

Entities and multitudes – *notes on the plural*

When I applied for my artistic fellowship, the title of my project was: *From 1:100 – or how to narrate a we*. Later on, that “we” ended in brackets, and even later, it disappeared altogether.

For a while, the project was called: *1:100 and back again*, before it finally got the title it has now: *1:100 – the hybrid performative text as a feedbackloop*. So why did the “we” and the term narration disappear from the title? And why was it there to begin with?

AN ONGOING DEBATE

At the chore of my project was how to represent the tension and the bond between the individual and the society. Between our own, private story, and that which shapes us as a community, as people living in the same time and under the same conditions.

In 2015, when I started the project, there was an ongoing debate in Norway about the writer’s place in literature, often called the “reality”-debate. The individual, and the individual story, in this case the true story of the writer, stood at the centre. Several authors had published novels that had no fictional filters between themselves and the work. The works were often autobiographical, the author used her full name, and the writer’s family, friends, lovers and so on were exposed as a part of a fiction that, in some way, also was real.

A lot of these publications got great reviews. Some said that this way of writing produced the best fiction. A writer colleague of mine even stated in a conversation that fiction in itself was losing ground, since “reality” always will be king, or experienced as “stronger” than any made up story.

At the centre of the debate was the tremendous success and the bursts of controversy that surrounded Karl Ove Knausgård’s six volumes of novels, *Min Kamp*. In the novel, as well in a series of articles and essays published at the same time, Knausgård stated that he saw the novel as a strangely intimate genre.

The space that the novel opens up, he states, is a private space – while your encounters with your neighbours, or other parents at a school-event happens in a social context. In the inner, private space of the novel, all social rules are repealed. Only here can you understand what the social really consists of, and only here can you discover who we are as human beings, inside and outside that social sphere. In the novel, one can connect with a writer that has been dead for hundreds of years, even one who lives hundreds of miles away, and while the media strives to portray the general, the novels handles what is idiosyncratic, the singular and particular, and through this, reality can step to the foreground and we can see ourselves and the world as it really is.

At the chore of this debate, where Knausgård’s work and voice was so central, was the unique expression of the individual and issues like humanism and diversity. Phrases like “having the right to one’s own story”, and “I reserve my right to let my voice be heard”, was often repeated. Or, “I had to write this. Literature is more important to me, than the pain it might inflict on others”. To be able to evoke empathy and humanism, some said – you *have* to draw on the individual experience. Life can’t be understood or felt, if we do not see it with the eyes of the one that actually has experienced it. To write about yourself, can be the only way to expose us to humanity.

The moralists were angry. The relativists shrugged their shoulders, and I myself was about to move in a total different direction. Daily, I experienced the push and the pull of a global reality, a place where I was intrinsically and ethically fused into a consumer-culture

and an economy I could not shake myself free from. I felt as if I was king of the consumer rubbish-heap. It had become impossible for me to understand my own life-story, and even my own happiness as something separate from everybody else's. Enjoying the freedom of individuality, I had also come to the end of what it had to offer. It was no longer enough to face my inner fears, traumas and demons. I wanted to go out there, collide with reality and see if I could find myself there. Who would I be? What would I sound like?

A MULTITUDE OF VOICES

Being a researcher, my topic was not prose, or the novel, but the performative text, but my background is in prose and poetry, and there is an obvious literary influence in my texts for the stage. I would even say that my performative texts evolve and thrive at the crossroads between literature and theatre.

In 2016, at the time when the "reality-debate" raged, I did a presentation of my project in collaboration with the Faculty for Theatre at NTNU in Trondheim. In the presentation I stated that it is a romantic notion that we have to go inside to find our true artistic voice, and that just as much literature and theatre has come about through experimenting with and entering into dialogue with events outside us. That maybe we do not only have one voice, and that inside us are a multitude of impulses and tendencies. That maybe we do not only have one voice, and that inside us are a multitude of impulses and tendencies. In plays as well as novels, this is where I can see myself as another (Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1994), make other choices, and be close to people I otherwise would never meet. Those who are like me, as well as those who are not. Yes, there are novels and plays that explore the suffering of the one: *die lied de Junge Werters*, *Sult* by Knut Hamsun. But there are also novels and plays that expose and explore the collective, like Dylan Thomas *Under Milkwood*, or Elias Kouhries *Bob Shams*.

Nobel prize winner Svetlana Aleksijevitsj gives voice to a multitude of voices in her books. This is her "life's project", she states, in an interview with Ane Farsethås (Ane Farsethås, *Ny tids tale*. Oslo, *Morgenbladet* 2017). She calls her books voice-novels, and rejects the notion that what she is writing is journalism or documentary. Rather, she states, the form I have chosen is that of the novel

She calls her texts collective. They are collective in their form and they are collective in their intension, she states – and there is a philosophy to this. Aleksijevitsj is looking to find a particular point of view, and for her, to do this is a necessity. She continues: *We need new forms of writing to understand the radical change that has happened in the relationship between Man and nature* (my translation). After Hiroshima, after Tsjernobyl and Fukushima, something is fundamentally different, and the literature of today has to reflect that.

At an event arranged by the students of theatre at NTNU in 2016, I explored this in dialogue with the students. Here I talked about re-instating a public sphere that we can engage in. I talked about the hip-hop theatre scene that has created its own space, its own form and its own audience. Fighting the handicap of poverty, of illiteracy, of race – to try to raise potential for new possible worlds.

(<https://teaterlosjen.no/arrangementer/tale%20næss.html>).

THE "WE"

When I started my research project, I myself was looking to find a "new" form. I gave my research project the title *1:100 – or how to narrate a we*, and at the time, I did not really reflect on the binary nature of my choice. That we usually see the term "we" in opposition to the "I". As we see "you" in opposition to "them". And I did not know where this thinking, or lack of thinking, would take me.

Through formulating this "we", I had tried to find a way of expressing what constitutes a multitude of I's that are connected in some way. I had thought that this would be self-explanatory, but when I started to present my project to my fellow researchers, I soon understood that I had opened up "a can of worms". I had not foreseen the ethical and emotive reactions this term would produce.

More often than not, the conversations took a turn that literally pushed me away from the text and from a "fictional" space, and straight into social reality. A kind of unavoidable imperative had appeared. An imperative that wanted to take me into a landscape beyond the text, and the usual suggestions was that I should contact asylum centres, or different community theatre projects that they thought I could benefit from partaking in.

In these conversations, a change of tone accrued. The tone did not become hostile, but it became tense or ethically charged, as if I, through my choice of language, had taken up a position I did not recognise. People started addressing me differently. My colleagues started phrasing their comments in ways I weren't prepared for. Opening their sentences with formulations like:

– Why don't you –

Or:

– I think you should –

Often matched with a degree of frustration, impatience or even anger, as if I, through my research, had voluntarily taken on a cross and now I had to carry it. And as if I, through that, was pointing them out as morally inferior. I guess I became faced with what many activists are faced with: A kind of indignation, bordering on impatience. Like – You should do more. Or, you should do this. Or, you are working for a wrong cause, or in the wrong way, – and I was confused by it. Dumbstruck, because I knew it had to be my mistake. I had communicated something that I really did not intend to communicate.

I soon realised I had stepped into the moral shadow of the “we”, and it wasn't necessarily just what I said that was wrong, it was the effect it had. It was what was heard – when I said it.

AND BACK AGAIN

Neither community theatre, theatre as social activism, nor writing documentary theatre, had been on my agenda when I applied for this Fellowship. I see myself as a writer of fiction. Was the problem that people did not associate my research questions with fiction, or did they not have faith in fiction anymore, when it came to questions that represented the tension between individual and society?

I had noticed that the problem became even more obvious when the word “we” was placed in proximity to words like “the collective”, or “community”, or “political”, and four months into my fellowship, I sat down and wrote a deliberation to try to rethink my strategies. See: *From 1:100 and back again*).

As I saw it then, it could be that people that read my title interpret my intension to be that I, in my work, was trying to speak on behalf of the “we”. Or of everybody. That I, so to say, had taken on the task to give voice to the voiceless, *and* that my project was first and foremost a political project. An activists projects.

I must admit that there was a kind of confusion in me at the time. On one hand, I was engaged in the ongoing refugee crises. People were drowning trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, and one had to do *something*. I did feel a kind of urgency. A need to act, and a need to act now – and texts I wrote, Like *Where the Children Sleep*, was written when I was very much in that frame of mind. At the same time, I felt that there was no real viable action to take. NRK Radioteateret wanted to broadcast it, but in the end nothing came of it (See the text [here](#)).

At the same time, *Where the Children Sleep* was also a form-experiment. I was trying out different forms of addresses, bouncing off newspaper articles and reportage(<https://darbarnenover.aftonbladet.se/chapter/english-version/>), so several processes were going on at the same time.

Both the need to act, and the need to reflect (See: *Exercises and addresses*). The need to understand my artistic research-project, and this ethical tension made me ask: What is political theatre today anyway? If I did not think that theatre could change anything – then why was it so important to me to convey this ethical tension I was living in, in my art? (See: *Change, Protest, Theatre*).

By the autumn of 2016, I had changed the title of my project to *1:100 and back again*, but still the same frustrating comments returned in the discussion after a presentation I had for fellows and supervisors. The title was obviously not the only problem. There had to be something in the core of my thinking that lead me astray.

While writing this, I revisited the presentation, and here are some sequences of it. I have underlined some of the sentences that I *think* might have produced this reaction:

I have called my research from one to a hundred.

I have given myself the task to explore how to write a play, or plays, that presents a multitude of perspectives. Polyvocal texts that has at its core the fact that we live in communities. Together. To look at that which influences “us” – not just “me”.

My main question is: What can a play written from such a perspective look like? How do I write it, and what kind of ethical and formal implications will it have? How will these

implications leave their trace on the work I do and how I reflect around it?

It is easy to interpret the sentence: *To look at that which influences “us” – not just “me”*, as signalling an attitude that I am most interested in the influencing forces around us. That I wanted to shift my perspective from the personal, to take on the voice of the many. When I later in my presentation turned to the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s *Ten Thesis of politics*, I myself might have introduced an imperative. I had been interested in his thinking about art as an influencing force in society. I thought it would offer a way out of this notion that political theatre had to be the same as socially engaged theatre or documentary theatre. What I was looking for was a way to produce fiction, and when Ranciere states that politics is not the same as real, it is all about creating possible, alternative worlds, this offers opportunities. A potential of the “new” as *inventio*, addressing as a way of opening something new and not yet seen: *Political argument is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world where the argument would count as an argument, addressed by a subject qualified to argue upon an identified object to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he normally has no reason to either see or hear. ... So for my work to be political, I continued in my presentation: ... It must be able to make room for what Ranciere would call who-ever...*

I write: *The issue is – to go from one to a hundred. To make polyvocal texts that presents more than one perspective. Plays that explore equally what we have in common, – and our individual issues and agendas.*

It is easy to see how this could be portrayed as the start of a community project. Again I had brought up the topic of the voice-less many. And although I tried to emphasize that the “we”, or the plural, was not more important than the *I*, – I see now how this “we” easily could steal all the focus. Writing this, I think that this discussion had to emerge, and this frustration had to happen.

I think the question my fellows asked me was: Were my interest outside the text, or inside it? What did I want my work to do? Did I see my texts as tools for change, or as a kind of cultural critique in the classical sense. In other words: Did I believe that art in itself, through representing a “we,” could change the conditions for this “we”, or for the collective?

Reading the former title of my project, *1:100 – or how to narrate a we*, it is easy to interpret my project as an ongoing and continual expanding movement from the individual to the many. To think that *I*, as a principle, was going to leave the one, the individual and singular behind – to be engulfed in a never-ending plural.

In this day and age, we perceive ourselves as free individuals but we are so afraid to turn to final answers and solutions, so we shy away from doing anything at all. When somebody seems to pick up the torch, something happens. People are both relieved and provoked. Without knowing it, I had placed my project and myself at the chore of the ethical tension I so wanted to explore.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

In Armin Petra’s stage play based on Günther Grass’ novel *the Tin Drum*, he makes us all into Oscar. The play is communal. It gives us a world to share, but it is not a social project. It is a play for the live arts. A play like any other play. And in it you can feel the plurality of this shared Oscar, you can hear the voice of Günther Grass and the voice of Armin Petras. The presence of an author, composing the parts of this collective of voices together.

I can never free myself totally from being me.

“The one” can never become lost or completely dissolved in “the many”. Even if I had wished for it, to try would be futile. As Hannah Arendt so brilliantly states in her book (*The Human Condition Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1958*): *The fictional story reveals a maker just as every work of art clearly indicates that it was made by somebody; this does not belong to the character of the story itself but only to the mode in which it came into existence.*

WHO’S THAT IN THE MIRROR?

In doing my research, there are important goals to be reached; goals like accumulating knowledge, understanding, insight, comprehension and experience, but there is also the task of expanding ones boundaries as an artist. In my case, I wanted most of all to challenge myself. Challenge my understanding of what I do, my way of writing and thinking. I

wanted to unmask my own ethics and aesthetics by exposing myself to the “world”. My question to myself was – can I write differently? Not necessarily better, but in another way? Less Eurocentric, less concerned with the needs of the individual, more concerned about the drama that does not only shape each soul, but shape the world we live in and how we perceive it? If I place myself “out there” – what will I find? Not to become the other, or the many, but to expand my reach as a writer, and to expand my toolbox and my understanding.

Writing this, I realise that my motives for starting this exploration wasn't clear at the start, neither to myself, nor to those who tried to understand my project.

In trying to unmask my own intensions, I had to go back. Back to the place where it all started. To questions like: What conditions shaped, and shapes my mind-set? And – why do I write what I write (See the exchange thoughts on the subject of playwriting between the Dutch playwright Lot Vekeman and me [here](#)).

I am small girl looking at a pool of marbles.

I am a little girl putting the white ones to one side. The red ones to the other.

I am a little girl in the middle of a big demonstration. We are protesting against NATO. There are red banners in the wind. Song all around me.

I am a red pioneer tying my red pioneer-scarf around my neck.

I am drawing a drawing of a factory. The fat capitalist is sitting in his office, ruling over all the poor workers. I am repeating the words my parents have taught me: class, struggle, poverty, injustice, the masses.

I stand facing the mirror. I kiss it. I write a story of a grey, shimmering horse and a deep forest. I dream of everything else but politics. I want to have friends, but they find me too strange. I borrow my mother's typewriter and spend the afternoons transforming a comic to a play, a children's book into a cartoon.

There I am.

I sing.

I try to play the piano. I bury my hands deep in my cat's fur, my face in a book, striving to transform. To get away from the world. To become something beautiful. Writing in the unformed, hybrid handwriting of mine, the word r e v o l u t i o n and crossing it out again.

I am the sum of all this.

I am a roundabout.

I go from 1:100 and back again.

Literature:

Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958

Borgdoff, H. & Schwab, M., *The Exposition of Artistic Research: Publishing Art in Academia*, Leiden: Leiden University Press 2014

Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994

Ranciere, Jacques, *Ten thesis on Politics (in) Theory & Event*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2001

Articles:

Ane Farsethås, *Ny tids tale*, Oslo: Morgenbladet 2017

Knausgård, Karl Ove, *Virkelighetens sjokk*, Oslo: Klassekampen 2015

Links:

Tale Næss lecturing at Theatre Avant Garden: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQtiS46i0xI>

Tale Næss' deliberation at Klækken 03.09.17:

<https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2491375/PRESENTATION%20KLAEKKEN%202009.docx.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>