

Metode

The Interview as Convergent Point *

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between Qualitative Research and Performance Art

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The qualitative interview

We see it in a very wide selection of current research projects: there, in a small half-empty meeting room, an interviewer sits across from the interviewee. On the table between them are two glasses of water; coffee; cookies; the occasional piece of fruit. The interviewer leans slightly forward to indicate her sincere interest. She adds an ‘mmm’ and a small ‘yes’ here and there, nods in recognition and warm encouragement, whilst the interviewee speaks. At the end of the interview, they will have covered most of the topics in the semi-structured interview guide, which is flexible enough to make the two of them feel free to associate and go where the conversation takes them, while still being kept subtly on track. Once the interviewer realizes that they have already exceeded the allotted forty-five minutes, she turns off the recorder and they agree that it has been really interesting – for both of them.

Within social science, the qualitative interview’s field of origin, this interaction between interviewer and interviewee has been studied and written about extensively. My artistic practice within the field of interactive performance and arts-based research is based in this very tradition. Hence, before I begin unfolding how I have turned the interview into an immersive performance method, I will linger for a while longer in its traditional setting.

During the normative forty-five minutes of such an interview, a sense of intersubjectivity will have emerged between interviewee and interviewer. As noted by Steinar Kvale (1997) – the most broadly cited expert in qualitative research in Scandinavia – this entails a mutual understanding of each other which an experienced interviewer should be able to establish. Many methodological discussions around the qualitative interview will focus on how a researcher should work on her own sensitivity and skills of emotional insight. The interviewer should find appropriate ways to include her own social experience to acquire a nuanced understanding of the subjectively-experienced world of the interviewee. Within the field of qualitative research, which resists the deeply inscribed positivist ideal of objectivity in social science, the interviewer’s understanding may actually come from having conducted participatory or auto-ethnographic studies which provide her with practical bodily experiences of the subject later discussed in the interview.

I have taken a different methodological turn. In addition to focusing on my own empathic knowledge as a researcher, I have also examined and illuminated the other side of the table by asking how I might make the interviewee go further into her own bodily sensations and internal reflections. I was thrilled to find out what new modes of inquiry are possible if we stray from the idea of the interview as an egalitarian conversation and instead use methods outside of the qualitative research toolbox. We can hereby direct the interviewee to go deeper into parts of an experience which reside in the darkness of forgotten memories, or sensations bordering on the limits of language.

Overall, this article tells the story of how I crossed over from sociology into performance art through my practice-based research. It will discuss how treating the interview as a performance

may help to tackle some of the methodological problems found in the field of qualitative research. It will also explore how knowledge of these discussions may enrich the possibilities of artistic research and develop artistic methods within interactive performance art. In the process, I will only touch lightly upon otherwise extensive discussions within different disciplines and I will thereby reflect the largest risk faced by interdisciplinary researchers and artists. However, I have decided not to lose my nerve in the face of this challenge, and I will let the guiding star in my writing be the interview itself – a focal point between qualitative methods and performance art.

To the social scientist:

In his later – and to my knowledge much less known – critical writings about the qualitative interview, Kvale identifies the problem posed by viewing the qualitative interview as a caring conversation free of dominant positions. No matter how the interview is conducted, it will always be the researcher who sets the frame and controls what will be talked about in the interview (Kvale 2005). I endorse this critical standpoint and affirm that instead of trying to dissolve this asymmetry, the researcher should rather accept and outline the soft, subjectified forms of power exercised in an interview (ibid: 96). Kvale goes on to lay out different agonistic forms of interview which invite interviewees to engage in conflicts with the interviewer. I suggest integrating a performative approach to research as a way of both highlighting and working productively with the power dynamics within the interview. In this article, I align my approach with sociologist Norman K. Denzin who points to a *performative social science* as a possible solution to ethical problems in knowledge production in the social sciences. Denzin's critique of the traditional use of the qualitative interview is directed at the often unacknowledged power which the researcher holds over the interviewee's story when it comes to analysing the interview material (Denzin 2001). I wish to contribute to his advocacy within the field of qualitative research in combining performance with research. I will do so by presenting an example of how conceptualizing an interview as a performance has provided a way to be(come) transparent about the power aspects at play when I, as a researcher, influence the narratives generated by qualitative interviews. I outline a performance in which, as an interviewer, I deliberately direct the interviewee to go deeper into exploring specific aspects of their perception of a performance art piece through guiding their attention to specific details. I will discuss why I find framing social research as an art performance can be a way to heighten the self-reflexivity of our research subjects – and thereby acquire empirical material otherwise unavailable to the researcher.

In her introduction to how the field of performance studies has affected the qualitative paradigm, Patricia Leavy points to how performance offers itself as a unique research method: *"Perhaps more than anything else, performance-based methods can bring research findings to life, adding a dimensionality, and exposing that which is otherwise impossible to authentically (re)present."* (Leavy 2009: 135). But how do we make these findings available to analysis in the first place? How might we document the immediate experience of a performance? How can we access the memory of the aesthetic perception of it? And vitally, how can we make memories of aesthetic experiences available to expression at all?

To the interactive performer:

As an artist, I have found it very productive to work meticulously with methodological questions of *how* you seek to acquire empirical insight into a performance. So, to my peers in the field of interactive performance, I suggest working with qualitative research designs as a way of deepening our understanding of the interactive/immersive performance as an art form. I wonder: will we ever actually know our own artwork, if we do not witness what occurs in the moment the audience encounters it? Which bodily sensations and thoughts do our aesthetic choices and immersive dramaturgies invoke in our audience? What do they feel when looking into our eyes? We can, of course, always ask our audience after a performance the notorious question: So, what did you think? In the best case, we might get an interesting critique of our piece. In the worst, we might have our piece evaluated by someone who tells us what worked and what did not work in the installation. To the reader of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1986), either form of response offered in this vein would really function as testimony to the individual's *cultural capital*; post-rationalizations of the experience organized in such a way as to prove the respondent's rich cultural background and understanding of art.

I have found the qualitative interview to be a way to thoroughly document interactive art from the point of view of the participating audience. But I do not find that the classical semi-structured qualitative interview, presented to us by the (early) work of Kvale, can provide us with empirical material which mirrors the performance art experience. To really document the interactive art form, one must make inquiries and attempt to display what occurs at the moment the audience encounters the artworks sensuously. The semi-structured qualitative interview method described above could serve as a vehicle for the interviewer and audience's shared interpretations of the artwork. It could also provide material for a discourse analysis of how one talks about performance. Yet it would not provide insight into the immediate bodily experience and internal thoughts of an audience during their time in a performance installation. Below, I introduce a qualitative research design I have developed to deepen my understanding of the audience's inner experience. It combines a phenomenological in-depth descriptive approach to interviewing with immersive performance techniques, thereby enabling the participating audience to express their aesthetic experience. In his reflections about the production of knowledge in arts-based research, philosopher and music theorist Henk Borgdorff coins the term "research done in the service of artistic practice" to describe research which focuses on the technical and material side of art to explore new artistic possibilities (Borgdorff 2010: 52). For me, this inquiry into the audience's sensuous perception and inner imaginary realm has become the very site out of which my performance works emerge. The last part of this article will offer examples of how my use of the qualitative interview is now part of how I train interactive performers to encounter the audience. But I will first explain how I developed the interview method itself.

Frame analysis with lived experience at its core

In 2007, I worked in the Turbinehallerne in Copenhagen, once a venue of the Royal Danish Theatre. Over six nights, from ten o'clock in the evening until ten o'clock in the morning, I played the part of Nurse Rosette Lori in the interactive performance installation 'Night at the Hospital'. This was the performance group SIGNA's staging of a psychiatric ward. It was a fictional institution which I found shared many features of the American mental hospital in which sociologist Erving Goffman made his undercover participatory ethnographic observations. Until

then, I had ever only encountered this in Goffman's "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient" (1959) which was part of my curriculum while studying sociology. Now, down in the dark and moist basements of Turbinehallerne, I worked simultaneously as a researcher and as a nurse. In a team of six nurses, we looked after the twenty-five audience members, who had committed themselves into a performance in which they would play the role of patients, all suffering from different symptoms of amnesia. From my own sociological perspective, one of the interesting aspects of the works of SIGNA was that their audiences were socialized from being mere audience members into what Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen has called *active co-players* (2006). In 'Night at the Hospital' everything – including the audience – was part of a continually developing story about therapeutic experiments, loss of individual privacy, and non-transparent governance, enacted by the staff at the secret psychiatric research facility '2525'.

I found it compelling to explore how this process of socialization was experienced by the audience. Did they, at some point in the night, start to take on the perspective of their fictional role to the extent that they started thinking and feeling like the fictional self of their appointed character? Although the object of this article is not to elaborate on this particular audience research subject, I will briefly introduce the combination of theories and methods that I designed to answer this question. The theoretical framework is an inseparable part of the qualitative research design, and I believe that makers of interactive performance may take a strong interest in following the construction of it, as it can also be used as a model to construct the social situations in their own practice.

Sociologically poised to view the self as a product of internalized social values, I first delved into the Chicago school of sociology and the studies defined as symbolic interactionism to find my research concepts. To illustrate the complexity of the social situations within the performance of 'Night at the Hospital', I developed an analysis design based on the frame analysis of Erving Goffman, who focused on how people systematize and use social experiences in a way that enables them to act adequately with others (Hviid Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2002:147). We build mental frames that enable us to organize our social experience and interact in what Goffman conceptualizes as a *multileveled world*. Our ability to act socially depends on our ability to move within and manipulate these frames (Collins 1985: 283). For instance, we are able to transfer the meaning of one situation or frame (such as a real fight) to a corresponding structured situation (fictional fighting in a game). In the game, we would hit one another *as if* we were serious about it, while actually just performing stunts and not putting real strength into the punches we throw. We transform meaning from the *primary frame*, the actual, to the *secondary frame*, the fictional. The frame is a psychological mental state which distinguishes itself from reality. It allows us to step out of the roles of everyday life and accept things that are not actually what they appear (Hviid Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2002:148). In my research, a frame analysis provided a theoretical apparatus to show why we are able to immerse ourselves emotionally into a fictional situation. The experimental setup 'Night at the Hospital' proved to be a unique chance to study how these mental processes appear in practice. Performing as a nurse, I could use the observations of patients, which I kept in a little black book in the front pocket of my uniform, as ethnographic field notes to analyse the behaviour of patients/audience in the hospital. But I also wanted to know what was going on when the patients were alone. Literally, but also figuratively: what were they thinking? How were they feeling?

I wanted to anchor my frame analysis of how the audience might navigate and manipulate a multileveled world, such as a performance installation, in the phenomenological experience

of *being* in one. I gather that many of those working with artistic research today have taken phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of how knowledge is produced as an epistemological given; namely, that it stems from the body and *the lived experience*, which is defined as sensory experiences such as touch, taste, sight, and kinaesthetic sensations (Merleau-Ponty 2004). Merleau-Ponty reminds us of our bodily situatedness in the world. We are *perspectival beings* in the sense that we only perceive things from the specific point at which we are located and which would vary when experienced in another light, from another point of view, or standing in another position (Merleau-Ponty 2007:5). However, and perhaps especially within the social sciences, we tend to forget that our own bodies are the medium of our perception. As Merleau-Ponty states:

The bodily mediation most frequently escapes me: when I witness events that interest me, I am scarcely aware of the perpetual breaks which the blinking of the eyelids imposes on the spectacle, and they do not figure in my memory (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 7).

A phenomenological interview with sense memory technique

It was clear to me that I had to conduct phenomenological interviews with some of the former audience members. These interviews had to make the interviewee recall the incidents of the night from the subjective and spatial point of being *inside* the installation. So, it occurred to me to integrate *sense memory* into the interviews, a method acting technique which stems from Russian director Konstantin Stanislavskij's "system" for helping actors "*to act truthfully under imaginary circumstances*" (Stanislavskij 1967:8). By activating the affective memory of a specific event, one may recall the situational atmosphere of a space, which unlocks the emotional experience of being in that moment. The aesthetic experience of the events of the night spent in the installation had to appear vividly and clearly to the interviewees. My interview technique was based on directing them to go deep into the description of every small detail of their aesthetic observations, following a chronological (narrative) structure: starting at the beginning of the show when they were standing outside the Turbinehallerne on a cold February evening, until the last morning hours in their small and rusty hospital beds. This provided many details to their description, which the interviewees would have otherwise dismissed as common sense or unimportant information. Along with their own description of the performing staff and other patients' actions, I repeatedly asked them to describe *what* the spaces they entered looked like, *how* they smelled, and *how* they felt – as well as *what* they were thinking at that very moment. In this way, the interview became similar to what anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines as the ethnographic practice of making a *thick description* of the field.¹ I presented this style of interviewing to the interviewees by saying during the introduction that I would ask them to describe many things in detail. I also noted that some of these things, spaces, and events were known to me already, as I had been there in the installation as well. I added that sometimes I might even help describe some spaces in order to make respondents recall their experience of being in them.

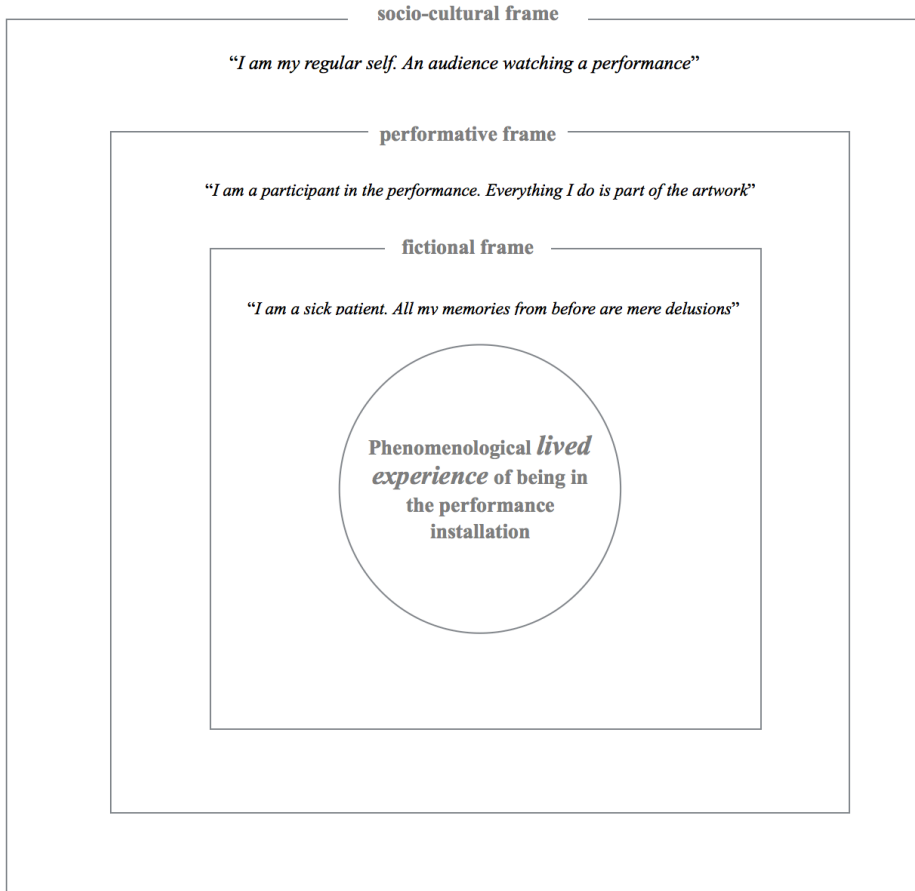
1) Borrowing the term first introduced by Gilbert Rule, Geertz uses it to define what kind of field notes ethnographers make to research webs of cultural meanings. As opposed to making *thin descriptions* (such as: "a boy is rapidly contracting his right eyelid"), the ethnographer creates *thick descriptions* (such as: "practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into believing a conspiracy is in motion") (Geertz 1973: 312).

Then you enter the social-room, that kind of waiting room. How long were you in there? A long time. I wasn't wearing a watch, so already then I lost my sense of time. But I thought I was sitting there a really long time. Three quarters to an hour. I don't know, because there was also someone who had sat there longer than me and that would be cruel, if they had sat there longer than me. Do you remember the atmosphere in there? What did you notice? I noticed people...primarily. I mean, those who were in there, the others who were going to be patients. I quickly noticed whom I for sure did not want to have anything to do with and whom I would like to have something to do with. So, it's not everyone, I notice. Dr. Reto came in and put on some music and danced a bit for us. There were some who mocked the music and already at that point I got annoyed with them, because they are ruining the experience for me. Because I came... I thought it was amazing because I had been given something to look at. And then there was marble cake! And then I thought people were really dumb, because they had coffee. Ok? If you drink coffee at ten you won't last. So you were actually sitting in there and preparing yourself mentally for the night? Yes, and looking a lot at the doctor. What was it the doctor was doing? He was dancing, I said, or this way he... moved weirdly to the music. Very focused. I don't know what it was he had in his hand and on his forehead. Then you get into Dr. Chaikin's office and I come and pick you up. Yes, I was with her and she asks me when I got up in the morning? And if I did any drugs? And if I had been drinking? And things like that. Then we go to your bed. Try to describe what you see on your way down. Other beds and rooms where people are changing clothes. Some were lying in a bed and moping and... So, you thought someone looked sort of pissed? I thought so. Then you come down to your room. Try to describe how it looks. It's really small. And there was kind of a bunk bed at one side of the room and a normal hospital-like bed on the left side. And then there was the television to the left side that showed this strange channel. Yes, and I had to lie in the bottom bunk bed. Do you greet anyone in there? There was no one there yet. I was the first in my room. I could change clothes without being afraid of anyone looking. Yes, I remember you were a little bit nervous, because one of the buttons wouldn't close. Yes, yes there was this button that wouldn't close and the three other buttons opened again the moment you closed them. So, I felt pretty naked. I had these grey underpants on and a tank top that didn't reach very far down. They were very pretty, but my thighs were very exposed and I don't show my legs from the knees and up. Do you remember what you and I talk about? No, I remember you trying to convince me it's okay. And I can't have a safety pin, but that's not until later on. Yes. But you try to close it for me [Laughs]. It was really nice. You repeatedly commented on my clothes. Also afterwards. Yes, I can picture it now too. It has also been explained to a lot of other patients. What about when the other patients came into the room? Then the first one enters, the one that's really stupid. He's really pissed and really boring. Ok? I try to say hi and he doesn't answer. Another nurse or doctor says that I shouldn't be bothered. I thought it was really annoying that there had to be such a sour one, but luckily he was removed.

Translated excerpt from interview #1, about Nights at the Hospital

[...] then I begin to play with these small objects they had given me. I'm not bored, but I'm alone in my room. Then I go with not liking the metal. I focus on the painting, which is in the room and try to combine it with the metal. Then I stick the metal onto the image, and then I start to talk to the nurses about what it is. And it's the same as that rock in that painting. Yes, it's crazy to think, but it's also a mental situation, so there was an appropriate keyword to start to move because now I can tell the staff that I am on to something. My personality – or character – had... found something out, that I, of course, in no way knew, and then I just repeated and repeated and repeated. So, after I had gone out for a round, then... I can feel that this repetition has made me a bit uneasy, so I try to find something to balance my inner discord, and then I find out that there are two identical paintings in the room next to mine. The paintings hang there synchronously on the right side, and then I start to move back and forwards and back and forwards and back and forwards. **You became manic? Did you feel manic?** I hadn't reached that level, but I did feel this discord within and chose to let it manifest as my uneasiness about these two identical paintings. And then because... I know some syndromes can't handle... like a kind of autism without quite being it anyway... and that gives you a certain freedom, like your world sort of exists between two rooms after having been out taking these rounds and now there are several nurses who get curious or at least notice that I show this kind of behavior. And then I try to think to myself: why is it that I'm doing this? Nurse Zala tells me that I have to find out what the difference between the paintings is. Then that opens the possibility for me to take my round forty times more because now I can see that there is a scratch here, which is not there and a thread on the painting there which is not there and... and then I walk around and find these small differences because then it's like I can sort of tell you when you come down [to the hospital room] what I have realized. And then you come and you... you tell me that I'm too worked up and need to take care... that I have to go back to my bed because there's no use in me jaunting around like that. **How does that feel? To be calmed down?** Well, it feels really nice, because then you can let go. Then you don't have to lead. I think that's really interesting in a role play... the point is that you have been admitted... And you present me with the idea that it's probably good for me to get a bath so that I can calm down a bit. And... luckily, I'm not that shy, so it's not a problem for me. I mean... I think others would have a problem sitting there in a zinc bath tub in the middle of everything. Well, it was something I have to do and part of my treatment, so I fully accept it. So, I'm washed with this pretty rough soap. It's hand soap you're being washed with. **[Laughs] Yes, for the hair and all over the body.** Yes, that's a part of being hospitalized; there's no room for luxury. **I think I also tell you you need to take care not to get stuck in the bathtub?** Yes, you say that someone else had gotten stuck in it, and then, of course, I start to sit and wonder if it could happen there in the bathtub... if there's a risk it will happen. I don't know... I'm just curious. That bath... it works really well on me, because I sort of got a fresh start. I've come to feel very comfortable with that once I get up and dried. There's someone else there next to me when I'm getting my bath. **Mm.** But I don't notice her at all. Why not? Well, yes, I notice her, but I also think that I shouldn't. Or I feel like I don't... – that that character I'm trying to build – has a sexuality. It's not a feeling he allows himself. And so... I try to sort of repress or... at least to limit myself from looking, even though there's a very beautiful girl next to me. **Yes.** That would be to cross her limits. And... It's brave enough to get naked in front of all those people. **So you were very aware of the people around you?** Well... I was very held-back, and I have met the most of you performers who were playing, so it came very naturally to me to be sort of pending. It's a mistake I've made earlier, where I just go off on some track and then it... uhm... it turns out that I've forced some stuff and not gotten the whole experience of it. **You wanted to get everything out of the experience? Yes.**

Translated excerpt from interview #2, about Nights at the Hospital



Model 1. A frame analysis model which illustrates the social frames the guests would have to navigate when participating in 'Night at the Hospital':

- 1) *The socio-cultural frame*, which signifies the definition of reality in which the audience is called by the name written on their social security card – the official sign of their identity – duly taken from them by us at the beginning of the evening, along with the rest of their personal belongings.
- 2) *The performative frame*, in which the hospital guests must see themselves as an active part of the art installation and must be able to perform in cohesion with the aesthetic concept and unspoken rules of the performance piece. This part of the analysis included the aesthetic concept of the performance installation.
- 3) *The fictional frame*, in which the hospital guests are defined by a fictional diagnosis of being mentally ill and, whether they like it or not, must submit to the hospitals' normative expectations regarding their behaviour as a patient.

As the interviewee was pulled deeper and deeper into her own story, it sometimes felt as if I had faded into the background. There, I could sit and silently observe how she would make gestures as if she was still in the room she was telling me about, or how she would look over my shoulder as if she was looking down the dark corridors of the psychiatric ward. With every new room that she entered in her own descriptions, I repeatedly asked her to do the same exercise of first locating herself spatially. When, for instance, I asked her to notice and then describe how it felt to walk on the hospital's concrete floors in thin white socks, I intended to activate what Michael Polanyi calls *tacit knowledge*, which is the knowledge working as a background to what is in focus of the conscious mind, *the focal knowledge*. Phenomenologist Jaana Parviainen explains the same concept with the example of walking on a slippery sidewalk and suddenly becoming aware of every step you take (Parviainen 2002:20).

I do not mean to imply that my interview provided a complete account of the tacit knowledge of the experience within the installation. Nor do I mean to suggest that the description would not give insight into the cultural or social capital of the audience (if that is what you were looking for). The point of my research in 'Night at the Hospital' was to get a thick description of how the audience had interpreted the piece and their own actions *within* the performance. Trying to make them include the tacit knowledge in their descriptions became a way firstly to trigger the memory of the audience members, and secondly to find out how the aesthetics of the performance influenced their experience. I will discuss later why both aesthetic memory and performance ended up providing a way for and to each other. First, however, I would like to take an excursion into some ethical questions and considerations regarding the validity of the research which I did not initially consider.

In the eyes of their performer/interviewer

By 2008, I found myself thrilled with this new possibility for me as a researcher coming from a social science background. Here I was, as a nurse in a fictional psychiatric facility, able to perform various kinds of subtle institutional transgressions into the patient's autonomy, which I could then subsequently explore the lived experience of as part of my qualitative research. The performance installation provided a setting for the kind of social experiments which have long been deemed too unethical within academia. Think of Erving Goffman's secret participatory study and of how the hospital staff and patients must have felt if they learned he was only faking his symptoms. Among anthropologists or sociologists today, those few who do not announce their presence in the field they are studying must work hard to protect the anonymity of the people they speak of in their subsequent analysis.² Unlike the artist or, say, the makers of reality TV, the social scientist has to be able to defend her choices according to established research ethics. She must show the ways in which she strives to avoid influencing her field of study (while acknowledging her own position within it) and thereby prove the validity of her research to the scientific community.³

2) An artist, Anna Odell, enacted something quite similar to Goffman's study in her much-debated final project 'Unknown Woman' (Okänd Kvinna 2009) at The University College of Arts, Craft and Design in Stockholm. Odell staged a fictional suicide attempt and used recordings from when she was admitted to a real psychiatric emergency centre. She did so in solidarity with the 'real' patients in order to expose the rough treatment people get in the Swedish psychiatric system today. Even though this particular intervention was not announced as a research project, Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson point to its features as a form of action research. In their discussions of 'How to Evaluate Arts-based Research?' (2011), they use it as a case study to discuss the potentially conflicting aims of art and research. Can the artist who adopts the revolutionary and transgressive model of art practice also meet the academic demands of transparency, intelligibility, and objectivity? (ibid: 418 - 419).

3) In this regard, I would like to point out that artists may wish to explore the *Code of Ethics* (1996) formulated by

When analysing the interview material, I became increasingly aware that the interviewees not only related to me as a researcher, but also naturally still saw me as one of SIGNA's performers – and, as such, someone to whom they wanted to come across as being skilled audience members. In contrast to what one of the interviewees called “deniers” – referring to audience members who kept insisting on their actual status of being an audience to a performance (i.e. the socio-cultural frame) – I learned that the hospital guests did highly reflexive and emotional work in identifying with their role as a patient. The people who offered to participate in an interview manipulated their own thoughts and feelings in order to work with the unspoken rules of the performance (i.e. the performative frame). In doing so, they created as intense an experience as possible within the fiction provided by SIGNA.

Another relevant question of validity arises when pursuing this traditional path of establishing a qualitative research project: Did my work as a SIGNA performer influence respondents' descriptions to any extent? For example, would the interviewee tell me a pleasing version of the story of the performance in which I had played a part? In other words, can you conduct research of a performative setting which you yourself helped to create?

My double status as a performer and researcher in the interview might have prevented the interviewees from sharing more critical thoughts about the piece with me. Had they experienced unwelcome transgressions? Felt intimidated or provoked by performers? Or possibly felt just plain bored sometimes? The preview for ‘Night at the Hospital’ announced the piece as a performance “for the hard-core”. So, in this case, I doubt whether such experiences would be left out of the interview. On the contrary, they might have become highlights of a respondent's description. Yet to answer my own question directly: yes, my status as a performer in the installation did compromise my research findings. Especially given that I, as a SIGNA performer, might also want to use the interview material to present the performance in a favourable light. This *does* pose a problem of validity; but in fields of research within the postmodern paradigm, this double status might also be viewed as rather an asset. At the end of this article, I will provide a practical example of the combination of interview and performance which can be read as a valid qualitative research method through the lens of a *performative, dialogical science* (Denzin 2001).

Interview as performance documentation

As it turned out, I ended up bringing the knowledge and methods of my research into play in my work as a performer and performance artist. Interviewing the former audience members helped me to see my own performance in the piece through their eyes.⁴

In addition to providing empirical material for audience research, I believe this phenomenological interview technique can also be used to produce very rich documentation of an interactive artwork itself. Instead of audio-visual documentation, I propose that the transcripts of the interviews are the best way for an outsider to see or understand the performance. Any claim that a qualitative interview can provide true testimonies of the audience's lived experiences – *and* document the

the American Sociological Association. This is a series of ethical guidelines which helps sociologists in their effort to conduct research which does not result in harm to individuals, groups, or communities. Acquainting oneself with such a code could – without dictating – potentially serve as a way for the conceptual artist to reflect upon her choices when involving other people in art pieces which share all the features of behaviourist social experiments.

4) In 2010, I was asked by the Swedish performance group Poste Restante to conduct interviews with audiences who had participated in the installation ‘Chopin's - Heart Emergency Retreat’. The interviews were then used as a way for me to reflect upon the piece with its artists, based on listening to the recordings of the audience's stories from within the installation.

performance – should cause any researcher and practitioner operating in the wake of postmodern, feminist philosophy and performance art to raise an eyebrow.⁵ Hence, the following will discuss further the ontological status of the interview material.

In view of my research frame analysis, the interview is prone to be read as a performance of the performance. Goffman's use of the theatrical show as a metaphor for social life was introduced as early as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). More recently, it has often been used by practitioners to push for the Performative Turn in science and philosophy by pointing to the postmodern condition that people must perform their identity on the *front stage* of public life. In the broadest sense, you might say that every social action could be regarded as performance. Yet, as a practitioner within performance studies and performance, it feels necessary to offer a more distinct definition of the concept. Philosopher and dancer Susan Kozel provides us with a definition that can bridge the seemingly opposing paradigms of social constructivism and phenomenology. Kozel has developed a philosophical approach to performance which relies on “a Merleau-Pontian reversibility and hyper-reflection” (2008:69). Performance, she finds, entails a *reflective intentionality* (i.e. a decision to see, to feel, to hear oneself as performing). You are being aware of what you are doing while you are doing it. It can be very subtle, like a gentle adjustment you might make in the tone of your voice to brighten someone's mood. To illustrate the more intense experience of this “split in attention”, Kozel refers to philosopher Roland Barthes' description of his experience when he suddenly feels himself observed by the camera lens and “everything changes” as he “instantly make[s] another body for himself” (1982:10 in *ibid* 2008). I find the moment the audience enters the performance installation to be a similar, intense experience involving observation of their own actions and feelings. The phenomenological understanding of performance as a split in attention could also be conceptualized as the different frames I used to construct my analysis model (figure 1). The frames specify the social lenses through which the audience observes their behaviour.

Entering the interview situation, the former audience member is then presented with an additional frame: to view their experience as a subject of research. For analysing the material, this implies viewing their description as a performance. The methodological claim I add to this is that the interview method suggested here makes it a performance based on a phenomenological mode of researching experience. By directing the interviewee to go back through the performance in such detail, she is given the opportunity to re-enter the installation, as the memory technique helps to actualize the sensuous experiences from the performance *in* the interview. The interview provides a new stage for the former audience member – a chance to perform her performance in the installation for the interviewer.

‘The Crack’ – making the invisible visible

During my research in 2007, I started crossing over from the field of sociology into the field of activism and eventually into that of performance art. Looking back at the interview material from ‘Night at the Hospital’ a few years later, I started valuing the interviews more and more for their quality as performance documentation – or as a new performance, with the participant acting as its co-creator. In the years that followed, I started developing non-verbal means for audience

5) Compare the discussions raised by performance art professor Peggy Phelan in her chapter ‘The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction’ in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) about the ideological problems entrenched in wanting to keep performances in the archive of art. This is a political problem because performance is seen as the very art form which resists the commodification of art. Though very relevant, this is an extensive discussion within the field of performance and beyond the scope of this article.

members to express their state of being *whilst* immersed in a performance. This was first employed in the ‘The Crack’, an interventionist installation by Fiction Pimps made at The House of Futures in 2010.⁶

We met the participating audience in the morning, on second floor of the building, and led them, one by one, into the installation we had made in one of the offices. We created the feeling of a labyrinthic passage through a series of paradoxical questions, asked whilst ritualistically washing their hands in front of a broken TV. The flickering noise of the screen and sounds of water became an analogue aspect of a roaming digital soundscape which constituted the audible expansion of the room. We intended to blur participants’ normal visual orientation. This, we told them, was to bring them into the “state of vertigo”; out of linear chronological time and into the universe of *Chôra*; a ‘non-place’ referred to by Plato as a ‘space’ for giving and creation (Ramö 1999:314).

Immersed in a space like ‘The Crack’, conversations between ourselves and the participants seemed to be woven of a kind of dreamlike material, one which so easily breaks as soon as it leaves the inner realm. Reaching the limits of language, phenomenological description *may* break into the poetics of image, gesture, or the categories of metaphor.⁷ The setting of the immersive performance installation provides a blurry, ambiguous space to search for other ways of giving shape to our experience. In ‘The Crack’, we invited the participants to construct their image of *Chôra*. Some spent what felt like hours sitting or lying on the beige carpeted office floor, eating sweets, drinking cheap whisky and cutting out pictures from old geography, art, and science books.

In retrospect, I now value ‘The Crack’ as an interview method which alters the interviewee’s mode of being: a lucid dream state, in which poetic language and imagery feel so much more available. Through first researching how audiences experience immersive art, and then using this insight to find techniques to influence the mode of being they experience it *in*, a new site of research and performance has been opened up to me.

‘Seeing Pink Narcissus’ – a dialogue between eyes and body

My first solo work was an artistic reflection on the complex premise of my genre: that you cannot really experience it without engaging with it. At the entrance to the gallery *68 Square Metres*, I introduced the performance installation guests to how they would be able to experience ‘Seeing Pink Narcissus’: by allowing me to direct them to see a boy as beautiful as the boy envisaged by James Bidgood (Bidgood being the director of the homoerotic movie ‘Pink Narcissus’ (1971)). As with my interview respondents, I use the first contact with the audience to introduce their

6) 2009 Fiction Pimps was co-founded by Madeleine Kate McGowan, Gry Worre Hallberg, and myself. ‘The Crack’ is one of the primary immersive methods which we developed and refined over a series of intense years of working together to create spaces for poetic modes of being in various institutional settings. My master’s thesis, *The Mise en Scène of Research* (2012), introduces how we combined our interventionist work with the methods of Future Studies in the interdisciplinary seminars ‘In 100 Years’, which were a series of seminars about sustainability by House of Futures. In the article ‘SENSING THE FUTURE’ (2012) I present stories of the sensuous modes of knowledge production by using material from the phenomenological interviews that I made with participants after the seminars.

7) If I were to align the experience of ‘The Crack’ with a discipline or method, it would be closest to psychoanalysis. The mode of being which the participants experienced could then be conceptualized in Jungian terms as a kind of *ambiance*. And the way to acquire insight to it would be a psychoanalytic session of looking into how they appear as symptoms or in archetypal imagery in dreams (Romanyshyn 2007:85). I must note, though, that such a methodological approach should not be taken lightly. Psychoanalysis implies a certain essentialist and early twentieth century gendered understanding of the human psyche. Though such approaches may be full of beautiful imagery and inspiring ancient alchemist knowledge, we should not just adopt them, or any method for that matter, without question.



Image 1. Made by visitor in The Crack

*And the young man asked:
“What’s next?”*

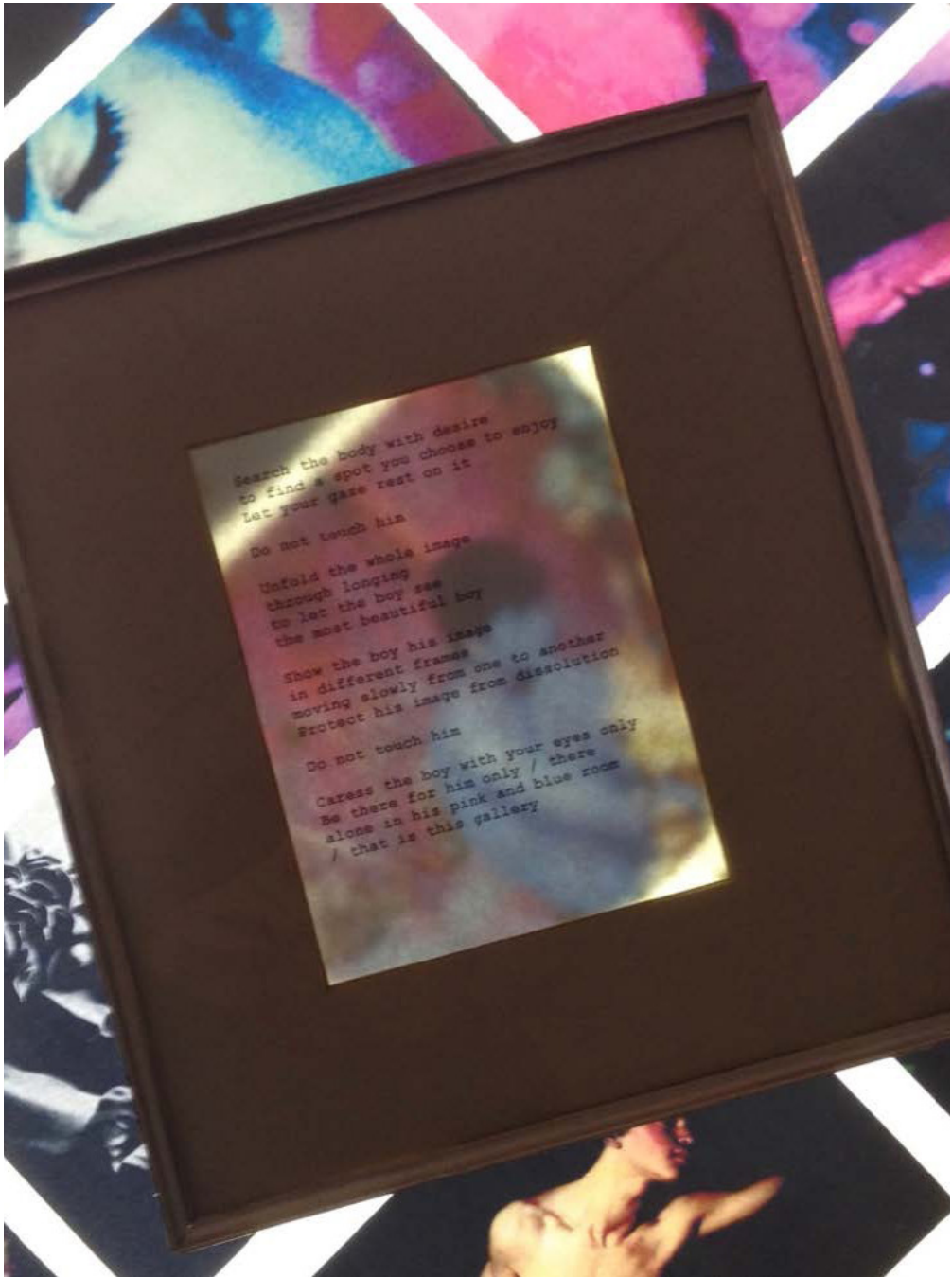
*And the answer he got was:
“Something Blue.”*

*Another young man asked
“What is the paradox?”*

*And he reached into the Bird Cage and the answer he got was:
“The question is the answer”.*

Answers given by participants at the beginning of their journey,
to questions posed by others by the end.

The Crack by Fiction Pimps 2010



*Image 2. On the table in the introduction room to Seeing Pink Narcissus,
curated by Iben Elmström, Sixty Eight 2014*

participation with a metaphor: they will come to maintain a fiction based on the myth of Narcissus, who fell madly in love with the most beautiful boy in the lake. In 'Seeing Pink Narcissus', the audiences' eyes perform the role of the reflecting water. How they see the body in the gallery space (and the angle of their view) is what the boy gets to see of the boy in the lake. In other words, being able to see his image depends on the reflection in their eyes.

There is never any direct eye contact during the interaction. It is a dialogue between the gaze and the body. If the audience does not take pleasure in his image, if they close their eyes or look away, the fiction of the boy dies. Then, the only thing left is the audience and the performer, Rasmus Knutzen-Nielsen, in an empty gallery space.

I introduce this piece in this context in order to open what might be considered an interview within artistic research. When read as an interview, you could say the initial questions become: *Do you think I am beautiful? What part of my body do you like the most?* In the rehearsals, I had worked with Rasmus to sense exactly where the gaze was resting, and on sensing whether it penetrated and thereby opened his body to my/the audience's desire. As the artistic creator of the piece, my interest never lay in getting a verbal answer to this question. I am interested in the phenomenological experience of *what* the audience's attitude does to the body. But in this case, I kept my own curiosity at bay. Knowing that my presence in the space would introduce another gaze into the situation, I let the interaction unfold only between the performer and the audience. If I wanted to acquire insight into the interactions, I could ask Rasmus afterwards to perform a choreography of the ways in which he moved under the gaze of the three different audiences.

Seeing Pink Narcissus' is an intense artistic score for the performer to phenomenologically explore, bringing physical form to the specific audience's mode of perception in the performance. Many of my works require the performers to direct the audience's attention into themselves. Their method in doing so stems from my work with the phenomenological interview.

'Your Past Belongs to Them Now' – interview as immersive performance

In 2018, collaborating with professor Falk Heinrich and the Research Laboratory for Art and Technology (AAU), I initiated a project which sought to name the specific skills interactive performers must possess and identify techniques that can be used to train them. This project also set out to explore how these skills might serve as methods in arts-based research. Halfway into the program, we found that my interview technique was crucial if the students were to understand the task of the interactive performer. As opposed to the actor, who uses sense-memory to bring out feelings and atmospheres in their own acting, the interactive performer must learn how to direct their audience into a mode of *thick description*, exploring their bodily sensations, memories, and styles of thought. This in no way excludes working with the movement and choreography of your own body, since your mode of presence influences the audience profoundly. But your primary task is to direct your intense emphatic attention onto your audience: to be able to sense, feel, or think what they do.

Rehearsing a mode for asking an audience descriptive phenomenological interview questions became the first step of the training. The second was to show the students how to continue adding artistic elements to the interview as an immersive dramaturgy for their one-to-one interactions. The third was to encounter an audience in the performance installation 'Your Past Belongs to Them Now'.

In this case, the audience was first immersed into the descriptive mode of storytelling by walking

slowly, shoulders touching lightly with a performer, listening to his repetitive sensuous observations of the present space as seen through the fictional frame of a distant future:

Remember walking here on the small short bridges connecting the balconies of the first floors of the theatre's open foyer? ...Remember sliding your hands along the banisters? ...Remember the soft sensation of the new metal material? ...Remember your reflection in the massive window facades fronting out to the railway station next to the theatre building? ...Remember how clean they were?... Remember how the sun cast shadows onto the warm wooden floors? ...Remember....

Again, this resembles how I introduce the interviewee to the phenomenological interview. But instead of explicitly instructing the audience to describe *their* experience in detail, the performer indirectly suggests it via the details provided in his description. In a later session, the audience is introduced to a collection of objects painted in different shades of white (a hammer, a plastic cup, a lice comb, a ...). Understood as a qualitative research interview, the objects could be conceptualized as *stimuli material*. Placed in the hands of the audience, the objects come to sensuously unlock an otherwise forgotten memory. The performers ask the participants to describe the features of the object they hold, where it comes from, and what that place looks like, as well as their bodily sensation of being there.

Some of the students in the program and the performance installation used the project for their university course in Arts-Based Research. Their contribution could very well be defined as research done for the sake of technical artistic development. The students helped me to explore performance methods and artistic strategies, which I will use, in turn, as part of the project EutopiaDystopia at *Polo del '900*, which is the museum and archive of the Italian Resistance Movements in Turin. The project will take place around the time that this article is published. In this case, the interview will be applied as an immersive qualitative method to answer the following research questions: *Is there such a thing as European identity today? If so, how might it appear in everyday life and contemporary aesthetics?* The twist of the performance is to have the audience tell us sensuous stories from the present, whilst being immersed in a fictional scenario twenty years from now, in the year 2039.⁸

8) Assisted by Dagmar Bille Milthers and Christine Hvidt Grønberg, who took part in the training program as students, Falk Heinrich will join me in Turin to write articles about the arts-based research methods of the 'EutopiaDystopia' project. The project is made in collaboration with TwLetteratura and supported by Compagnia di Sanpaolo.

[The Interview as Convergent Point]



Your past belongs to them Now, in collaboration with TwLetteratura and Art & Technology (AAU), Vendsyssel Teater 2018

Immersive performance as interview – in a performative, dialogical social science

'Your Past Belongs to Them Now' is my way of re-approaching the field of qualitative research. During the years in which I was occupied developing immersive performances as interventionist methods, some parts of social science have opened up to the idea of performance as research. As early as 2001, Denzin introduced what he saw as the emergence of *the reflexive interview* and a *performative, dialogical social science* (Denzin 2001). Since then, Leavy has described the range of performance-based *narrative inquiries* which have developed, inspired by the feminist critique of classical knowledge production (Leavy 2009).

According to Denzin, the first step in making a reflexive interview is to contest the idea of a researcher's right to the inner life of her respondents as a commodity. When conducting analysis based on empirical material as a sociologist, you must understand that you take authorship of the narrative. You must first reconstruct the interview as a way of creating "performance texts" and then start to convey interview material through a form respectful to the voice of the interviewee. This implies showing how the data produced by an interview becomes a selective reconstruction of the interviewee's world: a text which performs a story according to its own narrative logic. Denzin finds that performative media, such as ethnographic cinema or performing arts, can serve as analytic methods which point to how the story of the interviewee is being re-staged by the sociologist (ibid:23-26). In other words, adding a performative element to the research helps to highlight when power over the narrative has been taken from its initial author – and also when it has been given back.⁹

'Your Past Belongs to Them Now' is about training the performer toward checking in directly with the audience in order to see whether they feel their story is represented in what has been noted down. Exhibiting it directly afterwards, in an archive of stories as part of the installation, is a way to keep the process of analysis available to the audience. The project EutopiaDystopia is an artistic discussion about how we produce historical and sociological archives. It is an art-based research project looking at how we can produce an archive which consists of different subjective points of view, housed in stories which include somatic sensations and experiences which might require other modes of expression.¹⁰

In this article, I have presented ways of documenting the audience's experience in interactive performances through imagery ('The Crack') and through embodiment on behalf of the performer ('Seeing Pink Narcissus'). Integrating immersive techniques in interview methods may help to alter the interviewee's sensuous mode of being. Furthermore, this practice could serve to open up the interview to sensuous or even celestial aspects of experience, otherwise excluded within a traditional scientific paradigm. This, in turn, initiates another mode of inquiry and research findings, which traditional qualitative methods have no means to render visible. Thus, I propose

9) Denzin's primary example of the reflexive interview is the one-woman performance piece about race in America by professor and actor Anna Deavere Smith. It is based on interviews with people from across the United States, which begin with the simple introduction: "*If you give me an hour of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself performed*". (Smith 1993 in Denzin 2001: 33).

10) The idea for working with a somatic approach to archiving stems from my participation in a seminar arranged by Suzan Kozel at Malmö University in 2015 as part of the academic research project 'Living Archives'. The seminar introduced us to different forms of embodied, phenomenological, and artistic methodology giving importance to cultural knowledge resisting the written word.

to work artistically with the interview method to enable new modes of knowledge production and analysis from within a performative, dialogical social science.

The phenomenological interview becomes a stage for former audience members to perform their story; but in my interviews they are not entirely free to choose the style of their storytelling. The phenomenological technique fixes the story, or performance, in the *lived* experience of aesthetics of the performance installation and the social situations played out within it. In respect to Kvale's call for clear specification of the power dynamic in an interview, I want it to be obvious that I am like a director working with an actor. I help the interviewee to remember, connect with, and describe her initial feelings and aesthetic observations. The installation turns the audience members into performers; the phenomenological interview turns them into authors; and their descriptions become performance texts.

Conducting the interview within the explicit performative setting of an art installation might help make the distribution of power and ownership in knowledge production more transparent. When working with immersive performance as an interview, I *do* make a claim to my interviewees' inner world. This article has shown how the phenomenological interview method provides a step toward gaining insight into the audience's experience – in order to then start materializing it directly as part of the artwork. In 'Your Past Belongs to Them Now', I try to create a critical awareness in the audience about this fact, offering them a choice to either give their story to the archive, or take it with them when they leave the installation. I am very keen on inserting a critical element of risk into the very existence of the immersive art piece. At the same time, I am very humbled by the willingness of almost every audience member who enters the installation when it comes to sharing their inner world with us.

The idea for this performance emerged from a single quote by the French philosopher and activist Simone Weil, who said that: "*attention is the purest and rarest form of generosity*" (1947). During the rehearsals, I found myself repeating this sentence over and over, as it so profoundly points to the social quality the interview and interactive performance can nurture.

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