

Octopus Office

Octopus Office

Roles to Play, Things to Do.

MA Thesis
Johanna Balet Lettmayer

Academy of Art and Design Bergen, Department of Fine Art, 2016

Main Tutor: Sabine Popp
Writing Tutor: Daniela Cascella

With the generous support of: Leopold Lettmayer, The Writing Group, Pedro Gómez-Egaña, Henning Bergsvåg, Terese Longva, E.K., Astrid Lettmayer, Alex Sagmeister, Ulrike Johannsen, Henrik Olsen, Thomas Kilpper, Halvard Bysheim, Øyvind Baste Agdestein, Khib Copy, Heimo Wallner, Hedya Klein, Tina Csaicsich and Adnan Balet Balčinović

p. 7	Preface
p. 9	Introduction

Octopus

Roles to Play

p. 11	True Artists
p. 12	Make It Bigger!
	Playing a Role
	So What?
p. 13	Studio
	A Place for My Methods
p. 14	Be a Pig!
	I Am so Many
p. 15	Excuse Myself
	Fake It Till You Make It

Office

Things to Do. Part 1

p. 16	The Everyday
	Ambiguous Energy
p. 17	Grandparents
	The Potential of Refusal
p. 18	The Wizard
	Inventur, Ceramics
p. 19	The List
p. 20	Method
p. 21	Reconfiguration
	Bodies
P. 22	Lost in Presentation

Things to Do. Part 2

p. 23	Language Candy
	Participatory Art
p. 24	How Is This Art?
p. 25	Triple A
	Stumbling
p. 26	Writing Turned Image
	Toolbox
p. 27	Liminal Space

p. 29	References
-------	-------------------

Preface

I do not consider this - the MA program, project, thesis and the show at Kunsthall - as a closure. I am not and will hopefully never consider myself a master of fine arts.¹

I might earn the degree, but that is something else. I am not done. I am just starting out. Again.

The last two years were a period of accelerated change, huge leaps, a constant becoming. In between of course, long periods of unbecoming, cluelessness, disorientation, detours. But as it is so often stated: It is all part of it. And: It does not stop.

This is not a closure.

I came to think about the MA program as a dinner party. We, the people I studied with, got together. Everybody brought a lot of stuff. We looked at it and thought about what we could make. We cooked, we feasted. We wake up happy, with a headache, a kitchen full of leftovers, cooked and uncooked ingredients. The program is over. Not only did we make a fantastic meal with a bunch of great people. We also have loads of ideas and material to continue with, discussions to think about.

We did not go to a restaurant. We made the meal together. This means, not only attending a program but shaping it, redefining it. I was not interested so much in being educated, but in studying together, teaching each other. You are Khib, Pedro always said and I agree. I made myself part of a specific system. My own position in this system, the roles I play in the diverse contexts of the academy have an impact. In a conversation with Andrew it became clear that school, for me, is not just school, not an institutional structure that is outside of myself. How I relate to my education is how I relate to life, to art practice, to all systems I am part of.²

1 I am not so much interested in a discourse of mastery as the meaning of the word master and its etymology suggest: “late Old English mægester ‘one having control or authority,’ from Latin magister (n.) ‘chief, head, director, teacher’ (source of Old French maistre, French maître, Spanish and Italian maestro, Portuguese mestre, Dutch meester, German Meister), contrastive adjective (‘he who is greater’) from magis (adv.) ‘more,’ (...)” *Etymonline*.

A discourse of weakness was suggested by Brandon LaBelle in a lecture at the Academy of Art and Design in Bergen (11.1.2016) pointing out the potential of the weak form, the knowledge of the idiot, the fluid, minor body and how another type of identity, one that does not insist on the maintenance of the regular, dominant, masterful, can develop along these ideas.

2 “Andrea Fraser reminds us of the deepest point of Bourdieu’s critique of the institution of art: that the institution is not on the outside - but rather, that we are the institution. Her brilliant embodiments of art world conventions and ingrained habits show this down to the last embarrassing detail while nevertheless retaining the sovereign distance of play.” *Rebentisch*, p. 58.

Introduction

In German “to think” is translated as “denken”. But there is also the word “nachdenken”, an “after-thinking” - not as in “afterthought”, a closed entity, but as a process - a “behind-thinking, post-thinking”, a thinking about thoughts already thought.³

I imagine my head full of sieves of different sizes that engage in an endless process of sieving through existing material, adding thoughts, losing things, producing different combinations at different moments. Unfortunately the phrase “to have a head like a sieve” is already used for something else - to have a bad memory. In my imagination to have a head like a sieve is not only about loss. It helps me to understand and visualize an inherent part of my artistic practice: *nachdenken*.

This text shows what I have been sieving through lately.

I got surprised by my own naivety, by the hidden and quite outdated feelings I have about art and working as an artist which do not relate to my rational thinking on the topic. I discovered a strong desire to be a “real artist”, to have a clear identity and the struggle that goes along with it.

The first part *Octopus. Roles to play* is dedicated to that theme and takes shape as a coming of age story to be continued.

The second part strongly relates to *Octopus*, but evolves around my practice: *Office. In Things to do. Part 1* I record my rather oblivious activities which, luckily, I turned into a source of what I experience as insight at the moment, described in *Things to do. Part 2*.

Several months ago my tutor Sabine pointed out the German word “stutzen” to me as both a characteristic of my practice as well as what it produces for an audience. It is an onomatopoetic word with a short u, meaning “to stop short”. In English I prefer the word “stumble”. When a stumble occurs a movement is disturbed for an instant, a slight shock, but no actual fall. One keeps on moving, but the stumble has changed everything.

3 According to Byung-Chul Han “nachdenken” is the result of a negative potency, the potency to not-do - not to be confused with impotence, the inability to do something. Without negative potency, human beings would be helplessly open to all impulses, which would lead to a lethal hyperactivity. If one only had the potency to think, thinking would be an endless and unconnected amount of thoughts. see *Han*, p. 46-47.

Octopus

Roles to Play

I am suspicious of artists' tales about their development when they reach too far back into early teenage years or even childhood. I think of it as a strategy to manifest the identity of a "true artist".

The suspicion is directed towards the reproduction of the idea of the existence of true artists. But not being free of envy for clear identifications, I direct the suspicion also towards myself. I just cannot remember anything that would identify myself as an artist.

I have always admired the artists. Some of my earliest memories are of bearded, big bellied and beer drinking men from then Czechoslovakia hanging out in my father's studio in the Austrian countryside just after the Iron Curtain fell.

I was five and I was not like them.

I helped my grandmother in the kitchen. It did not seem as cool.

I still help my grandmother in the kitchen. I play housewife.

It still does not seem cool. But it feels horribly real.⁴

When I was in high school I discovered with relief that one could also engage with art on a theoretical level. I chose to study art history, but I was bored. Not the research, not the thinking, not the writing were boring, but the outcome, the papers, the seminars. Alex fell asleep when I practiced a talk about Le Corbusier's Villa Schwob with her, even though that was one of my more entertaining engagements. She has denied the incident for years. In the meantime our artist friends seemed to have better lives, do more interesting things, go to the cooler parties, get more acknowledgment.

I had to turn 27 to find the courage to make my first drawing. I'll try, be an artist. I turned away from theory and made comic books, zines filled with corky drawings and mundane dialogues. Look what I made!

4 A sensation that is also described by Frances Stark in *The Architect & The Housewife*. see *Stark*.

Try performance, make a video, make it bigger! Rebecca suggested when we looked at my work. Bigger! That seemed attractive. Big and dirty. Rough hands, fingernails that can never be completely cleaned, stained shirts, empty beer cans, full ashtrays, sleepless nights, dysfunctional in regular society.

No encounters with other artists and art practices, no critical thinking, no deconstruction, no gender studies could erase that desire of mine. Up to the present day I have a very vivid idea of how a “real artist” should be. Preferably a white male. Preferably ignorant. Preferably an alcoholic. Preferably up to something big.

I was in my studio at the Academy in Bergen when I wrote this. I opened a can of beer. I wore a blue overall. That night I was going to sleep there for the first time - it is illegal to stay after midnight. It was December 22nd and I borrowed the dog’s blanket from Maria’s studio.

This is not “me”. I feel like I am playing some kind of artist-role. A role that I invented. A role that is easy to invent, because it has a long tradition. A role like a magnet. A role that I will never be able to master. A role that I do not even really want to master.

What kind of artist can I be?

Kara Walker recalls that she tried to be an oil painter for a while. “I thought that was the medium that was the real art.”⁵ But she felt like she could not quite enter the club. And at some point she suspected that she was “trying to sidle up with white power, you know, trying to sidle up next to this patriarchal form.”⁶ She says: “Basically I started drawing and doing watercolors because they were sort of antithetical to fine art, they were sort of homey and sort of relegated to a second class status.”⁷

Proud and terrified I showed some of my “second class art” to my former advisor in art history, scary and always critical Prof. Friedrich Teja Bach. He smirked and chuckled a few times while he leafed through my zines. So, I get it, he said, you capture something one recognizes from one’s own life, something one can identify with. Well done. But so what? What more is there to it? And then he told me about Bruce Nauman. How, when Nauman had gotten his first studio, he had thought about the implications and decided: What I, the artist, do in my studio, is art. He had walked up and down. It was art.

5 *Walker*, min. 06:25.

6 *Ibd.*, min. 08:00.

7 *Ibd.*, min. 06:34.

It was a revolution in art.⁸

I was disappointed in myself. I did not know how I could be like Bruce Nauman.

Both my desire and the inability to be a “real artist” are nurtured by a long visual and philosophical tradition of the artist/outsider/thinker/genius in the studio/study. Whereas, writes Griselda Pollock: “Femininity was exclusively domestic and maternal. At the same time the bourgeois notions of the artist evolved associating the creator with everything that was anti-domestic.”⁹

Since the 1960s the idea of the creator in the studio has been widely challenged.¹⁰ But still, the studio is expected to be a site of some fascinating and mysterious processes.

Frances Stark is quite dry about it: “I am starting to think that, for me, being an artist in the studio is a complete fantasy. (...) Don’t get me wrong, I believe in what I do, and I even love what eventually goes out my door, but my methods have yet to form a place that feels like home.”¹¹

Form a place for my methods that feels like home.

Invent a role that does not feel like a bad reproduction of an outdated concept.

Face the multiplicity of identities and the many realities.

In *Coming to writing* Hélène Cixous claims:

“I have an animale. (...) It lives in me, (...). It’s crazy, (...). (...) it gives me the greatest pleasure. Don’t tell anyone. It’s beastly. (...) The animale is badly brought up, capricious and cumbersome. (...) Giving her pleasure is delicious to me.” But there is another voice simultaneously warning her: “If you bring her up, you will become more and more beastly. You will be crazy in the end.”¹²

Feeding the beast without feeding the cliché of the crazy artist can be a challenge.

8 In December 2015, I semi-accidentally come across Nauman’s statement. It is from the late 1980s about his starting out as an artist after grad school in 1966: “If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio and you’re not a painter ... if you don’t start out with some canvas, you do all kinds of things - you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around in the studio.” *The Studio Reader*, p.44.

9 Pollock, p. 48.

10 see amongst other: *The Studio Reader*.

11 *The Studio Reader*, p. 48.

12 Cixous, p. 34.

But then, halfway into my first year of the master program it was time to ponder New Year's resolutions with my mother. She came up with a good one for me: Be a pig! Thanks, mom. 2015, be a pig, check!

And at some point around that time Thomas asked me: What! You wanna become a writer now? And I said: No. I said it very uncertainly, like: No? Only later I realized that it was not about becoming a writer. I already was a writer. The question was: What else are you going to become? A pig.

I grew up in catholic Austria.

I was Maria once in a church play.

I am a worker.

I have always wanted to be a witch.

I am a walker, student, woman, academic, daughter, sister, friend, housewife, observer, reader, bourgeois, lover, consumer of popular culture, researcher, dreamer, writer, partner, storyteller, facilitator, mechanic, cleaner.

I am so many. I should maybe drop some of it.

Cut it off with a big pair of scissors like Cixous.

“Now, I believed as one should in the principle of identity, of noncontradiction, of unity. For years I aspired to this divine homogeneity. I was there with my big pair of scissors, and as soon as I saw myself overlapping, snip, I cut, I adjusted, I reduced everything to a personage known as ‘a proper woman’.”¹³

I could also say “proper artist”.

She felt under pressure, felt like people demanded one-ness from her. And she asked herself pretty much the same things that I ask myself about my practice.

“Write? But if I wrote ‘I,’ who would I be? (...) Wasn't writing the realm of the Truth? Isn't that Truth clear, distinct, and one? And I was blurry, several, simultaneous, impure. Give it up! Aren't you the very demon of multiplicity? All the people I caught myself being instead of me, my un-nameables, my monsters, my hybrids, I exhorted them to silence. (...) Worse still, I was threatened with metamorphosis. I could change color,

13 Ibid., p. 30.

events altered me, (...). Even now, I sometimes feel pushed to explain myself, to excuse myself, to rectify, like an old reflex.”¹⁴

Even now, I can add, even in 2016, 40 years after Cixous wrote the above, I sometimes feel pushed to explain myself, to excuse myself, to rectify, like an old reflex. For example, when I talk too much. Or when I drink too much. I just do not seem to be able to “ham things up” as Jan Verwoert put it so accurately in his essay *The Anti-Angelic Host*.¹⁵

I had to look it up. Ham things up. It is an expression that means over-do, exaggerate.

“In the cultural field, moreover, the unofficial reviews often enough happen during dinner parties or festive events, so the ability to impressively perform and confirm one’s potentials when drunk further reinforces traditional patterns and privileges. Created and expanded over centuries, patriarchal culture offers a vast repertoire of roles to play, things to say, and gestures that may be performed by a man who needs to jovially assert his claim to leadership in an inebriated state (and ‘ham things up’ without compromising his respectability, e.g., in front of a group of conservative donors or museum patrons). This repertoire seems intuitively accessible to men; its successful use is reinforced by the relentless depiction and repetition of such gestures by male characters within popular media; there is little risk of misunderstandings. The repertoire available for women is still limited by the relative short history of their access to public power positions.”¹⁶

So should I fake it till I make it?

I do not want to be in a reactive mode all the time - helplessly exposed to my own and others’ expectations on how things should go. Instead: lay ground for a space, an arena of positionings. A lack of repertoire entails a potential, an opening, something that is not yet there, spaces and identities, forms of behaviors, voices and actions that can be invented and inhabited. To recognize my own stereotypical identifications and desires allows me, not to overcome them but to befriend them, play with them and in that play develop roles and practices that are more mine than someone else’s. I do not believe in essentialist truths. It might still be fake but I might manage to make the fake, and own it.

14 Ibid., p. 29, except for the last sentence: Ibid., p. 16.

15 see *Verwoert 1*.

16 Ibid., p. 192.

Office

Things to Do. Part 1

Just as the role of the artist that I want to play feels strange to me, what I produce in that role does not satisfy me either. When Anthea Buys discussed the show of last year's graduates she nailed it for me when she asked: "How can you transfer a practice into an exhibition space?"¹⁷ I re-phrased it: How can I transfer my practice into an art piece available for an audience? First I need to broaden my idea of what is part of my practice and what not. My practice is much larger than I suspected. It is not confined to the studio and how I imagine a "real artist" works.

It is rooted in the everyday, ordinary occurrences and immediate surroundings, conversations, reading, notes, the observation of conventions of language, behavior and institutions - and a constant struggle to be more free, to create situations where one can become more free. Not free as in "freed from something" but as in "more free within something". Freedom not as a promise or something that can be reached or obtained but as something that has to be constantly made, like democracy or sanity. Not free from capitalism - impossible - but more free within it. Not free from gender roles and somewhat embarrassing desires but more free within them.

This means not to try to abandon or fully give in to the housewife in me but to work with the ambiguous energy coming from that direction. How can I read this energy? How can I re-read my ambivalence towards the everyday with all its burdens, necessary procedures and the neverending struggle against domestic clutter?

My grandmother is a hoarder. Clothes, jewelry, accessories, dishes, furniture, decorative elements of all kinds, old things, new things, plants, carpets, etc. etc. etc. My grandparents' house is crammed, from the basement to the last corner of the rooftop floor. Plants and objects from the flea market protrude not only into the garden but also out to the street, along and attached to the walls of the property. It is a magic place. But it is very crowded.

17 Buys.

My grandfather likes to think of himself as a minimalist. So sometimes he loses it. At one point he angrily fantasized about a plane to crush the house with all its clutter. They could build a new house, an empty house, a practical house.

As much as I love that house, I get it. I do sometimes wish for a plane to crush everything, so I could start from scratch. But what a fantasy, what force, what a very violent and specific thought. Complete destruction of the house and all it contains by a crashing plane. My grandparents live mostly peacefully in that very house. But there is an underlying conflict. A conflict that is bigger than my grandparents. There is an immense energy delivered in my grandfather's fantasy as well as in my grandmother's activity of filling more and more things into their house.

Like my grandmother I am deeply fascinated by the home and everything it entails. Like my grandfather I am deeply annoyed and frightened by it.

It is a rich conflict and it is grounded in the powers of the ordinary.

A few months ago Sabine said: At the moment I'm trying really hard so that my studio does not become too much like my home.

The home is an obstacle to work. The home stands for the procedures of everyday life: sleep, eat, drink, pee, shit, tidy, fuck, shower, cook, wash the dishes, change the diapers, change the sheets, empty the trash, vacuum the floor, have people over, call granny, bake a cake, check the mail, do the taxes, clip the nails.

It can get too much sometimes. And yes, there is a reason why it has been called a trap. Especially by women. The everyday just never ends. It is a lot of work and dirt and things pile up, seem to expand, are overwhelming.

But for the simple reason that it is ordinary, necessary, repetitive, banal the everyday bears a potential: the potential of refusal, the refusal to produce. When we sleep, for example, we are "freed from a morass of simulated needs". In *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* Jonathan Crary claims that "the huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep (...) subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism."¹⁸

18 Crary, p. 10.

The same could go for all kinds of ordinary activities of the everyday, of life maintenance. It is these activities which can remain to exist as a non-commodity and provide us with gaps and open spaces and unstructured times so necessary to not be completely controlled by the demands of a lifestyle that pretty much goes round the clock, 24/7.

One of my favorite examples for celebrating the ordinary is a scene in Walt Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* from 1963. This animation film tells the story of how King Arthur became King Arthur, it tells the story of a boy learning humanistic values, it tells the story of the battle between good and evil, but it also tells the story of an old wizard struggling with the burdens of everyday life, his failing memory, his lack of ideas, his controlling and losing control over the enchanted objects that surround him. What strikes me about what I came to call *The Packing Scene*¹⁹: Should it not be possible to just leave the house and when the wizard arrives at his destination everything is, through magic, already there and in place? But no, the objects have to be called, animated in the presence of the wizard, put into order, directed, shrunk and carried through the dark forest by the wizard's own hand. It is his stuff. Also he says, one cannot use magic to solve all problems, meaning in this case, the ordinary activity of packing the domestic clutter. It still has to be done, he just does it differently. The wizard's insisting on this banality is what I find interesting.

Inventur, the inventory of my kitchen initially is carried out in this spirit of embracing and animating the everyday. In winter 2014/15 I drew more than 400 kitchen utensils, in simple line drawings, each on a single sheet of A4 copy paper. I counted them, put them into zines and a slideshow-animation in 34 categories and used them for an exhibition at Galleri Bokboden in which I displayed all drawings chaotically on the walls of the space.²⁰ Related thoughts led to series of figurative ceramic works of exhausted and peeing figures. I was enthusiastic: Look what I made! But what more was there to it? What used to be satisfying after years focused on theory²¹ started not to be enough anymore.

Parallel to making these objects I developed a method for text production. In one of his writing seminars Henning said: Human beings are really bad in creating something from nothing. But they are really good in creating something from something.

19 see *Disney*, appr. min. 12-15.

20 see *Inventur*.

21 I had earned my degree in art history and worked in several art institutions.

This stuck with me. Driven by my interest in my immediate surroundings and banal activities, I started writing lists. These lists supply me with that “something” I can create something from.

The list can be a practical instrument to deal with reality, to tick things off the to-do list, to get an overview like in the shopping list or in an inventory of books or kitchen utensils. But the list can also have a poetic potential and a dizzying effect. It is a method we use, writes Umberto Eco, when “we do not know the boundaries of what we wish to portray, how many things we are talking about and presume their number to be, if not infinite, then at least astronomically large.”²² Just as Eco describes the list-maker, I experience “a pure love of iteration”²³, “a love of excess”²⁴ and “a greed for words, for the joyous (and rarely obsessive) science of the plural and the unlimited”²⁵.

My favorite list maker is Sei Shonagon, who lived 1000 years ago as a court-lady in Japan and wrote hundreds of lists recording her impressions of life at court later collected in *The Pillow Book*.²⁶

Her lists

create a joyful jumble

cast doubt on accepted structures

expose everything

name things without ceremony

stay uncommented

lead to realization

grow like a tumor

interrupt the tendency of completeness

disappoint expectations

combine disparate elements without creating a hierarchy

follow no logical structure

are fragmented

chaotic

excessive

explosive.²⁷

22 Eco, p. 15.

23 Ibid., p. 133.

24 Ibid., p. 253

25 Ibid., p. 327.

26 see *Shonagon*.

27 see *Pigeot*.

I am inspired by this re-interpretation of what the list can establish; but especially by what certain “moralists”, as Ivan Morris calls them in his introduction to Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*, were shocked about: “her worldly approach and promiscuous doings.”²⁸

Shonagon’s list of *Embarrassing Things* contains the following:

“(…) A man whom one loves gets drunk and keeps repeating himself. To have spoken about someone not knowing that he could overhear. This is embarrassing even if it be a servant or some other completely insignificant person. (...) Parents, convinced that their ugly child is adorable, pet him and repeat the things he has said, imitating his voice. (...) A man recites his own poems (not especially good ones) and tells one about the praise they have received - most embarrassing. Lying awake at night, one says something to one’s companion, who simply goes on sleeping. In the presence of a skilled musician, someone plays a zither just for his own pleasure and without tuning it. (...)”²⁹

Under one title Shonagon fits a variety of situations ranging from moments of great intimacy to public display of vanity. In observing banal situations with great attention she tells as much about the specifics of Japanese court culture as she does about the human condition. From her I learned to take a close look at seemingly minor things and to use lists as a tool to re-organize the world around me and the language I use to describe it with.

I apply the same method every time:

I take some paper and a pen and sit down in a room. I write a list of things I see and hear and feel and things that come to mind. I write down actual and approximate words, words in another language, sound-words and rhymes. I go to a place where I like to write. I take a book of my choice. I open it and place my finger on a page. I write down a few words that I see around my finger. For each letter of these words I chronologically search for a word in the list that starts with this letter. I write them down and organize them alphabetically. I organize them according to length. I write a sentence using only those words. I write a text using every word of the list chronologically.

In my lists I turn my everyday surroundings and their language into raw material. Single words lose most of their original function as well as their connection to the objects that

28 Morris, p. iX.

29 Shonagon, p. 102-103.

were named after them, their context. They change meaning in relation to each other, exist as sounds more than descriptions of a fixed reality. But the lists themselves are not the final stage.

After the systematic part I read what I have written. I listen to what I have written. It might suggest a character, an atmosphere, a dynamic, a scenery, maybe even a form, demanding: Write me into a love letter, a letter of complaint, an accusation, a dialogue, a phone conversation!

While editing I develop rhythm and rhyme, correspondences and repetitions within the existing material. The deconstructed surroundings are being reconfigured, put into a new order and animated. From between the words emerge images and narrative fragments, recognizable elements, but no linear story, no direct representation of spaces, possible meanings that one has to let go the next moment.

When I write, I speak, I read out loud, my upper body rocks back and forth. Writing is language is voice and therefore a bodily experience.

The spoken word, the sound of the voice or any sound “may create a relational space”³⁰ and “opens up a field of interaction while always already disappearing”³¹. This unfixed position of the voice, of sound lends itself to the dynamic I strive to create. My voice establishes a relationship. It travels into my roommates’ ears, without them actually listening. But they know I am there. The voice is relational, apart from content. It goes from my body into their bodies.

In *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* Adriana Cavarero explains this bodily relationship the voice creates on the organic level: “The sense of hearing, characterized as it is by organs that are internalized by highly sensitive passageways in the head, has its natural referent in a voice that also comes from internal passageways: the mouth, the throat, the network of the lungs.”³²

The voice being rooted deeply in the body inspires its characterization as subversive by psychoanalysis and studies on orality. This resonates with my approach of both using and dissolving conventional usages of language.

30 *LaBelle 2*, p. XVI.

31 *Ibid.*, p. XVII.

32 *Cavarero*, p. 4.

“From these perspectives, the voice plays a subversive role with respect to the disciplining codes of language (...) The voice appears this way, not so much as the medium of communication and oral transmissions, but as the register of an economy of drives that is bound to the rhythms of the body in a way that destabilizes the rational register on which the system of speech is built”, writes Cavarero.³³

In the beginning I did not pay much attention to my physical experience while writing and its implications. I presented a series of texts in several readings, different layouts in printed matter and recordings. I treated them like pieces of poetry and faced the same problem as before. Look what I made! I had broadened the definition of my practice. I had developed a dynamic in my texts that created a thrill: the movement in and out of understanding, a captivating moment of instability, of stumbling. But it was lost in presentation.

33 Ibid., p. 10-11.

Things to Do. Part 2

Anita calls my texts language candy. She says: Reading them, listening to them makes me want to eat the language candy too, makes me want to feel the words in my mouth, experience the rhythm with my own body.³⁴

I wanted to make the audience eat the language candy. I wanted them to coo along with my texts and enter the worlds created by rhythm and rhyme.

“‘Blue’ is not ‘you’”, writes Jan Verwoert, when he talks about the power of rhythm and rhyme. “(...) Correspondence in a state of non-identity allows for a transformation of realities that no one reality principle or symbolic economy based on laws of equivalency can contain. (...) To perform the rhyme together is to enter and inhabit this world. You are in it when you sing it.”³⁵

As an audience member I had always shied away from so called participatory performances. I did not want to be forced into becoming part of somebody else’s artwork or sit through it. I did not want to make the artwork happen by following invitations or instructions. I did not want to be “activated” in any way. Jacques Rancière’s text *The Emancipated Spectator* confirmed my vague distrust towards the incapacitation of the audience, which is implied in the idea that the participation will transform passive viewers into active agents. How dare anyone assume that I am not engaged in the world by looking, choosing and making sense of what I see? But also: How dare anyone interfere with my decision of being disconnected? To call looking “just looking” makes for an unacceptable, patronizing gesture.³⁶

In a lecture on participatory art at the Kunsthall in Bergen Irit Rogoff gave me a new vocabulary to think with.

34 In his *Lexicon of the Mouth* Brandon LaBelle describes mouthing as follows: “In surveying the movements that shape the mouth - movements that are also choreographies, improvisations, rhythms - it has become clear that what counts as ‘communicative acts’ are much greater than speech proper.” *LaBelle 1*, p. 11.

35 *Verwoert 2*, p. 98-99.

36 In *The Emancipated Spectator* Jacques Rancière writes: “Emancipation starts from (...) the principle of equality. (...) It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that ‘interpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets.” *Ranciere*, p. 7-8.

She talked about the term ‘participatory’ in the sense of an audience that is “implicated or entangled in a narrative” without having responsibility, and about art creating awareness rather than a product.³⁷

It made me think of the Tino Sehgal piece *This Variation* I saw at the Documenta 13 in Kassel in 2012, minutes of complete darkness before the room and crowd I had walked into started to manifest itself for my eyes. Audience and performers were partly indistinguishable. There was no stage, just a situation, people walking around, then voices, rhythms.

To avoid weakening the instability of my texts through a stable presentation as poetry, as art, as performance I have to create a situation of similar instability, a situation that does not - Ah, it’s art! - suggest a calming recognition but a situation that provokes questions: What is this? Is this real? Is this art? How is this art?

For the *Performance Art Bergen Open* festival I developed a discrete reading performance in a space that I had turned into a festival lounge as part of my project. I printed the texts as zines and laid them out on coffee tables. Within a timeframe of 1,5 hours per day I had performers enter the space one by one according to a schedule and disguised as audience. Each of them sat down, took a text and casually read it out loud.³⁸

I am not going for a liberating effect through the transgression of conventions. You need a line to break it, Nam June Paik is said to have answered a question of why Fluxus artists did their pieces in lecture halls and other institutional settings.³⁹ But the shattering of norms - more often than not - leads to new normative standards. Instead of breaking the line - in form of sets of rules for language and behavior in certain surroundings - I make the line visible by playing with it, stepping over it, stepping over it again, in and out of conventions, back and forth between the reassurance of the known and the risk of the unknown.

Performance art puts the audience at risk. It is both the danger and the capital of this field, Pedro said when we talked about how to navigate the relationship between audience and performer.

37 see Rogoff.

38 see *Billet me the brumm*.

39 I quote Brandon LaBelle who mentioned this in a conversation but we both were unable to find the source. Brandon says he read it in an interview with Nam June Paik but cannot remember where exactly.

During the opening show of *Triple A*, my exhibition for the MA Weekend at Hordaland Kunstsenter⁴⁰, it became clear that performance art puts the audience at risk most successfully when the performance itself is at risk. I accidentally messed up my script while trying to synchronize a pre-recorded Skype conversation. People reacted strongly to that part. Even though I had planted other elements of instability, to watch the performer stumble was exhilarating. To really be unsure what will happen next, what is part of the performance and what not, produces a heightened awareness, a suspicion about reality that is contagious and spreads to all elements of a situation and potentially beyond. The actual or imagined animation of a supposedly un-animated moment can even lead to paranoia, a seemingly automatic repetition of elements can cause an uncanny sensation that forces a questioning of the familiar status quo.⁴¹

The tricky part is to stumble without actually falling. Performer and audience need to get a grip on reality, need to feel safe from time to time. It is a challenge to create this act of moving in and out of understanding without activating defense mechanisms - the audience shutting down, the performer staying completely in control.

For the manipulations that achieve such a dynamic I have started to generate a toolbox of different strategies, ideas and references. I apply them in lecture- or reading-performances and discrete theatrical moments inspired by the Invisible Theater, Tino Sehgal's work and artists like Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, Tania Bruguera or Walid Raad.

In my scripts anecdotes merge with an academic tone and are combined with more anarchist elements based on lists (see above). I came to call these three voices AAA: anecdotal, academic, anarchist.⁴²

During a performative talk I gave for a seminar in November 2015 I made Sora, a usually friendly classmate who was sitting in the audience, interrupt me when I was in the middle of my script: Excuse me, Johanna, but this is really boring. Can't we just watch a video or something?

The effect was extraordinary. Terese said: You shocked us. It was a moment of complete in-stability. While Sora's act only lasted for a few seconds it worked in me long after the seminar was over.

40 see *Triple A*.

41 see *Freud*.

42 AAA led to the title of my exhibition at HKS: *Triple A*. see *Triple A*.

When they are not spoken out loud, my writings also appear as wall texts, zines, pamphlets, or scribbles on the walls of toilets: formats that seem (self)explanatory, but then break their promise of familiarity.

The Exhibition *Un Coup de Dés. Writing Turned Image. An Alphabet of Pensive Language* at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, that I saw in 2008 has greatly influenced my thinking about text and language. From Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* I learned about the power of the empty page. From Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* I learned about the possible visuality and non-linearity of text. From Marcel Broodthaers' take on Mallarmé's poem I learned about the potentials of dissolving and erasing language and questioning the validity of representations and categories. Other works from this exhibition, like Ewa Partum's *Aktive Poesie* made of single cut out letters, or Ana Torfs' uncanny cinematic slideshow *The Intruder* still inhabit my mind today. The experience of this exhibition contributed a great deal to my approach to language, the alphabet and storytelling as I was confronted both with a sincere and critical reflection on the subject as well as a broad range of playful and experimental works that reach beyond text as text.⁴³

My toolbox furthermore includes discretely planting signs or gestures, manipulating objects like an air conditioning or a light switch, going to a party not in a costume but in disguise or organizing oranges in a supermarket stall in a specific way⁴⁴. Possible operations are being researched, selected and choreographed. All parts change and grow along one another and the specific occasion, time, site, context and its observation over time. Finding and talking to performers might influence ideas and contents as well as new circumstances on spot.

The development of a piece is not a linear transfer of a script into a performance. It is a three-dimensional process of taking away and adding material, pressing, smoothing, pulling, shaping, looking at it from different angles. But, contrary to my ceramic sculptures, both the making and the outcome are fragmented.

43 see *Un Coup De Dés*.

44 The latter is a reference to Gabriel Orozco's work *Crazy Tourist* from 1991 in which he placed single oranges on empty market tables. Another more historical point of reference in this context is the Situationist International. Their revaluing of art objects as mere props for situations and their operations in everyday life are of great interest in my current practice and relate to the struggle I experienced when the things I made seemed nice but rather irrelevant.

Not all parts of my piece for the MA show are going to be finished on opening night. I declare Kunsthall and the duration of the exhibition to be an extended space of my artistic research and practice. Works will materialize and change in response to circumstances and protrude into areas outside of Kunsthall. Some parts will demand more planning, producing and rehearsing, others might happen with amateurs and quite spontaneously.⁴⁵ There is room for shaping the piece through delegating, misunderstandings, interpretations, loss of control and through reactions to experiences and observations of the process. Some parts will not be recognized at all, some parts only by a few people, some parts will be talked about afterwards, some things will be interpreted as parts even though they were not intended as such.

The documentation of the project fulfills, as is common in scattered and ephemeral art forms, the paradoxical role of suggesting the most complete access to the work without actually giving the reader the live experience of it. I plan to work on a publication during and after the exhibition period, that documents, describes and reflects the different elements and exists as the project's second life. It will both function as a witness of situations and as a discursive platform.⁴⁶

My suspicion and envy for clear identifications, my desire to be a "true artist" and to "produce work", got channeled into a practice which questions exactly that: instead of asking what the artist makes I ask what the work produces; instead of striving for or completely abandoning clear identifications my practice dwells in and produces a liminal space, where hierarchies, conventions and definitions receive attention and are being played with.

45 On the topic of delegated performance see *Bishop*.

46 Sabine raised the question, whether the activity of documenting the work will become part of the performance. It might.

References

Billet me the brumm. Johanna Balet Lettmayer, Billet me the brumm, performance, Performance Art Bergen Open Festival, Old Prison Bergen, 5.9.2015-6.9.2015.

Bishop. Claire Bishop, Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity, OCTOBER 140, Spring 2012, p. 91-112.

Buys. Anthea Buys, tour through the MA exhibition Discount Parachutes, Kunsthall Bergen, 25.4.2015.

Cavarero. Adriana Cavarero, Introduction, in: For More Than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression, Stanford 2005, p. 1-16.

Cixous. Hélène Cixous, Coming to Writing, in: Hélène Cixous, Coming to Writing and Other Essays, Cambridge/Mass., London 1991, p. 1- 58.

Crary. Jonathan Crary, 24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep, New York City, London 2014.

Disney. Walt Disney, The Sword in the Stone, Los Angeles 1963.

Eco. Umberto Eco, The Infinity of Lists, New York City 2009.

Etymonline, URL http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=master, last accessed on 25.2.2016, 12:15.

Freud. Sigmund Freud, Das Unheimliche (1919), in: Der Moses des Michelangelo. Schriften über Kunst und Künstler, Frankfurt am Main 1999, p.134-172.

Han. Byung-Chul Han, Die Müdigkeitsgesellschaft, Berlin 2014.

Inventur. Johanna Balet Lettmayer, Inventur, exhibition, Galleri Bokboden, Bergen, 10.9.2015-13.9.2015.

LaBelle 1. Brandon LaBelle, Lexicon of the Mouth. Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary, New York City, London 2014.

LaBelle 2. Brandon LaBelle, Acoustic Territories. Sound Culture and Everyday Life, New York City 2010.

Morris. Ivan Morris, Introduction, in: The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, translated and edited by Ivan Morris, London 1967, p. iX-XiX.

Pigeot, Jacqueline Pigeot, Die explodierte Liste: die Tradition der heterogenen Liste in der alten japanischen Literatur, in: Francois Jullien, Die Kunst Listen zu erstellen, Berlin 2004, p. 73-115.

Pollock. Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art, London 1988.

Rancière. Jacques Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, in: ArtForum, March 2007, accessed through a pdf Sabine sent me on 1.9.2015.

Rebentisch. Juliane Rebentisch, 25 artists from 1990 to 2015. And 25 reasons why each belongs in the Texte zur Kunst Canon, in: Texte zur Kunst, The Canon, Dezember 2015, 25. Jahrgang, Heft 100, Berlin 2015, p. 58-63.

Rogoff. Irit Rogoff, lecture, Kunsthall Bergen, 26.4.2015.

Shonagon. Sei Shonagon, The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, translated and edited by Ivan Morris, London 1967.

Stark. Frances Stark, The Architect & The Housewife, London 1999.

The Studio Reader. Mary Jane Jacob, Michelle Grabner (ed.), The Studio Reader. On the Space of Artists, Chicago, London 2010.

Triple A. Johanna Balet Lettmayer, Triple A, exhibition, Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen, 15.1.2016-17.1.2016.

Un Coup De Dés. Un Coup De Dés. Writing Turned Image. An Alphabet of Pensive Language, Exhibition Catalogue, Generali Foundation Vienna, 19.9.2008-23.11.2008, Vienna 2008.

Verwoert 1, Jan Verwoert, The Anti-Angelic Host, in: Jan Verwoert, Cookie!, Berlin 2013, p. 175-195.

Verwoert 2. Jan Verwoert, Why is art met with disbelief? It's too much like magic, in: Jan Verwoert, Cookie! Berlin 2013, p. 91-106.

Walker. Kara Walker, Rise Up Ye Mighty Race! Interview at the Chicago Humanities Festival, published on 4.3.2013, URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meSWqY_vMo0, last accessed on 10.03.2016, 15:59.

FROM THE LINE: STOOD AT THE STAGE DOOR. OCTOPUS OFFICE. SHE SAT ON YOUR RAG RUG, WOULDN'T YOU AGREE? VIOLET, PURPLE, ROSE RAG RUG. CROSSED LEGS, LAYERS OF DUST, BUT NO STRETCH OUT, NO DIRTY DUST EYES, NO STENCH. JUST POWDER ON THE GRID. DUST BURNING ON THE HEATER. STAMPS READY FOR POST OFFICE HOURS. YOU STAY INSIDE OFFICE. YOU GUARD THE PLASTIC WHEELS, THE DIRTY SOCKS, THE NEON PINK YELLOW ALUMINUM. YOU SAY, ALUMINUM. YOU PUT UP POSTERS, PICTURES, YOU FRAME THE SUN DANCE SILVER KNOB. YOU LEAVE THE LIGHTS ON, ALL THE LIGHTS, ALWAYS AGAINST ASSIGNMENT. YOU ARE THE DIRTY AGAINST TYPE. YOU ESCAPE THROUGH THE SLIDING DOOR. YOU TAKE YOUR PATTERN CONVERTER WITH YOU. BUT YOU'LL BE BACK. YOU LOVE YOUR STRUCTURE, YOUR FLOOR, WALL, HELICOPTER STRIPES, SQUARES AND OCTOPUS BUTTONS, YOUR CHICKEN VOLCANO, EYESUCKER, FAKE VELVET AND FOLDED QUILTS. YOUR TROPHIES THROW SHADOWS. ECHO THE TRASH TYPE, RUB SOUND WAVES AGAINST THE STAMP SUCKER. FIG TREES AND FAT LEAVES, SPONGES, NAPKINS, BONSAI BEARDED SPIES. YOU WORK ON THE PLOT. SHE'S ON YOUR RAG RUG. YOU NEED A REPLICA SHOEBOX, AN AMPLIFIER FOR GRAMMAR USAGE 1000. PRACTICAL ISSUES. FILE, LOGIC, PLATEAUS. YOU MUMBLE TO THE CURTAINS: STAMP SUCKER, COIN RADIO. YOU GO THROUGH DROOP CUPBOARDS WITH HEADLAMP FLASH, THE HIDING PLACE FOR MEDICAL CONDITIONS, GENERAL BAGS, CATS IN EXECUTIVE CHAIRS. YOU SPEAK OF OFFICE HOURS, PLASTIC WHEELS, OCTOPUS PILLOWS AND TYPE. PREPARE! EAT! YOU CROSS YOUR LEGS, LOSE SLIPPERS, DISEASE. RADIO KITCHEN ALARM, FOOD ALARM. ALARM. YOU OVERHEAT. LETTERS, MAGAZINES, BOOKS, GRIDS. BASKETS OF FOLDED PANTS, PULLOVERS IN EARTH COLORS. LIFT THE WEIGHT, BOOKS, KNOWLEDGE WAYS, BARBELLS, BEER BOTTLES. PILES OF PLATES AND CUTLERY FROM YESTERDAY, THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY, THE DAYS BEFORE COLLECTION. ASSEMBLE THE PACKAGE! NIGHT GOWN MAGENTA, THREE COURSE MEAL: BLACK TEA, CRABS, CRANBERRIES. YOU GET CLOSER TO THE HEATER, SAUNA, OFFICE. WIND OPEN SMASH WINDOW OPEN DOOR. TYPE TYPE. YOU ARE THE DIRTY AGAINST TYPE. THE HALLWAY MODERN BLINK ROOSTER, NO CHICKEN VOLCANO, BLINK BRACKET BUTTHINGE. PILES OF NEWSPAPERS ALL OVER THE PLACE. YOU ARE ALL OVER THE PLOT. MUMBLE TO THE CURTAINS: TAKE THE TRASH OUT? I SUGGEST PLASTIC RED BAG. YOU WEAR A SULTAN'S NIGHT GOWN MAGENTA, YOU FLAG THE COAT HANGER, YOU SCULPT UNDERWEAR IN THE CORNER, PREP STUDIES. NATIONAL CHOCOLATE PRIDE, DIALECT HISTORY. A PUPPET ON A STRING YOU DANCE ON THE FAKE CORK LINOL FLOOR. UNBUTTONED PANTS, PEACE. NO AGAINST TYPE. NO COUNTING, NO GENEROUS FLINCH. HESITATE! BEER GLASS FOR LEISURE, TOWERS OF COINS, ETYMOLOGICALLY, YOU SAY, URBAN GIN. DEMONSTRATE, MANIFEST, ENVELOPE. MUMBLE TO THE CURTAINS. CUT IT OUT! WHERE ARE THE SCISSORS, YOU ASK, THE ONES WITH STRING JEWELRY. SET FIRE ON THE FOLDS, PILES, USE THE LIGHTER, IGNITE! YOU BEND OVER YOUR MUDDLE, HAT ON, CROSSED LEGS. TYPE AIR INTO THE HALLWAY. TYPE TYPE TYPE. YOU OVERHEAT. YOU REALIZE, WARMTH, KLICK, TYPE, HEAT, BREATHE. BREATHE KLICK TYPE PREPARE ASSIGN. PREPARE AGAINST ASSIGNMENT, THE DIRTY AGAINST TYPE, TRASH ASSIGNMENT. A SICK METHOD, CUTLERY COLLECTION, TOWERS OF COINS, SPRAY PAINT ON THE LINOL FLOOR FAKE CORK. NECKLACE LIGHTER IN YOUR THROAT. PAPER CLIPS CHIP CHIP.