

VOICE – presentation Artistic Research Forum, oct 22

In 2020, I received support from DIKU for an artistic research project called VOICE. The aim of the project was to explore methods for a greater degree of ownership and agency of participants in film projects. The description of the project was as follows:

VOICE is structured around the work with a film script and a film production. The aim of the project is to use this production process to discuss fundamental questions about representation (...), as well as to develop a methodology for fiction films where the actors' experiences have a real impact on the script and the production.

The project had its starting point in a script draft for a longer film by project leader Ane Hjort Guttu, with the following synopsis:

VOICE is a fiction film about young people and media. Set in an Eastern suburb to Oslo, Norway, the film follows participants in the film workshop VOICE, run by Dawit, Sara and Juan. In the workshop, young people from the neighbourhood learn to «speak for themselves» through simple means: Using cell phones, they make films whose aesthetics and politics are continually discussed through extensive group seminars. VOICE is an unconventional «afterschool» in which the participants are jointly credited for everything they do, and they do not shy away from publishing provocative clips online, which have caught the attention of mainstream media.

When filmmaker Rhea arrives to make a documentary about VOICE, using more traditional documentary production methods, she is soon questioned by Dawit and the others. Why should Rhea, who is not from the area and who knows their project only from the outside, get to tell the story of VOICE? The activists claim that documentaries should be made «from within», and demand ever more influence in her film project. Rhea goes to great lengths to create a more "democratic" film production.

The purpose of this script was to discuss power relations within documentary filmmaking. In what way can you speak for and about others? Where is the line between solidarity and interest on the one hand, and cultural appropriation or just insensitivity, on the other?

The film is now more or less ready, and this clip is from the beginning of the film, where the documentary filmmaker enters the stage, and where we see an example of VOICE's working methods.

CLIP 1

In this summary, I will go into two decisions made in the implementation of this project, which were consequences of the research work and which I see as the most important to discuss in a critical evaluation of the project.

The project I outlined in the application to DIKU was based on an already written script, where the entire action took place inside a film workshop for young people. The first important move I took within the preliminary project, was to initiate a film workshop as a kind of pilot for the fictitious *VOICE*. In the script, the workshop was situated in Groruddalen, the main point being that it had to be a suburb in eastern Oslo. Prior to the project period, I had made research trips to Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmø, where I visited various activist initiatives, youth initiatives and groups/associations working with young people and film. In addition, I had met a number of people who were doing the same thing in Oslo, and done longer interviews with them.

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Nevertheless, I understood during the first months of the project that I could not make the film without going even deeper into what such a film workshop for young people should be; what kind of films they came to make, what themes they were concerned with, how it should be run, and more generally, how young people film and use film in their everyday lives.

I therefore conducted a film course that I held together with filmmaker Brwa Vahabpour in the spring of 2021, in collaboration with PRAKSIS Oslo and Interkulturelt museum. This course spanned nine sessions; a weekend in the beginning and end, and 7 meetings, and there were 8 participants between the ages of 16 and 18 from Oslo East.

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This workshop became an important experience for me, and I would like to go deeper into how it was structured:

- The first weekend was set aside for presentation of all the participants and discussion of the course.
- The course was task-based. The point of the assignments was not to learn about technical issues, but to become conscious of, and discuss, their form and content / aesthetics and politics and the relationship between them.
- Most of the time was spent to discuss the films that were made, within group sessions.
- In addition we saw about 25 different examples of historical and contemporary films or film clips.

Examples of tasks:

- Make a film that shows someone who is working. Max one minute, one take
- Make a film where you think of the camera as a gaze, a point of view which sees something. Who does this point of view belong to?

- Make a film in which you show something you know about in your immediate environment, which you think almost no one else knows.

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- In total, around 40 short and longer films were made during the course.
- The course's methodology was based on group discussion around a table, actually the group crit model taken from art education.
- The participants received a salary for each time they participated. We offered a simple dinner each session.
- The course ended with an exhibition of 13 selected films at the Intercultural Museum in Oslo. Here we also organized a public conversation, with an emphasis on art mediation and youth activities.

VIS BILDE

- 7 of the filmmakers were presented on the online platform *PRAKSIS presents*, with a short interview and a selected film:

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I experienced the implementation of this course, and arranging it as part of the preliminary project, as instructive in the following ways:

- I gained much more knowledge about topics young people are interested in (tiktok, urban myths, focus on mental health, focus on the family)
- I learned a lot more about the kind of togetherness/collaboration/presence the young people in the film should be able to have, and I modeled the workshop in the film after my own pilot workshop. I experienced, among other things
 - o Great kindness and support towards each other
 - o Easy adaptation of the group critique model, and enthusiasm towards it
 - o Great interest in various aesthetic/formal techniques and discussing them
 - o Less straining than I thought, but still extremely much noise/activity constantly.
 - o Dutiful, homework/assignment oriented
- I decided to cast 5 of the 8 participants as actors for the filming. This was successful and they were surprisingly good, I guess because they felt security with cast and crew, and with the workshop format.
- I decided to bring a number of the short films made in the film course, into the final film, either uncommented or with a constructed context (fex a staged discussion). Thereby, the script and the idea of the film changed: The young people in the film, and their interaction

with film/video which is going on constantly in their lives, became a more important part of the film than I had planned.

Looking back at my initial goal of developing a “methodology for fiction films where the actors' experiences have a real impact on the script and production”, I think all these “findings”, so to call them, were valuable. My idea, and ideal, was the following: in a film whose content is so concerned with agency and empowerment of participants, it was absolutely necessary for the development as well as the filming process to mirror or contain some reflection of these questions. Within the more conventional film field, which still is surprisingly focused on genres and categories, such a way of working is defined as *hybrid*. Actually, I got the initial idea for VOICE from seeing too many documentary films at CPH:Dox 2015, where the hybridity was limited to a fictional story “inserted” into an existing community: the filmmaker had entered some form of society and more or less “coopted” the lives and stories of the participants. Often, it felt like it would have been truer, and more interesting, if the subjects of the films had thrown out the filmmaker and made the film themselves. The script for VOICE was meant to portray a documentary film production which is more of a battle: between voices, between perspectives and political and ethical opinions.

KLIPP – Rhea og Dawit i klipperom

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The second important change that came about as a consequence of experiences made during the project, was the form of distribution. My meetings with young people and with the actors changed my preferences for how the film should be presented to an audience.

My original project description outlined a film of about 50 minutes, with screenings at Camden Art Centre, Trondheim Kunsthall, etc., that is, the general circulation in art institutions that my film works usually have. However, the experience of how distant and obscure the art field way of showing moving image, seemed to the actors and participants, made me wish to distribute the film on platforms more familiar and close to them, especially cinema, which still has a higher status than television (although to me, it would be ideal, conceptually, to show it on Netflix). I therefore changed the idea of the format into a full feature film for cinema. This turned out to be a much less healthy financial and resource framework for the project, but surely a more logical one, in line with the idea of the film and the process.

To me, questions of consequence throughout the preliminary project, production and distribution of a moving image work have become ever more interesting and important. A reason why so much emphasis in this presentation is put on the “product”, ie the film, is actually that a finished product in form of a distributionable *movie* became an important end result of the development work. A very specific problem (or challenge) arose as a consequence of the production, namely this:

What do you do, as an artist, when the artistic process, and the ethics of the artistic process, require that the display context for, the distribution of and the communication about the work must change? Of course, this happens to a greater or lesser extent all the time, you

adapt works to the viewing context or vice versa. However, in this project I feel specifically confronted with a more radical change, which was to partly leave the art field altogether and look at other ways of distributing the work, moreover, to enter a field which for me seems less experimental and more concerned with audience analyses, market strategies and the like. The realization that the people I worked with wished to be proud of the film and show it to their friends and families, and that this was something I wanted as well, meant that I had to change the idea of how the distribution should take place, as well as change the form of the work to feature length and possibly to a more accessible narrative structure.

In Walter Benjamin's seminal text from 1934; *The Author as Producer*, Benjamin seeks to define the role of the author, ie the artist, as a member of a society who necessarily has to relate to class struggle. The role of the author must be rethought, as he is part of an industry whose framework is defined by production. Unable to escape the class conflict in which the writing process takes place, the writer chooses sides, whether he is aware of it or not. "A more advanced type of writer does recognize this choice. His decision, made on the basis of class struggle, is to side with the proletariat. This puts an end to his autonomy. His activity is now decided by what is useful to the proletariat in the class struggle. Such writing is commonly called tendentious." And he continues: "A political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem, has a counterrevolutionary function so long as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer."

According to Benjamin, the artist must ask himself the question: "What is this art work's position within the means of production?" Benjamin's thesis is that when the *technique* of an art work is changed, its place within the means of production is equally altered. Here, Benjamin points to Bertolt Brecht's theory of *functional transformation*.

Image: An example of Brecht's magazine series *Versuche*, which Benjamin uses as an example of functional transformation.

One of the most valuable insights in Benjamin's essay is for me the reflection on limitations of works who claim to be revolutionary solely by choice of topics or by a "democratic" process. It has become ever more important for me to look at how the work can actually reach an audience outside of the established institutions for visual art. As part of the development of a distribution strategy for VOICE, I have become interested in how a work of art can inhabit several positions at the same time. Would it be possible for the art work VOICE to claim the space of a full feature cinema film with national distribution, while at the same time remaining an investigation into certain questions of agency or autonomy, or a *Lehrstück* on participatory filmmaking? I would like to quote Andrea Fraser when she writes (in her beautiful text *Why Does Fred Sandberg's Work Make Me Cry*;

The boundaries of the artistic field not only mark but continually reproduce an originary split that is also an originary loss. This is first of all the splitting that is social differentiation and hierarchization. It is the splitting of the social world into classes and, with divisions of labor, into specialized fields of production. It is the splitting off of art as an autonomous field from the field of general culture. It is the splitting off of artists as specialized producers of culture and the splitting off of competences that are unequally mastered and cultural goods that are unequally

shared.

Benjamin:

In other words, only by transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production – a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order – can one make this production politically useful.

Andrea Fraser:

I believe that art cannot exist outside of the field of art. However, at the same time as I maintain this view, I also believe that art cannot exist within the field of art. It must be art in this sense that is lost for me. But what could this art be, this art that can't exist within the field of art, the only place that art can exist? I'm afraid of this question.

In architect Palle Nielsen's work from 1968; Model for a Qualitative Society, he placed a huge building playground inside Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm. With this, he managed to make both an exhibition and a non-exhibition, or as he himself explains in the catalogue;

The idea is to create a framework for children's own creative play. Children of all ages will work on developing this framework.

Indoors and outdoors in all kinds of play - they should have the right to communicate their capacity for self-expression.

Their play is the exhibition.

The exhibition is the work of children.

There is no exhibition.

It is only an exhibition because the children are playing in an art museum.

It is only an exhibition for those who are not playing.

Another example of a similar strategy is Matias Faldbakken's novel from 2001; The Cocka Hola Company, which according to the author was meant as a art work in line with his other visual works, only that its display was placed within established literary institutions.

Or I could mention the kitchen sculpture of artist Sveinung Unneland, which was made as a prop for my 2021 film Manifesto. In the film, this object illustrated the lack of kitchens in newly built campuses; the students had to disguise a kitchen as a gallery wall to be able to make food within the school. After filming, this prop went into use and circulation within the art school, and was thereby able to inhabit the roles of prop, art work and kitchen at the same time.

And as a counter example: artist Frida Orupabo's most powerful work is in my view her incredible refined curation of instagram posts referring to a vast array of black historical culture, almost always in black and white, with 17000 followers. At once the art institution, here Kunstneres Hus, tried to transform the work into a conventional art display, or what

Benjamin calls “delivering to a production apparatus without changing it”, its power in strangely lost.

These last examples represent some still not quite formulated thoughts around the possible afterlife of the film work VOICE, within and without the art institution. I include some final documentation of VOICE in social media and images from the Norwegian festival premiere.