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The Red Shoes Project

- theatre for the very young as artistic research

Abstract

The author addresses various approaches to artistic research on the basis of her own artistic research project, *The Red Shoes Project* (2008-13), which consists of three closely related theatre performances for young children (0-3 years). The project was concerned with the development of dance theatre for the youngest children, in which opportunity was given for the children to participate actively in the performances.

As a PhD project *The Red Shoes Project* explored the theatre event through three different art settings, following theories on performative aesthetics and methods and research design from the field of artistic research. *De Røde Skoene* [the red shoes] (2008) was a dance theatre performance for 1-year olds, *Rød Sko Savnet* [red shoe missing] (2011) was an art installation, and *Mamma Danser* [mum's dancing] (2011) was an improvised dance concert, both for 0-3 year-olds. All of these productions had red shoes as a connecting theme and playful artistic material. The traditional common focus from spectators towards the stage in the first performance shifted in the latter towards each spectator's individual focus and the affective multi-focus of the whole event. The article discusses what implications these different focuses may have for the children, the performers and the artist-researcher¹.

A scientific research project generally presupposes a clear focus and a reflected perspective as essential for the result, whilst the more intuitive and improvised choices inherent in the artistic process can yield another type of knowledge. This knowledge, which is not so readily accessible through a hermeneutical interpreted "outside" perspective, becomes apparent when the interpretations are placed in dialogue with each other and with the bodily experiences of the performers. Henk Borgdorff's division into an interpretative, an instrumental and a performative research perspective is applied to provide a more comprehensive picture of the research process involved in creating art for the very young. The author concludes that these research perspectives together are helpful methodologies and that the project demonstrates the possibility of creating common artistic experiences between performers and children, in which both can take part in reciprocal interaction and improvisation.

¹ This has implications for the adult audience as well, but will not be considered specifically in this article. An analysis on this

Introduction

The performance events of *De Røde Skoene* was based on the free and voluntary participation of the children during the performance. The questions to be examined through the first part of the project was: Is it possible to make a theatre performance for the very small children, allowing them to participate by moving freely in, around and about the performance space during performance? If it is possible, how will this interaction work, what is required and what happens to the actors and children in this kind of communication?

No surprise these events appeared to happen when the one and two year olds wanted to explore or play, and the actors often inspired them:

The tempo rises, the musician runs the drumsticks in teasing rhythms and whirls and the actors starts to run fast from wall to wall. This is play! A small body rises from her sitting mat and starts jumping and laughing out loud. In a short time a little gang of jumpers join in. One of them dares to jump into the performance space, he runs to the drummer, and gets a small stick to play with. The actors start dancing a choreographic part. A few small children are crawling between the legs of the dancers. They want to take part. (*Log from the performance period in March 2008*)

In the first research phase, based on the work *De Røde Skoene*, I focused on the concepts of presence, borders, thresholds and playing through experimenting with different interactive approaches. Through open, improvised, participating, multi focal and affective dramaturgical strategies, the performance developed into a multi perspective and multi focal event, dealing with many different levels of experience. The differing interests between *children's* bodily, sensory, kinaesthetic approach, the *adult* interpreting conscious experiences and the *artists'* performative and musical communication, have been most challenging. On an analytic level this has called for new methodology. Starting the research process with a phenomenological hermeneutic approach, the impact of artistic practice became more important as the project developed into several artistic experiments. In the second and third research phases I focused more on the performative aspects of the theatre events. Artistic research methodology answered to my questions on the significance of practical knowledge (Borgdorff, 2012; Hannula, Suoranta, Vadén, Griffiths, & Köhli, 2005; Nytnes, 2006).

Art practice qualifies as research when its purpose is to broaden our knowledge and understanding through an original investigation. It begins with questions that are pertinent to the research context and the art world, and employs methods that are appropriate to the study. The process and the outcomes of the research are appropriately documented and disseminated to the research community and to the wider public. (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 43)

Henk Borgdorff's artistic research perspectives are divided into the *interpretative*, the *instrumental* and the *performative*. All of them can be applied to provide a more comprehensive picture of the research process involved in creating art for the very young. In this article I will show how the combination of perspectives can be useful in the research process of art practice and reflection, and that this will be my methodological contribution to further developments in research on (and in) art for the very young.

Background

With background as a drama teacher in early childhood education, my presumptions for working with small children and art was based on the knowledge of their capacity to engage and enjoy in performances made especially for their own age groups (Dunlope, 2011; Guss, 2000; Hernes, Os, & Selmer-Olsen, 2010; Selmer-Olsen, 2006). Child participation can be said to be an important issue and educational goal in kindergartens and nursery schools. Ideas concerning participation are relevant in several respects to the field of art and children (Bae, 2012; Bakken & Hommersand, 2013; Johannesen & Sandvik, 2008; Kunnskapsbasen, 2011; Lehmann & Reich, 2007; SceSam, 2012-14). In the field of art and performance these questions regarding the value of child participation can represent a greater challenge. Performing artists are not usually trained to interact with their audience. They would somehow need to have special interests, knowledge or skills to be able to handle this kind of improvised interaction with small children.

Small children, who do not have a strongly developed verbal language, express themselves physically and intuitively, meaning that adults who wish to communicate with the very young must assume an open, listening and less directed attitude. This open, listening attitude is also a characteristic of improvisation and especially well developed with

improvising performers in music and dance (Liset, Myrstad, & Sverdrup, 2011; Steinsholt & Sommerro, 2006). During the entire course of the project I have thus assumed that the improvising artists possess prerequisites for creating good artistic contact with very young children.

In the following section I will give a brief description of the project and the three phases of artistic research practice. All of them form part of the project's artistic and theoretical reflection around theatre for the very young and the children's need for participation in the artistic event. Each phase of the project contains a number of unique events and meetings between different spaces, installations, performing improvising artists, small children and adult spectators. My own participation as artistic director and researcher must also be included in the events.

Phase 1: The Red Shoes

In 2008 I started the PhD project *De Røde Skoene*, which was designed as an artistic and theoretical examination of children's theatre as a playground and connecting space between relational art and drama-based pedagogy within the field of performative aesthetics (Hovik, 2008-13). Erika Fisher-Lichte's theories on *co-presence* and *feedback-loop* (Fischer-Lichte, 2008) between the actors and the audience was my theoretical starting point, as I developed an understanding of the "musical communication"² (Bjørkvold, 2007; Hovik, 2011c; Trevarthen & Malloch, 2009) that arises in the mutual exchange of sensory impulses between the artists and the children.

My first research question was:

What happens when we invite small children (1-2 year-olds) to freely participate on stage during the performance? How can performative aesthetics inform this kind of art practice?

² The term musical is used in the sense of the Greek notion of the fine arts (dance, music, song).

The *De Røde Skoene* production, created and presented by the *Teater Fot* group (*Teater Fot - teater for de aller minste*, 2013), in which I was the artistic director, formed the empirical basis for an investigation of interaction and improvisation in children's theatre. The non-verbal performance, which lasted for approximately 45 minutes, also included a session of free playing with the red shoes. The play itself was based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale and explored the movement from bare feet to dancing with red shoes (from nature to culture). The red shoes made the dancers move and dance, and the children were invited to participate whenever they wanted to.

The most exciting part of the project [The Red Shoes] is the way the performance welcomes participation without coercing its audience. Babies feel a freedom to explore the space and the action rather than being accused of 'stage invasion'; equally, they are perfectly welcome to sit and enjoy the audio-visual elements of the performance if they wish. This is both refreshing and remarkable. (Fletcher-Watson, 25.09.13)

Link 1: *De Røde Skoene*: <https://vimeo.com/49630824>

Stated briefly, our experiences from the production process might suggest that many children enjoy and have a need to interact bodily with the performers and in the room. In this regard the performance succeeded. On the other hand the theatrical conventions of precisely repeating the event day by day would restrict the opportunities of the artists for free expression. The artistic need for precision in their scenic work, timing in choreography and progression in dramaturgy, works against the open and improvised expression. The long touring period with approximately 120 performances from 2008 to 2010 led the production to develop away from an improvisatory framework into a more prescribed and precise form. As the performers became more secure and more precise during this process, they also increased their awareness of the children, including both those children who chose to remain as sideline spectators and those who chose to participate in on-stage dance, music or play. The production thus found a form that worked well in relation to both children and adults at the same time as providing sufficient flexibility for improvised events (Hovik, 2011b).

Nevertheless, the project had in a sense departed from its original artistic concept in which improvisation was the mainstay, in favour of a fixed plan. The open, listening communication between the artists was also partly overshadowed by the social interaction of the children with each other on stage. Improvisation had developed from artistic interaction to a more problem-solving function. It was artistically interesting to observe the drummer interact with the small, responsive participants at the same time as maintaining contact with the dancers and driving the intensity on the stage. On the other hand it was not altogether as artistically interesting (while perhaps entertaining) to see how he, almost unobserved, prevented small and over-enthusiastic participants from taking over the drum kit. In conversation with the performers it emerged that the improvisation became more and more directed towards the interaction with the children and less towards interaction with each other. To what extent was it possible and desirable for the performers better to maintain the art of improvisation within this type of interactive and improvised performance, and how could it be achieved? It was necessary to find a form that enabled active participation from the audience at the same time as maintaining the structural sensitivity of the performers, both in relation to each other and to their own artistic expressions. My own intentions as the art researcher and director in relation to an open and listening interaction were put to the test.

Phase 2: Red Shoe Missing

The next version, *Rød Sko Savnet* [red shoe missing] (Hovik, 2011d), was an answer to the question of improvisation and became an art installation for the very young. My new research questions, was about the significance of free *playing*:

What happens when we invite small children (0-3 year-olds) to play in an art installation of red shoes, films and old children's toys and furniture? What is the function and role of playing in children's relation to art? Will installation art provide a better art experience for young children? How will improvising artists affect the children's playing?

The installation was co-produced with Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum, in a large exhibition room. It was possible to move around freely, touch everything, use and play with

objects and shoes. *Rød Sko Savnet* was shaped for the public of 0-3-year-olds and their accompanying adults: nursery schools during the week and parents and children at weekends. The multi-modal character of the installation (red shoes, rocking horses, old children's furniture, tableaux, films, dresses to creep into) could in itself function as a room of experiences, without a defined dramaturgy or performing artists.

Link 2: *Exhibition vernissage*: <https://vimeo.com/50294462>

On the text poster that introduced the exhibition I wrote the following:

This exhibition has been created for children from 0-3 years and their adults. The idea is that children should freely explore the room; touching anything is allowed. Don't just look – touch! Some of the things are old and you might want to be a bit light footed. It can be exciting to crawl into, onto and around all the objects. Those shoes that the children can reach themselves can be tried on, listened to and played with. The same is true of the old children's toys and suitcases. The films are intended both to watch and to "bathe in", if that is tempting! The adults should support the children in their exploration of the room and of the objects; not directing and deciding but listening to what the children want to do, exploring and playing together with them. On Sundays, professional artists within the fields of dance, theatre and music are present in the room and will create new forms of interaction with each other and with the children. It's simply a matter of listening well and to keep careful attention, because anything might happen!

Rød Sko Savnet was all about memories, about childhood, playing and nostalgia. It was inspired by my own childhood, my parents' and grand-parents' childhood and was created to bridge the adults' often nostalgic childhood memories and children's concrete, sensory world of discovery.

Nursery-school toddlers were invited, playing with shoes and rocking horses and to a great extent directing their own experiences during the weekdays. The pre-arranged improvised artistic events were performed by altogether eleven improvisation artists distributed across four Sundays over the course of six weeks in the spring of 2011. Here the improvisations, which could last about 30 minutes, were entirely open, without any pre-determined direction, choreography or composition. In common with the children's play, the improvisation artists were given no other framework than the space, the installation, the children and the public. We developed some opening and concluding strategies, but

otherwise there were no formal regular, choreographic, compositional or text-based guidelines. In the research interviews with the performers, in which I asked questions about their experiences, it emerged that they experienced positive contact with the children and parents and felt that it was exciting to throw them-selves into this free, improvised form of expression. Personally, I experienced problems with both perspective and focus in my role as a researching artist, something that I will expand on later. I collaborated, however, with a film photographer in making a documentary film, which proved to be a decisive methodological factor in the research process.

Link 3: *Rød Sko Savnet*: <https://vimeo.com/63920789>

Phase 3: Mum's Dancing

The last version, *Mamma Danser* [mum's dancing], which I would like to describe as an *improvised dance concert*, was formed through experiences with moving the installation into different rooms, two church-rooms and one theatre-room. In dialogue with a big church festival in Trondheim, Olavsfestdagene, we got the invitation to perform in the Nidaros cathedral and later in the big church Bergstadens Ziir in Røros – each of which in different ways provided new and overwhelming frameworks for the improvisations. The formal, restrained, tradition-bound and religious framing was a great contrast to the free, improvisational and loosely structured performance. A multi-focused form in a room that directs its focus towards one point – a religious centre, altar, pulpit or crucifix – also raised the question of the function of art and the meaning of context. The feeling that the form was not strong enough for the room argued in the direction of strengthening some formal elements. Our experiences in the religious rooms also reinforced my attention to dramaturgic frameworks. In the preparations for the final version of *Mamma Danser* these reflections determined the direction taken.

My last research questions were about the performative experiences of the multi-focused event:

What is involved in providing a forum for an experience of *decentred multi-focus* in theatre and art for the very young? How can artistic research methodology inform this research process?

By *decentred multi-focus* I mean that the form of artistic expression is not constrained by a linear succession of events but is divided into many simultaneous occurrences and areas of focus between which the spectators can freely choose. The spectator's experience of being decentred is thus incorporated in the art form (Bishop, 2005). This kind of artistic expression belongs to a tradition of installation art and interactive exhibition forms. But what does this mean for the youngest children? What does it involve for the artists? And not least, what does it entail for the art researcher and the research focus?

The final version of *Mamma Danser* was performed in a more clearly defined art room: a black box in *Dansens Hus* in Oslo [Oslo Dance Hall]. The format was now defined as installation and improvised dance concert, the dramaturgical structure was established as choreographic elements following the *Mamma Danser* film (Finborud Nøren, 2011) with introduction, order and timing, and the intention of when to interact and when not to interact with the children was sharpened. This version of *Mamma Danser* followed the dramatic structure of the film which was projected from overhead onto a duvet spread out on the floor so that the children could move around on the duvet and experience their own and each other's bodies in the film light. This dance film was about two busy, dancing mothers and their ambivalent relationships with their two small children of respectively one and two years of age, who are also present whilst their mothers dance. The film gradually shifts focus and perspective from the mothers to the children. The content of the film was directed to the adult audience, while the sensory experiences of film light were made for the children.

Link 4: *Mamma Danser* – a dance film by Mali Finborud Nøren: <https://vimeo.com/49630823>

At the improvised dance concert events at *Dansens Hus*, the free improvisations in the performance space, was interrupted three times by a fixed, choreographed dance. This dance was performed almost exactly in the same way as the dancers on the film *Mamma Danser*, and it was exactly timed with the film music. The dancers on the film was thus

reflected and repeated by the live dancers in the room. The live dance followed the film's form and content in both a choreographic and thematic sense. The interruption was repeated three times with varying focus during the course of the performance, each time followed by free improvisational sequences. The dancers coming together with the drummer in an improvised final act rounded up the performance. To date, eight performances of this last version have been held. The public has been both nursery-school groups and children accompanied by parents.

Link 5: *Mamma Danser* – NRK news report from *Dansens Hus* 2.10.2011:

<https://vimeo.com/49700726>

Methodologically I worked with changing perspectives and focuses, and became aware of my own position as an artist, director and researcher. I made some film recordings during the performances, and I tried to reveal how my research interests and questions discovered or covered the real event and the participant's different experiences.

In thematic terms, the three modes of performative expressions during the whole research project were concerned with red shoes, childhood memories (personal and historical) old children's toys, fairy-tale characters, and the power of music and dance. In dramaturgical terms the three versions transformed through different spaces, performers and dramaturgic strategies, thus forming new phases in the research process. Methodologically I had moved from an interpretive to a performative position, and this re-positioning had required theories on artistic research. Taking a performative research approach means, following Borgdorff, that the research takes form as an event involving both the artists, the audience and the researcher in mutual interaction, and that the researcher also can be the artist or the opposite way around (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 13). The research questions are changed along the way during the process, and will form stages in the performative research approach.

The last research question of what is involved in providing room for decentred multi-focus in art events for the very young has developed along the way. It has been inspired not least by conversations with the performers in the aftermath of performances – both in formal, documented research interviews and informal reflection. As I move towards the end of the

research project as a whole, I will keep the performing and performative perspectives in mind when approaching the question of methodology.

The methodology of artistic research

The methodology of *artistic research* allow a close connection between theory and artistic practice, it opens new perspectives and contribute to the understanding of both small children's relation to art/artists, and the artists relation to the very young audience participants (or spect-actors) through the personal lenses of the researching artist. But on the other hand, these personal lenses are limited, and might require some kind of distancing tools. The video camera has been a helpful companion, but even when captured in a moving image, the multi-focal experience becomes overwhelming. It is not possible to look at two things at the same time. This problem will be a crucial point concerning documentation later in this article.

Academic research in the arts is based on a written account and theoretical reflection about the artistic work. Artistic research, on the other hand, is carried out within and through an artistic process in which the artistic researcher does have the work of art as a goal. The documentation and analysis of action-based experience can be an important part, in order to reach new recognitions and knowledge. Still the knowledge is not basically outside the artwork, but inside. It is usual to distinguish between artistic and academic research in that the former is based on artistic expression, a work of art, which *in itself* can be regarded as a research result or as a material and media-specific reflection formed in its own language (Borgdorff, 2009, p.7). In academic research reflection is expressed through written language. The artistic language embodies its own form of reflection. However, when I define artistic research as a process whose goal is not just art but also action-based experience, recognition and knowledge, I place myself in an epistemological tradition in which practice is valued as a source of knowledge (Dewey, 2005; Gadamer, 2010 [1960]; Schön, 2001). I do not wish to establish a conflict between artistic and academic research, but rather to argue for a valuable combination of artistic practice and theoretical reflection.

This is uncontroversial both within artistic and academic research, even though these areas traditionally are separated on the basis of institutions, academic groupings and methods. Borgdorff distinguishes methodologically between interpretative (external) research *on* the arts, instrumental (applied) research *for* the arts, and performative (immanent) research *in* the arts (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 17).³ When Borgdorff distinguishes between the three research perspectives, this is in order to give artistic practice a place amongst the research traditions. I believe that the advantages of such a division include opening up for alternative research perspectives in the field of the arts, in addition to the possibility of further perspectives being developed in parallel. I do not believe it is necessary to choose one of these perspectives, but that a combination of them will be able to provide fuller answers to complex research questions.

An interpretative research perspective

Research on the arts is research that has art practice in the broadest sense of the word as its object. It refers to investigation aimed at drawing valid conclusions about art practice from a theoretical distance (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 12).

A performance can be framed and defined both historically, conceptually, materially and phenomenological, thus remaining an object for external observation, registration and interpretation (Borgdorff, 2006; Schön, 2001). This kind of research entails maintaining a certain distance between the researcher and the research object. Although hermeneutic interpretation can be understood in different ways, both as an external, objective perspective and as a unified perspective of subject and object, Borgdorff's *interpretative perspective*, or Schön's *reflection on action*, is based on the idea that the object of research remains untouched under the enquiring gaze of the researcher (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008, p. 192).

³ He makes an epistemological distinction between the *performative* "world-constituting" perspective where the theory itself is a practice and shapes the practice, and the *immanent* perspective, pointing at the theory as something already infused in every human action. The performative and the immanent perspectives merge together in the art practice.

As an interpretive researcher, I have an external perspective and thus make the artistic event a delineated object. I create a frame, cut and shape a more comprehensible object for analysis, like this example from one of my analyses of video clip from *De Røde Skoene*:

The music is full of energy. The rhythms run with energetic drive and fast riffs. The little boy runs happily around and around together with the dancers. First he runs after one of them, so one of the dancers runs after him. All the dancers keep an eye on the boy while jumping wildly, twisting and running in every direction. The boy seems to be focused on his own body, on his own feet and running, throwing small gazes on the dancers, who are running and jumping with him, attentive and open to his movements. (Video clip, private archive) (Hovik, 2011a)

By using the theory of performative aesthetics by Fischer-Lichte, the concept of feedback-loop between actors and spectators made me look for certain signs of communication in Fischer-Lichtes terms; *role reversal*, *community* and *touch* (Böhnisch, 2010, p. 93-138; Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 40-50; Hovik, 2011a, p. 126). My description and interpretation was then informed by theory, and also by alternative interpretations from the actors and spectators having been to the event or seen the film-clip. The different interpretations could then collide and give inspiration to new thoughts and understandings.

Instrumental research perspective

Research for the arts can be described as applied research in a narrow sense. In this type, art is not so much the object of investigation, but its objective. The research provides insights and instruments that may find their way into concrete practices [...]. (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 12)

An instrumental or applied research perspective comes from the body of technical and professional knowledge. It is connected to the development of the instrumental, material or crafted aspects of the art form, which in the case of *The Red Shoes Project* may be concerned with developing better communication and interaction between performers and audience in theatre for small children. The motivation behind the project was an instrumental rather than interpretative research perspective. The reason for trying out interactive theatre for the very young at all derived from experiences of theatre performances in which the needs

of small children to move around and participate on stage created problems and frustrations both for children, parents/carers and performers.

An instrumental approach to artistic practice can be used for investigating or solving problems or for improving specific functions within the field of the arts. By adapting the spatial conditions such that the children are not subsumed behind high-backed chairs in the auditorium, but are instead brought right in to the edge of the stage and possibly onto it, we can say that an instrumental strategy can be useful. A purely functional or instrumental goal for the research is in this instance that of developing the form or theatre dramaturgy in the direction of more interaction and participation, a direction I presumed would communicate better with the youngest children.

With regard to the installation *Rød Sko Savnet*, it was made as a kind of applied theatre for the very young, assuming that their need for bodily experiences is countered by the theatre rules of spectatorship. An instrumental research perspective seeks knowledge about the methods and applications of practice in the arts and turns to its own professional field to improve the arts practice. Within the instrumental research perspective, my second research question regarding what is the function and role of *playing* in art for the very young becomes a question of functionality. I have been able to focus on how the installation concept has enabled a greater physical proximity between the children and the performers and how this invites active and playful participation. By this means I have also discovered how the children's participation and playing can represent an artistic challenge in that it counteracts a common focus on the performers' improvisations and artistic expression.

An applied research perspective has been an important driving force in this artistic research project. This is not necessarily in opposition to an interpretative research perspective: the two perspectives may be said to complement each other. Borgdorff distinguishes between them by observing that the interpretative perspective researches the art whilst the applied perspective researches *in the service of* the art. A performative research perspective, in contrast to these, will research *within* and using the art (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 12).

Performative research perspective

Research in the arts is the most controversial of the three ideal types [...] This approach is based on the understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts [...] Concepts and theories, experiences and understandings are interwoven with art practices and, partly for this reason, art is always reflexive. (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 13)

The performative research perspective that we find in Borgdorff involves a fusion of the research object and the researcher-subject. In this perspective, no sense of distance is established between researcher and object but there is a possibility of recognising the fundamental connection between theory and practice that is active in artistic processes. It is with reference to a performative research and knowledge paradigm (Haseman, 2006) that different artistic research methods have developed under headings such as “artistic research”, “practice as research” (Borgdorff, 2009; Hannula et al., 2005; Nyrnes, 2006), “art-based research” (McNiff, 1998; Rasmussen, 2010), “practice-based research” (Elkjær, 2006; Friberg, Parekh-Gaihede, & Barton, 2010) and “practice-led research” (Dean & Smith, 2009; Freeman, 2010).

With artistic improvisation as an example the knowledge developed amongst the improvising performers is physical and relational, and it is not easily susceptible to delineation as an object for a distanced researcher perspective. Nevertheless, Borgdorff believes that artistic research in a broad sense is not really distinct from other scientific research. It is perfectly possible to compare artistic research with research in technology, the social sciences or other human sciences. A problem, however, is that artistic research often overlaps the divide between basic research (which is not useful in an instrumental sense), applied research and experimental development. The synthesis between these research approaches constitutes that which is distinctive with artistic research, which is defined as:

[...] that domain of research and development in which the practice of art – that is, the making and the playing, the creation and the performance and the works of art that result – play a constitutive role in a methodological sense. (Borgdorff, 2009, p. 23)

Borgdorff thus places artistic practice in the centre of research and defends a view of artistic research in which traditional humanistic academic writing does not play such an essential

role. Employing this kind of performative research perspective, this article would not have been a necessary contribution to the field of artistic research, in that *The Red Shoes Projects* artistic contributions would in it self be able to articulate the knowledge that it has reached.

The language of knowledge

One question that arises following such a performative research paradigm is what value this knowledge will have for anyone other than the actual performers. A theoretical and written reflection lifts these experiences into another language, thus becoming open for critical analysis and transferable both to artistic practice, research and to the public at large. Even though tacit, bodily or improvisational knowledge can be transmitted and can survive well enough within its own internal artistic environment, I think that it must be a goal to open up such knowledge also to other groups. It is not least an educational goal to help increase awareness of the significance of bodily and musical communication forms in all types of interaction, especially in interaction with young children. I am therefore arguing on behalf of that which I am myself practicing at the moment – a written, word-based reflection around the artistic issues that occur in performance practice.

Whilst writing this article I am also participating in an academic form of knowledge production. I am moving, according to Aslaug Nyrnes from the art material to another topos – a distinct language – in order to express myself in writing about the work (Nyrnes, 2006; 2012, p. 38). For Nyrnes, verbal language is not necessarily at odds with artistic language. Verbal language forms a part of knowledge in various structural ways and can assume poetical, narrative and argumentative forms. According to Nyrnes we move between three different places in artistic research: 1) own language, 2) theory (systematic language) and 3) the artistic material and expression (ibid.). I understand this topological thinking as a movement between different languages and language worlds, which essentially are of equal value but which in our culture are placed in different types of hierarchies, in which theory traditionally is ranked above practice. In the same way, a romantic view of art will emphasise the artistic experience over and above form and technique, whilst Nyrnes is concerned with material issues. On the basis of a bodily performative approach to the

artistic material, the artist develops knowledge in touch with her own writing or theoretical reading.

In this PhD-project I have not only been moving between language worlds, but also between research perspectives. The movement from an interpretative approach to an instrumental approach leads to the reflection on the performative artistic approach. In the last move I discovered that the performative research approach involves my own perspectives on every stage, but in different ways. As an artist researcher who works as a theatre director, the bodily experiences of performing are limited, but the experiences of seeing, listening and feeling together with the dialogues and intuitive choices during rehearsal are significant. I will now move on to the questions of different perspectives and focuses.

Focus and de-focus

A perspective is limited to that which is visible from a given standpoint, but nevertheless it contains a good deal of information. A focus deselects a quantity of available information and concentrates attention upon a selected point. Accounting for one's own perspective and finding a clear focus are important anchors in research but may also act in conflict with other ways of approaching knowledge. By means of a focus, individual events can emerge clearly and acquire significance, but by de-focusing one can discover other, new things that otherwise would have lain outside the area of focus. By not giving focus or form, room can be created for greater presence and openness about what is actually happening at the time. Working more intuitively and perceptively can thus lead to new realisations and knowledge. It is occasionally necessary to "quieten intention in order to awaken intuition" (Fyhn, 2011, p. 14).⁴

The problems related to the researcher's ability to perceive or not perceive what actually is taking place in the performance has been a key question of methodology in this project. I have chosen to describe the problem by distinguishing between three different forms of

⁴Translated from Norwegian in agreement with the author.

focus: *group focus* (common focus on performative events), *personal focus* (guided by own interests) and *multi-focus* (decentred, listening, floating).

The artistic research process was led by both by a focused intention and by a more open intuition, especially in the last phase, developing *Mamma Danser* as an open multi-focused event. The question of focus ran through this process both as an artistic and a research problem. In the following section I will present the documentation methods, and the different ways in which I have elaborated the questions of decentred experience, delimitation, focus, description and interpretation in terms of alternating research perspectives.

Documentation as external, internal and performative acts

A theatre performance is in principle not a material object but a production or event that is repeated a certain number of times. The events differ slightly from one occasion to the next, and as such form a kind of “floating object” which is difficult to document as an entity, but possible to describe both through text, pictures and video. As a means of framing a floating research object, visual documentation is very significant. Video film is more of a concrete research object than the production itself, which is live, ephemeral, relational and multi-focused. It can be difficult to nail down a floating research object in the research process. It thus rapidly becomes the case that research is carried out on the documentation, in other words, on a representation of the object rather than on the live work of art (Latour, 1999). This, however, is a premise for performance research and almost impossible to avoid if one takes an interpretative perspective. The filmed performance would be a good start for making an interpretation of *De Røde Skoene* performance. In 2008 I engaged a film photographer, Mette Valle Sannes (Sannes, 2008) to make a documentary on the project and also to edit three performances into split-screen research material.⁵

⁵ Mette Valle Sannes made the documentary film as a part of her MA in film production at NTNU in 2008 (Sannes, 2008)

Link 6: Documentary: on the making of *The Red Shoes* (2008) (Norwegian language):

<https://vimeo.com/62897764>

Link 7: Example of split-screen research documentation, *Tereses Dans*:

<https://vimeo.com/68796702>

Baz Kershaw distinguishes between extrinsic and integral documentation, in which the integral documentation is internal and accumulated around the artistic process whilst the extrinsic documentation comes as external result of the public event (Kershaw, 2006, p. 145). In this project there was both internal and external documentation. The external documentation was helpful in terms of remembering, but it was not so interesting as material for analysing. As my research interest focused on specific significant events, the external documentation did not emphasize anything particular, and thus missed out on this aspect. As additional external documents, the Norwegian television corporation NRK broadcast reports from all three productions:

Link 8: *De Røde Skoene*: <https://vimeo.com/50295609>

Link 9: *Rød Sko Savnet*: <https://vimeo.com/50294462>

Link 10: *Mamma Danser*: <https://vimeo.com/49700726>

Internal documentation, such as video made by myself during rehearsals and performances, became the most important research material. While working with *Rød Sko Savnet*, I also engaged a film photographer, Mari Lunden Nilsen, to document the installation, the playing and one improvised event, but this time I involved myself in the making of the documentary, both during film shooting and in discussing and reflecting on the material together with the photographer in the editing process. In this process I also reflected on the significance of video making as performative research, activating the documentation in dialogue both with external viewers and with theory (Osten, 2009; Parekh-Gaihede, 2010).

Link 11: Documentary on *Rød Sko Savnet*: <https://vimeo.com/63920789>

The internal documentation material that I created myself along the road was even more useful for the purpose of analysing. Even when I did not focus on particular events, my own

films assumed a greater significance than I had predicted. The documentation of data on the video clips highlighted individual events, children and situations as being of significance on the basis of obvious visual signs of communication. My own research dialogue with the camera lens became a methodological tool for analytical work in the process. With this material it was evident that the camera lens worked as a more focused observer than I did myself (Mohn, 2006). Throughout the research project I had filmed and photographed actively during the productions. There were many serendipitous occurrences; and interesting events took place whilst I was filming. Going on a treasure hunt through this material was like re-discovering moments and events that I had overlooked in the stream of events in the performance context. In the course of my work with *The Red Shoes Project* I have regularly conducted research interviews with performers about their experiences of interaction with the young children. Methodologically these clips were an excellent springboard for a dialogue with the performers about how they experienced and interpreted their actual interaction with the children. I collected these dialogues as sound recordings and by allowing the performers to comment on the documentation, it was possible to bring to life some of the effect of the live performance (Hovik, 2011a; Kershaw, 2006; Ledger, Ellis, & Wright, 2011; Mohn, 2006; Parekh-Gaihede, 2010).

Analysing a video clip:

I will now give a description of a video example from the improvised dance concert *Mamma Danser*. By analysing the possible intentions and communicative events in the video I could observe children in deep involvement and play, not just the more general picture of decentred chaotic activity:

The room is full of adults and children – about 20 persons within the picture frame – an adult is crouching on the floor and filming, children are crawling, darting or running around, the music is rhythmic, playful, insistent or eventually a little hesitant. Two children are rocking on their respective rocking horses. One child stands facing the camera with a borrowed white tulle skirt in one hand, a red shoe in the other hand and a red shoe on her foot. She is standing and rocking to the rhythms. The “white dancer” who is wearing a white tulle skirt is moving around the room, circling around the installation of “the black dress” and suddenly lies down on the floor (I

cannot see on the film what actually happened, but the dancer was later able to tell me that she had seen a child who lay down in the same way). She remains lying down and watches from there. A child comes over and bends over her. The dancer gets up, moves towards “the white dress” and shows her foot. The “black dancer” moves towards the white.

A break: the musician bangs the gong and a big sound spreads out through the room. The two dancers drop what they have in their hands and suddenly move quickly around the room. Several children and adults watch their progress. (*Internal video transcription*)

Link 12: *Mamma Danser* – en hendelse: <http://teaterfot.sircondesign.net/ph-d-avhandling/vedlegg-til-avhandling/forskningsfilmer/>

In the study of this video clip, which on the face of it may seem fairly confusing, I discovered on closer examination that the great majority of the children seem to be deeply focused. The children are concentrating on their own personal interests and fascinations. They come into the room and “inhabit” it in a more exploratory, sensory and physical way than the accompanying adults (Løkken, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1994 [1945], p. 3). The installation has been created with the small children’s physical approach in mind. Objects and installations are size-appropriate. It is evident that many of them relate intuitively to this. The investigation to which they are invited is a form of play in which they have the opportunity to try things out, inspect things from different angles, crawl in and out of the installations, move back and forth and place themselves in different parts of the room. The small children’s inter-subjective leanings, their exploratory physical curiosity, are given room to develop. Even though it does not emerge so clearly on the video, the atmosphere in the room was thoroughly attentive and concentrated. Some of the children are very active with the film projects, rocking horses or shoes, whilst others restrict themselves to one or few things, and a few hold back and watch from an adult’s knee.

The installation art’s activation and decentring of the spectator (Bishop, 2005), gives the children an opportunity for free exploration of new things, space and relationships. An example could be the children who *bathe* in the film projection on the duvet. They crawl around, roll about and watch curiously as their own and others’ bodies vanish in the film light. Claire Bishop terms this form of installation experience “mimetic engulfment”, in other

words, a form of decentring in which the spectators loses their own physical boundaries and becomes one with the surroundings (Bishop, 2005, p. 82). As I have interpreted the video clips, most of the children concentrate deeply upon the things on which they choose to focus. They can switch between a personal focus and a common focus on the dancers or the music and often interact with each other regarding the things under exploration. Some children seem also to be affected by the event in a less directed way. They appear decentred and captivated by sensory impulses.

In the next section I will show that also the performers' perspective is highly focused and centred, but at the same time aware about what is happening in the room as a whole.

Performers' performative perspective

After the performance period of *Mamma Danser* in September 2011, I was particularly interested in investigating the performer's reflections on the multi-focused and decentred concept we had created. In conversations around what is involved in multi-focus events and in the reflections around the film clips, the performers clearly expressed that the improvisations were exciting and contained varied and good meetings between themselves and the children. They highlight the concentrated attention they activate as improvising artist and prefer to use the terms *multi listening* and *in-depth attention* rather than the term *multi-focus*, which for the performers is resonant of superficial and un-concentrated attention. Instead, they placed emphasis on the balance between a form of multi listening and a deep centred focus on their own actions, both the prepared and the spontaneously improvised ones. This is a question of the necessity to listen simultaneously towards themselves and towards the totality of everything that happens in the room. Both the dancers and the musician represent centred focal points for the public in the production. The performers also describe their own experiences as deeply focused, even though many things are happening at the same time.

The dancer, who is moving around freely in the installation room, has a sense of moving in and out of her own focus. She says:

In the beginning, when I'm standing and turning around on my own, I gather quite a lot of information from the room and from what happens when the children come in. I get a feel for how they are (...) I notice several different things that are happening but nevertheless I choose to focus on the one thing or the other (...) I have an overview of what's going on in the room but I have a strong focus on what I'm doing. There and then I could not tell you everything that happened along the way. Absolutely not.⁶

The room and the installation also provide impulses for the dancer. She can, for instance, suddenly break off a sequence in order to fill up an empty space in the installation. This action is a physical and spatial intuitive impulse, which creates a balance and dynamic in the whole. The musician functions more as a fixed part of the installation, surrounded by his drums and percussion instruments. He experiences a type of overview from his perspective and says:

I have a very clear focus on two things: primarily on what I am doing and what the dancers are doing. And then I have a kind of supplementary focus on everything that is going on with the kids and the rest of the public. If I am to manage to create something with artistic content, it is a good thing to have a focus on what she [the dancer] is doing: that is the best impulse for me.⁷

He experiences his contribution to the whole as a sort of counterbalance to the spread focus: as someone who can gather the threads together and offer a focus. The musician can shape a clear voice and in collaboration with the dancers can create strong and clear figures in the room. He can also relax and make room for other impulses; allow other events to receive a full focus. He can choose to maintain his focus on the dancer, both giving and receiving impulses, or in other sequences he can play in relation to something that a group of children is playing. In one video clip we see some children who are standing and swaying to the rhythms. This rhythm can be caught up and reinforced by the musician, but he can also shape the activity by increasing or calming down the tempo.

All the performers are able to control the public's focus in the room with the help of sounds and actions. They assume a loaded "physical mode"; they put out feelers in all directions and

⁶ The quotes are taken from a research interview with Tone Pernille Østern and Tor Haugerud in October 2011

have an intense sense of presence. The dance will easily be characterised and led by impulses given in the room: the rhythm, the children, and the objects. During performances that develop in a chaotic direction the performers make use of various strategies:

- a) **Selecting.** They select a cross-section (personal focus) of what is happening: a child, a group of children or each other (dancer, musician) and hold their focus there.
- b) **Listening.** They direct their focus inwards towards the artistic expression itself and maintain a focused attention towards their own work (personal focus).
- c) **Giving.** They intervene in the situation and provide some clear impulses that gather attention creating a common focus.

Both the dancer and the musician express a dramaturgic awareness when they consciously and in collaboration direct a series of events which often begins cautiously in their contact with the children and which develops during the course of the performance towards a number of different breaks or high-points in terms of energy. A physical sense of space, time, rhythm, tempo and repetition plays a leading role during the improvisation. The improvisation artists have trained an intuitive sense of dramaturgy and use a form of improvised physical “narrative” or composition in the development of the scene. They focus fully on this and it is here that they also often capture the children’s awareness. Mastering this form of artistic improvisation requires skills, awareness and a great aesthetic sensibility. This knowledge can be appreciated and highlighted both artistically and theoretically and does not preclude an interpretative and instrumental research perspective. I believe rather that the performative knowledge paradigm opens the possibility of uncovering new artistic knowledge.

The artist researcher’s performative perspective

Performative knowledge comes from artistic practice as I have shown in the previous section. When it comes to the performative knowledge of the researcher, I will try to summarize my own experiences with art research moving between interpretative, applied and performative perspectives.

Even though the audio-visual documentation in the above example functions as a fairly objective descriptive narrative, there is no doubt that I have made an interpretative selection of several (contradictory) levels. First, during my own filming I chose to follow the movements of the dancers in the room. I was experiencing a high degree of decentred attention, searching for a focus, and the choreography offered this focus in the seemingly chaotic and playful event. It was also interesting to observe how the dancers' choreographic pattern managed to adapt to the crowded room.

Secondly, working on the description of the video clip I chose to follow the actions of the little girl with the tulle skirt, as I realized that she was in "musical" contact with the event. When I describe her involvement, I interpret only what I see in the picture. I have thus focused on some events and missed out a great many other perspectives. I have selected one child and one performer for my description, all though there are maybe 20 children inside the picture frame. What I choose is of course the interaction that I am especially interested in examining. My interpretation has elements of a phenomenological approach, in which perceptual elements predominate. I interpret the interaction as "musical" in the sense that the girl relates rhythmically, swaying to the music and the movement, and that the tactile qualities of the tulle skirt and the red shoes stimulate her attention.

Thirdly, turning my attention to the social presence of the little girl's parents or caretakers I also see that she is located in a social tension between her adults, who are paying her full attention, the performers who are in contact with her through movement and glances, and the other children who are playing round her and at whom she is looking.

At last, my own experiences as artist, director and researcher in this project as a whole, are based on an eight weeks production process, a touring period of 135 performances all together, three versions of the production and a huge number of different films and documents. An answer to this multitude was to pick out a small piece of the whole, to find a focus and a starting point for the interpretative research.

As a framed and fixed event, the small video clip experience was a fragment which gave me the opportunity to focus and deepen my understanding. The opportunity to compare and correct my interpretation in relation to other perspectives has been possible to realize in

dialogue with the performers. In these dialogues my own decentred experiences in the observation of the actual event turned out to be more of a problem for myself as artist researcher than for the performers, and the children. The confusing experience of multi-focus is a question of being in the midst of action or being an outsider and observer. Being an academic researcher requires this kind of distance, but I will argue that important knowledge about the art experience is missed out when focusing exclusively from an outside perspective. Being an artist researcher must eventually allow for placing oneself in the midst of action, and trust that this is also a valid perspective. Focusing and de-focusing in different stages of the process and the performance event can be useful strategies in performative research.

Conclusion

In terms of research methodology, this study has shown that it is not only possible but also interesting to use both an applied instrumental approach (the development of an improvisational, interactive theatre form for small children), a traditional interpretative approach (analysis of data material) and a performative approach (creative and practical experience and knowledge) in the development of new knowledge about theatre for the very young. The methodological approach have been helpful in sorting out the many different perspectives of artistic research, but in the concluding reflection it might have decentred my own perspective and led me too far away from the artistic material. The too broad and maybe disconnected approach could be a weakness in this research design, but can possibly open a potential for future research.

On the basis of the performative perspective I have anyhow attempted to shed light on the artistic events from several angles, with the aid of theoretical perspectives, performer perspectives, and interpretation of the young children's bodily forms of expression. The decentred view that I employed as director and dramaturge was in conflict with the need for a focused researcher view, which meant that at one point I had difficulty seeing and interpreting what was happening. By consciously focusing and de-focusing in different phases of the process I eventually found an approach and analytical strategy that could bring

with it both artistic and theoretical dimensions. The movement between different research perspectives has also been productive and by this means I hope to allow a more diverse picture of this art process than what could be generated by the artistic event in itself.

From the broader perspective of art and theatre history, interest in an open, flowing and multi-focused form may be related both to the historical avant-gardist experiments with live installations, performance and happenings and to post-modern trends which today are often termed relational or interactive art. When these art forms are applied to children's theatre they are confronted both by a more educationally shaped tradition in which the interests of child learning and development are important and on the other side by an entertainment tradition in which it is expected that the children will have fun and enjoy themselves (Helander, 1998). The open and decentred art-form that has been explored in this project, do not fit well into neither the educational nor the entertainment tradition, but hopefully contribute to the field of art for the very young, and the knowledge production in this field. The project demonstrates and reflects the possibility of creating common artistic experiences between adults and children, in which both can take part in reciprocal interaction and improvisation.

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