

6 Sisters Academy

Radical Live Intervention into the Educational System

Gry Worre Halberg

Sisters Academy is a performance experiment in search of a society and educational system that values the sensuous and the poetic. Initiated by the Sisters Hope—consisting of ‘poetic twin sisters’ Anna Lawaetz and Gry Worre Hallberg—Sisters Academy consists of performers, set-, sound- and light-designers and a documentary and graphic team from various backgrounds. Together we work from a performance-methodology of developing a ‘poetic self’.

We propose that the poetic self is something that we construct in between our everyday-self and the otherworldly, sensuous universes that we create in our imagination. We are interested in how the gap between the imagined and



Figure 6.1 Gry Worre Hallberg embodying the Headmistress at Sisters Academy #1, Odense, Denmark, 2014. Photography Diana Lindhardt.

the embodied can be narrowed and brought almost to zero. The poetic self is not a character, it is not a fiction, it is our inner inherent poetic potential that we might not unfold in our everyday life but that we discover, give an image and donate our flesh to. By doing so, we experience an expanding spectrum of possibilities, new spaces in which we can be. We don't change; we liberate new potential; we expand. My own poetic self is ‘The Sister’, often stepping into ‘The Headmistress’ when we manifest Sisters Academy as a radical intervention into the education system.

Manifesto of the Sisters Academy

The End is a New Beginning: In 2008 the financial world cracked, leaving a gap for a new paradigm to emerge. We regard the crack as a major opportunity.

The New Paradigm: We wish to take this opportunity and support the transition into the new, by living and breathing in the cracks.

The Sensuous Society: We will draw from the aesthetic dimension as a source of inspiration to inform the dawning world. We will call it: The Sensuous Society.

The Academy

The Sisters Academy is a school of an imagined future world made present today. As Sisters Academy we have temporarily taken over the leadership of a series of Nordic upper secondary schools.

Our first manifestation was funded by the Danish Art Council and took place in Odense 2014: 200 students and 20 teachers were placed under the leadership of the two ‘unheimliche’ twin sisters. Through immersive strategies we transform the space of the school. Everything from classrooms, hallways and bathrooms are transformed physically through set-, light-, and sound-design in order for the participants (both students and teachers) to investigate their own poetic self in an intensified time-space. On our blog (sistersacademy.dk/blog) reflections from participating students, teachers, performance staff and visitors are available. One of these is from English and Danish teacher Peter Eriksen, who reflects on his development of a poetic self:

It began with the sound of the soothing song of the black bird and its hectic, laborious upbringing of two or more broods of bickering hatchlings per summer. That was my image of the teacher I am becoming (willingly

or not), and a suitable poetic background to the challenge of entering Sisters Academy.

(sistersacademy.dk/blog, 19.01.16)

Equally, Sisters Academy take over all lessons. Maths might start by an exercise on 'how to sense Pi', history might be initiated by sharing the dreams of the night to explore collective unconscious patterns. Sisters Academy, therefore, not only emphasizes and amplifies the value of creativity in upper secondary schools, but also seeks to demonstrate how aesthetics, as in a sensuous mode of being and being together in the world, is fundamental to all other subject fields. Peter Eriksen describes this new process of working with students in the classroom:

I met my students as a teacher at the Sisters Academy for the first time today. I introduced myself as my poetic self and tried to stay true to the communicative characteristics related to this. Not too much instruction, focusing instead on relating what was interesting seen from my point of view. This led to a class exercise, inviting students to try my method—listening, repeating, passing on fragments of poetry—in turn, also adding to the shared material on their own. Next, groups of students worked on collecting their own material, coming up with fragments of song lyrics, film quotes, sayings, etc. All of this without writing anything down: listening, repeating, committing to heart. On my instructions, the groups worked on forming their new material into a shared song, belonging to them, based on their shared material.

(sistersacademy.dk/blog, 19.01.16)

In Sisters Academy there is no audience, only different levels of participation: those who perform as 'Sisters staff', teachers and students at the actual school, and visitors. As Sisters Hope is also a movement, everyone who encounters our universe may eventually be integrated as Sisters staff. Our interactive design and our immersive and interventionist strategies, which establish our universe, all aim at democratizing the aesthetic dimension.

Sisters Academy is therefore the school of an imagined future society where the sensuous and poetic mode of being is at the centre of all action and interaction. We are seeking to construct this future world in the present moment.

Manifesto of the Sisters Academy: How?

Performance Experiments: We have no way of answering the question 'how?', because we have not lived it. What we do have is the possibility

to explore it through performance experiments. By putting our flesh to the idea. Embodying visions to explore what the future could be. While we explore, we carve the path.

Space Change: The changing of space is crucial; we reconstruct spaces in ways that require us to navigate the world differently. Like bodies swallowed by the sea we are alienated from being upright legs walking the ground beneath our feet. Instinctively, our bodies adjust to the fluidity of the water. Try to survive. Take in breath. When we change space, we liberate new potential.

Impact: The idea of a sensuous society is a radical premise that changes the DNA of society. That changes everything. Through immersive performance strategies we change the spaces in which we live and establish a new set of rules that we must all play by. The body immerses into this universe, and knowledge will manifest in the flesh of the 'players' and evoke new ways of being and acting.

Immersion and Interaction

In taking over, occupying and transforming the spaces of the everyday schools. Sisters Academy operates a strategy of immersion. In his investigation of installation art, curator Nicolas De Oliveira, et al. (2003) links immersion to the concept of 'escape'—proposing that everyday life is put behind us as we immerse ourselves into an otherworldly space that becomes a parallel level of reality based on the sensuous. Similarly, Rosendal Nielsen puts it like this, as he analyses an immersive performance art piece, 'the involvement of perception and consciousness in an "extra-everyday-lively" world' (2007, 113, author's translation).

Nielsen categorizes three dimensions often at play in otherworldly universes: 1) spatial, and relating to our understanding of the space; 2) temporal, and relating to our experience of suspense; and 3) emotional, and relating to identification. The spatial dimension, which is linked to immersion, is highly dominating in the immersive performance spaces of Sisters Academy, as being present in the space and allowing us to exercise presence is more important than suspense and narrative structure.

Once taken over by Sisters Academy, the whole school is *immersed* into an otherworldly atmosphere that activates the senses and allows us to think and feel radically differently from everyday life. The toilets might be pink and filled with a low sound of humming, a classroom might have been turned into a forest and if you go to the leader of the school, she will greet you in an office filled with stuffed animals, sweet drinks, stamps, typewriters and fur hats.



Figure 6.2 Grand ceremony on the last day of Sisters Academy #1, Odense, Denmark, 2014. Photography Diana Lindhardt.

The universe is interactive in the sense that once you are at the school, whether you are perceived as a student or teacher, you leave your everyday persona behind to explore your potential poetic self while investigating how we can evoke and activate the senses and emotions to deepen the learning experience. The universe is interventionist in the sense that we will often intervene into everyday life contexts, using art to argue the need for the aesthetic dimension to be an integrated part of everyday life—not something exclusive and autonomous.

Manifesto of the Sisters Academy: Why?

The Sensuous Society? The economic system that has largely governed and dominated Western society and rational thought since the industrialization is not sustainable. The current ecological and economic crisis demonstrates how it has led to a fundamental de-enchantment of the lifeworld of modern people.

Aesthetic Interventions: In opposition to the economic milestone stands the artistic or rather aesthetic. Artistic output is the quintessence of an

ultimate aesthetic mode of being in the world. The notion of a sensuous society reshapes the role of art and artistic practice. In a Sensuous Society we need to democratize the aesthetic mode of being to overcome the longing and suffering that its general absence outside the art system creates.

Radical Intervention

Sisters Academy is therefore rooted in performance art, pedagogy and activism. We do not only immerse, we also interact, and we do so as a radical intervention into our everyday lives. We seek to change our experience of everyday life.

In this way our approach has a very clearly articulated social agenda. When we take over the leadership of a school, it should be perceived as a radical intervention into the educational system. But those of us who share co-presence in the space also influence and thereby intervene into each other through our every interaction. One could argue that this is life—that life is always like that. Within the space of the Sisters Academy, however, presence is intensified as we have stepped out of our everyday selves to explore new modes of being and being together. The ambience of the space evokes and supports this openness and curiosity. The Sisters Academy inserts the aesthetic dimension deep into the values and premises of education, making this the most important and fundamental factor from which the school is governed.

For two weeks the school is transformed as artists perform as new staff members. They embody a framework of sensuous and poetic inspiration for the regular teachers, inviting them to think and feel about their practice in a way that is different from their everyday teaching. In this way they enable the students to experience profoundly different modes of teaching and learning. Another reflection on the blog describes the experience of this intervention from a teacher's perspective:

In the process of finding my place in this strange as of yet non-existing universe, it struck me that the alienation I face is to some degree parallel to that of our average student at the school I normally teach: the language, the roles, the expectations, the unpredictability, all contribute to an at times stressful environment that we as teachers find natural and uneventful while our students constantly need to adapt and develop while striving to integrate it into their way of studying. I intend to search for the link between the poetic inspiration of black bird abilities and a teacher's toil and moil [. . .] At this point, I have no guarantee I will succeed—as is the case every day for many of our students.

(sistersacademy.dk/blog, 19.01.16)

The sensuous society is no utopia and the idea of the school as a sensuous space is no utopia either. We amplify the aesthetic and the sensuous as these have been under-prioritized since the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. We explore the potential through performance laboratories where we put our flesh to the idea in the live moment. We do it through interventionist practices where we engage in already existing systems. We aim at long-term impact by working proactively with strategies that continuously remind those who were present of the potential unfolded.

Many of the teachers who have participated in our process are now involved on a deeper level in Sisters Academy and will also unfold their practice with the rest of the Sister staff when we manifest in Sweden. Our world is full of examples such as these, and we are continuously exploring new ways for the singular live event to have long-lasting impact—to bring this future into the present.

Manifesto of the Sisters Academy

Poetic Revolution: The road to the Sensuous Society is carved with poetic revolution and poetic revolutionaries taking the necessary interventionist steps.

No Utopia: Sensuous Society is no utopia. Sensuous Society is a framework to explore the radical idea of the aesthetic dimension, the sensuous and the poetic as the highest values of society.

References

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7 One-to-One Performance

Who's in Charge?

Sarah Hogarth and Emma Bramley

I felt that I surrendered some control to her; more than I normally would perhaps, but still not much. I was quite closed and she seemed to work with what I gave. Did that make me in control?

(Spectator/participant. Control 25)

Taking place in 2014, *Control 25* was Liverpool's first one-to-one performance festival. As curators we (Sarah and Emma) invited both established and emerging artists to work with us to create twenty-five new one-to-one performances that would examine the nature of authorial control within the art form. In this practice-based reflection we explore the question of who's in charge—spectators, artist or artwork—in one-to-one performance.

We were interested in the capacity one-to-one performance has in blurring the boundaries of the performer and spectator relationship and allowing spectators/participants to become, as Harvie (2012, 54) puts it, both the *producers* and the *consumers* of the work. Our intention was to produce a festival that invited spectators/participants to co-create their experiences by taking on different roles that would demand various levels of control. This was expressed in marketing material that invited spectators/participants to *surrender, share or take control*, a tag line intended to highlight the variety of ways in which it was possible to interact with these works. To promote the notion of control further we divided the twenty-five performances into four routes—Remote, Birth, Pest and Passport—that described not only the themes and content of the work but also the level of potential risk that the performances offered in terms of audience interaction. By ranking the routes, we wanted to draw spectators/participants attention to the varying scales of control that they could choose from; by selecting a route and purchasing a ticket, they were from the beginning asked to make a decision about how they wanted to participate.

Spectators/participants might, therefore, select to pursue one of the gentler routes, either *Remote* or *Birth* control, which were marketed as *playful, familiar* and *everyday*. Here the invitation often placed the spectator in the role of the *observer, witness, confidante, detective*, roles that generally allowed spectators/participants to *retain* control and collaborate intellectually with the work or