

# Aesthetics and Dramaturgies of Immersive and Interactive Theatre Since the Turn of the Millennium

**SIGNA – Poste Restante – Sisters Hope**

**KIM SKJOLDAGER-NIELSEN**

## **ABSTRACT**

Since the turn of the millennium, stage art has seen an increased interest in adopting and developing interactive and immersive aesthetics. This article offers a comparative study of two Danish groups, SIGNA and Sisters Hope, and one Swedish group, Poste Restante. The visual dimension of the performances by these three groups is striking, which may be partly attributed to the interconnections between the artists that has allowed a flow of ideas and strategies to occur between one group and the other. Looking at these connections, it appears that there is a line going from SIGNA (established in 2001) to Poste Restante (established in 2007) and to Sisters Hope (established in 2014). Whilst there are similarities, there are also great differences in terms of the aesthetics and dramaturgies of these groups, which reflect political, ethical, and ideological differences in the context of Nordic societies. The paper investigates these aspects through their relations to the audience: how is the audience included in a performance? And what is the purpose of applying an interactive and immersive aesthetics?

## **KEYWORDS**

Aesthetics and Dramaturgies, Immersive theatre, SIGNA, Poste Restante, Sisters Hope

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# **Aesthetics and Dramaturgies of Immersive and Interactive Theatre Since the Turn of the Millennium**

## **SIGNA – Poste Restante – Sisters Hope**

### **Entering “the stage”**

I enter a black-box theatre space, and I immediately find myself standing on “the stage”. Dispersed throughout the space, there are islands of installations, each island making up the interior of a different locality – a kitchen, a dining room, a bathroom, a butcher’s shop, and so on – with its own inhabitants, characters of an implied fable, all of them encircling a young woman dressed in a hospital gown who is sitting in a hospital bed with another one hanging precariously above her like the sword of Damocles. Standing at the entrance, my nostrils are assaulted by the strong, raw smell of freshly chopped meat. On my right side, the butcher is chopping up real lambs, their bloody heads lying on a metal table in front of him. He takes a break and gulps down vodka from a bottle of what I recognize as a Polish brand. When seeing me, he broadsides me with curses. I quickly withdraw from this unpleasant character. With a sense of relief, I am attracted by a smell coming from the kitchen. At the stove, a middle-aged woman is stirring a large metal pot. Reassured by her friendly smile and attitude, I approach her and ask her what she is cooking: “Bigos”, a Polish dish made of sour cabbage, mushrooms, meat, and plums. She lifts the lid to let me sniff. Because of my appreciation she invites me for dinner. Together, with three other guests and the young woman from the hospital, who turns out to be the lady’s daughter, we enjoy the food and the company, until it is suddenly interrupted by the butcher who turns out to be the husband and father. He abuses his wife, and he grabs the daughter and throws her onto the dinner table with the bigos splashing all over everyone, including the guests who are trying to escape. Shaken and disturbed by this assault, I take some time to gather myself before I continue to investigate what this is all about, eventually piecing a fable together from talking to the different characters inhabiting the

installations. They are all related to the dying young woman in the center, and I make out a topography of what I interpret as being memories that she revisits (by physically going in and out of the installation scenarios when they are lit in dreamlike hues).

This is an account of some of my experiences of Signa Sørensen's *Konwaliowa*<sup>1</sup> *Cutie Doll*, performed in Kanonhallen in Copenhagen in 2002. It was her third production, and the third part of a four-part work about the Polish-Danish Nika who escaped Communist Poland with her parents and twin sister as a child. Her troubled relationship to her father made her leave Copenhagen for London where she made her living as a prostitute. She contracted HIV, and she returned to Copenhagen when dying in order to reunite with her twin sister. By opening this article with my account, I hope to give a visceral impression of what one might experience in what Signa Sørensen has called her "inhabited installations" or "performance-installations". In a sense, these terms are the epitome of the staging concept, inspired by installation art rather than theatre, but they are also clearly immersive, evoking a fiction through the acting of the inhabiting characters who interact not only with each other but also with the audience. *Konwaliowa Cutie Doll* was in many ways typical of the artistic work of Signa Sørensen and her company, which later became known as SIGNA. In this article, I will explore some of the changes it has gone through and how it set examples for other groups finding their own paths of artistic development.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to make a comparative study of SIGNA (Denmark/Austria), Poste Restante (Sweden), and Sisters Hope (Denmark), which have been some of the leading free groups disseminating immersive and interactive dramaturgy and aesthetics within the Nordic region and beyond through touring, guest performances, invited productions, and festivals. Responding to the call of the ANTS2020 conference on Scan-Aesthetics, I selected these groups since they are exemplary of the development within interactive and immersive stage art that puts an emphasis on authenticity. This does not mean that the history represented here is the only one to be told; far from it, as there are many other influential immersive and interactive free groups from the period.<sup>2</sup>

The direct line leading from SIGNA to the two other groups, taking the form of inspirational connections on the level of leadership and staff, concepts and imagery, makes it possible to trace certain historical developments. Here, I am interested in the following questions: 1) what similarities and differences between the groups can be found on the level of dramaturgy and aesthetics? And 2) can the developments be seen as responses to the dramaturgies and aesthetics of the earlier groups? By dramaturgy, I understand the staging's intended effects upon the perceptions of the audience; by aesthetics, I understand the visitors' potential cognitive sensations as evoked by the materiality of the event.

My claim is that these dramaturgies (intended as well as lived effects)

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1 Konwaliowa is a common street name in Poland. It translates as "Lilies-of-the-Valley Street".

2 Amongst these are the Danish groups Secret Hotel, Wunderland, Luna Park Scenekunst, and Cantabile2, the Swedish group Institutet, and the Norwegian group Baktruppen.

and varieties of aesthetics (potential cognitive sensations) reflect a general development of authenticity that ranges from fiction to function, from a chosen distance to total immersiveness on the part of the positioning of the audience, while they introduce a contract with the audience that builds on interaction rather than mere spectating from a distance (as in traditional theatre). The groups can be used to exemplify a history of authenticity from the years 2000-2020. Yet, I don't conceive of this as a linear, thematic historiography. Authenticity is only a particular tendency typical of this period +/-10 years, which certainly does not imply that authenticity was excluded from other stage arts during this time or earlier in history.<sup>3</sup>

### Theoretical concepts

The main concept of this investigation is *authenticity*. The Scan-Aesthetics project has made this the theme of a historiographic periodization which covers the time the three free groups in question were/are active. The concept of authenticity I have proposed is not normative but rather cognitive or reflexive, according to the kind of dramaturgy and aesthetics applied by the groups. This means that it is dynamic, malleable, and interchangeable with the history of the groups as well as with their works. I subscribe to the definition by Franziska Bork-Petersen who ascribes a certain consistency to aesthetics in, for instance, an actor's production of a fictional character or a performer's fulfillment of a function offered to the audience: "[A]authenticity is positively charged: reliability gives authority to the person or object that is authentic [...]. But [...] authenticity does not originate from the person or object, exclusively. It emerges in the meeting with an audience; with someone who attributes 'authenticity'. These two features [...] give 'authentic' the status of a value judgement."<sup>4</sup> In the case of the three groups discussed in this article, the question of authenticity depends on the dramaturgy and on the quality of relations established with the audience. It is not a matter of the subjectivity of the individual visitor. Hence, the concept of the work of art is important since it facilitates the potential experience of authenticity within its frame.

### Immersiveness and interactivity

This potential is found in the features of interactivity and immersiveness. I understand interactivity in stage arts the same way as the American director of interactive theatre, Gary Izzo, who applies it to a broader concept of stage art than dramatic theatre: "theatre in which the audience actively and spontaneously co-creates with the actor the unfolding drama."<sup>5</sup> In order for this interactivity to be considered authentic, it has to be consistent in the way the audience co-creates or submits to the events. Given the subjectivity of the value judgements

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3 One might consider the whole convention of naturalism as authenticity-seeking. One example, which sought authenticity to an extreme degree, was William Bloch's staging of Henri Nathansen's play *Indenfor Murene* at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen in 1912. During the opening scene, an actual meatball soup was served in order to give the audience an olfactory experience of being immersed in the fiction.

4 Bork-Petersen, 2013, 25.

5 Izzo, 1997, 26.

of the audience (the visitors), this relatively normative concept of interactivity presupposes a certain objective parameter for accessing and discussing the authenticity. In the case of interactive and immersive stage arts, this requires that we conceive of these formats as works of art. They cannot be conceived of merely as emergent events but are completely reliant upon the framework set up by the artist. The work of art is the frame, the material properties of staging, which determines the terms and rules of the audience's engagement. There is an openness in such works of art, in which improvisation both on the part of the audience member and on the part of the actor unfolds and completes the unique performance event, whilst the framework remains constant and repeatable from one performance to the next. Thus, there is no doing away with the concept of the work of art, as some avantgarde-oriented scholars and artists have otherwise suggested, refusing to rely on the receiver's transformation through the aesthetic experience in the (fragmented) art event. I, on the contrary, would assert that immersive and interactive stage art is *the return or even the rebirth of the work of art*.

Based on Gadamer, philosopher of aesthetics Dorte Jørgensen argues that "the work of art [*per se*] is not closed but open, because it constitutes a playfulness, which demands from the receiver a 'playing along' in order to approach the conveyed meaning of the work." In immersive and interactive stage art, the demand for the audience's playing along is taken to its extreme consequence of performativity or co-creation, in order to explore the potential of the work. As Jørgensen sees it, "the work of art prompts a process of reflection, in which the receiver herself begins to 'read' (i.e. interpret) the work. Therefore, the hermeneutical identity of the work is resting upon a much deeper level than the outwardly closed form. The unity of the work is not a question whether it constitutes a unity of harmonious proportions. On the contrary, the unity consists in the receiver having a notion of something *being* there [in the work], and that the person in question 'understood' something by it or, in other words, identified it as that which it is or was."<sup>6</sup>

Jørgensen then continues with Gadamer to establish how the unity of the work is accomplished through the receiver's aesthetic experience: "In his theory about the aesthetic, he includes an element of revised objective aesthetics, in so much as he maintains that there *is* something in the work, which addresses the receiver and transforms her. This aesthetic 'surplus' is not only located between the subject and the object as a product of the experience. [...] The aesthetic 'surplus' is *in* the work, namely as the increase in being, which appeals to the receiver and initiates her reflection. In the meantime, the receiver has no other access to this immanent transcendence than through the aesthetic experience, presupposing that he or she is partaking her- or himself through her or his 'reading' to recreate the meaning conveyed by the work."<sup>7</sup>

This is the hermeneutic identification performed by the receiving participant through an increase in being, that is, through accessing the deeper ontological

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6 Jørgensen, 2006, 149.

7 Jørgensen, 2006, 149.

layer of what Jørgensen calls the work's "substantial form".<sup>8</sup> This is also what, according to her, is the phenomenological prerequisite for the experience of beauty, which is the pivotal point of her metaphysics of experience. Jørgensen reconceptualizes the classical concept of beauty for our time, in a way that acknowledges "that not all has its purpose outside of itself; on the contrary, there is something, which has its purpose in itself. As long as the current art theory dismisses the concept of beauty and rejects metaphysics, however, there is no possibility of understanding this. Just as it will not understand what is going on in the kind of modern art which might have dismissed the classical work, but which still communicates with tradition thanks to its openness towards the beautiful."<sup>9</sup>

What might, then, be the beauty of immersive in interactive theatre? Immersive and interactive stage arts seek to facilitate an experience of being in the real world, which is ontologically framed by the work of art (as a world-constructing staging) with the purpose of instigating the visitor's self-reflection on her presence within the milieu and facilitated interactivity of the work and relate it interpretationally to the proposed themes of the work. This may enable an experience of beauty, understood as the visitor's best possible experience of immersiveness and interactivity. Jørgensen points out that the experience of beauty is not necessarily a harmonious, pleasing experience, but that it might be highly disturbing or ugly, affectively. Examples of such experience that I can think of are the many dystopian science fiction films of our troubled times, such as Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) or Pella Kågerman's and Hugo Lilja's *Aniara* (2018). According to Jørgensen, philosophical beauty is not about formal proportionality, as in the concept of beauty characteristic of the classical art theories of the nineteenth century, which still dominates today. This needs to be replaced by a contemporary concept of beauty, which is based on hermeneutic phenomenology. Beauty is an experience of the abandonment of one's intention-directed everyday subject when approaching the object, or the work of art, in a dissolving of the divide between them. This experience has a value in its own right, as an emphatic association with the work of art. In this sense, it is a rediscovery of what it means to be in the world, in particular when the experience is mediated by a work of art; it is a Being in the world, or rather, a worlding (a staging of a world) of the work of stage art. As I have discussed elsewhere, this aesthetic experience of the encounter with the work of art depends on the components of the "properties of staging" and the "capacity for experience", the former setting the manifest conditions and the latter determining what it is possible for the individual to experience, including previous experiences of art, cultural background, values or convictions (political views, religious beliefs or spiritual faith).<sup>10</sup> These capacities for experience might be a hindrance for the receiver's attunement to the proposed meaning of the work of art, e.g. the ability of an areligious person to interpret the religious themes of a work, or that of a climate-crisis denier's recognition of the end of the

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8 Jørgensen, 2006, 153.

9 Jørgensen, 2006, 37.

10 Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2018, 330-346.



world. Capacities of experience might increase with the experience of similar works of art, which is of particular importance when it comes to immersive and interactive stage art, because the audience is physically present in the work. To be attuned to the performance is part of the capacity to enter into the milieu and have encounters with the actors/performers who inhabit it. The success of this process of entry is entirely reliant on its staging or framework, which determines the expectations and feelings of trust or distrust. Being attuned may bring about an experience of beauty as self-transcendence, as a going beyond the visitor's inhibiting intentional subject. The opening of the work of art may, in the experience of transcendence, allow beauty to unfold in what the sociologist Hartmut Rosa has called "resonance",<sup>11</sup> i.e. a state of mutually stimulating relationships, which may be with fictional characters or with real-life performers in the worlding (a situation outside of everyday life). The experience of beauty is also a prerequisite for the openminded interpretation of the work of art; only being immersed in the work will open the full potential of interpretation, beyond political and ethical discourses.

In terms of staging, I relate immersiveness to the concept of the theatre scholar Gareth White: immersive theatre "has become a widely adopted term to designate a trend for performances which use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences, and which invite audience participation."<sup>12</sup> In addition to the physical-environmental way in which White understands immersiveness, the term may be understood mentally, as an imaginary immersion into a fiction that might be created on a conventional stage, or in a sensorial way (cf. my olfactory encounter with the butcher's shop and the kitchen in *Konwaliowa Cutie Doll*).

In my three case studies, immersiveness and interactivity were intimately related; the visitor did not experience interaction without immersion; i.e. he or she had to create an environment in which the interactivity could unfold – hence the rebirth of the work of art. Immersiveness contributed to the visitors' sense of being part of the performance as they realized the environment by being present, whether or not they decided to interact with the actors or performers (to the extent that this was at all possible).

### **Scenographics**

The theatre and performance scholar Rachel Hann has proposed a way of thinking beyond conventional theatre scenography, introducing the concept of scenographics, which I find particularly applicable to immersive and interactive events. Here, the audience is mobile and hence gradually realizes the imaginary world: "a scenographic trait enacts a perceptual provocation that calls attention to the broader thresholds of worldly encounter: of how orders of world orientate action and regulate behavior. Scenographics are predicated on the notion that they sustain a witness – a proximity as well as connectedness – that cultivates a potentiality for change and multiple practices within the same material environment. Scenographics isolate the potentiality latent within

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<sup>11</sup> Rosa, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> White, 2012, 221.

any staged atmosphere. Scenographics afford a framework of specifying the 'stage-like' potentials of a situation that may otherwise be captured by notions of performativity and theatricality".<sup>13</sup> This is certainly the case with the islands of installation in SIGNA's *Konwaliowa Cutie Doll*, which invite the visitor to explore the stage geographics and assemble a narrative about the hospitalized Nika on an individual spatial journey.

### **Fiction**

Fiction is another term which applies to this survey, and which is related to the scenographics and the performance of the actors. According to the dictionary *Vocabulary*, fiction is "a deliberately fabricated account of something. It can also be a literary work based on imagination rather than on fact, like a novel or short story." The Latin etymology of the word is enlightening: "The Latin word *fictus* means 'to form,' which seems like a good source for the English word *fiction*, since fiction is formed in the imagination."<sup>14</sup>

The Latin etymology is particularly interesting for the discussion of authenticity, as it points to the decisive part that the visitor plays despite any aesthetic emphasis put on the viscerality of the interaction and on the value, judgement attributed to the visitor's shaping of the fabricated world of the performance. This can be summarized with the question: Is it convincing to the visitor?

### **Function**

*Function* is a word that is used a lot, and which has multiple meanings. Here, I use the term in the rather straightforward sense of something's or someone's doing what is artistically assigned as the function. I also use it to designate the opposite of presenting a fictional character to the visitor. The performer is rather invested in performing a task, such as the job of a host or a masseuse or some other function. The performer is not invested in building a fictional character.

### **Methodology**

Methodologically, I have adopted a historiographical approach to the comparison of the aesthetics and dramaturgies of the three interactive and immersive free groups. Performance analysis is used to understand the dramaturgy and its intended effects on the visitor. These analyses are both experiential and multimodal; they are based on the events' significant moments and are supplemented with iconographical and reception analyses. Iconographical studies are used to establish the visual similarities of the groups' aesthetics. Reception analysis is applied to expand the understanding of the groups' dramaturgy and aesthetics.

### **Material**

Allow me to remind the reader of the disclaimer I made in the beginning: the chosen cases by no means constitute an exhaustive history of free groups doing interactive and immersive stage art in the Nordic region in the period 2001-

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13 Hann, 2019: 37.

14 <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/fiction> (accessed on 25 March 2021).



2021. The present research contribution should only be seen as an initial foray into this area. Many are the groups and artists who have not been included. Furthermore, the general historiography outlined in the Scan-Aesthetics conference call has set parameters of lineage, textual, stylistic, personal, and other interconnections. Due to limited space, I have chosen to focus on some significant events or productions in the histories of the selected groups. Doing so, all I can do is sketch out some tendencies within the development of interactive and immersive stage art in the Nordic region.

The materials I use for my studies are texts, conceptual presentations on the groups' websites, research by scholars or by the artists, interviews with the artists, reviews of performances, photographs, videos, and accounts of my own experiences as an audience member.

### **SIGNA (2001-2020)**

The foundation of what became the company SIGNA was laid by the work of the artist then called Signa Sørensen. Without any professional training in the visual arts or theatre, she established herself with swift success as a Copenhagen-based stage art director and interactive performer, drawing on her university studies in art history and on her experience as a champagne girl.<sup>15</sup> She presented her artistic project as an exploration of the formation of identities and power structures in the close encounters between people; she formulated this as the dictum: "Who am I now, who am I here".<sup>16</sup> Later on, her Austrian husband, sound, video, and performance artist Arthur Köstler, and Swedish scenographer Thomas Bo Nilsson joined her as artistic co-leaders. Based on her experiences as a champagne girl, Signa was interested in what she called "instant identities", which are mutually attributed to the other in the encounter between guest and performer. Instead of in a bar, these now took place in artistically staged environments, which Signa gave the name "performance-installations". As far as I know, this was a new term when she introduced it in the Danish stage art community. "Performance-installation" precedes the term "immersive theatre". It underscores the fact that it assumes an audience who is conceived of as mobile and as gradually able to perform the installation(s) of the staging or the scenographics. As will become apparent from my study, Signa's stagings have gone from being visually and spatially very obvious, when the scenographics were installed in large indoor spaces such as black-box theatres or on outdoor campsites. In her more recent work, installation art as a component of the performance-installation has to some degree disappeared into functional interiors that are integrated into the architecture of found buildings – an integration that is especially pronounced in *Night at the Hospital* (2007). This work may be seen as a turning point in SIGNA's oeuvre, moving towards a more extensive physical immersion, which

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<sup>15</sup> A seductive hostess at a go-go club who entertains the guests and makes them buy overpriced cocktails. The meanings of the term "champagne girl" may vary, depending on the dictionary, or on the praxis of the specific bar. The definition I have given here is based on the one usually given by Signa herself.

<sup>16</sup> Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2011, 69; Sørensen, 2005, 10.

has been the strategy of her scenographics ever since.

For the instalment of this performance, SIGNA chose the massive concrete basement of a former Copenhagen power plant, Turbinehallerne, which serve as an annex stage of the Royal Theatre. Its massive walls bring associations to a bunker in a state of emergency. In fact, this is the case, since the frame story told to the audience is that a pandemic which causes memory loss has broken out. The audience is informed that they are not who they think they are. The hospital has been set up as a research unit in order to find a cure. Twenty-five “patients” (audience members) are admitted over night from 10pm to 10am. The main component of the research method is sleep deprivation, which means that the audience is kept awake for all 12 hours while going through different intense treatments such as hypnosis, cognitive therapy and “primate therapy”, mostly on a one-to-one basis with the performers. Although made up, these pseudo-medical and quite absurd treatments were really applied, which caused various reactions amongst the audience. One interviewee said: “the actors were very personal and empathetic. They took care of me and looked after me, and it was very authentic,”<sup>17</sup> while another had the following opinion: “What I found very characteristic of the performance was this one-to-one relationship: ‘Well; now you’re going to find out what torture feels like.’ At 7-8 o’clock in the morning they dragged us out. Once again, I must stress that this performance was almost irresponsible.”<sup>18</sup> The story is set in Copenhagen, sometime soon, in a totalitarian state. Imaginary and actual reality coincide, and it is not hard to imagine that such a situation might arise given the current climate and ecological crises. Before the audience arrives, they have received an instructional email informing them that they will be kept awake all night. They are also informed that they will have to deposit their clothes and belongings, such as mobiles and watches, and wear hospital gowns.

With its use of found space, the installation has become invisible. Art historian Anne Ring Petersen says that installation art (which SIGNA indicates as their main source of inspiration) is characterized by a flickering between factuality, i.e. a “social recognizability” or behavioral familiarity with an interior (e.g. the patients’ room, the common areas, the doctors’ offices, the kitchen, all of which were later found in *Night at the Hospital*), and theatricality, which implies a distancing effect on the viewer, i.e. a theatricalizing splitting of the “space perceived into a space external to the work and a space internal to the work, that is, into work and not-work.”<sup>19</sup> Installation art’s perceived framing cannot be reduced to a frame comparable to the frame of a painting, but it is nonetheless present, Petersen maintains, as “a connection between objects or elements that is overly charged with meaning, a spatial arrangement that puts things in a different light than that of reality, function and ordinary social life.”<sup>20</sup> This kind of scenography is especially pronounced in *Konwaliowa Cutie Doll*, where it is the visitor who performatively and imaginarily completes the stage

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17 Bagger, 2012, 109.

18 Bagger, 2012, 109.

19 Petersen, 2005, 231.

20 Petersen, 2005, 232.

geography, while it is gone in *Night at the Hospital*; here, it has been absorbed into the found architectural environment.

SIGNA's "performance-installations" are from the beginning a very distinctive example of Scandinavian immersive, interactive theatre events. Using installation art as a theatrical component, which is interwoven with the performance (doing) of the artistic actors and the audience.

These performance-installations are extremely durational, their environments are habitational, and this makes them come across as authentic. As a way of describing them as parallel worlds, they have been compared to the fictive Holodeck device from the TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which allows everyone to experience different virtual environments.<sup>21</sup> The authenticity of these totalizing fictions is upheld by frame narratives, with house rules that regulate the behaviour of the visitors. Actors create Stanislavskian characters invested in the environment through worlding. Their acting may be characterized as an extreme form of method acting, which is meant to produce authenticity in the encounters with the visitors. With Jørgensen in mind, one might think of such authentic encounters as beautiful for the participant.

The scenarios, however, are dystopian (taking place in the present, the future, or in some undecided time and place). Often, the history of the found location determines the geographical place. Sites used include black-box theatres, abandoned or occupied buildings, constructed shanty towns, and camps of tents and campers. Exteriors or interiors are reminiscent of the 1950s or 60s, or of post-Communist Eastern Europe (Poland). Signa herself describes her stenographic aesthetic as one of "bleakness", referring to their worn-downness and the sense of melancholia, demi-monde, camp, second-hand. The authenticity of this aesthetic lies in its care for details and individual objects, which is experientially reliant in its worlding. The bleakness is a feature which the works of the two other groups tend to share. This becomes apparent in the iconographic studies.

### **Poste Restante (2007-2020)**

In 2007, the Swedish performance theatre group Poste Restante was founded by Linn Hilda Lamberg and Stefan Åkesson, both of whom were students at the Stockholm University of the Arts (Uniarts), within scenography and dramaturgy, respectively. They were soon joined by the curator Eric Berg and formed a joint artistic leadership. The founding idea behind Poste Restante was a counteraction or intervention into the Swedish stage arts community, which they found was too institutionalized and solidified in conventional theatre, the development of which can probably be traced back to the influential realist theatre of Ingmar Bergman. There was very little room for new experimental formats, Lamberg and Åkeson found. Inspiration came from the new wave of participatory theatre, amongst other from the Flemish Ontroend Goed and from SIGNA,<sup>22</sup> with which Lamberg had been a trainee as part of her studies in

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21 The exceptions were primarily SIGNA's early performance-installations, which featured performative spatial gaps between the installations.

22 Interview with Linn Hilda Lamberg, 23 March 2021: <https://www.su.se/institutionen-for-kultur->

set design. She was assistant scenographer and performer in the original 2007 rendition of SIGNA's highly acclaimed *Die Erscheinungen der Martha Rubin* (which was presented at the Berlin Theatertreffen the following year as the best German-language production of the season 2007/2008).

Right from the beginning, Poste Restante have conceived of their immersive and interactive works of art as "constructed institutions". They emphasize that these are real, that they are in no way fictional spheres, but that they serve as artistic spaces of exception, in which the audience is invited to explore specific existential questions or dilemmas on their own. Thus, these frameworks are stagings of facilitation that create a space for self-reflection through artistic means. They suggest themes of social relevance more than they impose these on the guests; the intention is to give the audience the position of "the leading part",<sup>23</sup> instead of the productions serving to satisfy the artists' need for self-expression. Here, the visitor's ability to make her own experiences might be considered the main criterium for authenticity and beauty.

### **Chopins Hjärta (2009-10)**

I went to Chopins Hjärta when it was staged in Stockholm, in 2010. This is the second rendition, as it was played the year before at the Palace of Culture and Science in central Warsaw. It was presented on Poste Restante's website as a "retreat for the restless at heart". This "constructed institution" is loosely inspired by the Polish composer's life and illness. Hence, the title, "Chopin's Heart". At the time of my visit, I was not aware of the full implications of the reference, but I can imagine that these would not be lost on a Polish audience. First now (in 2021), do I make the connection between the function of the institution and the poetic title. Chopin is buried in Paris, but his heart was brought home to Poland by his sister. In more than a psychological sense, Chopin was restless at heart; he was not at home in his existence and in spirit; an existential dilemma, which resonates emotionally with many in our times.

The retreat is in the northwestern outskirts of Stockholm city in the spacious basement of an inconspicuous housing building. I go down a few flights of stairs and ring the doorbell of a typical Swedish front door in light birchwood, as if I were about to enter somebody's flat. A young woman with the nametag "Linn" opens the door and bids me welcome. She relieves me of my ticket, my coat and backpack, which are hung on a typical Swedish coat-hanger shelf fixed to the wall of the hallway. Then, she introduces me to a young male, named Eric, who is to be my host during my stay. He tells me I am welcome to stay as long I want until they close. They offer different activities in which I can choose to participate; but there is no pressure at all. If I just need to be on my own, to read a book or listen to a record that would be alright. If I decide to attend one or more of the activities, I should just let him know, and he would sign me up for them. After a while, I decide to go and sit down in nature. A corner has been staged with large plants, bushes, and a backdrop wall photostat with trees.

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23 Interview with Linn Hilda Lamberg, 23 March 2021: <https://www.su.se/institutionen-for-kultur-och-estetik/nyheter/teatervetenskap-m%C3%B6ter-praktiken-1.527354>

On the floor, there is grass. A lady tells me to remove my shoes and sit down in a deckchair, then I am blindfolded to be better able to focus on the sounds of nature and feel the grass beneath my feet. She assures me that she will be nearby and check if I am alright. It is quite pleasant.

When I am done, I decide to go to Spain, like Chopin did, and enjoy the sunset. Another young lady awaits me in a small room behind a red-colored, beaded curtain. She invites me to enter and sit next to her while watching some slide projections of the sunset. She offers me a glass of sangria, and we sit in silence, enjoying the view for some time, then she suddenly asks me if I want to dance. I agree, and we dance until she thanks me. It has been another pleasant experience.

It is getting close to the time when I must catch the last metro, but I decide there is time for a last treat, a hand massage. In a small clinic, a Polish speaking lady invites me to sit and put my hands in front of me on a small table. She apologizes for not speaking any Swedish or English. Then she gently rubs my hands and applies some nicely scented oils as she goes deeper with her work. She checks if it is “OK?”, I reply “Yes”, and she goes on for quite a while. Then she finishes, I thank her profusely for the invigorating treatment. And I get ready to leave. Eric kindly sees me off and asks how my stay was. I share my gratitude and say that I will recommend it to my friends.

I go on my way musing on the experience I had just had, which was full of care and concern from the artists’ side—so much more so than the transgressive experiences I had had or had witnessed in SIGNA’s performances. And at the same time, I wondered if there was a subtle ironic meta-comment in this ethical dramaturgy about the Swedish social democratic idea of the society as Folkhem (the Folk Home), a place, where the individual in all stages of life is taken care of by the authorities. The care for me in the performance was so authentic it was almost overdone.

### ***The Leviathan Camaraderie (2015)***

On the Poste Restante website, this is presented as “an immersive performance on the hardships of coexistence and the longing for belonging. It takes the form of a secret society, a society that perceives itself as having shouldered the responsibility to lay a foundation for a new, egalitarian order, as an alternative to contemporary civilization. It does so by deconstructing civilization as we know it, exorcising its lingering perversions and establishing an alternative to contemporary civilization.”<sup>24</sup>

The constructed institution, the camaraderie, embeds the dilemma the performance addresses: how is it possible to turn one’s back on society, the alternative still enclosed within it and permeated by it? During the admittance procedure, this dilemma becomes evident as the admittee has all logos on his or her clothes and shoes taped over with black gaffer tape. One was given a hoodie with the logo of the camaraderie as well as a personal badge that one can sew onto it. All become equal, at least in appearance. All are given common tasks, I prepared dinner in the kitchen together with my assigned

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<sup>24</sup> <https://mdtsthlm.se/archive/165/> (accessed on 14 December 2021).



group, and we had to find the most efficient ways within the little time we had. Power structures quickly manifested themselves in such processes, where natural leaders began to stand out. Our assigned guide to the camaraderie also aroused our curiosity regarding an activity called “indulgence”, in which one is allowed, momentarily, to submit to otherwise forbidden desires. None of the newcomers were let in on the premises of what it was about, until just before it was about to take place. My group waited outside two doors where it was up to us to decide. Having been left on our own to test our dedication to the “camaraderie”, I felt like saying no thanks as I felt a certain mounting group pressure. “Indulging” is a normal thing to do in the camaraderie. In the end, my curiosity got the better of me. I was taken to a dimly lit room, and I had to kiss another comrade, in my case a male. And then I had to give and receive a slap on the cheek. It was done quite convincingly by both of us. Afterwards, we made sure the other one was alright.

SIGNA relies on an aesthetic of transgression which creates a hyperreal fictional worlding that depends on power structures and identity formation in the encounters between visitors and actors. One thing that has proven a risk throughout SIGNA’s existence is the tendency to pursue authenticity to the extreme through the immersion of the audience in the acting,<sup>25</sup> but it probably went the farthest in Villa Salò from 2010.<sup>26</sup> Value judgements are similarly affected: the more transgressive it is, the more authentic. Unlike SIGNA, Poste Restante creates authenticity by providing a space for the audience that allows them to make their own experiences, that is, based on their own choices.

### **Sisters Hope (2007-2020)**

Sisters Hope was started in 2007 by Gry Worre Hallberg and Anna Lawaetz, when both studied Theatre and Performance studies at the University of Copenhagen.<sup>27</sup> The project was inspired by SIGNA, with which Gry had performed from 2005 to 2007, and by the concept of the performance-installation. In a course on drama pedagogy, Gry and Anna came up with the idea of applying this kind of scenographics to learning processes in order to boost students’ creativity and ultimately their personal transformation.

As interventionist performance artists, Gry and Anna began to present themselves as “poetic twin sisters”, the Sisters Hope.<sup>28</sup> They were the artistic leaders of what eventually became the free group Sisters Hope.

The group does not conceive of their immersive, interactive, interventionist events as performance-installations, but as “modes of being and being

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25 According to theater critic Monna Dithmer, SIGNA operates in “the zone of indeterminacy” where the boundary between art and reality has been blurred in order to “confuse the receiving apparatus of the audience” (Dithmer, 2009, 41; my translation). This is the space where the “non-ethics” may turn out to expose everyone involved to “manipulation” and to “put [them] at risk on a psychological level” (Hammer, 2007, 153).

26 Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2012, 69.

27 Hallberg, 2021, 153.

28 Hallberg, 2021, 152.



together”.<sup>29</sup> They also refer to them as “manifestations”,<sup>30</sup> thereby suggesting the reiteration of a preexisting work of art. In fact, this is a crossover format that places itself conceptionally in the interstices of performance art, research, pedagogy, and activism.<sup>31</sup> There is a self-identification with the historical avantgarde, aiming for the merging of art and life.<sup>32</sup> The manifestations take on functional, institutional formats that aim to transform the participant through a cultivation of “the Sensuous”, an aesthetic mode that is applied to learning (in principle, any school subject) or of “practicing being”, a kind of atmospheric mindfulness. They employ staged rituals, rites of passage, which are not used for changing one’s status, as in indigenous cultures,<sup>33</sup> but rather aim to change students’ sensual (perceptual) state of mind through sensual learning.

Sisters Hope mainly employed two large-scale staging strategies:

- “Take-Over” of the actual leadership of upper secondary schools.
- “The Boarding School” (or *Sisters Academy*), which is installed in an art venue, totally transformed scenographically.

With these concepts, the performers aim to fulfil dual functional roles as teachers and as symbolic, inspirational figures, such as “the octopus” or “the invoker”. The participant is given the leading part as a real-life student in the school takeover, or as a “student” in the boarding school who enrolls for 24 hours. The staging involves an ethical dramaturgy based on values like care and trust, which are needed for facilitating the learning, but it also nurtures devotion, perhaps at the expense of critical reflection.

The playing and staging facilitate “sensual/poetic being”, the “poetic” referring back to the Greek origin of the word, *poiesis*, the bringing forth of what was not there before. According to the Sisters Hope, everyone has a “poetic self”, a creative potential that can be brought forth, and the realization of which is a precondition for bringing about the “Sensuous Society”, political change emerging from within the individual. The poetic self is to be the backbone of a global movement of teachers.

### ***Sisters Academy (2017)***

Probably the most attention-grabbing manifestation of the boarding school was when Sisters Hope were awarded the Vision Exhibition Award<sup>34</sup> and transformed the Copenhagen art venue Den Frie into the *Sisters Academy*. Architectonically, the building refers to Egyptian and Greek temples, the façade adorned with a golden relief of Pegasus, symbolizing the freedom of art. To this façade Sisters Hope added a red neon sign, saying “Sisters Academy”. On both sides of the heavy entrance gate, they hung banners with their characteristic red and white

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29 Hallberg, 2021, 24.

30 Hallberg, 2021, 55.

31 Hallberg, 2021, 23.

32 Hallberg, 2021, 155-156.

33 Edelman and Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2014, 29.

34 A competition to realize an exhibition idea. See: <https://www.bikubenfonden.dk/udstillingsprisen-vision> (accessed on 22 April 2021).

logo, the depiction of a brain directly interconnected with a heart and a uterus, mapping the group's crossover of performance art, research, pedagogy, and activism. The interior of the building was refurbished to accommodate the group's iterative rite of passage, with spaces dedicated to the pre-liminal (the exclusion from society), the liminal (the stay and sensuous learning), and the post-liminal (the reintegration into society). From a functional point of view, the stenographical redesign turned the exhibition rooms into dormitories, a dining room, classrooms, the headmistress' office, the archivist's office, etc. In aesthetic terms, a sense of otherworldliness was suggested using heavy red curtains for the walls, and of red-filtered lights, which created a sense of dense material immersiveness. The red corridor through which the "students" passed on the way towards the exit brought associations to the Black Lodge of *Twin Peaks*. The implication that the students were never to leave the place was enhanced by a language twist: the student was not told that "it is time to exit", but "it is time to exist."<sup>35</sup> In this way, the students were invited to bring their poetic selves out into everyday life, initiating a new way of being in the world, tuning into its beauty, in resonance, in interconnectedness.

### ***Wa(l)king Copenhagen (2020)***

Sisters Hope started out with activism in the form of interventions in public spaces that involved unexpected scenarios, such as tea parties or strange rituals conducted by the twin sisters dressed in peculiar costumes and matching fur hats. This was an attempt to make performance art accessible to members of the public who do not normally attend art institutions.

The first covid-19 lockdown led to a return to this format when The Sister (Gry) was invited by Copenhagen International Theatre/Metropolis to contribute to their online 100-days/100-artists/100-walks *Wa(l)king Copenhagen 2020*, which gathered international performing artists to do live-streamed artistic walks through the dormant city. The following constitutes a significant moment from my experience of the Sisters Hope performance.<sup>36</sup>

Here, I shall just dwell on the opening of the walk. A female figure stands completely still in front of the street door of an older apartment building in what I take to be one of the Copenhagen boroughs. She is covered in a strongly red-colored gown with her head and face hidden in a see-through veil. She holds a white egg in front of her, ceremoniously. The street is eerily still, no noise except for a few birds chirping in the distance. It is an outlandish scene in my home city, witnessed from another city without pandemic lockdown, Stockholm. The motionless insistence on presence captivates across space and time. It becomes a meditative moment which, for me, takes on an eco-spiritual meaning as I am reminded of the divine female who has given birth to the cosmos in the shape of an egg in one of the illustrations of Hildegard von Bingen's *Scrivias*.<sup>37</sup> In the pandemic-ridden city, the image becomes a sign of rebirth, red signifying blood, life. At the same time, the activist theme of "wa(l)

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35 Hallberg, 2021, 204.

36 <https://www.metropolis.dk/gry-worre-hallberg/> (accessed on 22 April 2021).

37 von Bingen, 1990, 90-91.

king” brings associations to the slow-moving performers of the Red Brigade of the Extinction Rebellion movement<sup>38</sup> although the interventionist dramaturgy of Sisters Hope is not about traffic disruption or civil disobedience.<sup>39</sup>

The effect of authenticity in the performances of Sisters Hope relies on the staging of immersion and interactivity, which create a sense of extra-terrestrialness and open an aesthetic crack in society. While similar effects might be generated by SIGNA, Sisters Hope make their performances instrumental to their political goals, according to their manifesto. SIGNA is dedicated to investigating social problems often ignored by the establishment, but they do not have a political program.

### **Conclusion: SIGNA – Poste Restante – Sisters Hope**

I began with the claim that the dramaturgies (the intended and lived effects) and the varieties of aesthetics (cognitive sensitivity) characteristic of the three groups reflect a development of authenticity that range from fiction to function, from distance to immersiveness, from beholding to interacting. While I believe this holds true, authenticity cannot be understood normatively; it requires a dynamic, cognitive concept, which allows for development within a conceptual frame of interactivity and immersiveness. This requirement is met by Bork-Petersen’s concept, according to which authenticity is the performative reliability of a relationship between visitor and performer. This relationship might be determined by a contract of fiction as is the case of SIGNA, or by one of function as with Poste Restante and Sisters Hope. Authentic fiction relies on consistent, psychological character-building and an environment whose details and functionality, when it comes to inventory and technology, may pass the test of scrutiny. Authentic function relies on the fulfillment of a function, ultimately its impact on the reality of the guest. Dramaturgical development does not move in a linear way that sees SIGNA abandon fiction; it rather establishes a more complete or submissive immersion. This means that the theatricality of the performance-installation disappears, possibly imposing restrictions on the visitors’ co-creative interactivity, all in order to give the audience a more authentic experience in accordance with the framework, even if this comes at the cost of abandoning ethics, as in *Night at the Hospital*.

The major dramaturgical difference in Poste Restante and Sisters Hope is the introduction of the contract of function. In both cases, the artistic leaders use their experience of working with SIGNA but choose a different path for their own work. The functionality of Poste Restante consists in introducing, by artistic means, a “constructed institution” into society, which provides the best possible working conditions (an ethical dramaturgy) for the guest that allows her to make her own experiences with a certain existential dilemma or problem, e.g. how to heal restlessness in a restless society, or how to turn one’s back on society while still remaining part of a community. As such, this is an offering of

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38 <https://metro.co.uk/2019/10/07/red-brigade-silently-appear-extinction-rebellion-protests-10875730/> (accessed on 25 March 2021)

39 Hallberg, 2021, 147.

a resource for self-reflection. The functionality of Sisters Hope is perhaps the most ambitious: to provide access, by pedagogical means, to the “sensuous”, and to the discovery of an individual “poetic self” that may contribute to the realization of “the sensuous society”, a bottom-up turnover of the hegemonic, economical social order. Here, Sisters Hope take its aesthetic utopian project beyond performance art and into political didactics, introduced by means of interventions into the educational sector. By spreading the sensuous learning method, Sisters Hope are hoping to develop into a global movement.<sup>40</sup>

### AUTHOR

Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen (1971-2022) held a PhD in theatre studies from Stockholm University. During his career, he taught as a lecturer at the universities of Stockholm, Lodz, Copenhagen and Roskilde. Highly active from early on in the international academic community, he was a member of the international working groups Science and the Performance Studies Space Program. He was also a cofounder of the working group Performance, Spirituality and Religion under International Federation for Theatre Research where he served as an elected member of the Executive Committee from 2016. A well-known face in the Nordic Community, he served as a board member of Nordic Theatre Studies from 2007, as its co-editor from 2010 to 2016. Occasionally acting as a performer and dramaturge in immersive theatre productions in Denmark and Sweden, his wide-ranging research interests included cosmo-aesthetics, science exhibitions, spirituality, ecology, contemporary staged events, rituals, performance art, intermediality, interactivity, performance analysis, and dramaturgy. The present article is his last completed scholarly work.

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