of a bubble, where I'm only being fed my own input? A loop of missed-out transformations, with the actor's work merely being a resumé of my own ideological presumptions?

Is it a political unease? The discomfort within an economy of participation, where top-to-bottom management appears outdated.

A pacifist stance, in opposition to organizational models derived from the military?

An ethical dilemma? Steering people through a process they don't have the full picture of.

Is it laziness? The fatigue that comes with having the conditions for creativity rest on my own shoulders time and time again? – (A thought locating the strategies of (neoliberal) outsourcing and (postdramatic) devising in dangerous proximity.)

Or is it an unbearable sense of loneliness? The isolation of the director/protagonist in relation to the ensemble's/chorus' jouissance...

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My dilemma, I guess, occurs mostly within directing practices that are “neither-nor” (My own practice, but most likely one of most directors of my own and the coming generation.) That is to say, neither truly devised works, where the result is to the highest possible degree based on how the process shaped it; nor fully masterminded (conceptual) works, where the execution attempts to avoid all possible friction with the material's genuine contribution.

...

REFLECTIONS/ SENSE-ABLE TRANSLATIONS/ PLAY

2 months after accomplishing their fictitious rehearsal process around "A Streetcar Named Desire", Sarah and Johannes made an interview to analyze the work.

They met in Stockholm, in an actual studio, where they would have been conducting the study if not for an all-encompassing pandemic that hit in March 2020.

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In a first attempt to compress the vast amount of digital documentation from the study, Johannes had formulated a number of made up TABLOID FRONT PAGES, “covering” single events in the rehearsal process.

These “headlines” were then used to prompt our conversation.

During it, Sarah is aware of the overall format, but doesn't know the content of the individual prompts.

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The original interview was 2h18 long.

It has been cut by over half its length now, with one edited version made by Sarah, and another one made by Johannes.

The editing work was done parallel and accomplished on the same day, so that Sarah and Johannes would not be aware of the choices the other makes.

There is an overlap in the selection of material, but this method ensures the integrity of the actor's and the director's different perspectives.

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On a content level, the guiding star during the interview was the research question of Johannes' project: How does consent work in an actor-director relation ?

Showing singular perspectives in regard to that has also been the criteria for editing.

*

The visual set-up and editing style is our individual interpretation of the performative TV-interviews German filmmaker Alexander Kluge proposes in a Brechtian tradition.



Actress Deadnames Director

**Actress Produces Alienation
Within The Ensemble
To Help Director**

**Bystander Director
Exploits
Interpersonal Conflict
To Produce
Better Acting**

**Actress Threatens
To Calm Down A Little
And Be Polite
On Stage**

**Director Wastes
Ensemble's Time
By Telling A Dream
With No Connection
To The Play**

**Director Insists
On A Certain
Intonation**

**Director Brings In
An Actor
He Knows The Actress
To Be Sexually Attracted To**

**Director Forces
Iranian Actress
To Sing Iranian Song
During Table-Read**

In a general climate of retribution and deplatforming – “the time of the great purge” as playwright Carmen Aguirre called it in early 2021 – I had allowed my own ethical anxiety to compose imaginary tabloid headlines. Sarah and I use them in a constructive take on sensationalism (transmitting knowledge through sensations), as Jane Gallop suggests for her book “Feminist Accused Of Sexual Harrassment”. (1997)

In the context presented here, this set-up also re-produces the dispositive of classical theater processes: the director in the dark, the actor in exposure.

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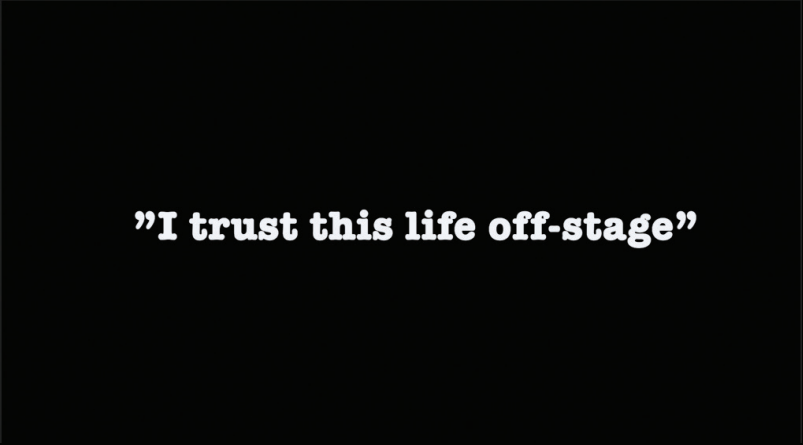
During the interview, Sarah had the freedom to apply the language of her choice. Subtitles in English are provided.

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The study itself as well as this analysis are haunted by Danish director Lars von Trier. His ghostly presence accompanies both versions in the form of classical music: 4 pieces by Vivaldi and Pergolesi Trier uses in “Dogville”.



The prompted interview. Sarah's, the actress', edit.



The prompted interview. Johannes', the director's, edit.