

## **Transformative Impact**

### Art-based research on Sisters Academy

#### **Abstract**

Are people transformed by physical participation in performance-universes? And in continuation: Can we change education and the world we live in by exposing teachers and students to radically different modes of being exposed through this method?

As part of Sisters Hope, I create interventions in the shape of performance-universes at educational institutions. This proposed project allows us to study the transformative impact of a series of *Sisters Academies* in 2014 and 2015.

The project is based on the following five observations and hypotheses:

- 1) According to Critical Theory, the economic system has governed our mode of being since the Industrialization. This project suggests that the current economic crisis comprises an opportunity to establish a different paradigm. Furthermore, the project suggests that the aesthetic sphere, where the world is experienced through senses and emotions, may come to govern our mode of being after the crisis. Thus, one aim of the project is to explore this sensuous mode as an alternative approach to being in the world, an approach I call ‘the sensuous society’. This society is no utopia, but a radical example of an alternative world order that I explore through a series of performance experiments.
- 2) Sisters Academy is one such experiment, and is the proposed school in this imagined sensuous society. The educational setting was chosen because of its vast potential for societal change.
- 3) The applied performance method, ‘live and relational fictional universes’, is a relatively new method, and the present project will expand our knowledge of the method’s transformative potential and possible errors.
- 4) The project will combine a phenomenological and a discourse analytical approach in order to answer a range of questions, including:
  - a. Is the transformation real or just as imaginary as the spaces?
  - b. Will it end with the imaginary universe?
  - c. If the imaginary universe is merely an escape from everyday life, can the transformative potential be more than an illusion? Or will the Academy in fact have a lasting transformative effect on the participants?
- 5) As the project is art- and practice-based it will also involve a methodical examination and discussion of my own position both as a practitioner and a researcher, as well as the possibilities and challenges of this dual position. The key to realize the innovative potential of the sensuous mode of being, however, is that the data is collected while the participants are in that mode – which presupposes that the researcher is present in the situation. Thus, in order to be able to collect the data, the researcher must also be in the mode. This calls for the development of an analytical tool that can operate from within, and transport data out of, the fictional universe.

## **Aims of the project**

I aim to examine:

*Whether and how the narrative framework of the performance-universe of Sisters Academy directs the imaginary world and thus the bodily engagement of the participants, and what qualities the imaginary world must have to produce a lasting transformative impact?*

Over the last couple of years, I have become engaged in a new movement to use fiction in the framing of performance art works that I call *live and relational fictional universes*: Open fictional narratives are embodied by the performers and other participants in framed spaces, which results in a sense of being in a parallel, yet very real, universe<sup>1</sup>. These operate as '*spaces-in-between*', a term inspired from ritual theory and the idea of the liminal phase (Van Gennep) – a 'between and betwixt' (cf. Turner) mode of being allowing a sensuous experience. This state is often used to describe the artistic experience: Bourriaud borrows Marx's term 'interstice' to describe relational art works, and theatre studies labels the between-and-betwixt as 'transitional' and 'transformative' (cf. Féral, Fischer-Lichte). I define these spaces-in-between as spaces where the premises of everyday life are - temporarily - put on hold, and an aesthetic, sensuous, liminal and potentially (Müller-Scholl) transformative experience is generated.

However, my hypothesis is that the potential transformative impact depends on the quality of the imaginary world and its ability to evoke the participants' longings and desires, and to inspire them to act on the experiences within the universe even after the closure of the spaces-in-between.

By imaginary world, I refer to the world that emerges within the minds of the participants (Wihstutz, Huppauf and Wulf), and I believe that it is informed by a combination of different strategies: The most important are the narrative framestory, the immersive installation, the performers who embody the narrative and the possibility of interaction.

The case material will consist of three confirmed manifested Sisters Academies during 2014-2015.

### **Case material**

- Sisters Academy at HF & VUC, FLOW in Odense, DK, March 2014
- Sisters Academy at Myndlistaskolinn in Reykjavik, IS, August 2014
- Sisters Academy at Qeqqani Ilinniarnertuunngorniarfik in Nuuk, GL, June 2015

In the manifestations, the founders of Sisters Academy, namely Sisters Hope (alias PhD-fellow Anna Lawaetz and myself) will participate in the roles of the twin sisters Coco and Coca Pebber, and take over the leadership of three upper secondary schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Performance groups such as SIGNA (DK) and Punchdrunk (UK) can be considered pioneers within this genre.

The first manifestation is funded by the Danish Art Council and will take place at FLOW in Odense. 200 students and 20 teachers will be under the leadership of the two ‘unheimliche’ twin sisters of Sisters Hope. Math 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. Thus, Sisters Academy not only emphasize and amplify the value of the creative subjects in upper secondary education, but is an experiment where the aesthetic and sensuous mode of being is the very basis of every subject and the dna of the school. For a deeper insight into this difference e.g. see the latest rapport from OECD<sup>2</sup>: “Arts for Art’s sake? The Impact of Arts Education”, 2013.

### **Theory**

The project is rooted in Critical Theory, and Sisters Hope was established as a critique of the global socio-economical system that has dominated since the Industrialization. Economic premises such as efficiency, duty, and discipline have dominated everyday life in Western society, and been accepted as the primary mode of being. However, the economic logic is not sustainable, as evidenced by the current ecological and economic crises, and this logic has lead to a fundamental disenchantment of the life-world of modern man, as argued by Weber and the early Frankfurt School.

One alternative to the economic system is the artistic or rather aesthetic. As defined by Baumgarten and the aesthetic philosophy following him (e.g. Kant, Nietzsche, Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer), art is the quintessence of an aesthetic mode of being in the world. Based on Baumgarten, educational researcher Ken Robinson defines the aesthetic experience as one where the senses are operating at their peak. Thus, the aesthetic dimension serves as a key source of inspiration in a sensuous society where the aesthetic mode of being is at the center of all action and interactions and of societal structures.

The French sociologist and phenomenologist Maffesoli supplements the outset in Critical Theory by arguing that we are already witnessing a re-enchantment of the world through the activation of the aesthetic mode of being on different stages of everyday life. I understand the performance-universes to strive at intensifying such a re-enchantment, not at least by helping participants to perceive their everyday life in a new light within an otherworldly frame. Sisters Academy is such an intervention into the everyday life context of the educational institution, potentially creating change from within.

For my analysis, I will apply Foucault’s discourse analysis to examine the narrative, because Foucault set out to understand the profound impact on narratives. Furthermore, I will create a phenomenological research design by drawing on Merleau-Ponty to study whether and how the narrative affects the imaginary world and thus the participants’ embodied experience. To bridge the gap between the analysis of the process and the impact of the Academies, I shall develop a new art-based analytical tool to grasp that which is sensed and felt by the participants: By mapping the perceived, I aim to peek into the imaginary to study how this affects their being in the world. However, I am aware that their minds are not fully accessible.

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<sup>2</sup> Centre for Eductioanal Research and Innovation.

Thus, when I analyze my material, I will apply psychoanalytical tropes to identify ‘slips’ (Freud, Lacan, Žižek), and will be mindful of the articulated (root) metaphors (Turner) because of what they may reveal of the imaginary world of the participants.

### **Method**

According to certain epistemological traditions, a line can be drawn between practical and theoretical knowledge. The craftsman embodies his knowledge whilst the knowledge of the scientist is research-based. However, there is a growing awareness of the value and potential of studying your own (research) practice (e.g. O’Brien, McNiff). Thus, the dichotomy between artistic practice and academia is slowly eroding. New sites of learning appear where different practitioners interact in spaces that transcend the boundaries between art and academia. The present project subscribes to this new understanding of knowledge production.

In the proposed project, I will have a dual, and potentially challenging, role as both art practitioner and academic. A researcher studying one’s own practice is very close to the object of analysis, i.e. a monistic position. This position holds definite advantages, not least direct access to the object of research, but it also holds challenges and raises questions, one of the most important being: *How can a practitioner uphold the required academic objectivity?* Inspired by Rorty’s pragmatism, Lehmann suggests a position as a ‘pragmatic dualist’ for the study of your own practice. Lehmann claims that it is possible to be both an ‘experiencing practitioner’ and an ‘analyzing researcher’, but not simultaneously, because the two modes of perception can not co-exist (“*You can’t reflect on the trance while you are in it*” p. 266, 2002, my translation).

Even so, I have found that I do reflect while I perform my artistic practice, and that my subsequent analyses are based on these in-situ reflections. Furthermore, in Sisters Academy, we actively apply a ritual structure (rites of passage) that includes a post-liminal phase, which is a reflective phase where the participants digest and translate the experiences within the liminal space-in-between into everyday life. Bogh and Tygstrup argues that even though the distinction between the craftsman’s embodied knowledge and the scientist’s purely research-based knowledge is convenient, “knowledge-generating instructions today are engaged in creating spaces for more complex encounters, spaces in which no clear-cut distinction between embodied and conceptual knowledge and within which inquiry and research feed from both practical and theoretical sources” p. 103, 2011.

Furthermore, the key to realize the innovative potential of the sensuous mode of being, is that the data is collected while the participants are in that mode – which presupposes that the researchers is present in the situation. Thus, in order to be able to collect the data, the researcher must also be in the mode.

This calls for a turn away from the researcher-practitioner distinction, and means we need to develop an analytical tool that can operate from within, and transport data out of, the fictional universe.

The concrete tools for data collection during the academies include logbooks, diaries and an unmanned confession booth equipped with a camera. The aim is to identify a total of 15 informants selected based on their response to the Academy’s approach, and will encompass three teachers (one positive, one neutral and one negative) and

two students (one positive, one negative) from each of the three schools.

### **Perspectives and relevance**

The study of the transformative impact of fictive parallel universes will lead to several innovative approaches to measure this impact:

1. The project combines discourse analysis and phenomenology, two approaches that are seemingly rarely used in combination – the typical mode seems to be to apply either a phenomenological, or a discourse analytical, approach. I will examine whether and how the discursive narrative frame affects the (phenomenologically recorded) experience and mode of being of the participants.
2. The project will comprise a systematic study of both the notion of a sensuous society and what this means, and also of the value in experimenting with a new educational paradigm, in this case the ‘school of a sensuous society’, i.e. Sisters Academy.
3. The methodological study of my own dual role as practitioner and a researcher and the question of how to do art-based research will be addressed and evaluated continuously. The key contribution of this project may well turn out to be the development of analytical tools that:
  - a. allow the researcher to study a process while taking part in it at the same time, and
  - b. enable us and future researchers to collect data during transformative events.

The project fills a gap and is both interdisciplinary and international.

### **Network and international contacts**

I have established a solid national and international network of research programs, artists and individual scholars that are familiar with, and have expressed their wish to contribute to, the project, including:

- The research program ‘Cultural Transformations’ at Arts, Aarhus University
- Sara Berg, Director of the Life Beyond-project of Umeå University
- Ingibjörg Jóhannsdóttir, head of Art Educations at the Iceland Academy of Fine Arts.
- Donatella Bernadi, Professor, Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm.
- Gerald Lidstone, Goldsmiths, Director of the Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship and Deputy Head of the Drama Department.
- Professor Tore Kristensen (Transformation Economy, Department of Marketing, CBS)
- I have established a wide-ranging network established through the forums I have co-founded, which for example includes the Theatrum Mundi network and here within amongst others the professors Richard Sennett (NYU and LSE), Saskia Sassen (Columbia University), Ricky Burdett (Director of LSE cities).
- Performance Study international, PSi, and the North Atlantic cluster core-group.
- SA Advisory Board, comprising 1, 2, 3, etc.

- Anne Mette W. Nielsen, ph.d. scholar, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen.
- Erica Fischer-Lichte, professor, Inst. für Theaterwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin.
- Helen Carr, professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature Goldsmiths, London.
- Henrik Flygare, Head of Department, HF & VUC FYN Odense, FLOW.
- Henrik Hermansen, Head of Secretariat, Department of management, politics and philosophy, Copenhagen Business School.
- Ida Krøgholt, senior lecturer, ARTS, University of Aarhus.
- Lotte Darsø, senior lecturer, the Department of Education, University of Aarhus.
- Marie Lind, teachers' representative, HF & VUC FYN Odense, FLOW.
- Marianne Ping Huang, Associate Dean, Arts, University of Aarhus.
- Ole Fogh Kirkeby, professor, Department of management, politics and philosophy, Copenhagen Business School.

Because the proposed project requires that I establish and participate in a number of transformative events myself, I propose to undertake the project as a part-time endeavor from 15 December 2013 to 14 December 2018.

## Tentative project plan (2013 – 2018)

### 2013 - 2014: PHASE I. Initiation and data collection

**2013:** Overview and mapping of existing research within the field of study. Begin development of discourse analytical and phenomenological research design, including a methodological framework that addresses my dual position as (art-based) researcher and practitioner. This work continues into the spring of 2014.

**2014:** Manifestation of Sisters Academy #1 (Odense, DK) and #2 (Rekjavik, IS). Collection of data.

**Result:** Development of a provisional art-based, phenomenological research design and discourse analytical theoretical framework to begin to understand the novel data of fictional performance-universes and their potential transformative impact. Findings will be presented in an international journal (e.g. Nordic Theatre Journal) and at the International Federation for Theatre Research Conference 2014.



### 2015 - 2016: PHASE II. Data collection, international perspectives. Initial analysis

**2015:** Manifestation of Sisters Academy #3 (Nuuk, GR) as part of PSI: Fluid States #19. Continued collection of data and refinement of research design.

**2016:** Visiting scholar at InterArt, Berlin supervised by Prof. Fischer-Lichte. Topics: the use of fictional strategies and the claimed liminal and transformative potential of the space-in-between in the juxtaposition between phenomenology and discourse analysis.

**Result:** Thorough examination of the influence of the narrative frame (the discourse) on the imaginary world of the participants and an in-depth discussion on what qualifies as actual transformation within the fictive performance-universes. Results will be presented in an international journal (e.g. A Journal of Performance and Art) and at the Performance Studies International Conference # 19 and #20.



### 2017 - 2018: PHASE III. Analysis and production of thesis

**2017:** Analysis. 2 months' stay at NYU (supervised by Prof. Sennett) to present and hopefully inject my research and findings into relevant international equivalents.

**2018:** Analysis. Write the dissertation.

**Result:** The findings will be presented to a range of fields with the aim to inject the concept into (learning) practices everywhere. Final results will be presented in an international journal (e.g. Substance) and at a selected Theatrum Mundi conference and the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) 2018.



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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U> (Changing educational paradigms, Ken Robinson, RSA animate).