

## The City Dwellers Project – An immersive endeavor

My research is in playwrighting, but when I applied for my fellowship in 2015, it was clear from the start that in addition to working with full-length plays and performative sketches, I also wanted to work with material that focused on voice and sound, using potential immersive strategies.

I planned for this and tested out different scenarios during the first years of my research period, and slowly the project called *City Dwellers* started to emerge.

### THE CITY DWELLERS PROJECT

During my research period, I have focused on producing hybrid performative texts that create polyvocality. I have wanted to write pieces for the stage that through these polyvocal hybrid strategies has the potential to unveil the ties and tensions between the individual and society.

I have also tried to use the setting, or the place where the text is situated, as a vehicle for these strategies.

In that process, I have been looking for settings that could be able to contain both mass events and singular experiences; an oil-rig adrift, a sweatshop producing fake life vests, a hotel that used to be a monastery etc. Looking for an immersive project, I started looking at the city as such an entity. And I wanted to write a text produced by the city itself, not a text about a city. It became vital for me to look at the city as a happening. Let`s call it an Agent. A place influenced, even created by Man, but still an owner and producer of its own history. Even its own reality.

I wanted to look not only on what we do to the city, but what the city does to us. And as a case-study, I started researching Detroit.

The idea was that the history of the city could function as a kind of shadow-dramaturgy for the immersive piece I was planning, and in 2017 I visited the city, spending 5 weeks there.

### GATHERING OF MATERIAL

During my stay in Detroit I wrote more texts, did several sound-recordings, and I photographed and filmed: street scenes, the neighborhood I lived in, urban farming, industrial wasteland etc. This was then added to the pool of material.

The gathering and production of material went on all through my research period.

Most of it was writing.

I wrote a sketch for one small play called “Detroit”, situated the night before X-mas in a derelict library. I also wrote a long poetic medley inspired by the history of Detroit, and I gathered city-related bits and pieces taken from other projects: Rambling monologues and rants, dialogues, visions and reflections. Or it could be remarks I overheard. Snippets of dialogue from films and television-series. One-liners and outbursts, and I called these snippets “ready-mades”.

Sometimes existing text bred new texts. Variations merged or came about through improvisations in workshops and recording sessions. Often material from other projects, workshops, impro-based activities, or discussions ended up in the pool.

## THE ESSENCE OF THE PROJECT / A FEEDBACK LOOP

As the project developed, I wanted to explore whether a sound-installation or an immersive voice-installation could manifest multitudes, not as mass-entities, but as distinct voices.

I also wanted to explore whether these entities could – through compositional tools in space, represent a place. This became the goal for my immersive endeavor.

The first title for my research project had been: *From 1:100 – or how to narrate a we*. As soon as I started working on this question, I had realized that there were several problems with it. First, it was the word “narrate”. It was as if I had given the texts I was going to write a form before I had even begun writing them, before even having analyzed what forms this endeavor would demand and produce.

And what did I really mean when I used the word “we”?

Did I want to write plays that represented everybody, meaning everybody else or everybody including me? If that was so, how could that be possible? And, I thought, using the word “we” must mean that there is somebody else, a “them”. So, who decides who are “we” and who are “them”?

The questions left me unsettled, and as the work progressed, I came up with a new title, carefully based on the research I was actually doing. The new title of my project was *1:100 – the performative hybrid text as a feedback loop*. And in a way it constituted just as much an answer to my first title, as it posed a question.

Through polyvocal hybrid forms I had found a way to represent a conglomerate of voices, attitudes, worldviews, aesthetics and dramaturgical strategies in one and the same text. What held them together was composition.

My praxis had become a constant feedbackloop between gathering texts, writing texts and compiling them in various ways. Using ready-mades, collective writing endeavors, by rewriting them, having them read by actors etc., I made myself constantly bounce and collide with the world and with the texts those collisions created.

Working in this feedback loop even entered the process of compiling or assembling. When put together and combined as modules in a hybrid manner, the texts began to reverberate, to transform. Each module or texts-block responding to the other, and to the whole. This was more than an internal dialogue. The process inside each text-compilation started to resemble a Deleuzian machine assemblage.

In *the City Dwellers project* I took this one step further, and – all though it was mainly practicalities and chance that made this project the last project I produced in my research period– looking back at it, it makes sense that things turned out this way.

## THE POOL

*The City Dwellers project* does not constitute a play. It is rather a text pool or a pool of material. Although I have made several attempts to turn this material into narratives, as a whole it is not. It consists of a series of smaller and larger texts, fragments, outbursts, even just sounds and sighs, as well as monologues, ready-mades, witness-statements, reflections and afterthoughts (see: <https://www.fromonetoahundred.com/city-dwellers-project/>).

Today the material is organized in a kind of timeline, but it could just as well have been organized differently, and when assembled or reassembled, numerous different selections and compilations are viable.

The one thing these compilations have in common is that they have been gathered, written and selected during my research period, and that they center on activities influenced by the “city”. Whether it is a city being founded, a city flourishing, or a city under the threat of collapse.

## VOICES, NOT BODIES

The sheer multitude of the material produced, meant that a manifestation of it would be more suited to an audio-based rendering than a staging. To have so many people on stage would not just be a massive task, but would also entail the risk of meaning and affect being lost in the pure physicality of the effort.

In 2017 I started recording the various texts while beginning to plan for an immersive, polyvocal rendering. I invited the visual artist and scenographer Lawrence Malstaf to help

me with a spatial solution (See: <http://lawrencemalstaf.com>). I wanted to use the history of Detroit as a shadow dramaturgy for the piece, both visually and in the way the text was put together, and he came up with the idea of a grid of vertical steel wires. These wires would follow the pattern of an early Detroit city plan. The speakers would be mounted on the wires, and the audience could then move freely between them.

Later I also started collaborating with composer and researcher Ulf A. S. Holbrook (<https://www.uio.no/ritmo/english/people/phd-fellows/ulfah/>), we were trying to add an atmospheric outer layer to the piece through an accompanying 24 speaker ambisonics composition, complementing my more narrative stream of voices. The idea was to have three times present, at one and the same time. The time of each individual, a historic, epic and social time, and then the presence of something everlasting, a nonhuman duration. A time that would still be played out long after we are gone.

During the recording sessions, new variations on the material came about. Through spontaneous improvisations in the studio, based on meetings with the readers, through the translation process to other languages (Farsi, German, French, Finnish etc.) as well as in the editing process.

Sometimes it seemed as if this material and the way it was generated, took on a will of its own. A will to grow and expand. Each part triggering and influencing the other.

## PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

To secure the technical quality of the production, I needed to find collaborators, and through the head of research at KHiO at the time, Trond Lossius (<http://trondlossius.no>) I now managed to get NOTAM (<https://notam.no>) on board. Lossius was also the one who had introduced me to Holbrook.

I also needed co-funding to make all this happen, and I found that through Dramatikkens Hus (<https://www.dramatikkenshus.no>) and the production company Ferske Scener (<https://www.ferskescener.no>).

I also needed to find a stage, and I finally got a place at one of KHiO's eight, large black boxes.

A date for the production could be set for spring 2019, and the public invited to see the result in March. Three performers were also invited into the project (Mine Yacine, Fredrik Høstaker and Helle Bendixen).

## LOW TECH AND HIGH TECH

The manifestation of *the City Dwellers project* was to become a strange mix of low tech and high tech.

The simple base idea was to create 40 small units where sound and light were combined.

The first phase, 3D printing small, transparent plastic houses to contain the sound source (an ipod and a small speaker) and the light source (two small led lights), was relatively easy. And all though I knew that the quality and range of the speakers was limited (I was working with music angels), I hoped that the "boxes" would not influence the quality of the sound too much.

What I was looking for was after all not an amplified sound, just voices sounding like voices.

When it came to connecting light and sound, I had some experience with that.

I had experimented with such technology in previous projects back in 2007.

But since this ipod had very low voltage, we needed to amplify the sound signal to be able to trigger the light source. This became the main challenge, and since it was decades ago that I had worked with such a project, I knew that my collaborators could probably find a better and more updated solution than the one I suggested.

The next problem was to find a way to synchronize all the 40 units. Making them start and stop at the same time.

NOTAM and its team seemed sure to have a solution to the first challenge. A special component was ordered from China, and while waiting for it to arrive, my light designer and technician, Isak Bjørn was working on the other problem – synchronizing the units, making them communicate with each other.

He wanted to replace the ipods with a Bluetooth system, and a software, that put them in touch with each other wirelessly.

Lots of time was spent going down both these roads, but in the end both problems would show themselves to be unsolvable.

In the end we had to return to using the iPods, synchronizing all 40 units manually by pressing play. This process involved careful editing, and five people on the play buttons.

It was a time-consuming process just to get the piece started. The method was also overly vulnerable to human error, and this made the work we did in space inflexible. Leaving no place for improvisation or impulsivity.

When the part finally arrived at NOTAM from China, it did not do the job we had hoped it would, and in the end, we had to do it all the old fashioned way. Working manually on each component, in a process involving assembling and welding. Yet another time-consuming job, and in the end involving more than five people working in an assemble line. All the time I had put aside for working in space, was now spent on solving these technical problems, producing the units. In the end we managed to create the instrument, but there was no time left to rehearse. No time to make the music it was going to play.

The composing in space. Slowly adding live action, setting the lights, testing the piece with the audience etc. had to be put aside. We had to face the facts. There would be no performance.

And when all components were finally in place, new surprises and challenges arise. I had to go from production mode back to research mode.

All in all, we ended up making four different try-outs at KHiO. Two on th 9<sup>th</sup> and two on 10<sup>th</sup> of March.

This became *City Dwellers # 1-4*.

## FROM PRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

Prepping the production I had compiled the material as a narrative.

In that narrative a city was founded, then grew and finally collapsed.

The events in the text unfolded in four successive waves of events, from the founding of the city in 1701 until today. I even tried to look beyond present time, and into a future radically different from now.

To strengthen the narration, I added some longer epic and narrative monologues, tying the piece together.

When introducing the material into space, I got some surprises.

Listening to the mix in stereo in protocols, or on 11 small speakers in a circle, it had been easy to follow the different events unfolding, but when introduced to 40 small speaker in a large spread out space, something new happened. Instead of the different segments joining up, gathering into a narrative, things started to fragment.

The theatrical feel and the dark anonymity of the black box added to this. Instead of creating a feeling of a particular world, where particular events took place, it felt as this place could be any place at any time wherever.

In my meta reflection I write: *The web of stories I had spent month writing, recording and weaving carefully together, lost its impact once it was dispersed in the space. And on top of that, Holbrooks's droning music gave the whole piece a somber feeling. A sense of something foreboding.*

*I had not created an event. I had created a lament (see: <https://www.fromonetoahundred.com/metareflection/>).*

In the new situation that now occurred, the performance being cancelled, and the try outs taking place – we had the chance to turn this into something constructive. So, I continued working. Testing different compilation strategies, different texts in different parts of the room. Working with the lights, using costumes or no costumes. Addressing the audience or leaving them alone. Editing all through the night.

This continued throughout the weekend.

I was constantly adding and cutting, moving material around. Making the try-outs into a place for manifesting different forms and aesthetics. Making it into a process of trials and errors.

While working I discovered that in such a large space something interesting happened: the further apart the different sound-sources were, the harder it was for the audience to connect them. And since it took time to move from one part of the room to the other, from one sound source to another sound source, I had to take that into consideration when putting the piece together.

At KHiO, some of the try-outs moved close to abstractions. With a few sentences here and there, a gradual shift in light, the faint sound of voices, the pieces became like living

paintings. That together with an element of randomness that came with the fact that we had not gained complete control over the piece technically, made it sometimes sound like voice-based music. At times this was moving and beautiful, but I had to ask myself. If narration was what I was after, how could I find a way to compose in space creating connections, bridges, and meaning.

I had to find a way of compiling the segment that created duration and consistency, tension and dynamics.

In half of the try outs I went for that. Using a strategy that I often use when writing librettos. Emphasizing repetition, density of sound (many sound sources producing sound and parallel meaning/affect at the same time), longer and preferably looped segments of sound/text, choir-segments, long powerful monologues (aries) etc. etc.

It is always a terrible feeling to see your plans fall through

At the same time, with *City Dwellers # 1-4*, I also experienced an exhilarating feeling of discovery. There was so many things that could not be understood or planned for, it had to be experienced in the space itself.

Thinking back, there was nothing wrong with the original plan. The project had a sound foundation, and the material could have carried it. It would have worked in stereo or in a smaller space. But even if we had overcome the technical challenges, and even with more time and better speakers, I know now that the problem would not necessarily have been solved in *that* space where we were working. I would have had to go back to the editing board. I would have had to look for a differently dramaturgy, and I would have had to gain total control of the placement of each speaker, each sound source. Having done that, I still might not have achieved the feeling of energy and lived public life that I was after.

#### WHAT SPACE?

In a black box it is hard to achieve transparency. To let reality shine through or enter into the picture. At least for projects that are more poetic than documentary.

For me the black box took away the feeling of something living. Of every day. Of reality.

After the try outs at KHiO, I realized that I was not finished.

This was not the end.

There were more work to do.

I had to try again elsewhere. In another space, and with another compilation and another immersive spatial rendering. Maybe I needed to move the project into more of a public space? So, the process continued. And although NOTAM had now done theirsbit, the research went on. As a matter of fact, it still goes on today

#### CITY DWELLERS # 5–8

To simplify and try to understand the process and issues I was dealing with, I chose a public space and to work with fewer speakers, creating shorter pieces and simpler compositions.

In *City Dwellers # 5*, I only used two texts and two speakers, creating a duo (<https://www.fromonetoahundred.com/city-dwellers-5/>).

Here I wanted to try out texts that had the same focus-point; women and textile, seen from different angles, but still echoing each other in both sentiment and form.

In *City Dwellers # 6*, I worked with five speakers and five texts, then expanding to eight all in all. Here I worked with timbre and small variations within the texts, creating more of an ambient piece together with the composer Mariam Gviniashvili (<http://www.mariamgviniashvili.com/>). Here it was the different atmospheres of the individual pieces produced and the way they were placed in the space itself that was the focus.

The foyer at Vega Scene was both noisy and busy. Nothing came for free here, and the audience had to make a conscious choice to choose to engage in the pieces, if they were to have a real experience of both content and form.

In *City Dwellers # 7*, I chose a semi-public space, a gallery with a large window that exposed what went on inside to the public, and that exposed and involved the public life outside to what went on in the piece. But I could still mainly control the space.

Here I used some of the same material from *City Dwellers # 1–4*, but the space was smaller, and I anchored the piece in a monologue or prologue, recorded in my own voice, that took in the place itself and anchored everything in a here and now.

All direct references to Detroit was left out, together with the more narrative monologues made especially for the historical version, and all the material choices were happening in a historical now.

Many of the longer texts were in several languages, and I also wrote, recorded and included some texts based on people and events from the street where the gallery was situated (<https://www.bananaz.no>).

Since the space was so small, the audience experienced the piece more on equal terms sound wise. But where one sat, and where one looked still had some influence aesthetically.

## CITY DWELLERS GOES DIGITAL

When the Corona virus stopped all prospects of performing for an audience, some festivals went digital. Vårscenefest in Tromsø asked their festival artist to choose digital formats, and *City Dwellers # 8* was a direct result of that.

Here I returned to Detroit as a vicinity, creating a grid of twelve short films accompanied by twelve texts, and with specially composed music by Kristoffer Lislegaard (See: <https://varscenefest.org/city-dwellers-8/>).

The small films were mainly Detroit city-scapes; a down town street, a derelict factory, an empty lot, two houses, a field by an urban farm etc. The audience visiting the page could activate and move freely between the different films and they could also move the films around on the screen. Activating one, or all. Stop and start as they wanted to, and through that create a feedbackloop between one or several of the films, creating different content and different atmospheres.

In the next piece I am planning, *City Dwellers # 9*, I will work on site, in a shop or in an urban space in Tromsø, and here again I will work with the same material as in the other manifestations, adding some new texts that deals with the changes and choices in the urban fabric of Tromsø right now.

## AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

How important has the issue of audience participation been for this project, I have asked myself. The true answer would probably be – important *and* not so important.

Being an immersive project in space, it has been exciting to see what happens when an audience move freely in a space filled with immersive sound.

The fact that the audience is there. Settling in groups beside a particular voice, by a particular speaker. Being both in deep concentration, in the process of listening and together, adds something to the feeling of the piece and the visual impact of the piece. This is something that I enjoy watching, but in a way, it is only surface participation. It is only in the web-based manifestation, *City Dwellers # 8*, that the audience has any real say. Here they can not only move freely “inside” the piece but take part in assembling it. Here the combination of text, sound and the visuals/films, creates a potential for a variety of aesthetics, meaning and affect to occur. As such, *City Dwellers # 8* is also interactive, digital literature, with all that genre has to offer. It is multimodal. It exists on the computer, but works across disciplines, and you, as an audience have to physically involve yourself, to make the piece “happen”.

## COMPOSITIONAL PRINCIPLES

Many different compositional principles has been at work in the different manifestations of *the City Dwellers project*.

I have tested strict narratively based principles, with the history of Detroit as a shadow dramaturgy, leading up to the first different compilations tried out at KHiO.

Here I also worked with repetition, chorus-work, elongated solos etc. Techniques I often use when writing a libretto (try outs 2 and 4).

In try outs 1 and 3, randomness, rhythm and abstraction played a larger part. Here I left narration behind. Leaving space for the ambisonics composition by Ulf A. S. Holbrook to shape the piece.

In *City Dwellers # 5* I worked with mirroring and variation etc, etc.

In each one of these projects, I have learned something new about how spatial rendering and immersive strategies influences the dramaturgy. And how that again influences both

content and form. This gives limitation, but also opens up a world of opportunities to be discovered and explored.

## A PERFORMANCE OR AN INSTALLATION

One can ask oneself if it is right to call these manifestations installations.

Sometimes I have called them dramatic installations or voice-based sound-pieces, but I have been very hesitant to call them performances. Mainly because the live aspect is so minimal, as all has been recorded and framed.

I guess that's the same in an audio play or an hörspiel, but still. It has felt better to categorize these as installations.

One critic called *City Dwellers # 8* an immersive audio play. And maybe that is the right category to place these pieces in, but in many of them, the visual aspects are vital. As their placement is in space, or the ongoing interplay between sound and light. In *City Dwellers # 1–4*, the try outs involved live actions, so I have still not settled on what category this project belong to. And as of now, I do not know what manifestations the project will take on in the future.

## SOME FINAL COMMENTS

When I started working with dramatic installations in the late 1990's, I had already developed a fascination for the voice as a medium as well as for contemporary photographers and video artists like Cindy Sherman, Bill Viola, H. C. Gilje and Crispin Gurholt.

It was often the clash of references, time and attitude, that attracted me to these works. The way that time and society's passing fads and technologies were set into play by the mixing and overlapping of visuals and references. The paradoxes and tension they produced, along with gestic theatricality and the intrinsic instinct for staging, felt inspiring.

Although my first installation-pieces did not resemble any of these works, I think the potential for awaking these qualities, as well as my fascination for the human voice, drew me to towards the installation as a medium. Having found a growing need to explore parallel actions and layers of time, I was probably looking for a way out of the dichotomies of dualism. I was striving to find a Thirdspace. A merging of space and time. I wanted to create parallel scenes, even parallel worlds. Allowing them to co-exist side by side.

In *the City Dwellers project*, I took this into a period of spatial experimentation. So far, I have had to work with stationary speakers and linear sound. I have not had the technology to move the sound from speaker to speaker, creating a floating and flexible world. My solution was to work with multiple sources as I tried to create immersive landscapes of voices through a pool of performative texts in a spatial representation.

All the works that followed (except from *City Dwellers # 8*) have been purely voice based, adding almost no other additional sound.

In the radio play, composer Kent Olofsson writes, the listener must imagine the place where the play is set through what is heard. As such, the radio play is free to move quickly between different times, places and situations, or let them occur simultaneously in a way that cannot be done on stage (Composing the Performance (2018), p. 29). This was something I wanted to utilize.

As in a radio play, I was looking for layering. For parallel scenes. For assemblages of texts and voice-performances that resembled the solos and communal sequences of a dance-performance or a musical composition. In a radio play or a hörspiel, scenes can intercut and run parallel. You can have a war-scene going on in the background, while placing a dialogue between a few main characters in the foreground, interweaving them with an inner dialogue, even adding a narrator commenting the scene.

In *the City Dwellers project*, I have worked with many times and places at the same time, introduced many characters, situations and perspectives. Bit in an immersive piece where the audience moves freely, *they* decide what is in the foreground and what constitutes the background. Discovering the consequences of this has been both thought provoking and exhilarating.

Throughout the research period there has been a constant movement back and forth between writing material, re-writing, recording and spatial try-outs in a series of feedback loops. The space has been the page, so to speak. The space has offered something notation could not.

As I see it, for now the page cannot offer a sound-based Thirdspace, which is what is needed here. For now, there is no real script for the different manifestations of the project. Only a master-mix of each work in Protocols.

Today the material consists of 461 short texts. 90 % of them has been recorded. All in all by 102 different readers, included myself.

The project has now manifested itself in many ways and in different spaces: A grand sized black box, a theatre foyer, a gallery and online.

The first four try outs were at KHiO in March 2019, each try out lasting about an hour.

The second consisted of two smaller sound-installations in the foyer at Vega Scene in the autumn the same year.

Then I did a twenty-minute piece at Gallery Bananaz, presented in February 2020, involving seventeen speakers, and then the latest web-based piece in the spring of 2020

In 2021 I plan to do a site-specific piece in Tromsø. And together with Ulf A. S. Holbrook I will do a pure audio-based, ambisonic version for Intonal Festival at AIC in Malmö.

Throughout these last space-based projects, I have been working with, and will continue to work with the young designer Tharadon (<https://tharadon.com/Projects>).

*The City Dwellers project* is not a play. It is a continuously growing text pool.

Each manifestation is a new compilation, a new assemblage.

Most of them have come about through composing on the floor. Only there did the effects of the intended mash of parallel actions and texts in space reveal themselves.

Early on, in *City Dwellers # 1 - 4*, the manifestation took on an almost monster-like quality. It was a gigantic narrative hybrid. In *City Dwellers # 8*, the mass had thinned out, but the hybrid is still there.

Now a new feedback loop has arisen.

From one manifestation to another.

Each having its own spatial solution, its own compositional logic, and its own take on audience involvement and the visuals going on in the space where it take place.

In the end the project has become so rich, it has taken on a life of its own.