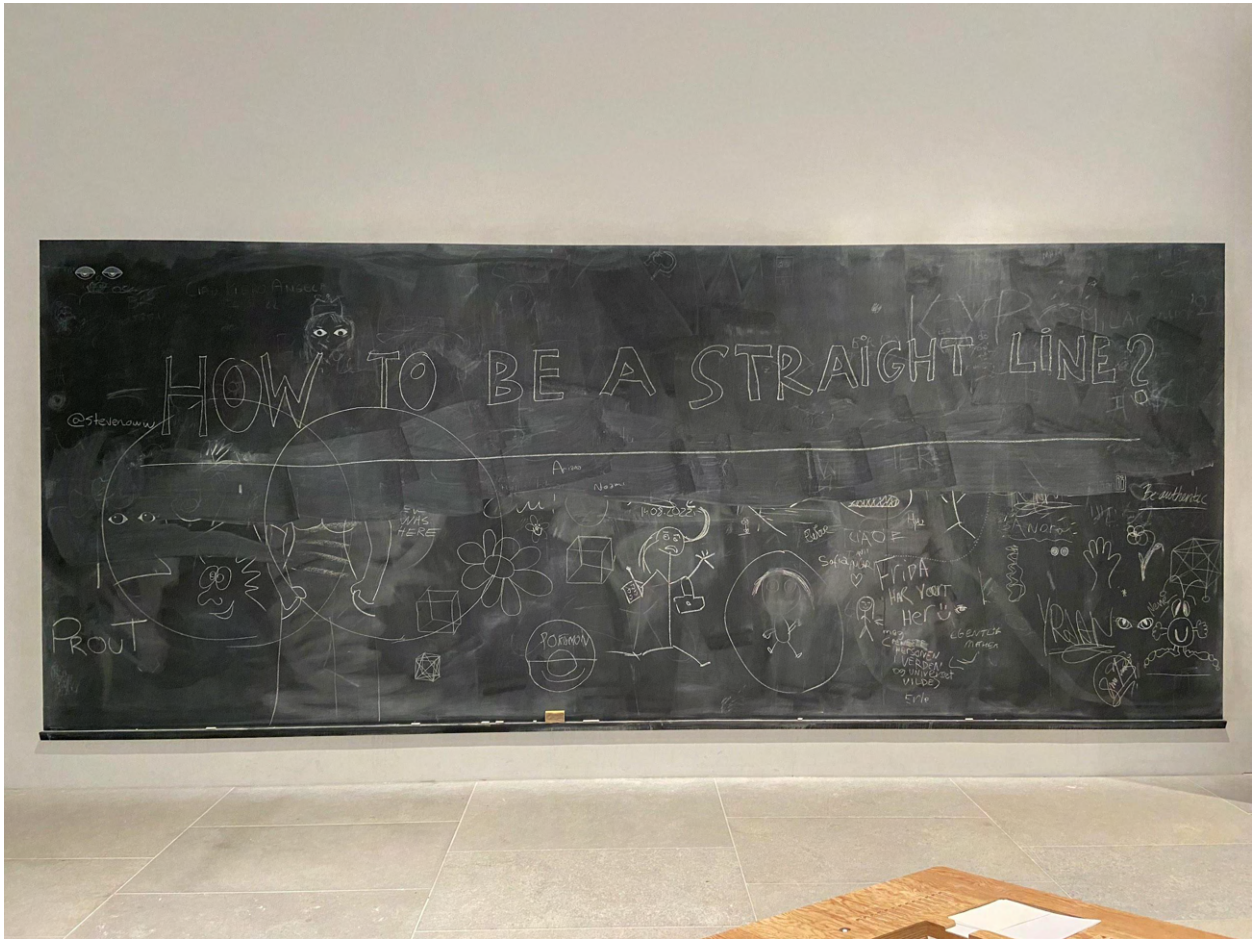


How to be a straight line?



14.08.2022, Sara Liv, *How to be a straight line?*, Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo

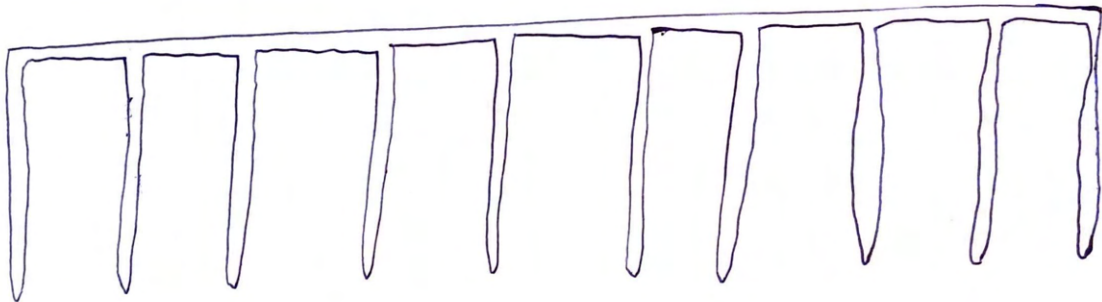
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MA Research Paper 2022

Kunstakademiet Oslo

Introduction

I am a perfectionist. I like everything to be clean, tidy, and straight. I tidy my room every day. Also my studio. I am a queer person though. I came out around the age of 27, when I finally moved to Oslo from Denmark. I bought new glasses recently. It took me 1 year to manage this. Now I struggle with them. Because they are not straight. Or perfect. I hate them. Even if I chose them very carefully. I think it is a form of self-hate. And why do I hate myself? Probably because I am not straight. And I have shameful fantasies. I am ashamed of myself. I did not know for many years that I was not straight. I thought I was straight, but that I just had to work very hard to be feminine enough, to be desired. But the reason why my glasses are not straight, is actually because of my face. My face is not symmetrical. So for them to sit comfortably on my face, they sit crooked. I also tried to be skinny enough. For one year I ate so many carrots that my skin turned orange.



14.04.2022, drawing related to my performance *Props*, Belvedere 21, Vienna

The etymology of “direct” relates to “being straight” or getting “straight to the point.” To go directly is to follow a line without a detour, without mediation. Within the concept of direction is a concept of “straightness.” To follow a line might be a way of becoming straight, by not deviating at any point.¹

I walk from A to B. I get from my school at Schillerplatz to my home in 18th district. I wonder how that also feels like a straight line, as when I lived in 13th district? I realised that maybe it is because my school is placed in the middle of the centre, and every line is organised to go directly to the centre.²

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 16

² I currently live and study in Vienna as an exchange student at Academy of Fine Arts Vienna

A tour-guide explained to me, that the centre in Vienna seems to pull everything towards it, like a magnet. I learned that the numbers in Vienna are all organised around the centre. Apparently, every street number in Vienna increases as they geographically move away from the centre. In that way you would always be able to tell the direction of the centre just by looking at the street numbers.

Nasjonalmuseet

Throughout the past year I have been working with this question “How to be a straight line”. It started when I worked as an assistant of *Wall Drawing #839* by Sol LeWitt at the New National Museum in Oslo. This work pulled me in. During this period, I had a dream, where I literally was a straight line on the wall, trying to stay as straight as possible throughout the night. Many other nights were also occupied by drawing, applying paint, and working on the wall. I sometimes woke up and had to say to myself that the “work” I was doing during the nights was not making any difference and I should stop “working”.



14.08.2022, Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #839*, Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo

I tried to convince the curators at the museum, that I should have a performance in front of the wall as part of the opening exhibition. I called my performance “How to be a straight line on the wall”. I never got a reply.

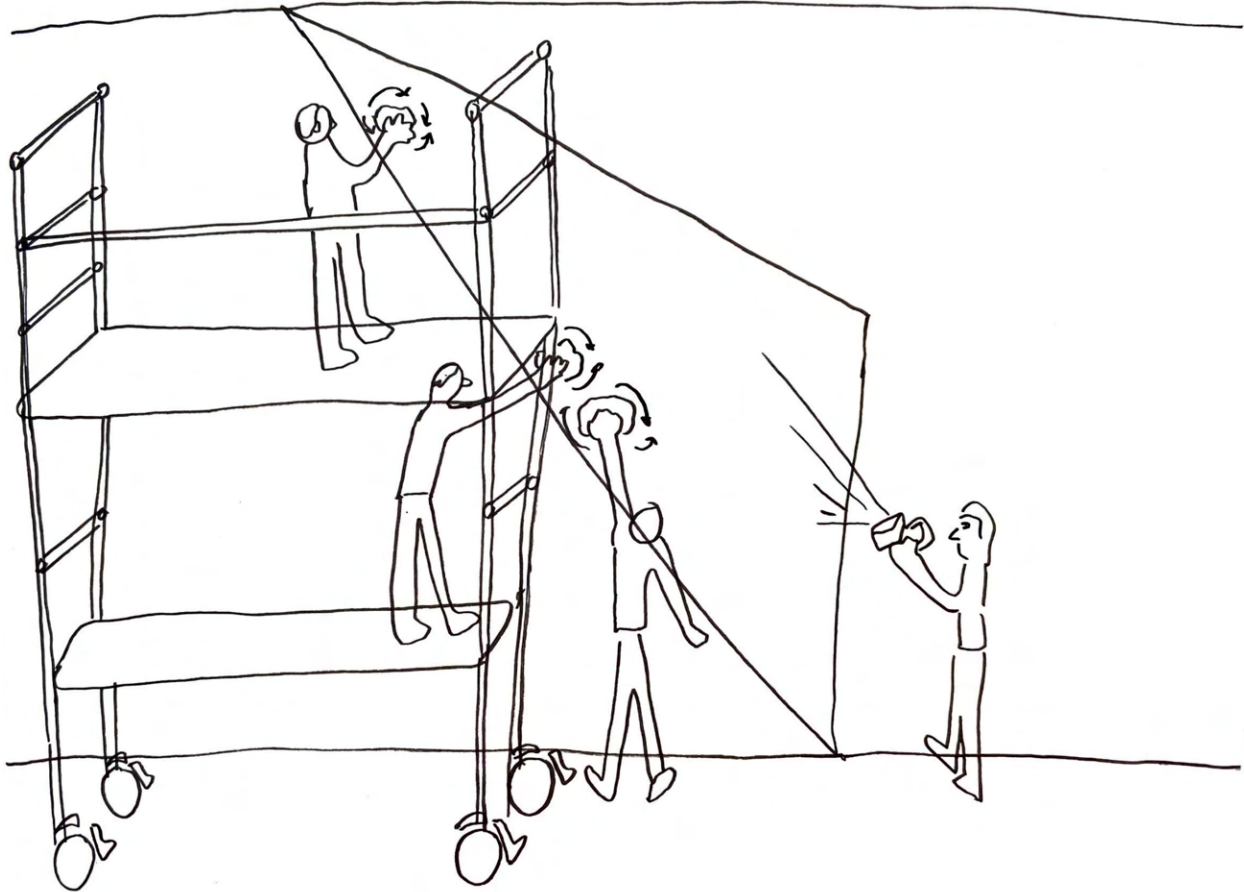
When I visited the museum recently, I put my work on a blackboard in the kids’ workshop. I wrote “How to be a straight line?” with big capital letters, and while I was photographing, someone else showed up and drew a line under my question.³ Thank you!

Today after having my breakfast, I just remembered that I dreamt about this work again, but this time it was not about working on the wall, it was about our lunch times. Every day around noon we were escorted by guards to the top roof, where we were served an extraordinary selection of freshly cooked foods. We were a group of 8 people – 6 newly graduated artists or art students and 2 draughtsmen (meaning 2 people who have been drawing and installing Sol LeWitt’s works for the past 10/20 years).

As one can see on the image, *Wall Drawing #839* is quite massive. It measures around 25 m long, 2-3 m wide, and almost 5 m high, and the drawing is covering all 4 sides. The “ink” (which today is a mixture of acrylic paint and water) is applied by layering. For example, the background field (meaning the big reddish shape formed by the negative space of the triangular fields) consists of 16 layers, where 12 of them are red and 4 of them grey. The paint is applied with rags, in 2 different motions. One is called “wiping” and it looks a bit like wiping windows, but in very organic forms, and the other is called “boom boom” and it looks like you are padding someone, but very fast and firmly. So, as one can imagine the contact with the wall is very bodily and organic – but in a systematic, coordinated, and focused way. Since an aim in this process is to create a lively but not irregular or spotted texture, we had to coordinate our movements in a way that looks like we are doing a performance together. Let me explain.

The “ink” is applied in a way where you always keep applying wet on wet, meaning you strive to not let any edges dry until you finish the whole field. And by field I refer to the triangular shapes and the background shape, that appear in different colours on the finished Wall Drawing. So, since the wall is huge and bigger than human’s proportions, we worked in teams of 4 people on a scaffold. One person would be up, one in the middle and one on the ground, and the last person would assist with light and by spotting holes or lost “connections”.

³ Referring to the photograph on the front page of this paper



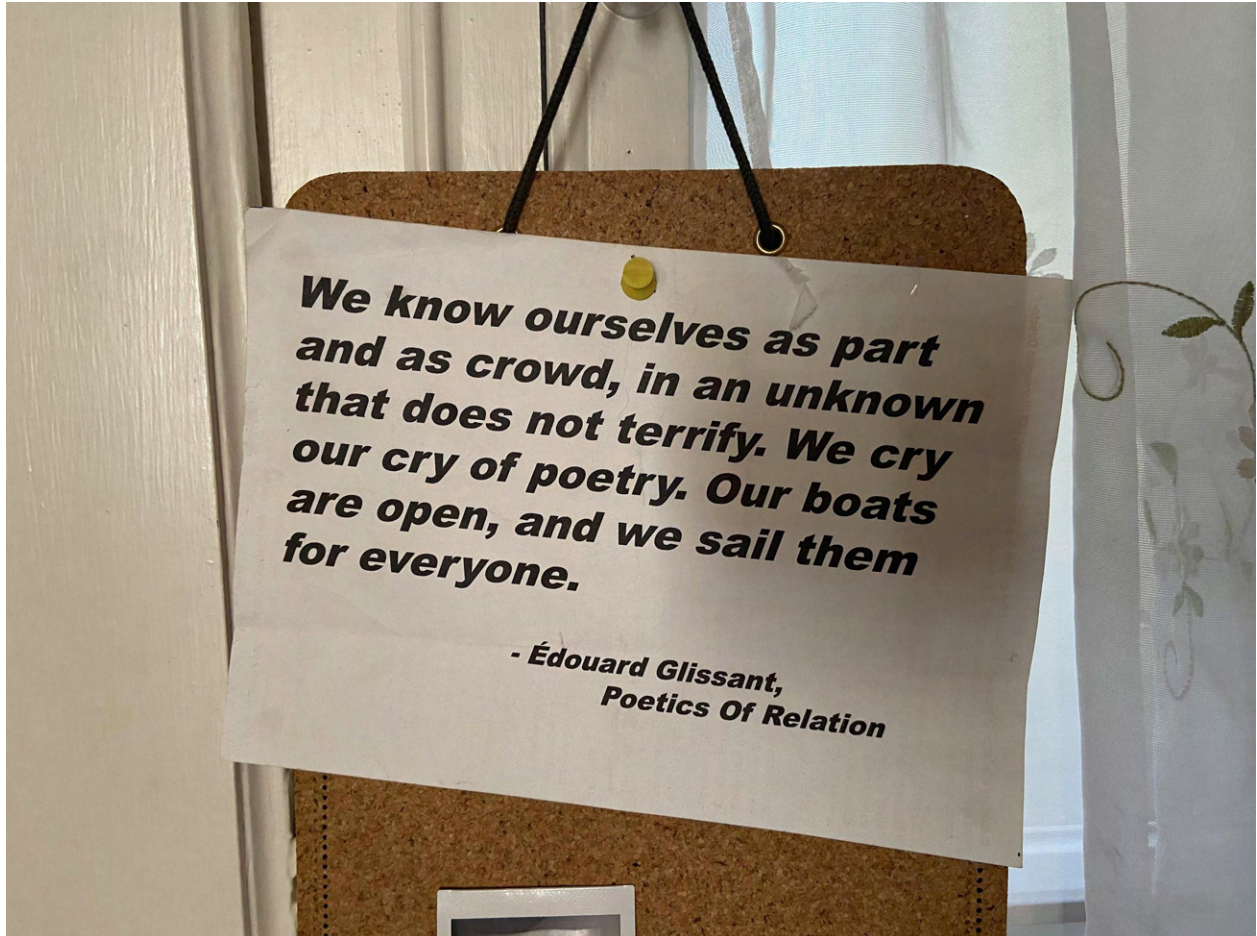
13.09.2022, drawing: 3 persons on scaffold “inking” (wiping motion), one assisting with light

It was very important to communicate and “connect” with the other’s wet edges. The “connections” had to be precise and not overlapping, because we wanted to apply a consistent amount of “ink” on the field. And remember, that this “ink” is very liquidly, and we applied many layers of the same colour on top of each other, so it was not always easy to see the wet edges. Sometimes we had to lean to one side for our eyes to spot what was dry and what was wet, and sometimes we had to be directed from the assisting person on the ground. Imagine we were 4 people but working as one body. I got addicted to “inking”. And I started feeling like the wall was the ground under my feet. As if I was changing dimensions.

We really treated and cared for the wall, like it got a full body massage, and I was in a feeling of flow and together-ness. Sometimes, I thought of us sailing a boat together.⁴

⁴ Descriptions of the work with *Wall Drawing #839* are based on my own experience and memory

And this brings me to a quote by Édouard Glissant, that hangs in my kitchen.⁵ The flier with the quote is from a collective and political action that I took part of in my first year in the bachelor studies at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. The action was called *Slow Walk*.⁶



13.09.2022, photograph from my current home in Vienna

I wish to perform with you a slow walk to the next section in this text.....
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⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 9

⁶ In the action we walked slowly together from the academy to UDI and UNE as a response to a colleague being denied his student visa

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Sara Ahmed and shower discussions

I found the quote from Sara Ahmed fitting, because it is almost delivering a recipe for how to become straight. *To follow a line might be a way of becoming straight, by not deviating at any point.* Explained so simple that one could go out and follow it directly. Just follow a line without deviation. Though it is not actually possible. Because reality will always interrupt you in one way or another. Recently, I read this article on NRK.no about how students at some youth schools refuse to shower after their gym class because of “open shower landscapes”, and they don’t feel safe or comfortable to be naked together. The week before, I read another article on the same online newspaper about how commercial gyms experience an increased number of people showering after their training, because of increasing electricity prices. It was highlighted in the article that it was mostly young people doing this trick and occupying the showers. So, within a week's interval, we could read about two opposite problems.⁷

Two opposite problems, but in the same costume. A costume that we could call “young people showering (in Norway)”. How do I relate this story to Sara Ahmed’s quote? I very intuitively put those themes together, but I struggle to make sense of it, when I return to the text. Maybe I recognised that the news

⁷ <https://www.nrk.no/vestland/hoge-straumprisar-forer-til-eksplosiv-auke-i-talet-pa-folk-som-dusjar-pa-treningssenter-1.16077657>
<https://www.nrk.no/nordland/ingen-i-klassen-dusjer-etter-gymtimen-vil-ha-egne-baser-1.16080440>
<https://www.nrk.no/nordland/bygde-baser-for-elevene-etter-dusjnekt-ma-velge-hvilke-kamper-du-skal-ta-1.16091844>

stories contradicted each other in a way that even if both stories were very straightforward, they became absurd and lost their meaning, when read together. But in losing their meaning they gained another. Like when someone falls out of the line. They fall out queer.

When reading about the young people refusing to shower in open landscapes, my first reaction was, that they were spoiled and just had to learn to become comfortable with each other, but wait a minute, maybe this is not right, just because this is how it was, when I grew up. Back to the question about gender and sexuality, I was not at all aware that I “fell out”, when I was at their age (around 13), but in my mind I never had this option. Could it be that I was raised to think that we are all the same? At least I was supposed to be same as the other girls.

Could the open shower landscapes be seen as a “dead” dream about all of us being the same? But then divided into binary categories with “boys” in one and “girls” in another. How will non-binary, queer and trans people fit into this category? And what about fat people, and/or people with disabilities, and/or people of colour and/or people who look and behave differently than the average Norwegian student? In one school, Rognan ungdomsskole, they just gave the students what they asked for and installed shower dividers, and according to the article it was neither costly nor very time demanding.



6.09.2022, Rognan ungdomsskole, press photo: BØRGE TORBERGSEN

Let's zoom in on these shower dividers. What do they express? How do the shower dividers reflect our contemporary society? What would Sara Ahmed say about the shower dividers? As Johan pointed out in our group feedback, they are also straight lines.⁸ Straight lines that apparently make the students more comfortable, creating a safe border between private space and public space.

Are they straightening devices? A concept that I also borrowed from Sara Ahmed. Devices that make things or people stay on the line.⁹ Or are they props that let us be apart and together at the same time, in a reality where cameras are a constant threat to our privacy / our intimacy?

I keep coming back to this point in the text, trying to say something about why I am fascinated by these shower dividers, trying to answer my questions. But the words are not coming out. They seem to be stuck. I feel their presence – partly at the back of my head, partly at the bottom part of my tongue.

Write a section about tidying

I want to write about tidying and relate it to my artistic process. I move things from place to place. I search for something, not necessarily knowing what yet. When I tidy, I know the places of the things – I have decided already. When I move objects in my artistic practice, I don't know the places. I am looking for organisation. But not to create order. But to create new thoughts. Like algebra? An equation. I am looking for the equation. Tidying is very repetitive. Continuous movements or gestures that don't lead to any result. Or the result is temporary and then it must be done all over again. Things are being moved into places over and over again. I think about this artist who put all his belongings on a factory band.¹⁰ And there is another example with an artist sorting alphabet soup.¹¹ I really love the work from Klara Lidén *Ohyra*, where she is in her kitchen, banging her head and beating herself up for not being good at cleaning, or not visiting grandma enough, or sleeping around too much, or getting drunk too often. This work is simple, intimate, and rough. And her character is very humorous even if I as a viewer feel discomfort and stress from watching the artist beating herself. It inspires me.

Lately I have also been trying to fight the monster within myself. And wanted to beat it up or squeeze it out. It was not possible. I gave up.

⁸ Johan Andréén, part of my MFA class, Oslo National Academy of the Arts

⁹ "Straightening devices" is mentioned in Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 66

¹⁰ Michael Landy destroyed all his belongings in his work *Break Down*

¹¹ Ursus Wehrli, *The Art of Clean-Up: Life Made Neat and Tidy*



9.09.2022, screenshot from *Ohyra*, Klara Lidén, <https://vimeo.com/256607874>

In the work Klara Lidén is failing. Falling out of the line. Because she is not living up to certain standards. Her behaviour and queer identity do not really live up to the housewife expectations. And for that she punishes herself, as we were all trained to do. But in fact, she is wearing a protective helmet. A protective helmet that also serves like a costume, or as a monstrous hat. A hat that keeps her in a child-like state even when she is being punished. A hat that keeps our imagination alive. A hat that keeps her away from the straight line.

Klara Lidén is confrontational. Whereas I think about the shower dividers as non-confrontational. Klara Lidén is fighting with the line. The shower dividers stay put.

Kae Tempest: Grace

Kae Tempest is a singer and musician, and on their album called *The Line Is A Curve* I have been very touched by the last song *Grace*.¹² Listen to it. The song is constructed as a spoken poem with some light instrumental tunes along it. Some of the sentences are "Death is like taking off a tight shoe", "Let me be Love" "Make music with me", "but if you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you". This reminds me of what I am going through personally, as mentioned in the introduction. It feels like I am digging into deeper traumas where I haven't been before. It makes me uncomfortable, but the song also reminds me of the reason why I do art. To bring forth what I spent the

¹² Kae Tempest, album *The Line Is A Curve*, title *Grace*:
<https://open.spotify.com/track/18hFt8DD6fMm7EnYHElcUp?si=MMjlTCu1QNSOoy6gJEkmvQ>

first many years of my life to press down. And for others to be touched or inspired. “Please unscrew me”. This is a desire I can very much relate to. The desire of being taken apart and put together in a new way. The desire of being loose and free. My friends tell me I am a person of opposites. As free and creative I can be in my studio and in my artistic process, emitting a flow of energy to everyone around me – as controlled and obsessive I can be in my personal zone, tidying up constantly and obsessing about small details that feel discomfoting.

I often listen to music while working. It creates a motor or a rhythm, and sometimes I put songs on repeat, like now I have Grace on repeat while writing. It is like a companion in the work and leads the text forward.

Yesterday I went to see a play

Yesterday I went to see a play from Samira Elagoz and it touched me so deeply, that I started writing about it immediately.¹³ The piece is a performance and a film following two lovers, that meet in the beginning of the pandemic, and then spend 3 months in quarantine together. The story is told from the perspective of Sam (one of the two characters), who is also present on the stage. Sam sits in front of the screen in an armchair with a laptop in front of him. Most of the time Sam is not lit, but throughout the screening lights get on Sam and the screening pauses. Sam gently leads us through the storyline with his stage monologues.



31.10.2022, drawing: Sam on stage in the work *Seek Bromance*

¹³ Samira Elagoz, *Seek Bromance*, film/performance, Tanzquartier Wien

Before entering the piece, I had expected seeing a cute and soothing love story between two trans men, but the story was nothing like that. The piece was 4 hours long with an intermission. I guess the duration of the piece was related to their experience of quarantining together for so long. The love story was rough and far from cute. And each of the characters were showing quite narcissistic traits. I was asking myself, why are they acting like teenagers? I assume they were both in their mid or late twenties. After the intermission I started realising that this was maybe not a love story. This was a story of the gender transitioning of Sam. A story of someone coming to himself.

When Samira arrived in LA, where she met Cade (the other character), in March 2020, she was presenting feminine and had just spent the last years touring with a piece addressing toxic masculinity and the experience of being raped. Cade was on the other hand already in the middle of his transition and had recently started passing as a man in public. With Cade's assistance, Sam started injecting T while they were together in LA.¹⁴



30.10.2022, still from *Seek Bromance*, Samira Elagoz

¹⁴ T (Testosterone)

Sam and Cade shared a story of performing extreme femininity in the past, and throughout the film, they seemed to be mirroring each other, and learning masculinity versus femininity from the other. During the first part of the piece, I considered both characters to be quite self-absorbed and very focused on how the outer world perceived them. An outer world that is so paradoxically absent during the film, because of the pandemic.

The character Sam that I met on stage, was quite different though. He seemed calm, sympathetic, and grounded. And by the end of the piece, I understood what I had been witnessing. It was as if we got a glance into the puberty of a gender transitioning journey and by the end of it, he landed in his own body. This was emphasized by the fact that he was performing with us live, in a body that throughout the storyline had undergone physical changes as an effect of the Testosterone.

A story of coming to oneself is not a straight line. It can be messy and disturbing.

Since I saw this piece *Seek Bromance*, I have been wanting to ask myself, why I hold on to this question “How to be a straight line?”. It got to me suddenly, that maybe the experience of being a line on the wall, that I had in my dream, was not a pleasant one. And that the work I have been doing, might be related to my own gender-questioning journey. Have I been holding on to a story about myself or an identity that I thought I had to be? Like the line.

Ending

I wish that this was a story of coming to oneself. I wish that the point by the end of the line, was one of release and conclusion. I feel that writing this paper took me through a process of breaking apart and putting pieces back together. Like tidying. But the tidiness was after all not the place where I wanted to be. As Klara Lidén is banging herself, I am also still beating myself up. For a reason that I am not sure of.

What I found in the meeting with Samira Elagoz, was an artist who let their work be such an intimate part of themselves. The line between his own journey and his work is very thin and almost invisible. His work *is* his own journey, and they are probably more intimately connected than one could ever be with a lover or any other relationship.

Telling your truth is scary.

It would be easier to just zip yourself up and go into the world. But truth is, it is not. As Kae Tempest says “but if you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you”. It is noticeable how the general feeling that I describe to my therapist, resembles the feeling of wearing my new glasses. Something is not right, and I don’t know what. It feels like I am wearing something that I am allergic to. Like a constant vibration of discomfort.



If one gets the chance to visit the New National Museum in Oslo, a thing that is hard to miss is the toilets. They are so fancy, dressed in Italian marble (but still separated into 2 gender categories). Like a costume. The toilets are very performative. They want to draw us into a narrative or dream. I feel very big inside of them. As if I am too clumsy for the room.

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