

THE LISTENING ROOM

Essay on the essay-work at HDK, Academy of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg, including some deviations and other ways to keep it open

by Magnus Haglund, writer, lecturer, musician

Abstract:

This text describes the essay work at Academy of Design and Crafts, Gothenburg, and is a commission by Claes Caldenby/Andrej Slavik at Chalmers, Architectural Theory and Methods, for an anthology of texts about place and exploration, an outcome of the international seminar Common Ground, taking place at Chalmers, Gothenburg in December 2016. Magnus Haglund has been in charge of the independent course Skrivandet som konstnärligt verktyg, Writing as an Artistic Tool, at HDK since 2014. The text is a contextualization of the ideas behind the course.

1. Barthes Recharged

There are several starting-points. One is a workshop taking place at Konstfack, Stockholm, in December 2009. Title: Do We Have To Take A Step Back in Order to Come Closer? Concept: To do recordings on the local train Tvärbanan that crosses several underground lines in the southern and western parts of Stockholm, and combine them with psychogeographical walks between the stations. Out of this material a collective sound piece was created, a 25 minutes long house track called M/S Tvärbanan. A recurring fantasy among the participants of the workshop was the transformation of the train journey into some kind of ghost ship or submarine, doing secret underwater investigations of the city.

The curators/teachers for this workshop was me, Magnus Haglund, and the sound artist Isak Eldh. The basic reading companion consisted of excerpts from Roland Barthes' lecture series for College de France during the first half of 1978, called *The Neutral* (translated by Rosalind E Krauss and Denis Hollier, Columbia University Press, New York 2005). These fragments were read aloud while traveling back and forth on the train, for example one describing Roland Barthes' experience of going to the Sennelier art supply store on the quai near Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. "Thursday, March 9, fine afternoon, I go out to buy some paints (Sennelier inks) – bottles of pigment: following my taste for the names (golden yellow, sky blue, brilliant green, purple, sun yellow, cartham pink – a rather intense pink), I buy sixteen bottles. In putting them away, I knock one over: in sponging up I make a new mess: little domestic complications.... And now, I am going to give you the official name of the spilled color, a name printed on the small bottle (as on the others vermilion, turquoise, etc): it was the color called Neutral (obviously I had opened this bottle first to see what kind of color was this Neutral about which I am going to be speaking for thirteen weeks). Well, I was both punished and disappointed: punished because Neutral spatters and stains (it's a type of dull grey-black); disappointed because Neutral is a color like the others, and for sale (therefor, Neutral is not unmarketable): the unclassifiable is classified – all the more reason for us to go back to discourse, which, at least, cannot say what the Neutral is."

The fact that Roland Barthes' words were sounding on the train, mixing with the information system calling out the names of the stations, the doors opening and closing on the different stops, people moving back and forth looking for places to sit, was a challenging teaching experience. A transferring of meanings, a re-ordering of the words. The alternative dimensions of the texts and the life of the city got further amplified through the parts in the Barthes book concerning the summer house in Stockholm belonging to the Swedish 18th century mystic

Emanuel Swedenborg, in the middle of the square of his house at Hornsgatan. Roland Barthes was particularly interested in the retreat qualities of his lifestyle. “Made his coffee in the fireplace of his study: would drink it day and night with a lot of sugar but neither milk nor cream. Food: only boiled semolina and milk.” For Barthes this was connected with something he called minor ownership, “that which signals retreat, aloofness, individual, anonymity, what doesn’t show, colorless”.

For the workshop two artists were invited to give a lecture: the pianist Mats Persson and the conceptual artist Leif Elggren. Several years before both of them had, independently, recorded the house organ in Swedenborg’s summer house (since the end of the 19th century the house is part of the open-air museum Skansen). Mats Persson and Leif Elggren talked about the specific conditions of the instrument, the special sounds of the organ and Mats Persson even handed over his recordings, done tone by tone separately. This became an important aspect of the sound piece created later in the week. One of the psychogeographical walks ended at the foot of the Essinge bridge. There a couple of iron bars looking like organ pipes were scattered. The participants in the walk started to play with the bars, banged them on the walls of the bridge and recorded the different sounds. In the studio situation later on in the week, when the basic montage work was done collectively, the field recordings were combined with Mats Persson’s recordings from the summer house. The possibility of playing new melodies on the remnants of the Swedenborg organ was something of a revelation, and created a special link to the Barthes fragments. The city was read in a new way. The openness of the situation changed the understanding of Roland Barthes’ speculations on the meanings of the neutral. Barthes and Stockholm remixed, put together, taken apart, being played upon, in the flow with the house rhythms.

Several months later I met the artist Barbara Häggdahl, then in charge of the master program in the crafts department at HDK, Academy of Design and Crafts

in Gothenburg. I told her about the workshop experience in Stockholm, and the fruitful discussions with the participants. Barbara got excited and wondered if something similar would be possible to do together with the master students at the crafts department, with the aim of opening up the writing part of their examination work. Let's try it and see what happens, I said.

2. To write and not to write

Even if my teaching practice at HDK started with giving an ironically highbrow lecture based on Alain Badiou's then newly published *The Communist Hypothesis*, using the book cover's kitsch-maoist design with its paraphrase on *Mao's Little Red Book*, as an example of a doubled-edged aesthetic characterizing our postmodern/premodern times – something I commented on by playing the Beatles track Revolution 1, “but if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, you ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow” – I quite immediately understood the necessity of finding more direct ways of talking and listening, to get through to the students. To find meaningful meeting points between theory and practice.

I began by creating simple exercises. The first one consisted of specific addresses somewhere in the inner city of Gothenburg, one each for every student, plus instructions. “Be at this place between two thirty and three o'clock in the afternoon. Listen to the sounds you hear and think about how they change your perception of the place. Take some notes.” Then we met a couple of days later and talked about the experience, the relation between taking notes and more finished forms of writing, the role of the unexpected, the importance of listening to what's going on. Listening became a central word. The activity of being an attentive listener.

Of course there were meetings with the staff, with the professors in the departments of textile, jewellery and ceramics, and with Barbara Häggdahl,

about how to create schemes that could work practically in the context of the master program. What kind of reading would be fruitful for the students and what kind of dialogue with their individual practices could create a sense of sharing and real learning?

After a period of tryouts a scheme was settled. In the master program the text written in connection with the examination work is called report. The main topic for my teaching was the improvement of the writing part, and the processes leading up to it. A system of three individual talks per student was created, one hour each, and this has been followed since. The first conversation focuses on material aspects and takes place about half a year before the examination. The students show some of their former work, what it is about and how they think about the ongoing process. The second one occurs in the middle of the working and writing process. Now the focus is on different ways of dealing with the text material. What kind of context and references outside the material process are needed to make the work understood and exciting to read about? The last one deals with the finished text, with details such as commas and the length of sentences, as well as the philosophical and political contexts. How to improve the text, to make it talk and communicate better? How to trust the personal voice, and sometimes: how to distrust it?

The freedom of writing has been emphasized. Not that the students are expected to become professional poets or lyrical essayists, but it has been necessary to create and give access to the more risk-taking parts of the essay tradition, from Michel de Montaigne and Walter Benjamin, to Virginia Woolf and Lucy Lippard. Apart from using texts from Glenn Adamson's most valid collection *The Craft Reader*, essays like Woolf's "Street Haunting: A London Adventure", Lippard's postface to *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object 1966-1972* and Rebecca Solnit's book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* have been important door openers.

A quote from the Solnit book has been something of a guideline, in its description of the importance of not knowing the result of an artistic process, while you're right in it: "Lost really has two disparate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. There are objects and people that disappear from your sight or knowledge or possession; you lose a bracelet, a friend, the key. You still know where you are. Everything is familiar except that there is one item less, one missing element. Or you get lost, in which case the world has become larger than your knowledge of it. Either way, there is a loss of control /.../ Of course to forget the past is to lose the sense of loss that is also memory of an absent richness and a set of clues to navigate the present by; the art is not one of forgetting but letting go. And when everything else is gone, you can be rich in loss."

The indeterminacy of the Solnit getting-lost-position seems to be something of a connective thread, binding more intuitive ways of working with metaphysical speculation, giving space for personal declarations and sincere explorations. The clue to this is to recognize the different voices. Therefore a document was created, with suggestions and recommendations regarding the writing process and how to understand the role of the text in relation to one's artistic work. Here are some excerpts:

How to get started with the report writing?

Many of the secrets of writing are to be found in the moments when something important takes place, and this includes the moments when nothing in particular seems to be happening. Then it's good to write, to take notes in one's notebook. Sometimes things are formulated in a precise way, even if one is not conscious about it. Save the notes from the work and try to put them together, in patterns that appear because of, and in relation to, the work process. Most of what you do has some

kind of meaning, but an essential part of writing is to rewrite what you've written before, to find a way towards concreteness. What is hindering a text is not seldom the idea that a text has to be finished and clear even before the first sentence is put down on paper. Therefore it's important to start as early as possible, instead of waiting until the last moment with writing the report. It takes time learning how to write and one has to take the time to do it.

But it's also important to understand the obstacles. Sometimes they have to do with the misconception that a certain academic way of writing is preferable. The fear of writing, and not the least the fear of doing it wrongly, not living up to the expectations, is very often standing in the way of the text. It's not at all for certain that everything should be that precious and well-turned; the clearly worded and perfectly controlled can become a straight-jacket. For a true understanding of the artistic process the unfinished and even ugly sentences can be as important as the balanced and beautiful. Sometimes it is the digressions that lead you straight into the essence. Use your freedom, the possibilities of trying things out.

What is the difference between essay and report?

This is a question that comes up again and again. It's not that easy to answer though. The essay as a form is both open and free, but it demands close reasoning and independence in thought, both stylistically and from the point of view of the content. But the freer and more concrete the report text relates to its subject, the closer it gets to the essay as a form. Freedom and concretion seem to belong together, and there's a wide, open space for individual shapes, using personal stories and combinations of stylistic levels. As long as the

reader is taken into concern, using the train of thoughts and the telling of certain experiences as a true dialogue, the text can take innumerable routes and expressions. A good degree report very often looks like a good essay.

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Let's assume that the novels and essays by Virginia Woolf have an importance for the exam work (or some other artist, philosopher or sociologist paving the way for a feminist understanding of the world, or some other critical reading of the relationship between the arts and the society): Then use that, instead of hiding it! The critical reflection and the theoretical widening of the perspectives are of utmost importance for the writing of the report. If the perspective is too individually based, as if you were the inventor of everything you are doing, the result very often becomes narcissistic. But the importance of this particular question, the Virginia Woolf one, has to do with a fear aspect. If the philosophical references are made in a timid and unoriginal way, it leads to shallowness instead of a deepening.

Therefore it is essential how one thing connects to another, and how firmly established the questions and conceptual aspects are. Clarity in thought is important.

A significant anthology concerning the changes and increasing conceptual extensions of the craft field, is Glenn Adamson's *The Craft Reader*, consisting of more than 70 essays and texts, from the 19th century and onwards (Berg Publishers, Oxford, New York, 2010; a copy can be found in the library of HDK). Not that you necessarily have to read this thick compendium of texts from beginning to end, but the collage of different formulations about the techniques of arts

and their transformations, almost immediately makes you start thinking about the consequences of keeping up the practice of craft. The relevant context is the thing, the widening of the perspectives, putting the dialogue about the art form in focus.

To write and not to write

What is not written is as important as what is actually to be read on the page. Learning how to write is to rewrite, knowing what to keep and what to take away. Not to say too much, not being over-explicit, over-pedagogic. To give the readers a chance to think, fill in the contours, create their own spaces.

3. The Essay in Dialogue with Art

In 2014 a new possibility was presented: To run an independent course specializing in essay writing in connection with art making, open to apply for by artists from different fields – architects, actors, former HDK students, photographers, painters, conceptual artists, film makers. With a bit of luck a usefully valid anthology was released by the Oslo based writer Arne Melberg just a couple of months before the course started, called *Essä*, consisting of 23 classic essays, from Montaigne to Susan Sontag, plus four texts by Swedish writers, and four essays on essays by Melberg himself, on the topics The Body, The Place, The Memory and The Art. This became the reading material for the course, plus Sontag's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and WG Sebald's walking essay *The Rings of Saturn*. Already from the start many were interested in attending and then the word has spread, and the course is now into its fourth year, with more and more people applying for it.

The course has followed the same route: Four seminar days, six hours each, with a lecture in the morning concerning different aspects of the essay tradition (the freedom of Montaigne's writings, the fragmentary techniques of Walter Benjamin, the labyrinthine enigmas of Sebald's books, the conceptual dimensions of contemporary artists using the essay method, from Tacita Dean to Lina Selander), and then in the afternoon long sessions with all of the participants reading out the texts they have written before the seminar + reactions and discussions about the writing. The listening dimension in these afternoon activities is crucial. To learn from the others, to respect the individual differences, to be interested in the territories in between the texts. The course ends with everyone writing a more substantial essay, and then the whole group meets for two final seminars, diving more deeply into the content and the possibilities of further explorations in connection with the writing.

An important stimulus for the course is the absence of curiosity in so much theoretical writings about contemporary art, a gap that seems to have widened between how artists think about their work and how critics and curators present it. The essay can, when it works, turn out to be something of an experimental ground for a more sensitive and creative way of describing the thought processes, a series of counterpoint possibilities running parallel to the art making. This is one of the conclusions from this course, anyway, a sniff of a freedom giving space to the personal signature. And this is where the late writings of Roland Barthes come back to us: a sensuality in language most needed, something that the British essayist Brian Dillon has formulated in his collections *Objects in the Mirror* (Sternberg Press, 2014) and *Essayism* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), quoting for example the poet and translator Michael Hamburger, one of WG Sebald's closest friends, and somebody who was living in dialogue with the true adventure of art: "The spirit of essay-writing walks on irresistibly, even over the corpse of the essay, and is glimpsed, now here, now there, in novels, stories, poems or articles, from time to time in the

very parkland of philosophy, formidably walled and strictly guarded though it may seem, the parkland from which it escaped centuries ago to wander about into the wild meadow.”

This escapism from the controls of society and culture, and the immersion in the essential details, sometimes with hallucinatory dimensions, are the significant factors of Roland Barthes’ late writings, in books like *Empire of Signs*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *A Lover’s Discourse* and *Camera Lucida*. In her essay “Writing Itself: Roland Barthes” Susan Sontag points out the necessary liberty of his project, a radicalism with strong effects on the identity of the writer. “The aesthete’s radicalism: to be multiple, to make multiple identifications; to assume fully the privilege of the personal. Barthes’ work – he avows that he writes by obsessions – consists of continuities and detours; the accumulation of points of view; finally, their disburdenment: a mixture of progress and caprice. For Barthes, liberty is a state that consists in remaining plural, fluid, vibrating with doctrine; whose price is being indecisive, apprehensive, fearful of being taken for an impostor. The writer’s freedom that Barthes describes is, in part, flight. The writer is the deputy of his own ego – of that self in perpetual flight before what is fixed by writing, as the mind is in perpetual flight from doctrine. ‘Who *speaks* is not who *writes*, and who *writes* is not who *is*.’ Barthes wants to move on – that is one of the imperatives of the aesthete’s sensibility.”

Yes, we have to move on, walk between the stations, explore the secret territories, under the bridges, along the industrial sites, find words for the objects of losses and longings, use the spaces in between that fulfil the intimate and utopian dreams of the essay, making us true multiple human beings. We are in dialogue with the world and each other. We try it and see what happens. The essay is a listening room.

Reading material

Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (The MIT Press, 2000)

Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (transl David Macey and Steve Corcoran, Verso 2010)

Roland Barthes, *The Neutral, Lecture Course at the Collège de France 1977-78* (transl Rosalind E Kraus and Dennis Hollier, Columbia University Press, 2005)

Brian Dillon, *Objects in the Mirror* (Sternberg Press, 2014)

Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcarraldo Editions 2016)

Arne Melberg, *Essä* (Daidalos, 2014)

Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Viking, 2005)

WG Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (transl Michael Hulse, Vintage 2002)

Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2009)

Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2008)