

**HOW TO MAKE  
ART WHEN THE  
WORLD IS AT  
SUCH A STATE?**

**FEMINIST ARTISTIC RESEARCH  
AS A CRITICAL ALTERNATIVE**

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary political and progressive artistic practice needs the theoretical framework provided by gender studies and cultural studies to produce, contextualize and analyze meaningful work: Both through the presentation of methods and of alternative values for the artistic research. This as these theories provides a theoretical backdrop legitimizing alternative (read:subordinated) art practices within the formalist art institutions because it states that the institutions are not 'neutral' as in the fictional consensus we find ourselves in.

## **Subjective positioning**

I am a young political artist working with ideas, concepts, and contexts. I am also a white-passing non-binary eldest sibling from a working class background. I am the first artist and the first person with my degree of education in my family. To me art is not a given, not a language I learned as a child nor a scene that I was automatically given access to. The task of finding my place within this scene I chose to work on seemed insurmountable until I found my models of explanation to why it looks and acts the way it does; And for how to make work challenging these structures.

## **Art in opposition**

An artist could be defined as a cultural practitioner producing language. Language in this context is defined as any media content at all as in the definition of culture studies definition of culture as construction - A chain of events describing how meaning is produced in our communication, with the prejudices of both the transmitter and the receptor of certain information deeply affecting the meaning it results in. An artist can use other types of language to communicate than the conventional och traditionally prevalent (read; art). Therefore an artist can also talk about other subjects, or point to the unseen or overlooked within the usual ones, using expressions and words leading up to new or different ideas, worlds, and systems of value. It is then also the

artist's responsibility to actively try to challenge and break up any articulations of discrimination within the prevalent mainstream discourses. This can be done both by investigating and critiquing the existing structures but more importantly through presenting alternatives to them.

My theoretical starting-point mainly derived from my education in gender studies but also from experiences with self-organized artist practices and from social work, such as educations in norm critique. I base my artistic research on lived experience with autoethnography as my main methodology: I do text-based work, performative work, social work and time based work. I am much interested in the emerging field of Artistic Research and its possibilities to broaden the sense of what research, data and results might mean: And how feminist theory can provide a useful backdrop to it. All of the above mentioned is political work, both in the subjects investigated or the perspectives established, but also with the form and structure of the work itself as a tool of norm-critical expression. For example in the project *Truth Speak Week* (2016) where I hosted a café in an arts centre for one week, asking the customers to help me define words and concepts, a new word each day. Or in *Borrow an artist* (2015) where I held a three-day discussion open to the public about the role of the artist and what an artist does or might do. But is it really possible to keep one's artistic integrity working within the same structures and institutions one is simultaneously critiquing?

Any artistic practice holding focus on new or unconventional frameworks and/or contextualization is essentially existing in opposition to the prevalent traditions of society in general and the art world and its institutions in particular. The defining centre of these traditions has coded certain positions, expressions and bodies with higher value than 'others'. The 'other' is made up as a position of subordination to the defining centre in a hierarchal social structure where some groups holds privileges above, and on account of, the 'others'. The same structures make the base of any scene or field in our societies and communities. The same power relations manifests in different contexts, situations and points in time.

The art scene and its inhabitants holds their progressive self-image to high regards: Traditions has been examined and reexamined over the years but what is yet to be scrutinized is this false self-positioning of neutrality. Even though the ideas on what type of art is held the highest, is excluded, or even frowned upon are ever changing, constantly moving with the times and the contemporary understandings of art, the 'progressive' contemporary art scene does not seem to have adjusted for equality or diversity to any extent than the mainstream society. So how does one go about, as a feminist artist, to try and remain autonomous under these circumstances? Is it possible? "How to be political and do the "right" thing under "wrong" conditions?" (pp.2) as Antje Shuhmann put it. (2014).

Art today is seen as something that can 'be anything' - Any work by an artist positioned within the art world; But the art world today is a neo-liberalist one, just like any other place in contemporary society. The modus operandi of the late capitalist art scene is better articulated by institutional critics such as Adrian Piper (1983) who describes "*the subordination of the artist's political effectiveness to the demands of professional and artistic success*" (pp.277), a fact that i will let sum up my perspective on the subject together with a quote from the bachelor work of artist Sarah Degerhammar (2013) "*It is impossible to organize or to make relevant art when the ultimate artistic fantasy is that of individual funding*". Even as I agree I do not despair, but start looking for alternatives. Even when the concepts of 'artist' and 'artwork' becomes the same interconnected product on a hyper commercialized scene, there are ways to turn the individualization into a useful critical subjectivity, especially for artists.

### **Feminist theory and critical art**

In any contemporary artistic practices, and the ones focused on concepts and ideas in particular, the methodologies and the theoretical framework applied to the work says a lot about the possibilities and limitations of the works produced. Gender studies and feminist theory makes us able to talk about power and point towards social possibilities and alternatives through artistic

practice today since it provides the notion that the art world is (just as any scene is) neutral on faulty grounds; But it does also provide methods for taking action within the prevalent systems. Feminist science critic Elizabeth Minnich (1988) interrogates the problems with the traditional production of knowledge in her work *Transforming Knowledge*:

The problem we still have today in thinking well about the rich diversity of humankind is expressed by the observation that. At the beginning of the dominant Western tradition, a particular group of privileged men took themselves to be the *inclusive* term or kind, the *norm*, and the *ideal* for all, a ‘mis-taking’ that is locked into our thinking primarily in the form of faulty generalizations, circular reasoning, mystified concepts that result from the former errors, and the partial (in both senses of the term) knowledge that frames such concepts. (pp.2)

Minnich introduces the *Root Problems*, a four-step model of mis-takings that can be used as an analytical tool in critical studies of knowledge production. The Root Problems are a chain of events (1-3) in production of knowledge leading up to the result, or the framework of such knowledge (4)

1. Faulty generalization
2. Circular reasoning
3. Mystified concepts
4. Partial knowledge

According to Minnich, in fully recognizing the faults identified by the Root Problems “we expand the range of human expressiveness and meaning from which all can and should learn.” (pp.185). The identified errors can be turned into vision through self-reflexive critical work, but Minnich proposed an analysis rather than an articulated way of action. After realizing and accepting the circumstances we have to start looking for solutions, the presentation of alternatives is a crucial part of any oppositional work.

The artist has a way more diverse field to navigate in the post-internet reality of today than ever before. This also means that the artist has a bigger responsibility to take active charge over it, present alternatives to the post-truth fake news and the traditions of oppression and subordination

of certain stories. Today is for instance the only time in history when the art world is not the only outlet on which to present, perform, or engage in, artistic work. Or at least it is not necessarily bound to the physical rooms of the art world. Small zones where we can breathe exists, where we can think and take action.

To produce new knowledge, or at least break up consensus, I put my focus on getting in charge over the chain of production of meaning that my practice is and finds itself in. I use my body, my experiences and my life as material and means to discuss society with myself as an example. The artworks becomes suggestions of ways action as well as content meant to open up for understanding of given concepts. Sometimes they exist as the mere act of themselves, as in conversational pieces or action writing in diary format.

Christopher Crouch (2007) writes about how creative processes rather than the products created might present new knowledge in research in the creative arts. Crouch also discusses the differences between narcissism and self-reflection in creative self-expression, separating between what is further described as self-reflective versus self-reflexive work, the latter posing questions also of the sort of knowledge created in the process in which the work is the created rather than focusing only on the traditional evaluations of the research, as in the former.

Donna Haraway (1988) further explains what this self-reflexive work could mean by talking about situated knowledge, the importance of articulated positioning of the transmitter in any work aiming for 'objectivity'. We need to allow the positioning of never ending subjectivities instead of trying to fit everyone into the rules and the preconceptions of the defining centre.

The moral is simple: only partial perspectives promises objective vision. All western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting up subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see(pp. 10)

Subjective positioning, lived experience as artistic research can indeed talk about alternative matters, but also add more dimensions to research, taking into consideration the full human experience of knowledge and understanding.

## **Conclusion**

Embodied knowledge is bigger than knowledge under the regime of the mind, it provides a fuller understanding of a subject. The body, the individual, emotions, positions, power-relations are to be considered instead of diminished. The use of the self and the individual through making it into a structural example is an opening to discuss the political through making use of the personal. Making research art, art as inquiry, with this set-up is a radical way to both critique the existing power-relations of knowledge production and to present other values and results. Values that can better describe the full human experience; such as sensations, emotions and hunches. Neither art nor knowledge exists solely in the mind, and it is time for the time of the mind to come to an end.

I try to make myself a living example for the usefulness of these feminist subjective approaches. My writing as an activity is contemplating and reflexive, constantly sorting, evaluating, and analyzing. It is a research producing unconventional data, possibly unmeasurable in the traditional sense. My research produces concepts, ideas, narratives, as well as frameworks for social interactions. I write notes, I write poetry, I write diaries, I write as I perform research through actions previously written down in schedules for myself, I write questions and answers for me and others, I write articles and instruction manuals, I write menus and stories and lists, I write to understand, to comment, and to communicate. I reflect, I analyze, and I comment on the current. I try to open up for others to do the same by spreading my 'manifesto', both in content and form. I state that the art itself could be a tool, a language, for discussing and breaking apart any forcing structures in general and in the art world in particular. Art is the perfect arena to put these theories into action.

We who find ourselves in opposition must look to the interstices, the gaps and the in-betweens. We must act precisely when the window is open. There are temporary autonomous zones to work in, with, and from; And as long as they're temporary we must simultaneously find ways to slowly shift the values of the work we do, live and think.

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