

Looking for a Practice

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Essay, Praktisk kunskap

Uniarts, 2019

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DEAR READER,

The first couple of pages of this text was written (and read) as an open letter to my fellow PhD students taking the course Method and methodology and the teachers responsible for it. In it different topics and problems are touched upon that are then picked up and expanded later in the text. The sum of it is still very much a letter, to you and to myself. I am very grateful for your time in reading it and any sort of reply you might offer.

OPEN LETTER, JO'S DILEMMA

2019

"War artists, as I'm sure you all know..." was spoken at a keynote at the PARSE conference in November. No, we don't know, we have never heard of war artists. It's a UK thing apparently. We sometimes use the quote as an example of the gap between who the speaker think they are talking to and who their audience actually is and what they understand of the subject. It is a familiar feeling to me.

In class, we are a group of people with varying but specific skillsets and a mutual interest in understanding the nature of artistic research.

(Yes, you may know my classmates and teachers but let me reassure you; this is not gossip and will not be sensitive content to anyone but possibly myself. If it is we can readdress it, go back, change it, make another mistake. This is our privilege.)

It has happened a couple of times that when doubt is expressed in the class we are reassured that we shouldn't worry; things will fall in to place. Method, knowledge development and all the rest will become evident in our own artistic practice. This will provide the answer.

Moreover, we have all been chosen, out of many many applicants because we are interesting *artists*. We have all proven ourselves.

Only I am not. I have not.

If my work is who I am then I am a civil servant. Albeit of an unusual kind with much freedom to be creative and to test my own ideas. These ideas are not necessarily within that part of the creative industries usually called art.

So how can I conduct artistic research? Can one conduct artistic research without being an artist? Will it cause some sort of embarrassment in the artistic research community if I do?

These will be interesting questions for me. And scary of course, I have much at stake. I did not voice these questions in then, there in class. But I think they must be part of my thinking and writing about my research, or I will feel as if I am trying to get away with something that does not belong to me. The scary questions are a way to make this research unique to me, for me to own it. It may also be of interest to my peers who do not share it.

I can reason with myself and try the path of omission. My research¹ doesn't fit social sciences or the humanities; it is too practical and focused on my own productions. This could indicate that it belongs with artistic research.

I can look at where I am and take that as evidence; I have been accepted as a doctoral candidate in artistic research so the powers that be have decided that I belong in this class among the interesting artists.

...

Traditional research is accessible in the sense that anyone who can read and make sense of a theory has access to it. The text is the thing and out there for anyone to apply, mirror, modify or contradict. It is open source. It is part of the dissemination task of researchers to publish and make work accessible. In artistic research, I understand that the work has to be disseminated in such a way that it can be reviewed by peers. Not sure if peers refers to other artists of other artistic researchers, but certainly not everyone. There seems to be a filter bubble problem in this approach?

...

Some people in artistic research have problematized the kind of art produced within a research context, saying that research-art is its own category, that it communicates mainly with a research-context and less with the "real" art world.

I think it is meant as a critique but it is reassuring to me. A comforting thought, maybe I can do research-art if not "real" world art.

I can be happy not fully understanding things, it doesn't always cause frustration. Sometimes I'm ok with the penny taking its time to drop. Pragmatic me.

¹ *Dramaturgy for Participatory Practices*, looks at dramaturgical elements in LARP and Virtual Reality.

I guess I didn't realise I would have to be so interested in myself, to focus on my personal choices of method. It comes with trying to be authentic rather than objective I suppose. If scientific research aims for objectivity (a construct), I guess artistic research uses authenticity (also a construct?), awareness of one's directed gaze or perspective, the relations and positions that frame it.

...

I've read an article by Esa Kirkkopelto². He seems to argue that artistic research is the research conducted within artistic institutions. If by institutions he means (though perhaps not exclusively) art colleges then I'm home safe. I'm not sure that is what he means by it though.

I think his argument is more about trying to open up the field for artists not tied to an academic alma mater but to some other kind of institution, maybe even an artistic tradition as an institution, using the term in a much wider sense. Maybe I can borrow some of his words but I think I must draw the line at willfully misunderstanding and hijacking the whole argument for my own purpose.

He seems to make an argument for whatever is useful, for the institution and perhaps all of society. That is a very instrumental take on art that echoes how it is used, produced and talked about at my day job as a civil servant. Surely, it cannot be that easy.

...

Ralph Lemon³ advises us to make sure we get something out of it. Yes, it is a privilege to be a PhD student, but the answer to "what's in it for me" cannot be about being a good student. Tempting as it is.

Maybe this perspective is helpful. I think I know what the institution wants from me. (Experience of a new economic model, and some sort of access to studies on play and game theory).

What's in it for me, is not about the money (my salary is the same) but I wouldn't be here without the money. So what do I want from the institution? The space to do things in a context where such things are noticed. This may change.

² Kirkkopelto, Esa, Konstnärlig forskning som institutionell praktik, Vetenskapsrådets årsbok 2015 https://www.vr.se/download/18.2412c5311624176023d259fc/1555426697818/Aarsbok-KFoU_VR_2015.pdf

³ Visiting lecturer at Uniarts November 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Lemon

The things I want to do revolves around co-creativity, finding a formula for responsive dramaturgy, learning about how to stimulate agency. Fun things. For this I prototype in larp⁴ and VR to have some examples to look at. All in an effort to try to understand a dialogic form of storytelling and how to play together. These are my reasons for being here. It would be different doing this somewhere else.

Dialogic stories. Dialogue. This is what I say I'm interested in. But I haven't yet glanced at the forms my players generously filled in after taking part of the larp scenario. Maybe I'm not so interested in their input, maybe I'm afraid of what they might say.

I will assume that my identity as not-an-artist will be less important than the work I do, the methods I use. It would be a shame if the work had to suffer for my lack. In the past, I've been able to teach without being a teacher and to make television without being a tv-producer, I have hope.

THE NON-ARTIST

This was the start to a dialogue with myself and an open letter to my fellow PhD adventurers. It was prompted by the task for examination we were set by Juliette Mapp to describe a dilemma we'd encountered during the course and by a discussion with my supervisor Jaako Stenros. He kindly let me vent my anxieties and suggested that this question, can I do artistic research as a non-artist, might be an interesting one to work with. It is unavoidable to me and I hope it may be of some interest to others with a stake in artistic research too.

This of course it what one needs supervisors for. On my own I might have been so anxious to make up for my lacks and perform the part that I might have avoided the issue and overlooked this material that I have been given, trying to compensate for something that I have not. By talking to supervisors, teachers and peers, I have not only been given a most therapeutic recognition of this material but way to continue working and to be present and invested in this work. However, work isn't all therapy, and I'm looking to find how can I use the uniqueness of my position, the non-artist within artistic research, to bring something to the development of the work as well as to myself?

⁴ Live action role playing (sv. Lajv)

As no event and no shape entirely resembles another, so none is wholly different from another.(...) If our faces were not similar, we could not distinguish a man from a beast; if they were not dissimilar, we could not distinguish one man from another. All things hold together by some similarity; every example limps; and the comparison which is derived from experience is always weak and imperfect; yet comparisons always join at one corner or another.⁵ (Michel de Montaigne)

It has been pointed out to me that the dichotomy between artistic research and other kinds of research is partly one of my own invention. Social sciences and humanities use methods of self reflection and qualitative methods are more often than not subjective and do have a narrative voice present in the texts. Even the most traditional kind of scientific research has subjective and sometimes even esoteric aspects to it, and the concept of absolute objectivity has been critiqued by actor-network-theory. Borders are blurred. Trying to fix the borders between different areas of research isn't my objective but trying to understand my position as an artistic researcher is.

The position of the artistic researcher is a position of subjectivity. In the text above, I have used the word authenticity and I've kept it because a subjective viewpoint needs authenticity to be valid or it just becomes an empty pose or an ironic joke.

What in this subjective position, must I be aware of, take into account? Both regarding how it might direct my gaze, affect my work and myself. Upon reading the open letter in class I got the question if this position, being the odd fish, is it a method or a habit? I hope it can be a method whatever else it may be.

Henk Borgdoff talks about artistic research and differs between these three: research *on* the arts; research *for* the arts, research *in* the arts.

“The interpretative perspective (‘research on the arts’) is common to the research traditions of the humanities and social sciences which observe a certain theoretical distance when they make art practice their object of study. The instrumental perspective (‘research for the arts’) is characteristic of the more applied, often technical research done in the service of art practice; in the artistic process done in the service of art practice; this research delivers, as it were, the

⁵ Montaigne, Michel de, *Essays*, Book III, *On Experience*, Penguin Books, London, 1958, p 350

tools and the material knowledge that can then be applied in practice, in the artistic process and in the artistic product itself. In this case art practice is not the object of study, but its objective. And as we see, the place of artistic practice becomes more central to the research here.

We can justifiably speak of artistic research (‘research *in* the arts’) when that artistic practice is not only the result of the research but also it’s methodological vehicle.”⁶

From my perspective these definitions offer some much needed guidance, notice how he never mentions who performs the research but only talks about how the research is conducted and what it produces. By Borgdorff’s definition it is all about the work. So the non-artist, can do artistic research. Thank you Mr Borgdorff for solving my dilemma.

It does not help me with the question of how to use the position of the non-artist as a method however or give any specifics on what this perspective might bring. Let us have a look at one other perspective, directed gaze that is perhaps usable and useful. My default work-identity is as a civil servant. What, if anything, can the civil servant gaze show us about artistic research in dramaturgy for participatory practices...now, doesn’t that just roll off the tongue?

THE WORK AND THE OTHER WORK

The Artistic Research Project

Few things are as exiting to me as creating as much drama as possible for my character in a larp, or taking part in a game that turns my everyday life into a story of action and suspense. When it works it is thrilling. I have taken part of many a boring game though; sometimes my preparations as a player have been rewarded with only disappointment. This has made me curious about design, game mechanics and supportive narratives. What is it that gives a player a sense of agency, a space to maneuver within the fiction and the urge to do so? How is it triggered, how can design nurture it? How can players be supported to make their

⁶ Borgdorff, Henk, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research”, *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* Ed. Biggs, Michael & Karlsson, Henrik, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010, p. 47

contributions to the story without taking off in the wrong direction and getting the storyline derailed?

This is the starting point for my desire to look into dramaturgy for participatory practices. I've decided to make some trials with a short freeform larp, a scenario for 4 people. It is a séance, a setting surrounded by expectations and clichés for to guide the participants and give them some idea of how to act. The séance is the container for their input, they are asked questions and have to come up with the answers. There is a thin layer of fiction around the experience to support and suggest things for the participants to riff off, but mainly it is up to them. After a run the participants get to fill in a questionnaire of a few questions to try and hone in on the perceived sense of agency or lack thereof.

This séance will be translated into a VR-experience, same story-frame, same number of people. A lot more support and input in the immersive technology to react to. I'm hoping this will show a much stronger experience of agency and tell me something about how to twist and turn the motivational dials of the participants.

Looking at elements of immersive design as a set of dials on a mixing desk is a well known figure among larp- designers⁷. It is a thought model and pedagogical and creative tool to help make you aware of your preferences and choices available to you in the design process. It also helps larpers decide which event to sign up for.

If I get a lot of input from my players, I hope to furnish my mixing desk with a specific set of dials on agency.

Crossmedia Developer, Gävleborg

My other work is as a civil servant for the cultural department of Region Gävleborg (Gävleborg County Council), I am a developer within crossmedia⁸. There is a number of documents, ratified by our elected regional representatives, that regulate what we do at the cultural department but the most important is Regional kulturplan (The Regional Plan for Culture). This document clearly states what sort of art and cultural projects to promote and the

⁷ https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/The_Mixing_Desk_of_Larp

⁸ <https://www.regiongavleborg.se/kultur/verksamhet/crossmedia/>

desired societal effect this is meant to bring about. An instrumental view of arts and culture as means to create good living conditions for the citizens of the region.

*Regional Culture Plan Gävleborg 2019–2021 When the intrinsic value of art and culture meets social development.*⁹



One of the goals for crossmedia development is to:

- *further developing knowledge within immersive experiences (VR/AR/MR)* among the county's cultural actors to jointly explore new storytelling tools*¹⁰

This allows me to arrange workshops and create prototypes in VR. Understanding the conditions of this particular form of participatory storytelling practice is essential if dispersing it to among “the county’s cultural actors” is going to be useful. It is a happy situation that the prime directive for both my work and my other work overlap and I get to further my understanding of immersive experiences in both arenas. Lucky me.

PERVASIVE THINGS

Pervasiveness. I like pervasive games, pervasive stories that follow you from the screen, on the bus, to work and home again. I like when the narrative lets you keep a link to the fiction

⁹ <https://www.regiongavleborg.se/kultur/kulturplan-gavleborg/kulturplan-2019-2021/>

¹⁰ https://www.regiongavleborg.se/globalassets/kultur/regional-kulturplan-gavleborg/2019-2021/regional-kulturplan-gavleborg_2019-2021_engelska---digital-version.pdf p.25

throughout the day, transforming it. Like an augmented filter of story over work, commuting, doing chores, all that is IRL; it becomes life with the boring bits transformed.

Pervasiveness is normally a part of the design, you watch videos of the story, on your computer, get messages from characters on your phone, plan outings and activities together with your co-players etc. The fiction is designed to leak out from the platform where you first encountered it and stick with you as you move to the next platform whether that be digital or analog, it is meant to follow you around. A few years ago this form of storytelling was usually referred to as transmedia or crossmedia, but these are yesterday's buzzwords and as embarrassing to us now as Ipods or a low cut waistline on a pair of jeans.

Pervasiveness as a term can also be used to describe the effects on the participant's behavior and emotions triggered by the fiction, in participatory experiences these can be very similar to embodied memory.

One aspect of pervasiveness *in effect* often written about in articles on larp is "bleed". Bleed is when emotions triggered by something your larp-character experienced linger on after the larp is finished. This can take the shape of longing for fictional family, lovers or frenemies. Bleed is a sign of impact on the participant. The impact of participatory experiences (i.e. larp) is often significant and long lasting. The experienced larp designer knows the importance of making room for participants to deal with it, or even capitalize on it.

Sometimes things turn pervasive even though they are not designed to, or the impact can manifest in unexpected ways it is rather personal and a little unpredictable. I am currently taking part in a letter larp (Incendio, winter 2019/2020¹¹). This larp goes on for months and though my character and her correspondents don't really stay with me that much, the idea of corresponding in writing does. Therefore, it seems natural to me to express myself as if writing a personal letter, as was the start of this text. I tend to form sentences in letter-writing language, words meant for a recipient when I think. I wish it could come to you in a manila envelope, hand written in India ink for flavour.

A personal letter allows off-topic excursions and musings on vaguely related thoughts and intuition just as Montaigne's essay format does. Swedish poet and philosopher Hans Larsson also trod along this path in his book on intuition.

¹¹ <https://brevlotteriet.wordpress.com/>

Denna inre erfarenhetskälla är lika viktig för vetenskapliga undersökningar som den är i diktningen,...¹²

This inner source of experience is as important to scientific investigation as it is in poetry...¹³

These methods of reflecting on “both” (or “all”) rather than “either or” seem most constructive to me, and less of a fiction than formats that exclude such meanderings. Perhaps this letter-writing will eventually be part of a reciprocated correspondence of some sort, turning into a participatory investigation or practice if you will. Research *in* the arts...

STARLIGHT RUNNER – REGIONAL POLITICS - PROPAGANDA

Few people have capitalized on pervasive *storytelling* as well as Jeff Gomez and Starlight Runner¹⁴. Starlight Runner is a company that uses story world building as a way to strengthen brands and character identities. These can be stories for brands such as Disney or Coca Cola and sometimes even regions or small countries. By building a mythology that can be dispersed on various platforms in a transmedia strategy they create value that encourages the customer/audience to be loyal to a brand, and the citizen to behave and contribute to society. As if stories are hard wired into human DNA and by telling the appropriate story we act accordingly, like hardware running on the appropriate software.

Of course I have always believed that stories and art can do this, have this kind of impact. But it feels very uncomfortable all the same. Like...propaganda. A certain message to make us behave and think a certain way.

This shouldn't be a problem for me. I work with cultural projects from a political agenda. In the documents that regulate what my colleagues and I at the cultural department at Region Gävleborg do, it is very clear that it is to create value for the citizens of the region. In fact I

¹² Larsson, Hans, *Intuition, Några ord om diktning och vetenskap*, Dialoger förlag & Metod AB, Stockholm, p 81

¹³ Author's own transl.

¹⁴ <https://starlightrunner.com/>

get upset when the power and impact of cultural experiences and art is not taken seriously enough in development strategies or budget planning.

My particular region faces the same kind of problems as many other rural regions relying heavily on old industries and dealing with exodus of young people. Low statistics regarding higher education, high figures in unemployment, more men than women, addiction, mental health issues etc. The prognosis for Gävleborg is that every taxpayer will have support themselves and another 0.9 people in 2025¹⁵. Immigration of people who could, with little investment, be useful as regional workforce would be an economical salvation. Immigrants who can learn Swedish and the necessary skills to work in industries, in agriculture or as caretakers are much cheaper than children that need 20+ years of education and social investment to become taxpayers. Simple maths.

<https://www.regiongavleborg.se/regional-utveckling/forskning-och-samhallsmedicin/samhallsmedicin/>

In my daughter's school 25% of the kids 14-16ys voted for the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) in the latest school election. This suggests the political feeling among the citizens of Gävleborg towards immigrants is not as welcoming as it could be.

¹⁵ <https://www.regiongavleborg.se/regional-utveckling/fakta-gavleborg/befolkningsprognos/>

My neighbours, Dec 2019



In light of this the Starlight Runner strategy to storyfy people into a more desired behaviour becomes less scary and more appealing as I ponder the situation. After all, I'm a very good person, with the very best sort of opinions, what could possibly go wrong?

GOOD INTENTIONS

...for it would be strange to think that the art of politics, or practical wisdom, is the best knowledge since man is not the best thing in the world...¹⁶ (Aristotle)

I hope and believe that what we do at the Dept for Culture, Region Gävleborg is somehow different to the Starlight Runner transmedia strategy for disenfranchised regions. I hope and believe that the Starlight Runner transmedia strategy is not propaganda. However, I'm not certain and have no real evidence what makes it different. I am hoping further studies will give some leads on this.

I guess I have a nagging suspicion that the Starlight Runner method of storyfying people in to desired behaviors is close to repeating the pattern even by it's inverting it. As Hanna Arendt points out this is a great risk of any packaged message. Marx turns Hegel on his head but creates a Hegelian view of history or nihilism is simply the mirror image of conventionality.¹⁷

So my being comfortable and pragmatic about not understanding is a risk of laziness and lack of thinking. If I am happy with being two and not one with myself as Socrates stipulated, I run the risk of the pattern of un-reflection and simply use the results of my research instrumentally.¹⁸

To Arendt real thinking is not about producing results or knowledge but about searching for meaning and about unrelenting questioning¹⁹. Real thinking is of course difficult to explain, not an easy sell to voters and therefore problematic in politics and government.

If my PhD work and my other work both go splendidly, I will help build a better understanding of how to make people engage and to want to engage in a kind of storytelling that can possibly affect their behavior even after the experience itself, due to bleed and other pervasive effects.

¹⁶ Aristoteles, *The Nichomacean Ethics*, book VI, paragraph 7

¹⁷ Arendt, Hanna, "Tänkande och moraliska överväganden", *Tanke Känsla Identitet*, Red. Holm, Ulla M, Mark, Eva, Persson Annika, Anamma Böcker AB, 1997, p 59-60

¹⁸ Ibid p 64

¹⁹ Ibid . 48-49

Honing the tools or adding dials to the designers mixing desk would be ‘research *for* the arts’ according to Borgdorff. The results of research for and in the arts can be used more or less directly in my work for Region Gävleborg.

My research project is about understanding the most powerful, most impactful form of storytelling I know, hone the tools and then use them, responsibly of course. Ms Responsible, me.

As a civil servant of an unusual kind with much freedom to be creative and to test my own ideas and as an artistic researcher with a proximity to regional politics I’m in a position to both invent and implement. I shall try to not cause harm along the way and realise that I cannot be the only one monitoring this dual process and that some sort of audit on both lines of work will have to be part of my percentage seminars and any other dissemination of the work (both/either). I shall go back to my supervisors and consult with them on how to best address this.

By bringing in the civil servant practice into the artistic research I might find that method, knowledge development and all the rest will become evident. Things might fall into place. At least I have hope.

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