



Artistic research for a production

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How does Hotel Pro Forma develop a new production and what does an artistic process look like? Well, first of all it takes 2-4 years to develop and produce a performance. Each project is associated with extensive research in relation to a topic that will be the focal point of the performance.

“We explore the world and the production is the exploration. We use the production as a journey into the world in order to return with new knowledge and awareness. It must be clear to the audience that they are involved in this study since each production is fundamentally different from the others. This means that each new production requires new processes, new conditions, new partners, new venues, and new constellations. It’s a matter of trusting in the partners we have chosen to be part of the artistic development and of our giving them responsibility. Trust is paramount even if this often involves economic aspects“ (*Dehlholm 2009*).

Atelier Hotel Pro Forma

In recent years, the production process has somewhat changed. In 2011 Hotel Pro Forma launched a program for interns and artists-in-residence as a form of aesthetic education. Twice a year, students from inside and outside Denmark apply for internships in the fields of visual arts, sound, lighting, and video design, architecture, dramaturgy, and arts management. The trainees work individually or in groups on productions in progress. *The Atelier* has led to a shift in the artistic process. The emergence of *The Atelier* has meant a move towards a more differentiated process in which several young artists and trainees are involved in the developmental work with Kirsten Dehlholm as the arbiter of the game. *The Atelier* has not only expanded Hotel Pro Forma’s artistic radius, but has also made it possible to create more productions a year, both in and outside Denmark. More artists and more knowledge are in play, which challenges Dehlholm’s talent for collaborating on and concretely translating artistic concepts into practical solutions. We would imagine that her ability to show confidence in the trainees being able to complete a task is paramount. *The Atelier* has created a dynamic and inspiring studio and former trainees are often artistic collaborators in new productions and exhibitions. This workshop co-operation is risky and demanding and is itself a framework which raises unexpected questions and reactions that provide surprising options and opt-outs. If you ask Kirsten Dehlholm what her driving force is, she says that it is curiosity and her need constantly to go beyond her own experience and thus get into that deep water where any spectacle must have its point of departure. Here are some comments from a couple of *Atelier* trainees.

From Atelier Hotel Pro Forma 2015 (Kirsten Dehlholm)

William Lippert: interdisciplinary project, January 2017.

We spent two weeks creating an open Lounge for the public. All the trainees came from different disciplines – installation art, architecture, sound design, arts management, literature etc. This interdisciplinary approach is fairly characteristic of Hotel Pro Forma. It was inspiring to cooperate with skilled young people and, in this way, be challenged from every possible angle. I can't think of a better setting to practice the discipline of collaboration than with 10 other people who know their stuff. It expands your horizon and your ideas are contested, and this is valuable. At the same time, you are forced to clarify your ideas from different perspectives. Creating a finished product that everybody could vouch for was a remarkable learning experience. Naturally, Kirsten Dehlholm is pivotal at Hotel Pro Forma and the person who decides what will work and what won't. Step by step it gradually dawned on me that we were creating a shared directory of understanding, rather than material for one person. In this way, I felt like a scientist in a Murakami-like enterprise veiled in mystery and difficult to explain, but indisputably of great importance. I'm talking about the process of creating at Hotel Pro Forma. You recognize that the creative process for a production is convoluted – with many stops, and spaces and chock-full of curiosities.

Learning to see by Sara Krøgholt Trier, January 2017.

Before my internship I sometimes peeped in on Hotel Pro Forma's online video archive. (*Vimeo*) to see *Why Does Night Come Mother*, a production in which the audience is standing on balconies looking down on a white floor, which look like a canvas. Even if you know that the performers are lying on the floor it looks as if they are climbing. But most interestingly the perspective between the stage and audience alternates again and again. In this way *Why Does Night Come Mother* is double-cheating the eye, forcing spectators to see themselves from the outside and become aware of their own perspective.

Being a trainee at Hotel Pro Forma is reminiscent of being a spectator in *Why Does Night Come Mother*: that is to be placed in a context that makes you conscious about your own aesthetic perspective and its way of thinking. So being a trainee is much more about being better at seeing than being better at providing a service within a goal-oriented framework. As such *The Atelier* works as an artistic laboratory. But do you really learn to improve your sight, to see more clearly? I believe it is about becoming aware of how everything is constructed. How our habits and thought patterns follow certain codes that are embedded in time and culture. To see more clearly we must be able to break away from worn out patterns. Through a clear concept and a series of rules Kirsten Dehlholm forces us look beyond "normal" patterns of thought.

In October 2016 the trainees were in charge of organizing a Lounge, that is an open-house event at which the public has access to the studio in a curated setting. Kirsten Dehlholm presented us with a sentence that functioned as the main motif for the event: *The scream that was stolen*. Kirsten had read a text by one of the trainees that made her think of Edvard Munch's painting, "The Scream", which had been stolen both in 1994 and again in 2004. The connection was completely arbitrary. Nevertheless, *The scream that was stolen*, was

the vehicle for our event and at first glance it seemed like ‘a mission impossible’. We spent hours in the group discussing how to interpret the phrase in order to create a framework for our Lounge. In particular, we found it hard to understand what kind of ‘scream’ we were working with. Was it a physical or a metaphorical scream? Did the scream belong to the audience, or was the Lounge space a kind of crime scene? All our questions forced us to consider quite fundamental questions about creating a social space. Who was the sender and who was the receiver of the social event? Is the social space supposed to create security or can it be disturbing? We ended up making an interactive performance-installation where guests wore masks when they arrived until they left.

From Kirsten Dehlholm’s point of view there was a significant purpose in giving us this seemingly random phrase. To engage in a social context and to step into a social space, are associated with a number of unwritten rules, various kinds of behaviors and roles that we normally do not think of. Having people wear masks became a small intervention beyond ‘the normal’, which made people aware of their behavior and changed the way people behaved when they entered the space. This arbitrary concept forced us to rethink the idea of the Lounge, and made us aware that we were designing a social event. Making the guests wear masks was a way to displace the notion of the ‘normal’, as well as an invitation to experience what was going on from different perspectives. To me the most rewarding thing about being a trainee was to work interdisciplinarily with art and thus try to grasp what this was all about, which again is another way of seeing.

An artistic process for *Cosmos+*

As a very first step towards a new performance Kirsten Dehlholm develops a basic concept that provides a framework around a specific topic. Then she identifies the right partners and collaborators to further elaborate on the theme. This process is conducted through a methodical rigor with clear rules.

For the production *Cosmos +* (2014) the following rules were formulated:

- All scientific information about the universe must be correct.
- No throughgoing narrative, but factual information about the universe to be mixed with a range of short everyday stories.
- Texts and visuals to awaken wonder, to be humorous and something to learn from.

Cosmos + is about scientifically observed cosmic phenomena, that are juxtaposed with elements from everyday life. “It’s from the earth we look out into the universe and this is where we live and when we started the work on *Cosmos+*, I did not know anything about the universe, so I began extensive research and at the same time I worked intuitively.” (Dehlholm 2014) The production examined how phenomena of the firmament can be transformed into an aesthetic, sensuous, and factual experience for children and adults, and the scientifically exact is brought into play with the non-exact. It is between these two opposites the production took shape. In the process of their training, the interns worked as co-players. Kirsten Dehlholm first designed a couple of pages as inspirational material to be able to support them go into the substance of the cosmos.

Extracts from the material:

- Wherever we look in the universe we see gravity at work. It creates shape and structure; it governs the orbit of every star and galaxy in ways we thought we were able to predict. But there was a flaw in our understanding of this force, and it would be exposed by one of our close neighbors. Gravity is not a force pulling us towards the center of the earth like a giant magnet. In a sense gravity isn't really a force at all.
- This is Mercury. For thousands of years we've marveled as this fleet-footed planet races across the face of the sun. But 150 years ago astronomers noticed something strange about Mercury's orbit.
- Describing the nature of gravity turned out to be one of the great intellectual challenges, but almost 200 years after Newton's death a new theory emerged. After ten years of work, Albert Einstein published the new theory of general relativity in 1915. It stands to this day as one of the great achievements in the history of physics. You see, not only was it able to explain with absolute precision the strange behavior of Mercury. But it explains, to this day, everything we see out there in the universe that has anything to do with gravity. And, most importantly, it explains how gravity actually works.

During the introductory week, the trainees had three days to deal with one of these tasks:

- Create a work on gravity. Gravity is the power of stars, planets and galaxies in the space that surrounds them.
- Use the concept of a warped, stretched, and bent space-time continuum to create a visual/audio/text work.

The trainees were told that they had to process the notions of the universe intuitively - notions and phenomena, that were just as incomprehensible for Dehlholm as for the interns.

To establish some kind of understanding of the phenomena of the universe a lot of research was carried out. A large amount of information from books, articles, film programs, and scientific facts was put into a script and sequence after sequence slowly emerged. To ensure that the knowledge about the universe was as correct as possible, Dehlholm had a series of meetings with a theoretical physicist, a teacher of astronomy, a physicist, and a mathematician. One Lithuanian and two Danish poets were asked to contribute stories from everyday life. Finally, Kirsten Dehlholm edited the entire manuscript, structured around nine cosmic phenomena as chapters in a book. There is no dialogue in *Cosmos+*, but observations that alternate between startling facts and poetic and humorous remarks from everyday life. The performance begins with the recitation of a number of concepts about the universe like event horizon, white dwarf and red giant. Only experts understand the scope of these phenomena.

To develop a visual score

The visual plays a vital role in Hotel Pro Forma's works. One of several challenges related to *Cosmos* + was to develop a visual score. What do *black holes*, *supernovae*, or *white dwarfs* look like? Yes, what is a white dwarf¹? How can projections be developed to look like 3D without being created as 3D? The premise was to shape scientific phenomena visually without copy pasting from the Internet. The first step towards penetrating into a visual idiom was to find a series of photos and images on the Internet as pointers toward a visual language. From here the trainees could invent their own aesthetic expression.

Endlessly large and small explosions take place in the universe all the time. How can this be displayed on stage to be sensuous and captivating? Hotel Pro Forma's kitchen was converted into a chemical laboratory, where trainees mixed liquids such as milk, Coca Cola, oil, ink, etc., mixtures which were then filmed. A trainee conducted scores of experiments to produce a special texture by frying steel wool on a pan. When you fry steel wool, the heated steel wool emits flashes of light. The challenge was to film a small lump of steel wool so it could be blown up as video projection measuring 14 x 9 m. Subsequently video designers digitally processed the film over the course of several months. The filmed micro-explosions were an element in the giant visualizations that were projected from the front and the rear in the entire height and width of the stage. The projections poetically paraphrase a series of cosmic phenomena, while we wonder and are fascinated. Everything is precisely aligned between man and the universe, in an aesthetic of interference, where different structures and patterns are shattered. We see a material strangeness, which cannot be explained. One may ask what kind of expertise and knowledge is brought into play to create the enthralling images? We would imagine it is a skill that comes out of the rigor of the approach. But perhaps, most of all, it is Kirsten Dehlholm's ability to challenge her own judgment and rely on her intuition.

Artistic research design

When explosive structures are filmed there is no other specific goal than that the result must look convincing within a tight aesthetic frame. The creative process is not linear, nobody really knows the target, and the process is like a spiral movement between knowing the path and getting lost. The investigative process runs almost all the way until "the study or research" is completed, which is when the production has its premiere. Hotel Pro Forma is continuously working to uncover new narrative forms, new ways to contrast different perspectives and new ways of seeing. This way of working requires a scientific researcher's precision and consistency. Within the humanities, there are other research formats than in the natural sciences. Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* sheds light on applied intuitive knowhow. *Phronesis* describes the ability to handle one's own reality and pursue a practical judgment in the right situation, which is about being engaged in the world and the present time. As such *phronesis* is embedded in a specific context that cannot be

1) A **white dwarf** is what stars like the Sun become after they have exhausted their nuclear fuel. Near the end of its nuclear burning stage, this type of star expels most of its outer material, creating a planetary nebula. Only the hot core of the star remains. (NASA)

generalized. Or to put it briefly, phronesis is the intellectual activity that is relevant to a practice. It focuses on what is variable, and that which cannot be captured by universal rules. In other words, phronesis is about analyzing the values of good and bad as a source for action, or, again in other words, about judgment. This leaves phronesis in some kind of opposition to a scientific research ideal, which is a paradox, since all research needs to include an individual judgment. The distinctive intellectual practices and knowledge that are linked to a specific context are a key element in all science. It is precisely the context-dependent and the particular that make Hotel Pro Forma's gaze and approach significant.

While a scientific research ideal needs to be verifiable, art operates in a different paradigm, in which the senses are in play. It is the mind-expanding aesthetic experience that links aesthetics to knowledge. Just as the scientific researcher has clear terms and a high degree of precision, we find the same rigor in artistic research. Hotel Pro Forma breaks up predictable patterns into new configurations, which makes the audience become aware that it is possible to imagine a different gaze with other distinctions and categories. In its artistic practise Hotel Pro Forma contributes to expanding the framework of both the performing arts and the visual arts in its search for new pathways and trajectories.

Through comprehensive studies Hotel Pro Forma's productions penetrate into the matrix or substance of visual and performing art through wrestling with the effects of form. The aesthetic sensation is the primary matter of Hotel Pro Forma, and precisely the sensed is an amplifier for insight or cognition. Cognition is based on both sensation and thinking. Knowing what something is means to be able to conceptualize it. In this sense, Hotel Pro Forma expands our conceptions of and perspective on the world. In conclusion, we can say that Hotel Pro Forma does research with art and not in art and conducts basic research on the premises of visual and performing arts.

The Hotel of Beauty

Hotel Pro Forma's staging of real materials and form is 1) the dissolution of the dramaturgy of the text as a specific technique and tradition and 2) a restoration of this as an otherness that creates reflection. The formal rules and framework make it possible to work with precision, and with a judgment that benefits to renew the material as an observer position in relation to text.

But one may ask: What do you learn from a bird's eye perspective? Breaking with the classical viewpoint of the spectator means that you get access to a different reality where you lose your ordinary everyday security, where gravity is stable. This breaking with the classical viewpoint opens up for a real metaphysics and thus the experience of the relativity of perspective or just the perspective. A central perspective is being upset by a poly-perspective. The separation of trajectories and gaze directions is a learning feature that is useful in opening up a given text and thus creating multiple meanings. The re-unifying of incoherent objects creates a sensory realism that extends the vision and the gaze movement and the vertical perspective and the horizontal lanes create theatrical landscapes and sculptures, but also form the rules for acting. This means that the performers are subjected to a framework in which the enunciation of the text both designs the performer

as medium and gives the text a specific significance in the eyes and ears – of an audience.

Artistic research is a reflection *of* and *on* the work, which is brought into play in relation to previous and future works and traditions. Hotel Pro Forma has for a long time been engaged in such an artistic reflection in various media, which we perceive as a kind of artistic research. Through articles, interviews, and seminars these reflections have been disseminated, but also in teaching and workshops where these dramaturgical approaches are explicated.

The distinction between theater and performance has a long history, which is presented as the ‘battle’ between representing the text, as opposed to acting the text. Today these oppositions seem to be unproductive, and the displacement in performing arts means that one can be both text-oriented and be acting. The opposition is rather a choice between different medialities that require specific skills. You can choose to specialize in media such as audio, visuals, movement, sound, and a combination. Consequently one must examine the materials, the media, and compositional forms. This makes artistic research part of a process. Hotel Pro Forma has created a reflexivity between theater and performance as two paradigms that benefit from challenging each other in a cross-aesthetic dramaturgy.

Hotel Pro Forma’s approach to a production is to decide on materials and forms and then clean, isolate, delay, separate, and put the material together again. This creates forms in novel ways, since their stability is upset and the audience’s expectations of familiar shapes are destabilized. Purification is achieved by removing unnecessary items. It is an offshoot of Modernism, particularly after WW2 to seek to purify mediality as surface, sound, action, and space. Since performance involves the audience’s perception in often unfamiliar ways, this does demand something of the spectator. This is unlike conventional theater, where the issue of credibility is associated with the actors’ ability to identify, to represent, and to interpret a role. But Kirsten Dehlholm has a different view of theater and performance and she says:

“We are taught to understand. I would like to delay understanding for a second after the brain has been affected. The subconscious registers much faster than consciousness and I use all my performances to come down to the subconscious, to pure sensation, to seduction. This is what the body recalls but it is very hard to put into words” (Dehlholm 1995).

Hotel Pro Forma’s credibility lies in the form as part of the concept that touches the spectator’s sense of direction and orientation, independently of an interpretation. The key is the exchange between theater and the visual medium, often as a combination of the features of the two media, namely surface and space. Beauty is encountered through an object or a performance but it is a subjective judgment that creates a relationship and a community in saying ‘this is beautiful’. The individual object or artwork demands, so to speak, a social aesthetic *sensus communis*. Kant argues that *sensus communis*, and in particular the agreement of others to an individual’s judgments of taste, is necessary to ground the communicability of subjective aesthetic judgments. However, a subjective competence and commitment are often, but not always, a prerequisite for being able to relate to whether something is beautiful. As a producer of various constructions of objects

and images, Hotel Pro Forma contributes to creating this commitment and to establishing a common space where beauty can be negotiated. Through unfolding the beauty of the surface, of things, of humanity, and the artificial Hotel Pro Forma reveals different perspectives on sensation and art as a community. In this sense, Hotel Pro Forma contributes to making us rethink and exchange what forms are assessed within the framework of an art domain.

The loss of boundaries and norms and the experience of homelessness are a modern condition that makes a metaphysical position significant. While we expect answers from science, the metaphysical experience is a reflection that there are questions we can ask, but which we cannot get satisfactory intellectual or theoretical answers to. Even though the beauty is staged, the boundary of what is beyond our knowledge is sensed. This kind of knowledge is decidedly present in several performances and very apparent in *Why Does Night Come Mother?* – a modern classic. The spectators are placed in a ‘divine’ bird eye position. We look down on the stage (floor) from the balcony and we observe spaces, figures, surfaces and movements and the composed beauty on the floor. We sense, become dizzy, and look down with a particularly elevated and attentive optic. It is a construction that creates a transition between *the sensuous* and *the conceptual*. In other words a kind of transcendence or metaphysics. What the spectator ultimately senses is *endlessness*, while in *Cosmos* + we experience *infinity*. In both cases, it is genesis and the framed event that run between sensation and reflexivity.

What is pioneering in Hotel Pro Forma’s work is the courage to mix different branches of knowledge such as science, astrophysics, poetry, biology in various forms of presentation. As formulated by the lighting designer, Jesper Kongshaug, Hotel Pro Forma has become curriculum. Concepts and experiences form part of academic education as learning material, stage artistic education, and artistic reflections. Hotel Pro Forma’s cultivation of beauty points in many directions and holds many layers of knowledge that extend beyond an artistic practice. The question is whether the cross-ethical and medial approach can inspire a broader field of education across artistic, academic, and stage artistic education?