

Paper for symposium: *Forthcoming Materials of Practice*, 2014

Leaving the Darkroom – Notes on materiality, the document and hybridity

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this open investigation of ***Forthcoming Materials of Practice***. I am here today first and foremost as an artist and to speak about how an artistic practice can consist of several elements and several roles, and most importantly: that the artist can speak for her or himself. This is my point of departure, attempting to find connecting points between materiality, the document and hybridity –as a sort of backbone for this talk. The images you see behind me are a mixture from my research archives spanning several projects and years.

When I received the invite to come here to Edinburgh to reflect upon ***Forthcoming Materials of Practice*** – I experienced a rupture in an editing flow of a new film project I am currently working on. The simple gesture of shifting my gaze from the timeline of the editing programme – to check my iCal, which by the way is also on the same screen, showed an odd relationship between time and space, practice and praxis.

The small shift in looking at a slightly different angle within the same virtual space took me to another corner of my practice without any physical movement beyond that of tapping the keyboard of my computer. You could argue that this happens all the time in a thought process, where slight shifts bring you here and there, and the immateriality of this is something not even to be noticed. How do you then discuss a rupture in terms of a material practice? Or can a complexity of ruptures create materiality in relation to practice? Here I am, identifying myself as an artist with a holistic practice in the sense of several positions embedded in one body and practice, be it filmmaking, pedagogy, organisation or exhibition making and yet here I am still feeling a rupture of the flow.

“We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” as John Berger states in his seminal text *Ways of Seeing*.¹ So is it the relationship between things, gestures, roles and so forth that we experience as becoming ruptured? If relations can be the foundation of artistic practice, not to mention aesthetic discourse, we would logically have to consider relationships as a possible artistic material.

But before going down this road, or any other, we must critically consider every description, in fact the very act of description in itself. Calling something by a particular name can also create a comfort or a space for identification that makes it easier for others to grasp – what are you, what is the working methodology, do you belong to a particular hierarchy and so forth. A system of organisation and interpretation occurs as soon as classification enters the stage, however basic it may be. Who has the power to name something, and which tradition do we consider when talking about classification? The potentiality of an artistic practice should be considered much greater than the labels that it can be granted. This requires that

¹ Berger, John. *Ways of seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972

we approach it by means of holistic thinking and not in terms of a genealogy of western thought.

I come from a background in analogue photography – meaning hours on end spent in the darkroom. Along with having a specialised approach to materials, chemicals and mathematical processes, this prompts thinking around the processing and appearance of an image that has been detached from the place and time it was taken. It is only materialised by the body and mind that carefully calculates the time of exposure, the rhythmic movement of the chemical trays and the process of rinsing and drying. I often left the darkroom with fingers drenched in chemicals and a smell of fixer lingering for days. Someone mentioned that you could clearly measure chemicals in blood samples taken from older photographers, but I insisted on not wearing gloves in order to be in touch with the sensitive material. An allergic reaction eventually occurred, so I could not stay in the darkroom and had to leave this particular physicality behind. In turn, this would lead me to a Master of Fine Arts programme in an art academy that takes pride in an interdisciplinary approach.

I am no philosopher, but I am inspired by the clarity with which philosophers can present complex matters in terms of language. I am not a theoretician, but I do enjoy digging into the thought processes and claims made by others. The list goes on, and somehow I have established an artistic practice that contains elements of the before mentioned through an interdisciplinary approach. Rather than creating a dichotomy between the specialised and the interdisciplinary, or the material and the immaterial – I am interested in investigating the space they share.

Artist, curator, author and professor Marion von Osten has mentioned a Russian Constructivist approach when speaking about her own practice,² since the constructivists did not discriminate the positions and activities we have come to think of as different. She claims that it is a matter of tradition and which genealogy you insert yourself into. She is referring to a second wave feminist art tradition, where self-organisation and own exhibition making challenged the dominant perception of the artist, based upon a 19th Century male genius model. One of the reflections she brings up is that inhabiting different and multiple roles comes out of a necessity to pend between multitudes of “possible articulations” in the field of art.

I would like to call this position a hybrid practice. The basic definition of hybridity is a biological mixture between two species, which can be seen on both a material level as well as on a practical level. In this case I’m applying the notion of hybridity to describe a multiplicity embedded in a practice – in this instance an artistic practice. This resonates with a postcolonial discourse on the awareness of hybridity in place of multiculturalism - such as seen in Homi K. Bhabha’s book *The Location of Culture* from 1994,³ where he pleads for a

² <http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-19-reader/marion-von-osten-on-her-collaborative-style-and-multiple-roles.html#.VCvd8-dD3e4>

³ Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

truly transnational culture liberated from Western multiculturalism and celebration of cultural diversity, which is seen as a way of recolonizing the subject. Not only, as Marion von Osten mentions, is hybridity a necessity for exploring multiple articulations in the field of art, but often a prerequisite for making a living by means of artistic practice. In this way, holding multiple positions can be seen as a way towards sustainability for the artist. However, one must also be aware of the issue of hybridity in the realm of neoliberalism, where precarious working conditions has become the ultimate celebration of the so-called flexible and employable citizen, which has been promoted by the current socio-political conditions. The fact that having multiple positions and roles could be perceived as only a way of conforming to the neo-liberal agenda, would mean that an in-depth discussion on multiplicity in an artistic practice would be needed as a critical self reflection.

It feels like we are in a moment of time where we can discuss the different potentials in pedagogy and education in relation to artistic production. Teaching and pedagogy can play a significant role in expanding the multiple positions that one can inhabit in an artistic practice. I would like to elaborate a bit on pedagogy as artistic method and matter, in order to better address its materiality or immateriality. One way of looking at pedagogy as a method interwoven within an artistic practice could be through the term “work stories” developed by the Swedish artist and writer Magnus Bårtås.⁴ He speaks about work stories as a tool for the artist in terms of self-narration. A work story is a written or oral narrative about the forming of materials, immaterial units, situations, relations and social practices that are, or lead to, an artwork. Work stories speak primarily about processes, and processes are on-going, which means that work stories are taking place both in a zone of transition and one of transaction.

Self-narration in an artistic practice can be seen as having ties to pedagogy, as it is a form of embodied mediation, a process that traditionally lies outside the realm of artistic practice and thereby can function as an expansion of the artist’s dialogue with an audience. This seems especially relevant if one views an art exhibition as a context capable of creating new generative experience, which means including mediation as part of the creative work, a view presented by Nathaniel Katz in correspondence with Raqs Media Collective in 2008.⁵

Bårtås furthermore addresses the importance of artists working and acting from their own set of premises when it comes to writing, talking and sharing their work stories, so the artist can take a standpoint of the strategies of inclusion and exclusion in relation to their process and research. This claim of a space to speak for oneself as an artist can also be considered as an artistic material where processes can be revealed or hidden depending on the chosen strategies. Though it can be an immaterial task to trace the shifts and transformations that undergoes in an artistic practice one might say that mediation could be considered as a relational substance. In other words a place from which the storyteller can open doors to rooms filled with speculation and anticipation, each having a potential to conceal or unravel the processes of the chosen artistic practice and material.

⁴ Bårtås, Magnus. *You Told Me – verkberättelser och videoessäer*, Dissertation # 19 in ArtMonitor, Gothenburg University. 2010

⁵ Raqs Media Collective. *Wonderful Uncertainty: Curating and the educational turn* pp. 76-82. Open editions/Die Appel. 2010

Now it is time to tell a small tale about my own working methodology, and show some examples:

In my own practice I use collective processes, oral history and subjective history as material for projects. I always have a long-term perspective and make use of what Bärtås coins “work stories” in terms of contextualizing and re-contextualizing the process from within. The projects are often developed over 2-3 years and consist of multiple investigations under the same umbrella of a site, a situation or a specific moment in recent history. I have developed a method of working, beginning with multiple research stays in the given location, where I am collecting, interviewing and spending hours in the archives, before I start to limit the scope. This means that vast amounts of material, narratives and research are processed and enter a new sort of subjective archive. In the words of Jan Verwoert, the material is being “certified” due to the selection process, even though there is no scientific validation taking place. The material, such as texts, sound recordings, images and so forth become documents, the very act of being included and categorized in an archive. A large part of a project often has to do with establishing relationships to the participants or collectives, who often either live under precarious conditions or somehow feel marginalized. Together we work with their subjective stories, to investigate memory as material where the ephemeral aspect of interpreting someone’s interpretation potentially can highlight otherwise invisible structures.

One example I would like to talk about is from the project *Decembers*, which takes its point of departure in the stories from the periphery of the Solidarinosc Movement in Poland. These stories were narrated by an already established group of women, who were writing their subjective history in affiliation with the University of the Third Age in Gdansk.

Gdansk is known for the solidarity movement Solidarinosc, which after many years of self-organisation and strikes took part in ending the communist rule. **(Shift to Round table 1989 image)** The breakthrough came with the "Round Table Talks" in 1989, which you are now seeing an image from.

The women chose which perspectives to present and through dialogue with them I chose to situate them around a scaled down version of the round table. **(Shift to image of table)**. In this collaboration with the women who are not actresses and had not been in front of a camera before, situations occurred and gaps became open, through which new aspects could appear through improvisation or by chance, all contributing to the final work. In this instance I could say my work as an artist was to orchestrate a process based on historic material and subjective perspectives. Another collaborator in this project was the European centre for Solidarity in the shipyard of Gdansk – they gave me access to the discarded images and documents of their archive, which I based another film work on, where a fictional female protagonist tells her story as an unofficial history of archival images deemed not spectacular enough, and as a reflexive perspective on the women’s stories from the periphery. The complete project consists of three film works, a temporary museum based on their personal objects, a booklet and prints, which all have become documents over the women’s previously untold stories and are now inscribed in a subjective archival narrative. In my ways of working I have the intention of challenging the status of archival records as being

impeccable witnesses to events, and the documentary film as a faithful representation thereof.

The example I would like to show you here is the installation video: *Decembers – performing a past*, where the women perform their stories simultaneously - without subtitles. By leaving out subtitles, the film might at first seem to exclude non-Polish speakers. If the viewer can overcome the wish for translation in relation to the narration going on in the film, one can simply let oneself follow the flow of the chorus-like soundtrack, which has the capacity to make the exhibition space vibrate rhythmically, without it necessarily being alienating.

The deconstruction of the linear storytelling stresses how historical periods consist of a sort of layering of several pasts - as opposed to one linear narrative, which traditional writing of history is based upon. This relates to how Michel Foucault describes the writing of history as being closer to archaeology in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* from 1969,⁶ where the approach to historic material is a mapping of discourses, which are often non-continuous, and not about looking to reveal the truth of single events.

I will now show a 2 min excerpt of *Decembers – performing a past*

The intention was, through the use of cinematic gestures, references to political theatre and exhibition design, to allow the stories of the women to unfold while the forgotten and peripheral history was revealed.

(pause)

Even though it is of course possible to distinguish between producing, mediating, negotiating, filming, organising, teaching, exhibition making and so forth, it is all one and the same practice to me, as all material and immaterial elements function within the same artistic framework, in order to have the potential of “possibilities of articulations in the field of art” as Marion von Osten calls it, and to use it as material and a force in my practice through self-reflexive means. Maybe most importantly of all: to claim ownership of all these positions, collaborations and possibilities - and to see how it may contribute to a discourse on hybrid art practices. Let’s once and for all bury the saying “those who can, do, those who can’t, teach”!

⁶ Foucault, Michel. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Routledge, 2002