

Work Stories and Life Stories

Afterword by Magnus Bårtås

Artistic methods are not only methods, but also different ways for people to arrange their existence. Life stories and work stories are intertwined. The fact that one often encounters a work as a narrative has made the artistic world a folkloric world – someone has seen something done by someone, and then narrates it – through teaching, in a lecture, at a bar or in a café. More often than not, minor misunderstandings arise. It is maybe one of the reasons why artists either try to take control over their work narratives – or like in the conceptual tradition – construct and emphasize the sequence of conduct and action. As an example, Simon Starling says about his method: “When I’m making art I’m thinking up novels in a way... I’m involved in an activity which is similar to that of a narrator.” Starling’s work is exactly that: sequences of actions where different chapters are of the utmost consequence and the temporality itself, or the narrative, create the work. Starling’s objects – cars, boats, replicas of sculptures – are added to, go through transformations and are hit by destruction. Flows, travels and movement create analogies about production paths, global capitalism, entropy, mistakes, chance and syntheses. Insofar as the objects remain and are physically shown, they have the character of three-dimensional documentations of events rather than sculptures.

Work stories are verbally exchanged or written down. They can take the shape of lists, information, material descriptions, lyrical prose, short stories, essays and movies. We meet them through hearsay, as press releases, written protocols, performance directions, documents or scores. Sometimes conflict forms around work stories. They are kidnapped by the news media, distorted and taken advantage of for populist purposes. The work stories that was established in the Swedish media around Anna Odell’s yet unfinished work *Okänd kvinna, 2009-349701*, in what was probably the most large-scale art debate the country had ever seen, took the artist a long time and hard work with lots of interviews and lectures to change.

Sometimes work stories are censored or secret because they are anti-heroic or they undermine the art market; sometimes they are predominantly mythical. The mythical narratives include that of Joseph Beuys’ plane crash during World War II on Crimea. Beuys’s main materials, such as fat, blankets and sleds, which are combined and created in numerous combinations, emanate from this basic narrative about how he was taken care of by nomadic Tartars, how they saved his life in the snow with the help of fat and blankets that warmed him in the cold.

Among the secret work stories is that of Gordon Matta-Clark’s collection of works called *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (one of several circulating titles). These collages were sold at high prices in the 1990s, but actually consisted of materials that Matta-Clark’s widow Jane Crawford had found in a cardboard box after the artist’s death. New York was more or less bankrupt at the beginning of the 1970s and the city rid itself of impossible pieces of land to make money for the municipal treasure, and even areas as small as fifty meters long and thirty centimeters wide, often hard to access between behind buildings, sometimes completely inaccessible. Matta-Clark bought a number of these areas at auction, he gathered the certificates, a number of maps and notes, but he never created a work before his death. It was not difficult to understand Matta-Clark’s interest in these anomalies of city planning: it was an obvious Gordon Matta-Clark work. But the true work story

is only about an “early study” of Matta-Clark (without us knowing anything about his intentions), as well as a collage by the widow that was displayed in Madrid, sold and ended up in a museum.

Every work is an invitation, a statement that says: “I/we did this, you can also make your own version.” There are many who claim that it doesn’t matter whether the artist created the work, but that is a mistake. Yoko Ono’s simplest work, *Fly Piece* from 1963, was also her most difficult. But on a certain level she has *created* the work, otherwise it would be uninteresting. These circumstances – that one can always extract a work story from a work of art, that it contains an invitation to do so – establishes a gigantic virtual handbook of the history of art. This gigantic handbook really doesn’t say much about the results, nor is it to be confused with a recipe book for art. It doesn’t say much about the interpretation of the work either. One can utilize this book like one utilizes travel literature, to fantasize about events, places and meetings. But it is built, as previously mentioned, on an understanding: that people with bodies carry out things on their own or publicly, that there exists or have existed people with that experience. To be sure, upon physically meeting a work that one has only heard about, one can on occasion painfully experience that the work is so exceptionally much better in the imagination and sometimes one wants to continue living in one’s illusions. But this does not lessen the meaning of how the narrative is anchored in reality. A work story, just like a life story, can be more or less fictitious and contains like all (documented) narratives the structure of fictionalization as well as temporality, including and excluding, overrun with incongruences. But it mainly draws its force from something similar to the aura of both the relic and the document, as well as from the lived experience that inhabits the body. When Carl Michael von Hausswolff in an interview changes the work story surrounding his highly debated piece *Memory Works* – aquarelles that were said to contain ashes from the concentration camp Majadanek in Eastern Poland – and says that the work might not contain any ashes from the people who were burned in the concentration camp’s ovens, he is degrading two important aspects that are linked together: the work’s conceptual buoyancy and the aura of the document, which have the power to establish a connection to the past. Or as one of the critics, Salomon Schulman, said it: “Who knows – part of the ashes may have come from some of my relatives? Straight from my own flesh and blood?”

Roger von Reybekiel’s *Seven Pears in a Line* is perhaps not a handbook as much as a work of work. A concrete poem in the wonderful world of lists. Parts of the score seem simple, parts of it quite banal. Others involve complicated processes, good planning, developed logistics and certain specific resources. But there is nothing frivolous about *Seven Pears in a Line*, even if there might appear to be. Remember that people have chosen to live their lives this way. And that this has had consequences.