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KENT SJÖSTRÖM¹

Perspective-taking in Artistic Research

①

In any discussion about artistic research methods, the relation between *distance*, *proximity* and *subjectivity* in connection to the research object – be it the artist himself or the artwork – is crucial. In the following, I will first present some examples from practice-based artistic research, and discuss how the research process is signified by the artist being involved in an oscillating movement, thus establishing different perspectives on the art project at hand.

In moving between different positions, the artistic researcher creates a personal composition of perspectives. In the unique overview involved in this process, the artistic researcher finds a methodological approach, avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of claiming objectivity – or transparent subjectivity – on one side, and the insider's intuitivism and general relativism on the other. As my examples will show, these changing stances could be described as adaptive, creative and analytical. I will also examine how some of Bertolt Brecht's ideas could be connected to the artistic research presented, especially Brecht's approach towards making artistic work open to scruti-

ny. Finally, the unique composition of perspectives will be exemplified through the concept of the House of Lore. The overall approach is about perspective-taking on the artistic work, including the artist herself.²

②

How could one's personal experience, knowledge and ideology be challenged through fictionalising it? A Swedish director and PhD student, John Hanse, has a background connected to left-wing political activism, including physical confrontation with both fascists and police forces, mostly in the streets of Sweden, but also elsewhere in Europe. When confronted with a learning play written by Brecht 1930, *The Decision* (*Die Massnahme*), Hanse came to see parallels to his own activism, and especially to the use of violence and to the emotional factor in political movement.³ Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (learning play) describes how a group of Soviet revolutionaries infiltrate Chinese society in the 1920s. One member of the group, The Young Comrade, is overwhelmed by his own revolutionary excitement and emotionalism to such an extent that the strategies fail. Finally, he himself agrees that

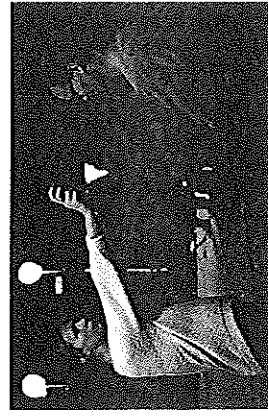
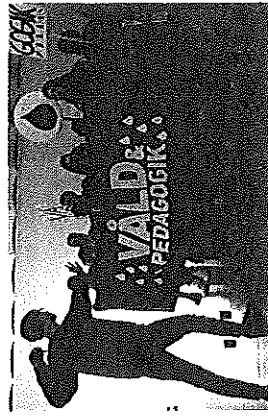
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2. For an overview of research on perspective-taking, see: Louis McHugh and Ian Stewart (eds.), *The Self and Perspective Taking: Contributions and Applications from Modern and Behavioral science* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2012).

3. Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays: Three*, trans. by John Willett (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 61–89.

his comrades must execute him, in order to avoid a further setback for the revolutionary movement.

This fiction, this play, showed itself to be useful in an ongoing Swedish debate about how to confront fascists, who, to an increasing degree, are active in contemporary political life, and this is a debate where Hanse takes part. Thus, Brecht's original play has been used as a base for a new contemporary learning play, *Violence & Learning* (*Väld & pedagogik*), which is performed, or rather acted.⁴ The spectators are, as Brecht suggested, active and follow instructions that are given to them by the actors during the performance.



Many plays by Brecht involve a trial, for example *The Decision*. The play is framed by the Party Committee, which judges the revolutionaries' strategies. This judging aspect is taken into account in Hanse's variant of

the play: what is the judgement of the contemporary left-wing movement vis-à-vis those radicals who use violence? But on another level the judgement process is also used by Hanse towards himself, in something that might be called a "methodological approach" to artistic research. As Hanse presents this participatory project to his own comrades in the left-wing movement, he is also questioned in the evaluation discussion that follows the performance: is Hanse suspicious when scrutinising the leftist project? Does he give voices and space to those fascists that are the opponents? Here Hanse, through his approach, puts his artistic presentation as well as himself in a position where they could be scrutinised. This is a strategy that is congenial with that found in the work of Brecht, as I will show later.

In this project, Hanse takes another perspective on what is well known and maybe taken for granted in his own political experience. He is moving apart from himself, through partly fictionalising his own knowledge or perspective, and particularly on the question of the use of violence as a political tool, or in self-defence. The movement is that of an insider taking the position of an outsider. He is creating a new kind of gaze in taking another perspective on his own position, but in this new position he also criticises those artists that state that they are creating "political theatre", a label Hanse himself avoids: "The performances we have seen that commented on political violence have had an outside perspective on the political movements that playwrights seem to have little

4. *Violence Learning* [website], accessed 20 May 2016, <http://valdochpedagogik.se/en/>.

or no understanding of. We work the other way around.⁵ Here Hanse is requesting and putting at stake a specific awareness of the perspective taken. This movement of John Hanse is the opposite of the next example, that of Cecilia Parsberg.

③

Swedish visual artist Cecilia Parsberg has named her PhD project *How do you become a successful beggar in Sweden?* She opens her description of her project as follows:

I experience a distance, almost a gulf between me and those who are begging. Overall, it feels like the atmosphere on the street has changed; something has happened in the social climate that feels substantial and yet not defined. Is it solidarity, the ability to be touched? How does it feel for you? Would you like to participate?⁶

Parsberg is surely not a beggar, she has no personal experience of begging, but as an artist she is attracted by this unfamiliar phenomenon. I will exemplify her research method in describing how Parsberg uses and translates an everyday but unfamiliar phenomenon and makes it into art; it is an act of *translation* and *aestheticisation*, perhaps also of *appropriation*. She uses aspects that she finds in the situation of begging, and moves them into her domain of art creation. (I would here like to stress that I, as a spectator and reader of any research, am free to define what

I consider to be the artist's methods. It is even more interesting to do so if the artist claims that there is nothing like a method.)

Parsberg chooses to take different perspectives on the phenomenon of bodies in the street: she sort of out one phenomenon found in begging, that of bodies in different positions on the street, and made it into a separate artwork. As a part of the process, Parsberg asked her friends to create any pose on the street with their bodies and then she made photos of them. She gave these photos titles that simply were the name, occupation and title of the person, even the affiliation. It came to appear as a striking irony that these peoples' bodies on the street had titles, often academic ones, in comparison to the beggars: bodies without names or titles.



Parsberg writes: "I have investigated the choreographies of European giving and begging."⁷ The phenomenon of *giving and taking* was elaborated into an idea about transactions, balancing and money exchange, even exchange of values. This is highly associative, but any way framed in the begging situation.

5. Henrik Bromander and John Hanse, "Detta är inte politiskt teater" (This is not 'political theatre'). *Teaterutredningarna* 1/2016 (online), accessed 6 August 2016, <http://teaterutredningarna.se/?p=1210> (my translation).
6. Cecilia Parsberg, *Kropp på gata. Body on street* (web site), accessed 17 May 2016, <http://ceciliaparsberg.com/>.

In the summer of 2011, Parsberg hired a professional market researcher to conduct a qualitative market survey, in which givers in Sweden shared their views on those begging on the streets and answered her questions about how the beggars could beg more successfully. Then Parsberg interviewed begging people to give their view on giving people. The artistic result became *The Chorus of Giving and the Chorus of Begging*. This chorus is actually two: one chorus of those who usually receive and one of those who usually give. They are improvising, without words or music, the feelings that exist between these two groups. The beggars and givers were filmed and the film is showed in art galleries, where the spectator is standing between the two choruses. Here the spectator is given a position where they can share the perspective of the artistic researcher's dilemma. I would like to describe it as if this position is a symptom of the power relations existing in the European Union.



Parsberg uses no coherent theories in her research, and when asked about the method she says that investigating her own intentions is a part of her method. I would anyway like to view her approach as an intentional movement between different positions, social and bodily, and in

this movement, she is creating new perspectives to be exposed. Parsberg embodies and performs what is strange for her, in recreating a bodily experience outside her own. When interviewed, she is asked questions about psychology and sociology, and she is also asked to make statements about society as a whole and about beggars' relation to society. Parsberg is treated as an expert, but she claims she is not. She was invited to a sociological conference, together with other artistic researchers, but this event ended up in a disappointment. Presenting a choir of giving and begging was not accepted, and Parsberg was criticised. The artistic approach was not considered serious enough. This could also be seen as a good example of when artistic research does not fit into the academic format; it even shows a resistance to academic framing.

Neither Parsberg's nor Hanse's research projects are finished yet, and the final artistic process and conclusions will be presented in their doctoral dissertations. The conclusions that follows are drawn by me, in relation to the research presented so far. Compared to Hanse's approach, Parsberg's research follows another path: she takes control over the unfamiliar content, and she translates it into a language of art, which is in her domain. Hanse distances himself from a familiar way of expression by fictionalising it. They are both, though, turning their experiences and dilemmas into art in a research process, which includes changes of positions. They also go public in an activist way, inviting the spectator, reader or participant to scrutinise their processes. Finally, they are both also investigating their

7. Cecilia Parsberg, *How do you become a successful beggar in Sweden?* (web site), accessed 17 May 2016, <http://ceciliaparsberg.com/>.

own way of creating art. Parsberg describes how her position as an artist makes it possible for her to create alternative images of the phenomenon of begging, in relation to those produced by other media: "It is possible to try to expose some of the aesthetic matrix. To try to see behind the images produced of the Westerner, the beggar, the Roma, of the perpetrators versus victims, and of other images that have become stereotypes, and that often are the base for the discussions carried out."⁸

Parsberg's project also created a distance to her own bodily relation to the beggars that she has met during the project. When recapitulating her bodily behaviour in the initial encounter with the beggars, she is overwhelmed by feelings of negative self-awareness and shame, combined with a questioning of her own artistic ethical principles.⁹ In her narrative of her research, she shows how private behaviour, as well as artistic expression, cannot be separated from a political stance.

John Hanse is distancing himself from his political experience, in using the learning play as a means to gain another understanding not only of his own political position but also that of his opponents. The overall aim of his artistic research is to investigate whether it is possible to create a new kind of contemporary learning play.

④ "Observe! Imitate? Be yourself!" is a workshop format that tries to inves-

8. Cecilia Parsberg, "Konsten kan skapa ett nytt bäringsutrymme" (Art can create new arenas for action), *Svenska dagbladet* (online newspaper), 28 November 2014, accessed 6 August 2016, <http://www.svenskajournal.se/2014-11-28/ceilia-parsberg-konst-kan-skapa-ettyt-baeringsutrymme/> (my translation).

9. Ibid.

imitation is treated in connection to the question of authenticity, identity, self-consistency, otherness, etc. This parallel display of the issue of imitation enabled us to see the exercises from another perspective than when performed for actor's training. This also provoked a new meaning that was generated from the exercises outside the actor's training context.



Besides this intentionally in-harmonious blend of parallel approaches, we initiated another form of perspective-taking method: that of the encounter and interaction of the participants from different backgrounds – mainly theatre practitioners and researchers in humanities. First, what was interesting was how a routine exercise for theatre practitioners, such as that of imitating and copying another person, was re-evaluated in the encounter with a theoretical and philosophical context. The outcome was unexpected. The starting point was the familiarity with the observation exercise, but in the new context it was revealed how this basic exercise made us re-evaluate our thinking about our identity and the alterity of the other, about proximity and distance, and also about the way we learn about our uniqueness and limitations. In this way, the participants who were actors or theatre practitioners gained another and unexpected outcome

in the form of embodied ideas, and they even became acquainted with new theoretical knowledge. For people from a non-theatrical field, with no routine in bodily imitation, the exercise in itself carried challenges and raised questions, questions that were unexpected for the theatre practitioners. The very idea of copying another person could be seen as intrusive, and it was questioned to what extent it was actually possible to copy another person. Finally, the exercise gave rise to another kind of knowledge, especially that of how closeness to another person makes us see and feel the boundaries of our own bodily presence.

Theory and practice both seem to have an estranging effect, depending on the background of the performer. For the philosopher, the embodied experience problematises what could be verbally expressed and understood in a written discourse, and it made the discussion about identity and alterity more embodied, and more complex.

What I would like to stress here is how phenomena like imitation, observation and the quest for authenticity could be scrutinized from different perspectives, chosen from individual starting points, and where the outcome depends on the horizons of the participants. Theory can be used to get another perspective on the *common sense* of actor's training, not to confirm it. In a similar way, the theorising does not diminish the practical value of any exercise, but adds another perspective.

Parsberg and Hanse are personally engaged in practices oscillating between different perspectives, and this approach simply does not need any theory. Koubová and Sjöström

used theories in order to analyse a practical routine, and through this they were re-evaluating or undermining an artistic practice. This happened through contextualisation of different theoretical assumptions. The theory, so to speak, was put into artistic work, and at the same time it created distance to this work.

⑤

In the following section I will widen my presentation of perspective-taking in artistic research through showing how the three cases presented could resonate with some ideas found in the work of Bertolt Brecht. The research projects that I have presented, and especially their different ways of relating to theory, have some connections to Brecht, and that is of course not a coincidence. My statement is that the theories and practice of Brecht have showed themselves to be useful in a discussion on artistic research.

Brecht was constantly examining the art of observation and the ability to scrutinise art and the artist – even himself – but also society. In this process he had an overall aim, that of problematising the concept of presence and distance in relation to the artistic process. In his "Speech to Danish Working-class Actors on the Art of Observation" he said: "People will observe you to see / How well you have observed."¹⁰ If I can present a slogan that I find summarises the artistic research process, then this one works well. Brecht was possessed by the idea of how to commu-

nicate his constant changing ideas. He regularly presented the interplay of his theories and his plays in the journal *Versuche*, and he conducted dialogues with his actors and with contemporary philosophers such as Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin.

Brecht openly claimed his need for theory: "A man with one theory is lost. He must have several, four, many! He must stuff them in his pockets like newspapers, always the most recent, you can live well between them, you can dwell easily between the theories."¹¹ He also claimed that this stance made his colleagues seriously question his artistic ability. That goes also for his quest for a "Theatre of the Scientific Age". In Brecht's case, Marxism and behaviourism worked as the fundament for his understanding of the world, but these theories also serve as a way of understanding his dramaturgy and dramatic characters today. But his quest for theories or his use of them does not alone make the dramatist and director Brecht an artistic researcher. Other qualities might qualify him for that position. He wrote down his suggestions, as he called his writing, and anyway said at the end of his life: "To hell with my way of writing!"¹² He clearly understood that in publishing and discussing his theories and artistic standpoints he opened himself up to misunderstanding, and it also made him artistically and politically vulnerable.

One aspect mentioned above is especially interesting: in observa-

tion, the critical sense is dependent on optics: it is about a specific kind of gaze. Brecht wanted to stimulate a new kind of gaze, both among his spectators and among his actors. Brecht is of course often associated with a critical and distanced attitude: in order to judge the actions on the stage, the spectator should not be seduced or hypnotised by the performance. The critical attitude and gaze of the spectator should be that of a dedicated expert, like the audience at a boxing match. But it is of fundamental importance not to confuse a critical gaze with a negative attitude. In some of his works, especially in his learning plays, Brecht also argues that bodily involvement and proximity is supportive for understanding a situation. So only to use terms such as distance or rationalism does not cover Brecht's attitude to an understanding of the artistic process. He speaks in favour of an oscillating movement between dedication and estrangement. In this, the spectator experiences differences and contradictions that make the performance impossible to take in as a whole or a consistent unity. From Brecht's point of view, this is considered positive.

One example of a distanced gaze, from Brecht's practice, is that the theatrical machine should be made visible, e.g. through the use of a half-curtain, and also in how the music, which often was atonal, is used as an estranging effect. Also, Brecht's criticism of identification is a means to avoid a one-dimensional view of the character; the spectator is invited to critically examine the actor's work on his interpretation of the character, and also to wonder about the strangeness of the plot. In this way, Brecht constantly encour-

ages the spectator to take different perspectives. And in Brecht's case the use of theories is one aspect that could be used to create contextualisation and criticism, but also to show that the artistic process should relate to science. The stance, the *Halting*, taken by Brecht offers an artistic-based model for inviting the spectator, in the wide sense, to scrutinise the process of knowledge production in the theatre. Here, as in the other projects presented above, perspective-taking is crucial for an understanding of how an artist – or an artistic researcher – understands his own work through moving between different positions, and thus creating a mobility in the gaze. This reasoning is also in line with the concept and metaphor of the House of Lore that I aim to present below.

So, Brecht could be considered an example of an artist that takes a stance resembling that of the artistic researcher. I could also have referred to other theatre practitioners, such as, in the 18th century, the actor David Garrick and the playwright and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, or to the 20th-century directors like Konstantin Stanislavsky, Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine. They, and many others, have struggled with the relation to science, traditions, methods, mythology, writing and rationality. Sometimes they claim that art could do fine without all this, but anyway, they are often into some kind of negotiation between independence from theories, and even hostility towards them, and using them when pragmatically needed. I have chosen Brecht as a prime example, mainly because of his consistent need to communicate his ideas about art. Through his writing, he

10. Bertolt Brecht, John Willett and Ralph Manheim, *Poems, 1933-1956*, trans. by John Willett, revised edition (London: Methuen, 1987), 235.

11. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Art and Politics*, trans. by Steve Giles, Tom Kahn and Laura Bradley (London: Methuen Drama, 2003), 15.

12. Bertolt Brecht et al., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. by Steve Giles et al., revised and expanded edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 269.

made himself open to criticism, and surely he has been criticised.

⑥

I claim that in a research process the researcher is producing a certain body of knowledge. If artistic research implies scrutiny, this knowledge must be clarified, visible, understood, experienced and communicated. In order to do so, the practitioner's knowledge must be described in a relevant way. For me, the metaphor of the House of Lore, which was presented by Professor Stephen M. North in 1987, is useful.¹³ According to North, the practitioner's knowledge can be described as dynamic, pragmatic and anti-hierarchical, but also as contradictory and inconsistent. These labels, I argue, can also be used when discussing the knowledge of the artist.

An artistic practitioner might imagine all her experience and knowledge, her workshops and performances, mistakes and triumphs, the books read, the classes attended, and criticism received, and much more, and then imagine it all as a self-created building, a House of Lore. This house has new and old rooms, as well as large and small ones: there are towers and stairs, secret connections; some of the rooms are open to everyone, and some secretly locked; some areas are in ruins, some kept fresh and clean, and so on. So what signifies, if applied to the artist's knowledge, the House of Lore? The house represents an anti-hierarchical knowledge, just as a personal memory or a positive review could have the same

weight in the work as the collected works of Stanislavsky. It is a highly personal building, constantly rebuilt and changed, in line with that artist's knowledge, often signified by an oral tradition and bodily experience. The knowledge found in Lore, and formulated as such, could be seen as being the opposite of scientific knowledge: Lore could be practically anything that works for the individual artist, and here also pure mumbo jumbo might make sense. The concept is highly pragmatic, but this does not mean that theory is excluded from it, rather that it can only take a position in relation to its pragmatic value.

What is of primary interest in my discussion is that an overview of the House of Lore in all its aspects is impossible from one perspective; only through moving inside and outside the building can it be more thoroughly viewed. This perspective-taking needs movement, and the changes of position create many perspectives. Through moving in relation to this house, full of rooms that represent different experiences, the practitioner constantly finds new perspectives, some of them characterised by being very close, some of them signified by a distant gaze. This ability is what distinguishes the artist's insider knowledge about his own work from that of a critic, a scientist or a spectator. It might also be argued that this aspect is what legitimises artistic research. This perspective-taking process could be described as a personal *composition of knowledge*. The artist could be considered as a creator who is dealing constantly with different perspectives.

tives, both in relation to himself as a subject and to the object investigated. This approach is clearly visible in Hanse's and Parsberg's research. In this aspect I find the concept of the House of Lore most useful.

I mentioned earlier that "body of knowledge" is a concept sometimes used in association with the House of Lore. There may be a danger in this reasoning: one should not confuse experience with knowledge. The concept of the House of Lore easily makes one look mostly backwards at one's own experience, and this approach might diminish the intentional and interpretative aspect of the artist's knowledge. The metaphor of the House of Lore might simply carry within it a deterministic view of the practitioner's work, as one understands one's artistry as ruled by one's background. This reasoning goes well together with how North, the creator of the concept, claims that practitioners tend to use familiar and well-known solutions to new problems.¹⁴ In this way the practitioner's relation to her experience is not seen as constantly productive in building further knowledge. Having said this, I consider the House of Lore metaphor valuable in elucidating the research process of the artist, as it indicates bodily presence, movement and a strategic changing of gaze – all in order to establish what is called *perspective-taking*.

⑦

In this chapter I have given examples of different approaches to how artists create perspectives on themselves, and on familiar and unfamiliar artistic material, and also on artists' differ-

ent relations to theory in connection to practice. The tendencies among artists, researchers or not, to hesitate in relation to science, theories and the academy has a long history and carries within it a narrative that must be considered. I consider this narrative as a fear of moving away from being an expert in one's own field, of going into theoretical dilettantism or of getting caught in philosophical namedropping, or even of art losing its very essence. This hesitation is also present in a discussion about methods for artistic work, as well as for artistic research, methods might be seen as general rules, jeopardising the uniqueness of the artistic creation. In my presentation of some artistic research processes, I have displayed approaches that would diminish these risks.

My examples also show how the artist's subjectivity in relation to her artwork should not be confused with relativism in general. But in artistic research the difference between situated knowledge and a relativistic standpoint – often negatively defined – is not always clear. I argue that the artistic research process, as it is exemplified above, could be described as situated knowledge production, a trustworthy and transmissible knowledge, and not as the creation of generalisable rules. In describing the dynamic situatedness of her research position, the artist needs to contextualise her work, both in relation to tradition and in relation to other, contemporary perspectives. Transparency, or at least less opacity, is achieved through defining the perspectives taken and making them understandable, as exemplified by the House of Lore.

13. Stephen M. North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987), 23–36.

14. Ibid., 33.

The reflective stances presented in the examples above are not states of mind or specific cognitive processes but physical approaches combining different viewpoints on a unique artwork. There are definitely good reasons for requesting validity also from research in, on and through artistic work. This legitimacy is obtained through the research process being opened up for scrutiny by the experts in the field, mainly other artists.

The artistic researcher can create new frames for how artists' work is looked at, listened to and perceived, and mainly for how art could be scrutinised, and in this way opens up new perspectives for the spectator's gaze. From my viewpoint, this is a central pedagogical challenge for the artistic researcher: investigating the values, knowledge and even theories that are inherent in his own practice, from different perspectives and through a nimble gaze.

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