

## Collaboratively telling everyday life – whispering, walking, touching, stitching and writing

Between 2004 and 2007 we, Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström, have been working in combined research and art projects within the Interactive Institute, studio [12-21]. Our main concern in these projects, [*visklek*], [*ljudstråk*], [*glasrörd*] and *stitching together* has been to tell stories together with other people using numerous channels of communication. The process has been collaborative and we want the process of writing this text to be collaborative in a similar way. We have invited Per Brunsog to a discussion around some of the questions we've been asking ourselves during the projects.

## *[visklek]*, Växjö 2004



Starting in the simple, playful and banal concept of Chinese Whispers we wanted to play a game and in this game explore how we could create a platform in the city of Växjö for strangers to meet and in this meeting point enable them to collaborate via storytelling.

In February 2004 we arranged five workshops with about twenty mid-teenagers from various areas in the Växjö region of southern Sweden. During the workshops each participant was asked to make a postcard, consisting of a picture and a message. The content was to come from their everyday lives and surroundings, as if they were tourists at home. All of the short stories from the postcards were recorded by the author on site at the specific place that they were talking about.

We chose five audio recordings. Each one was placed on an answering machine which was accessible for the public by a simple phone call. We made five posters, each referring to one of the answering machines, with the picture from the postcard and with the question: “Do you want to play *[visklek]*? Call 0470- 794621”. Posters were put up in and around Växjö, as well as elsewhere.

The rules were a combination of Chinese Whispers and social norms around the use of answering machines. A person who called one of the answering machines heard a standard message with instructions of how to play *[visklek]*. A message connected to the picture on the poster was played out to be heard, memorized, repeated and recorded. The next person who participated heard whatever message the last caller-in had left. After four calls the game started all over again.

After two months in progress, *[visklek]* had received about 1000 calls, all very different and marked by each and every participant’s words, voice and tone.

The project was exhibited at Växjö Art Centre during the summer of 2004.

**Participation and presentation:** Presentation at Dag X, a young entrepreneurship fair held in Växjö. Exhibition at Växjö Art Centre. Presented a paper at the design conference In the making. Presented a paper in process at the Nordic summer school. Basis for workshops and lectures held at Växjö university, Blekinge Tekniska Högskola, Malmö Högskola.

**Financing:** Interactive Institute, studio [12-21]. Växjö Art Centre.

**Press:** Swedish Radio P4 Kronoberg. Smålandsposten. Swedish Radio P3-news. Swedish Radio Kulturnytt, P1. Radiobio. Dagens Nyheter. Flipper Swedish Radio P3. Blogs.

**Graphic design:** Michaela Green  
Programming: Mario Scholz

## *[ljudstråk]*, Ljungby 2005



*[ljudstråk]* is a library of audio walks, available to the public. With headphones in your ears you can walk in the traces of stories told by young people from Ljungby, Sweden. Every audio walk starts at the Museum of Legends, Sagomuseet, in Ljungby - just like the project itself started off with the tradition of oral storytelling in this region, Sagobygden.

During the spring of 2005 we worked with teenagers in Ljungby, asking them to observe the surroundings in their everyday lives. For some weeks they wrote down where and when they moved around in the town, as well as what they were thinking of. Together we walked around in the town to develop their stories. Finally the participants did a live-on-tape recording of the stories while retracing those walks through the town.

The soundwalks are available at the Museum of Legends for visitors to borrow. When you choose one of the soundwalks from the library and press play the young voice will guide you through an extraordinary ordinary walk in the town. You can hear about pretending to be a rough-sleeper at the square; about a drunk business man that makes a move on you when you are with your friends in the park; about having ice-cream in the middle of the winter because the ad says that you can have summer whenever you want to.

**Participation and presentation:** Berättarfestivalen 2005 and 2006, the storytelling festival in Ljungby. Presented at the conference Kultur och kreativitet in Copenhagen 2006. Basis for workshops and lectures held at Blekinge Tekniska Högskola and Malmö Högskola. Part of Sofia Mavroudis' c-uppsats on sound art and public space at the Institution of Art history, Lund university. As part of Cultural planning in the Öresund region there has been a project made in Farum, Denmark, that is highly inspired by *[ljudstråk]*. Presentation at Malmöfestivalen, Malmö.

**Financing:** The Interactive Institute, studio [12-21]. Framtidens kultur. Landstinget Kronoberg, as part of Cultural planning. Ljungby kommun. Berättarnätet Kronoberg. Länsstyrelsen Kronoberg.

**Press:** Smålandsposten. Smålänningen. Smålandsnytt Swedish Television. Sommarfrank Sveriges Radio P3. Article in Munvigan. Review in [www.konsten.net](http://www.konsten.net)

**Graphic design:** Joel Galvez

**Programming:** Mario Scholz

## *[glasrörd]*, Växjö 2005



In Sweden there is a tradition of giving glass objects as gifts. They are often given on specific occasions such as graduation, birthdays or when moving to a new apartment and are therefore symbols of transitions in life. In *[glasrörd]* we explored the rituals around gift-giving in relation to the importance of the given object itself. *Glasrörd* is our own, homemade word and could mean touched by glass, touching glass or touch of glass.

During the summer of 2005 we visited seven young people in the region of the Kingdom of Crystal in Småland, Sweden, and asked them to tell us personal stories about their glass gifts. Where do you keep it? How do you use it? Who gave it to you? To challenge their emotional attachment to their gifts we also asked them if they were willing to exchange their gifts with something else and if so, to state what they wished in exchange.

The gifts were then moved, along with the recorded stories connected to them, from a private setting to the museum. To be able to hear the story the visitors had to touch the object. At the museum the gifts were wrapped in order to show that they were in a state between two owners and also to focus on the story behind the object rather than on the object itself. Each object was accompanied by a text with historical information about one specific aspect of the object.

As a means of reaching outside of the museum we wrapped things in public spaces. This way everyday objects like park benches, trash bins, trees and lampposts were incorporated in our storytelling and became visible in a new way. At the museum and on a web page the visitors could bid on their favourite object by telling a story about something they were willing to exchange.

At the end of the exhibition an auction and the physical exchange took place - if the original owner were willing to let go of his or her gift. People got the chance to meet and to tell further stories about their bids.

**Participation and presentation:** Exhibition at the Swedish Glass Museum, Växjö. Workshop held together with Maja Heuer at the gymnasium for glass-blowing at Orrefors. Workshop held together with Malin Lundmark at the Swedish Glass Museum for the public and for crossmedia-students from Blekinge Tekniska Högskola. Basis for workshops and lectures held at Blekinge Tekniska Högskola and Malmö Högskola.

**Financing:** The Interactive Institute, studio [12-21]. Växjö kommun. Lessebo kommun. Uppvidinge kommun. SVID. The Swedish Glass Museum.

**Press:** Smålandsposten. Swedish Radio Kronoberg P4. Smålandsnytt Swedish Television.

**Antiquarian:** Maja Heuer

**Visual communication:** Ditte Tvaermose Andersen and Michaela Green

**Technical development:** Nicklas Marelius

## *stitching together*, Växjö, Mexico City, Puebla, Turku, Dale, Malmö 2006 - 2007



Most of us have text messages in our mobile phones that we do not want to throw away. They are connected to places, situations and people we love, hate, miss and, in any case, have a relation to. In *stitching together* we wanted to make these intimate, digital treasures longer lasting and stitch together different techniques, different speeds, people of different ages and different uses of communication channels.

In practice, in *stitching together* we offered the public a chance to share and embroider text messages in public sewing circles. The embroidering was done by hand and/or by a sewing machine. The participants could forward a text message which was transferred to the machine.

During 2006 and 2007 we arranged several sewing circles in Sweden, Mexico, Finland and Norway. Some people kept their embroidered text messages, others left them in the sewing circle. We made a quilt out of the messages that were left behind in order to create a new dialogue and make the stories, places and people connect.

Participation and presentation: Workshops at Växjö Art Centre. Workshop at Trolebús in Mexico City. Presentation at Ibéroamericana in Mexico City. Workshop and presentation at Universidad de las Americas in Puebla, Mexico. Workshop with crossmedia-students at Blekinge Tekniska Högskola. Exhibition at Digitally, Yours Aboa Vetus and Ars Nova Museum in Turku, Finland. Guests and lecturers at Craft Club in Malmö. Sewing circle at Dalsbua in Dale, Norway. Workshop at Malmöfestivalen, Malmö.

Financing: the Swedish Research Council. The Interactive Institute, studio [12-21]. Växjö university. Blekinge Institute of Technology. Kulturfonden för Sverige och Finland. Janome. Greger Sy.

Press: Swedish Radio Kronoberg P4. Smålandsposten. Swedish Radio P1 Svea Kultur. Sydsvenskan.

Collaborator: Agneta Råhlin, Växjö Art Centre. Kerstin Gustavsson, Blekinge Institute of Technology. Maria Rindeskär, the Swedish Embassy in Mexico.

Technical development: Nicklas Marelius and Bengt Sjölen

## A discussion between 2007 01 31 and 2007 04 05

Authors: ÅS: Åsa Ståhl, KL: Kristina Lindström, PB: Per Brunskog.

ÅS: We're here because of the *[ordlekar]*-project. This is a discussion that will be transcribed and the transcribed text will be sent around among the three of us. We will change, add and suggest changes in a collaborative writing manner<sup>1</sup>. We have some questions for ourselves and one hour from now on, so could you please turn on the alarm clock? And set it on 60 minutes.

**KL: *What is the motivation to work with collaborative storytelling and why do we want to tell stories together?***

ÅS: One way to describe the motivation to what we're doing is to go back to where it sort of started. Kristina was working for Swedish Television and I was working as a reporter for Swedish Radio. Although I was in a privileged position to influence what was aired, I was deadly tired of the speed and the logics of the news world as an excluding way of "telling the world". I was longing for a more intimate setting, where there could be more of a one-to-one-meeting. The art world, with its interest in new media and several platforms, turned out to be the future host of our ideas and for the stories that didn't fit into the mass-media. And there was Marie Denward at the Interactive Institute and Bengt Adlers at Växjö Art Centre who believed in our first idea: *[visklek]*.

KL: Yes, as you said Åsa, at that time I was working at the Swedish Television. They have a strong wish for participation and to create spaces for sharing stories. They work on several different platforms such as the television, Internet, eye-to-eye meetings and mobile phones. But their main focus is to create content for television. I wanted to let the collaborative process of telling and sharing stories to be enough in itself. I believe that our first project *[visklek]* is a reaction towards that. *[visklek]* is an attempt to create an open platform for collaborative storytelling which would allow people to share and exchange everyday stories in a playful way. The main focus is on the interaction between people instead of on the end result. One important aspect of telling stories is that it is a way of making sense of our own and other peoples' everyday lives. And it is important that there are spaces that allow us to share stories. That's one motivation to work with collaborative storytelling.

PB: While studying art history I became curious about theories of relational art. I wrote my masters thesis on Oda Projesi<sup>2</sup>, a Turkish art group that sometimes use a practice similar to yours. At that time I heard about your project *[ljudstråk]* in Ljungby, which I recognised as being relevant in this context. So my way into this was an interest in a type of art that I interpreted as relevant for today's society. An art not based on objects, but situations and human relations. Since then I have increasingly understood the significance of the exchange of life-experiences through storytelling. The artists I'm referring to emphasise the positive, as

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<sup>1</sup> There were 36 versions of this text before it was printed. Due to the limited number of pages you can only read half of the text in this publication. The rest can be found at [www.misplay.se](http://www.misplay.se)

<sup>2</sup> Brunskog, Per. "Oda Projesi". D-uppsats. Institutionen för Musik- och konstvetenskap. Lunds universitet. 2006.

well as critical, aspects of everyday social relations and towards life itself. As I see it they don't separate art and life. And I think both storytelling and participation are connected to creating identity.

KL: When we were in the process of doing our projects we did not begin with a definition of collaborative storytelling. We just tried to do it. When I look back I can see that it has not been so much about creating one story together but rather to share stories and to integrate telling and listening. *[visklek]* is an example of a platform that is based on both telling and listening. When you call the *[visklek]*-answering machine you first hear a story and then it is up to the caller to decide what to re-tell in that story. So it is not about creating consensus, but a never-ending negotiation around the different stories. I think that one important aspect of collaborative storytelling is to tell and listen. One way of defining is to do and our projects are possible definitions of collaborative storytelling.

PB: Is it the collective creativity you focus on? Or the sharing of life experiences?

KL: I think it is both, but mostly sharing and exchanging stories. Grant H Kester<sup>3</sup> distinguishes between collaborative production and dialogical works. In the latter he defines dialogue in itself as the aesthetic expression. In *stitching together*, for example, we have a collaborative production that will result in a quilt made out of embroidered text messages. But another aspect of the projects is the dialogic encounter between participants that take place during the workshops as well as after them. This is a process that does not have a clear beginning or end. Kester describes dialogical art as a cumulative process of exchange and dialogue rather than a single instantaneous chock of insight precipitated by an object or an image<sup>4</sup>. I would say that our works are durational rather than immediate. The projects are durational and the processes consist of several instances - the first sewing circle we hosted at Växjö Art Centre, the quilt, and this text. The result of the projects cannot be reduced to one specific moment and we can't sum it up in this text. So some parts of the projects can be experienced after the actual work, such as the recordings from the *[visklek]* answering machine or this text. But, the experience of participating in the sewing circle or calling *[visklek]* is connected to a specific time.

PB: Yes, and this is the reason why art critics, art historians, and anyone who will research the project, have to be participants. It is always a face-to-face-experience. You cannot just take part in the idea, or experience it, through the documentation. In the kind of art where you create a situation, the difference is even greater. So, to be a participant, or at least to be there, is a significant way to understand the interactions in the works. I think we even have to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the expressions that are in the material product that come out of the event, and on the other, the expressions in the event. This distinction is regardless of the fact that they are equal parts of the work, and that they affect each other. For example, there are the expressions in the form of the embroidered text on the patchwork quilt in *stitching together*, and the recorded stories in *[ljudstråk]*. Then there are the intersubjective encounters – the momentary interface. This social aspect is at the same time the relational aesthetics part of the work, which you can only catch by being a part of it.

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<sup>3</sup> Kester. Grant H. "Conversation Pieces". University of California Press. 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 12

ÅS: Part of my motivation in our projects is to find ways of making it possible to actually turn up the volume of those who usually can't make their voices heard. I think it has to do with my background in journalism and with my background in political science and ethnology.

KL: In [*glasrörd*] we worked at the Swedish Glass Museum. My impression is that it is a rather traditional museum, which mostly exhibits historical objects in display cases. The objects are often presented with the name of the designer, material and technique. We wanted to work with several aspects of these glass objects and chose to focus on glass gifts. Of course these are objects with tactile aspects, so we invited people to touch them. When someone touched the object they could hear a personal story connected to it. And in addition to that we offered a text with historical information about an aspect of the object. In this way we showed different ways of presenting an object - the tactile experience, the personal story and the historical information. Everything can be described in many different ways. An object, a situation or a street will be described differently depending on who is telling it and depending on when and where. That doesn't mean that one is right or the other is wrong. In [*ljudstråk*] we experienced that parts of the cultural board in Ljungby wanted the young people to tell other stories than they did. They wanted more historical information. The big question is who decides which stories should be told and who should tell them?

ÅS: We've been aiming at making the participants decide for themselves among layers of stories. That's how I see it.

PB: Kristina talked about how we learn to recognise ourselves through storytelling. I think even the collaborative process is significant here. When you collaborate, when you make things together, it is a good forum for live storytelling. At the same time you, as artists, use existing networks to get in contact with participants, and you create new networks. Édouard Glissant notices that in a networked society such as ours, we do not identify ourselves so much by background. Instead our relations to others are more and more relevant. In this context I think both storytelling and participation play an important role. He describes the difference between "root identity", which is connected to background, and on the other hand "relation identity". The root identity is a distant viewer; it looks at history as one single development, whereas the relation identity tries to expand the perspective, and can accept a contradictory and confused development between cultures. The root identity legitimates itself by protecting and trying to expand a territory, but the relation identity does not belong to one territory – it exists in the connections between territories. One person does not hold only one of these two characteristics, of course. I believe that this interpretation of society and the individual is important when we later will discuss questions about knowledge.

ÅS: Do you have a last comment for now? No? Next question:

**KL: *What are ours, Kristina's and Åsa's roles in these projects? Is it important to define and categorise us as project leader, or artist, or researcher, or interaction designer, or journalist?***

PB: As I see it, the most important aspect of your roles is to form an open and creative environment, where all the participants, you included, can develop the process and the project.

ÅS: I mainly think of our roles as “a setting up a situation” in which we invite others to participate. And to participate on different levels. If I have to position myself I usually introduce myself as an artist and a journalist and that’s because my artistic practice has grown out of my journalistic practice.

PB: Do you use any journalistic strategies?

ÅS: I use experiences such as how to approach people with curious questions. Questions as invitations keep coming back in our flyers, posters and invitations. I have also been inspired by Sawatsky and his method for posing open-ended questions<sup>7</sup>. He emphasises that the interviewee will give you a lot more information if you ask him/her to tell a story, as opposed to a more confrontational journalistic interview technique. This means in practice that I try to get to a point where the person realises that s/he has a story and then I ask open-ended questions, using the interviewee’s own words. In that situation I keep my own assumptions to myself. At other times I tell stories from my own life in order to make the interviewee have confidence in me. The third element is to listen. You need to listen, otherwise you’re too caught up with your own thoughts and you’ll miss what the other person is actually saying. We are combining an interview technique with a storytelling technique.

KL: Åsa, you said earlier that we aim at making the participants decide by themselves which stories should be told. I agree, but at the same time we do have an influence on which stories are told. We create the setting, we tell our own stories, and we ask questions even though we try to ask open questions. That is a way of setting the agenda and influencing which stories are told. And we put their stories in a context. We place them on answering machines in a museum or in a quilt.

ÅS: Of course. And you just pointed towards one of the main reasons why we should reveal who we are, what roles we’re playing, what positions we’re acting from and what we have on our minds. I portray people and I want them to recognise themselves. I want to understand their logic and rational. When I look at the contemporary art field I see so many people who do the same: who go between different roles. One person I want to mention is Jay Koh<sup>8</sup>. Koh is one who’s very much working with setting up situations. Inviting people to both listen and tell. He’s one who emphasises listening. I think it’s important in my role to both listen and tell, myself. I have to have something to contribute with. I have to dare to be quiet and to show something of my own every day life.

PB: Kester talks about the “aesthetic of listening”. I think this is a huge part of your artistic creativity and performance. I don’t think the extraordinary stories could come out from

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview see for example: [www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=676](http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=676)

<sup>8</sup> Email conversations between Jay Koh and Åsa Ståhl/Erik Sandelin

[*ljudstråk*] if you were not good listeners. And that is absolutely a central part of the aesthetic understanding of your works.

KL: In some stages of the process I think my role is very much like a traditional interaction designer. Especially when it comes to practical matters such as making sketches, communicating with a programmer or graphic designer. When we host workshops I also use strategies that are similar to strategies from interaction design. If I as an interaction designer host a workshop for users I wouldn't ask them: "So what do you want?" In a similar way as we don't ask a participant in our project: "So what do you want to tell?" Instead we have used different probes such as maps, postcards, places and objects as a starting point for storytelling. I have partly been inspired by Cultural Probes, a method developed by William Gaver, Anthony Dunne and Elena Pacenti in the project Projected Realities<sup>9</sup>. The method recognises the subjective role of the designer as an important part of the design process at the same time as it involves the users. So, the designer doesn't claim to be objective and design whatever the users wish for. Instead he or she will contribute with something to which the users can respond. So, the aim is not to define a problem as it often is within interaction design. Instead the users are engaged in playful activities that encourage them to be aware of their everyday lives. Hopefully this will then lead to design solutions that neither the designer nor the users would have come up with by themselves. I see similarities to their way of working to ours, except we don't aim to design something in the end.

PB: In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau<sup>10</sup> writes about the difference between the terms 'tactics' and 'strategies'. Strategy is a calculation you use when you are in power, when you know how to control the landscape. Tactics takes advantage of opportunities and develops them. That's what you use when you break into situations where you don't know the circumstances. I can see a connection in your practice and Oda Projesi's in this context: How you break into social situations, and come in contact with the participants. And of course this has to do with the role of the artist in connection to society too. It just doesn't work to be an introvert bohemian today, and the artist as a genius is not longer relevant. What I mean is something that you and Oda Projesi have in common: you complement each other as individuals in the meeting with participants. You are sincerely curious about the people you work with, and you are good listeners. It is not, as many relational projects today, where the art tries to explain the theory. I prefer when the theory is used to open up and give new perspectives on the project.

ÅS: Over the years Kristina and I have incorporated experiences and the collaboration has become tighter. We've learnt more about how to meet people and are quicker at adjusting to new situations. In a workshop situation one can pay attention to the participant while the other one can think about what the next step will be and we do this without talking about it. We do this because we've learnt how to collaborate with each other. Another thing that comes to my mind is that I always trust Kristina. I know that if I have a bad day Kristina will step up and take more responsibility and vice versa.

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<sup>9</sup> Gaver, B., Dunne, T. & Pacenti, E., *Cultural Probes*. In "Interactions magazine", (1): pp. 21-29

<sup>10</sup> de Certeau, Michel. "The Practice of Everyday Life". University of California. 1988.

KL: I agree. Trust is an important factor both in our collaboration and in our relation to the participants. We put trust in the participants and hopefully they will trust us. I would also like to comment what Per mentioned about de Certeau in relation to the participants. They also use their own tactics within the platform that we have set up. When we set up these platforms we have an idea of how they will be used. We set the rules and that could be called the strategy. But, of course the participants often grab the opportunity and use their own tactics to create spaces for participation that we did not intend to happen. When we hosted sewing circles in Sweden and Mexico we put focus on the collaborative production of a quilt. At the exhibition *Digitally Yours*<sup>11</sup> in Turku, Finland we invited people to bring their embroidery with them. This changed how people approached *stitching together*. The way some people used the platform almost turned it into a production unit. One woman wanted to make a welcome-sign for her boat and a young couple made pillows for his grandparents. They participated, but instead of embroidering already existing text messages they created new ones that had a specific purpose and use. One of the curators of the exhibition, Andy Best, asked us: “Do you feel used when they come here just to have something embroidered?” His question and the mounting feeling of a production unit struck a chord with our previous concerns. When we wrote the application for *[ordlekar]* to the Swedish Research Council one of our main questions was: “How can we allow, in art projects, for participation on several platforms? Without using or hijacking the participants as simple material.” In this case it was almost the other way around. Our time and labour was used in order to get something produced, that didn’t benefit the project. Or maybe it did. This shows the pros and cons of an open system and is the risk we are willing to take when we invite for participation.

ÅS: Ylva Gislén, who has written about collaborative storytelling<sup>13</sup>, suggests that we should allow for different types of participation. That not everybody wants to play the main character in the collaborative tale. Somebody might want to be the side-kick, who just says a few things, or who’s a lurker who’s just there. Not really saying very much, but still influencing the situation.

KL: Some people need to be lurkers in the beginning. In *[visklek]* we could see how some people wanted to get familiar with the system in the beginning. They tried to repeat the message as correctly as possible. And then they started to play with the system, the stories and the other participants.

- PB: It has become trendy in some parts of the art world to make “participation”-based art rather than “spectator”-based art. But the meaningful part of the understanding of a “participation”-based art project is in the way in which the audience interacts and uses the work. Mika Hannula points out that being a participant; to take part of this face-to-face-experience with both an individual and a collective sense; “is always more than just consuming a product”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.digitallyyours.org](http://www.digitallyyours.org)

<sup>13</sup> Gislén, Ylva. “Rum för handling. Kollaborativt berättande i digitala medier”. Blekinge Tekniska Högskola. Karlskrona. 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Mika Hannula. *Rrrrrrrradical Chic (Give Me Banana, I’ll Jump Like a Monkey)*. In “Superflex/Tools”, (ed) Steiner. Barbara. 2003. p184

KL: Some ways of engaging in our projects I would not call participation. In [*glasrörd*] we invited people to touch glass objects in order to trigger a story connected to the object. That's not participation to me. However, the people who took part in the exchange of gifts in the end of the project are, what I would call, participants. There is confusion about what is participation and what is interaction. I think there is a danger in calling everything participatory that involves some kind of interaction.

ÅS: I want to come back to our roles. I don't believe in splitting up the roles. I think it's problematic to say that you can be an artist at one point and a researcher at another. Especially when it comes to the kind of art that we do. If we're not there as human beings in a participatory situation we're not giving from ourselves. And our research is part of our practice as well as the participants are part of our research as well as our practice. We are not stepping out of our role as artists to observe what the participants do. That would make the participants become lab rats. We need to take risks with our own feelings.

PB: Oda Projesi has mentioned that they don't want to be categorised into art and aesthetics – instead they see their projects as something they do together with the participants. And I think it is easy to see these kinds of projects as a social experiment if you just look at your role from a theoretical perspective, such as aesthetics or what ever. But it is not first and foremost a social experiment; it is an action of social doing – a collective process and a one-to-one-meeting.

KL: I think it's important to communicate your role, because what you do is interpreted differently depending on whether you present yourself as an artist or a project leader or a journalist or a designer or whatever.

PB: Of course, in some situations it is a necessary strategy to define your role. From what I have been told the city council in Ljungby almost didn't support [*ljudstråk*] because they could not classify it as an art project. It wasn't until it was presented as art that they accepted it.

KL: It's clear that most of the participants don't have the same need to define what we do as for example financiers. When one of the participants was recording her [*ljudstråk*] we met a woman who asked her what she was doing. She just answered 'I don't know what we are doing. It's called [*ljudstråk*] and it's fun'. We'll get back to the issue of categorisations and knowledge at the question of what kind of knowledge we produce.

ÅS: That's ten minutes. Third question.

**KL: *One of the important aspects of our role is that we invite others to participate and to tell stories. How do we invite to participation? And what role do the participants play?***

KL: The way we invite is to always give something for others to respond to and within that invitation have a balance between the on/off-button and the blank canvas. So, we don't invite people to press play and there will be this fantastic story, and we don't offer a white paper to fill with a story. So, somewhere in between that.

ÅS: How have we done that in practice?

KL: In [*visklek*] people recognise the game and they know the rules. The system is filled with stories for the participants to listen to and repeat. And of course they can do whatever they want. They can choose to change the story or not to repeat the story if they don't want to, but at least they have something to respond to. During the exhibition we tried to collect new stories to play with through an answering machine. So anyone could call the [*visklek*]-system and leave a story. Almost no one left a story there. It was a blank canvas and nothing to respond to.

ÅS: I also think of [*glasrörd*], where you would hear stories once you touched the wrapped glass object. On the web you could also hear the stories. You were invited to make a bid on this object. So there was already a story that you responded to. The object was mainly conveyed through the story. That's also how I think of a story being there for you to react upon.

KL: In *stitching together* we didn't think that the participants would respond to each other's messages. But, last weekend we met an elderly man who wanted to reply to somebody else's text message by embroidering an answer and incorporate it into the *stitching together*-quilt. That was a way of responding that we hadn't thought of, that went a little bit outside the rules that we had set up.

ÅS: I think it's very important that we set up rules. And the great thing is that people break the rules. You know, in [*visklek*] people didn't give a damn sometimes about our rules. They used it as a notice board and called between themselves and told completely different stories. In [*glasrörd*], for example, our strategy was that people would make bids on the gifts that were on display in the museum but during the exchange of gifts on the performance day, what happened was that people had made bids on the bids. So, they broke the hierarchy that we had set up, which I think is very common when there are participants, when you invite to participation.

KL: The participants have played an important role in inviting others as well. In [*visklek*] we noticed that the participants from the workshops became active in spreading the word about the project and inviting friends to call. You can also hear in the recordings from the answering machine that people often call together with friends, and that they explain to each other how it works. In [*ljudstråk*] the participants also brought friends to the workshops.

ÅS: I think, for example with [*ljudstråk*], actually with all of the projects, we've stressed the fact that there should be flyers and small notes to spread around. And posters. To spread the

word about our projects. And for example with [*ljudstråk*], we spread a note saying: do you want to make your story... eternal. And we walked up to people with these flyers and handed them over and asked if they wanted to come to the first workshop. We went to schools, to cafés, we walked around. Coming back to the last question about our role, it was very much us as people, coming up and being able to both listen and answer directly to their questions and inviting them personally.

KL: Another way to invite is to ask people for help. By doing that we show that we are vulnerable. There are a lot of things we don't know, we don't understand and that we need help to solve. Instead of trying to hide our worries we try to share them. And hopefully we can also share the joy when everything works. This way of working and inviting has been especially important in *stitching together*.

ÅS: Was that the last comment on that question? Ten minutes have passed.

***PB: How do you describe your artistic practice?***

ÅS: We work with storytelling – other people's stories, our own and collaborative storytelling. We come up with an idea and carry it through with adjustments to the circumstances such as location, people involved, money issues, failing collaborations. It's got a lot to do with keeping the idea alive and communicating what direction we want the project to go. We set up a slightly twisted, but familiar, social situation where people can listen to and tell everyday life-stories together on different platforms. We are inviting people to participate as well as facilitating meetings between the participants.

PB: There are a lot of connections in the contemporary art scene with what you do, for example to the debates and writings about relational aesthetics, dialogue-art, community-based art, and participant-art<sup>15</sup>. These are theories that in some way try to understand the social interaction movement in contemporary art. Since the middle of the 1990's artists have started to see possibilities of social interaction in the context of art. But in some way, it is a history you can follow through the Situationists in the 70's and Fluxus in the 50's and 60's back to Dada in the 1910's – where artists have tried to break the border between “art and life”. An additional connection to contemporary art that has some similarity to the social interaction movement is what Nato Thompson calls, The Interventionists. These are artists who directly intervene in the society. In particular, the category Thompson calls “The Experimental University” is of interest. He describes this category as a type of critical thinking that uses art to present an alternative critical perspective<sup>16</sup>. This “how art can be used” is a part of the interactive social part as well. A significant phenomenon, in relation to your works, and the “use” of art, is what Bourriaud describes as an art that has followed the shift from a goods-based economy to a service-based economy. He writes about this in both

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<sup>15</sup> Described in texts as: Bourriaud, Nicolas. “Relational Aesthetics”. Les presses du reel, 1998 (English translation 2002) and Bishop, Claire. “Participation”. Whitechapel/MIT Press, 2006. and Doherety, Claire. “From Studio to Situation”. Black Dog Publishing, 2004 and Finkelpearl, Tom. “Dialogues in Public Art”. MIT Press, 2001, and Kester, Grant H. “Conversation Pieces”. University of California Press, 2004

<sup>16</sup> Thompson and Sholette. “The Interventionists – Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life”. MIT Press, 2004

*Relational Aesthetics* and in his next book: *Postproduction*<sup>17</sup>. In relational aesthetic this implies that artists use art as a tool for making intersubjective meeting places.

ÅS: Can you develop that a bit? What's the difference between using the art and making art?

PB: I think, when Bourriaud talks about using art as a tool, he means that when you know that you go into an art context, you can leave some of the conventions of everyday life behind, and therefore it is easier to create meeting places for people who in other cases never would meet each other. As I see it, this "using the art"-movement is a combination of a positive and critical attitude to everyday life-experiences. It is a mix between curiosity, self-realisation, and in some ways about having a positive outlook of things which can push the world in, as they see it, a good direction.

ÅS: I think we can describe our artistic practice by talking about some references in the contemporary art scene. One of them is another, already mentioned, collaboration: Oda Projesi<sup>18</sup>.

PB: What Oda Projesi generally is doing is to construct everyday situations where the intersubjective interactions can take form. Often the form comes out of collaboration. The collaborating partner can be an artist, an architect, school classes, neighbours or whatever. In this way Oda Projesi's role as artists is not only as creators, but also as collaborators and the collaborators can, just as much as Oda Projesi, be creators of the project. Commonly the processes are based on a workshops event, just like yours. Sometimes this workshop is the whole project and sometimes there is a product such as an exhibition, a book, or other printed material; or, as in the collaboration with us, a radio program. When I was in Istanbul I came to talk about [*ordlekar*] with one of the members of Oda Projesi, and they got interested in collaborating with you. Oda Projesi wanted to make a radio/sound collaboration that would be broadcast on their radio show.

ÅS: Yes, and we wanted to make a radio piece that dealt with the same issues as we find the most important in [*ordlekar*]: knowledge, learning, words and sounds as a basis for communication, invitations, questions, theory and practice. Part of the idea was to make a relay race where they would get a question they could answer by sending us a new sound piece, and we would send yet another new sound piece back to them. We decided to ask Oda Projesi to try to help us learn how to drive a car in Istanbul although we're in Malmö.

KL: It is a very practical issue - how to drive in a specific place, but since we're in Malmö and Oda Projesi are in Istanbul, we knew that this question would have to combine practice and a theory about driving in a quite thrilling way. We also realised that there was a language problem since we don't speak Turkish, but this would be broadcast in Turkey. We decided to incorporate our quick and dirty learning of Turkish into the sound piece and met with two Turkish speaking students who could help us translate our question: how to learn to drive a

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<sup>17</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Postproduction". Lukas & Sternberg. 2002

<sup>18</sup> [www.odaprojesi.org](http://www.odaprojesi.org)

car in Istanbul when we are in Malmö. The sound was broadcast in their radio show and we're now waiting for their reply. We're still eager to learn how to drive a car in Istanbul.<sup>19</sup>

ÅS: The collaboration between the Finnish-based artists Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta Kalleinen<sup>20</sup> has influenced us. And especially the Complaints Choir that they made in Helsinki during the winter 2006. The public was invited to email and snailmail complaints. About 2000 came in. Then, another step was to join the choir. 90 people did so and signed up for five rehearsals and concerts at the Kiasma theatre as well as for example in the railway station. In this case it is participation as something that many people can relate to, if not to say everybody: complaining and a choir, which by definition is something you do together. It is also about the joy of using words. And of playing with words.

KL: I see a similarity in their way of working to ours. They work with a known social setting as a choir, but in a slightly twisted way similar to the way we work in *stitching together*. One important part of both projects is the social aspects of the project and another is the collaborative production. In this case a composition and a quilt. Grant H Kester<sup>21</sup> writes about contemporary artists who are context providers rather than content providers. I think that describes our practice. When we arrange a sewing circle we provide with a context as Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta Kalleinen do. Of course we also contribute with content. But the main focus is to create some kind of setting for others to participate in.

ÅS: The Complaints Choir is a work about sharing and collaboration – everybody has to make an effort. Not only the artists. Is there even a need to talk about artists? Who is the artist here?

PB: There is lots of talk about this kind of art being democratic art. I even think it is the most political movement in art today, at least in Scandinavia. In this context there have been questions of whether this is just a way to be political without taking responsibility of the consequences of what you want. You as artists can hide your political standpoints behind the participants. Are there any political topics, or agendas in what you do, or is this political debate relevant for your practice?

ÅS: Yes, it's funny how I studied foreign policy and international relations, but since then I've started to see the micro-perspective as the most important and most challenging. Small scale and private is political as well as trying to reveal your agenda and work non-hierarchically in practice. I guess it comes from feminism as well.

PB: I agree. The aspect of the micro-utopian and the micro-political is absolutely a vital point here. No one today really believes that art can make a big utopian transformation of society. Instead it is on an individual level you as artists can make a change; that is what Bourriaud call the micro-utopian. Small individual changes, like making it possible for two people to meet who otherwise never would. You can create situations where you possibly are "learning

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<sup>19</sup> <http://aok.el-ljud.se/oda/driving2.mp3>

<sup>20</sup> [www.ykon.org/kochta-kalleinen/complaintschoir.html](http://www.ykon.org/kochta-kalleinen/complaintschoir.html)

<sup>21</sup> Kester. Grant H. "Conversation Pieces". University of California Press. 2004. p 1

to inhabit the world in a better way”<sup>22</sup>. To make a small change in a person’s life, giving that person an extra life-experience so she can look at the world and herself from an altered perspective.

ÅS: Let’s not forget Janet Cardiff with her soundwalks. She’s writing in her new book on soundwalks<sup>24</sup> that she’s very open about the technique she’s using, since she wants to use this technique and storytelling to make people aware of the here and now. Much more aware of themselves in the space where they’re walking the soundwalks. And also in their own bodies.

PB: The Danish group Superflex and their internet TV-project “Superchannel”, is worth mentioning. Like your projects, in Superchannel they create a space for the participants to express themselves in the public room<sup>25</sup>. In some of their other projects the participants are totally anonymous and their role is not mentioned in the presentation of the projects when exhibited. From what I have seen of their projects they just present the product and the process is hidden. Their attitude towards the participants is in general a way of “help to self-help”. If we instead look at Oda Projesi, we find a different attitude towards the participants: here, the participants are much more collaborators. Both Superflex and Oda Projesi work at an individual level. But as Oda Projesi themselves point out, they do not work with “change” but with “exchange”. And for them it is important to continue the contact with the participants also when the particular project is over<sup>26</sup>. I think these two different attitudes relate back to what we mentioned before: the micro-changes of the society. This is a general description of the group’s relationship to their participants, although there is big variation from project to project. But in general I think your practice concerning the participants are somewhere in between Oda Projesi’s and Superflex’s. You make a framework around the project that is not very easy to break out of for the participants, but at the same time you are open for participants who twist and turn your framework around.

ÅS: Another reference is MFK, Malmö Fria Kvinnouniveristet<sup>27</sup>. MFK are two artists, Lisa Nyberg and Johanna Gustafsson, who started a university and the only way you can be accepted to this university is if you identify yourself as a woman. It’s a separatist, feminist art project, where the first questions they put to their students were: “What do you want to learn? And what can you teach others?” They do in practice what a lot of feminism suggests: they challenge the idea of learning, what to learn, how to learn it. They challenge the idea of competition that we are so used to from other learning environments. I can see the merits of publishing an article that has been assessed by peers, since this is a potential way to make thoughts live longer – although it’s buried in an archive. But, I prefer the tendency to allowing for other ways of sharing knowledge, such as in workshops. We’ve chosen to host workshops rather than giving speeches. The reason is that if there is an allowing environment we can all learn from each other, and the idea of hierarchy in knowledge becomes questioned.

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<sup>22</sup> Bourriaud. Nicolas. “Relational Aesthetics”. Les Presses du Reel. 1998 (English translation 2002). p13

<sup>24</sup> Cardiff. Janet. “The Walk Book”. Cornerhouse Publications; Har/Com edition. 2006

<sup>25</sup> [www.superflex.net/tools/superchannel/](http://www.superflex.net/tools/superchannel/) and [www.superchannel.org](http://www.superchannel.org)

<sup>26</sup> As example Oda Projesi gave out a book, which is a dialogue between 154 people they have worked with over the years (Oda Projesi. *Neighbourhood, room, neighbour, guest?* Revolver. 2005). It is a conversation, with people from a broad spectrum of the society.

<sup>27</sup> [www.mfkuniversitet.blogspot.com](http://www.mfkuniversitet.blogspot.com)

KL: MFK is a good example of an allowing environment. This also links to questions that Pirjo Elovaara raised during the seminar in Väjö in relation to feminism. If you want to make a change, should you go to the belly of the beast or should you create your own boot camp? We have always been somewhere in between creating new spaces for collaborative storytelling and working within already existing contexts such as Väjö Art Gallery or The Swedish Glass Museum.

PB: Claire Bishop has brought up similar questions in some articles<sup>28</sup>. She argues: If you want to make democratic art – art that changes something, this micro-utopian strategy is not the strongest. It doesn't shake up our minds. She claims that it is more effective to put the spotlights on the existing hierarchic structure, rather than to construct new independent networks. Bishop also point attention towards whether the artists reveal their own opinion, or just make a forum for the participants to express their opinion. By not revealing an opinion, the artists make it impossible for an outsider to criticise the value the work stand for – and no real dialogue starts. So instead of this democratic and ethical value in the writing about relational art she wants to emphasise the aesthetic value. That would mean to focus on what the work expresses, not on what intention it has.

ÅS: I somehow see her point, but I think we deal with the dilemma of artist's opinion by revealing our own position in what we're doing. Bishop's criticism reminds me of the attacks on the Sawatsky-method. Open-ended questions and processes require a listener and an audience to be more active and take responsibility in his/her own critical assessment of the experience.

PB: Yes, the benefit is that your way of working shows other truths, although it might not have a traditional critical perspective.

KL: So the next question. *What kind of knowledge do we produce?*

ÅS: We are building a body of work. We are not here to fill a gap in the body of knowledge. I don't believe in the concept of completely "new". I believe in a mix of experiences and ideas that can overlap. And as Bourriaud writes in *Postproduction*<sup>29</sup>: "In this form of culture, which one might call a culture of use or a culture of activity, the artwork functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives. Each exhibition encloses within it the script of another; each work may be inserted into different programs and used for multiple scenarios. The artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributors." We create situations that are limited by time and space and that have a history. In those situations we and other participants can experience something that becomes situated knowledge. The participants can, ideally, bring that experiences into other times and spaces.

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<sup>28</sup> Bishop, Claire. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. In "October" #110, MIT Press. 2004, and Bishop, Claire. *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*. In "Artforum". February 2006

<sup>29</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Postproduction*. Lukas and Sternberg. 2002. Pp. 19-20

KL: Brad Haseman defines practice-led research, in his text, as research that is done through your practice rather than on your practice. And, the result, or the way you communicate your research should be done in the language of your practice.<sup>31</sup> Since we do work with collaborative storytelling, this discussion and text is also part of our practice. We haven't started off in theory or with a clear research question. Instead it has been an iterative process of working in practice, asking ourselves questions and finding possible answers. But I don't think that we have found the truth or the only answer to these questions. That wouldn't be possible because the questions that we ask are not those kinds of questions that have one answer.

ÅS: I started this question by saying that we're building a body of work. Instead of asking for "the research question" it is more relevant to ask for "what is it that you keep coming back to in the work you have already done and in the work that you are planning to do?", "what do the situations that we create have in common?" and "what is it that you have found/been thinking of while doing it?" This is also how I understand Mika Hannula and his co-writers<sup>32</sup>: do, keep on doing what you are doing as the artist who is a critical, self-reflective participant in a joint knowledge production.

PB: I think that you can find some kind of research in all artistic practices, and I believe that "artistic research" comes out of that. I also believe that the knowledge in these projects belongs to the intersubjective meeting. It's about the individual and what happens with the individuals in the interaction.

KL: I agree. The knowledge we produced is produced during the collaborative process of telling stories. Within our projects we explore new ways of knowing places, materials and channels of communication. Some parts of this knowledge production are difficult to put down in words in a text.

ÅS: We're not able to make knowledge general in the way that parts of the research tradition claims. So much knowledge is in our bodies. It's in our flesh and it depends on the situation and on the people who participate and therefore it's performative in a way. We have consciously decided to communicate our knowledge in workshops rather than in seminars, since we firmly believe that you learn more about participation and collaborative storytelling from engaging in it than from talking about it. The more we've been working together our work has taken the form of performances and performances are here and now. The new performance studio Teater Lilith in Malmö describe performance like this<sup>33</sup> (my translation): "Performance is visual arts live, Petter Pettersson points out. The artist is her/himself on the stage to tell something". So, there's a contradiction there between the here and now and the availability - the aspect of research concerning that you can share the knowledge, make your thoughts available to others for a longer period of time.

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<sup>31</sup> Haseman, Brad. 2006. *A manifesto for Performative Research*. In Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy, theme issue "practice-led Research" (118):pp. 98-106.

<sup>32</sup> Hannula, Souranta, Vadén. "Artistic Research – theories, methods and practices". Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki and University of Gothenburg/ArtMonitor. 2005. Kiljunen and Hannula (eds). "Artistic Research". Academy of Fine Arts. 2002. Hannula, M. *Practice-based Artistic Research – an opportunity, a challenge and a dilemma* in Konstnärlig forskning FoU – Årsbok 2006. Vetenskapsrådet pp.

<sup>33</sup> [www.svd.se/dynamiskt/kultur/did\\_14663959.asp](http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/kultur/did_14663959.asp)

PB: I was listening to some of the [*ljudstråk*] stories at home, and some out on location. The two experiences are hardly comparable. Even though I know the locations where the storyteller walked, and in that way could follow it in my mind, it is just a recorded material, and a distant experience. But to follow the walk on location is a here and now feeling. The stories and emotion make it a significant body experience and a break with normal sensations. It is an experience that makes you more observant of the surroundings. It is maybe not something that directly could be called knowledge, but it is an important subjective empirical experience.

ÅS: Another thing that comes out of the situation is awareness. And again, thinking back on what Janet Cardiff said: we try to create situations where you become aware of your every day life and where you can also, as you were saying, Kristina, start asking yourself questions. Those are questions that we can never put, because we don't know what questions are relevant for you. We can only be the instigators of something.

KL: During the seminar series that we had this autumn in Växjö Pirjo Elovaara talked about our projects as, a way of practising participation. So, in our projects we practice telling about our own everyday life and listening to others. I think this is an important aspect of our practice.

ÅS: We're also practising how to migrate knowledge from one platform to another platform. It's become particularly obvious in *stitching together* where we're trying to highlight the relation between the digital material, the physical meeting, the participatory situation, the networked and the bodily presence and experience. To arrange a sewing circle demands similar skills as to design a digital platform for participation<sup>34</sup>. More and more we've been thinking of *stitching together* as part of Web 2.0 \* and our contemporary networked society where there is a constant urge for participation. And that is knowledge to me. It's just that it doesn't easily fit into the measuring- and assessing-system that we're used to squeezing knowledge into. "This is a potential revolution: to really twist and turn the academic world – take away their monopoly on knowledge production, their self-defined, self-perpetuating head start. Practice won't wait for theory, or for theoreticians to build up an argument. It is already happening. This is practice-led research and there is knowledge to gain"<sup>35</sup>.

PB: I think critical consciousness is something that often is lacking in the traditional academic world<sup>36</sup>. Instead it has to legitimate itself through, what Åsa mentioned, filling a gap in the body of knowledge. Gilles Deleuz and Félix Guattari point out that scientific knowledge for the most part is limited to the 'place and time' where it is produced. Art doesn't have to

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<sup>34</sup> Lindström, K. and Ståhl, Å. *Kraften i att sy ihop*. In "Tidskrift för genusvetenskap". 2007. (forthcoming)

\* Web 2.0, a phrase coined by O'Reilly Media in 2004, refers to a perceived second-generation of Web-based services—such as social networking sites, wikis, communication tools, and folksonomies—that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users. O'Reilly Media used the phrase as a title for a series of conferences, and it has since become widely adopted. From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2)

<sup>35</sup> Ståhl, Å. *We Look Forward to Your Comments*. In "The Artists' Work Classification" (ed.) Gerber. Alison Collective Foundation Pod Press. San Fransisco. 2007. pp.7-9

<sup>36</sup> See Paulo Freire's notice about dialogical process to stimulate critical consciousness in education. Finkelpearl, Tom. "Dialogues in Public Art". MIT Press, 2001. pp. 277-292

produce any answer, and if it does, it can be full of contradictions. Art can take a multi-perspective since it doesn't have to fit in to any knowledge pattern. And a significant thing for (good) process/participant-based art is that it opens up in contrast to manifest; it opens up for the participants to express themselves.

KL: That's the difference between being a participant and a spectator.

PB: Another aspect is how the participants in [*ljudstråk*] began to look at themselves as creative.

ÅS: Yes, some of the storytellers in [*ljudstråk*] said clearly to us, "Nobody is interested in our stories" whereas we said "Yes, we're interested in your stories". They also said: "I don't have any stories to tell". This has been reoccurring in all of our projects: "I don't have any story to tell". That's the bell. The alarm clock. We've been talking for 60 minutes. But people do have stories to tell together.

PB: They also started to think of earlier experiences as something significant and creative.

ÅS: Yes, in [*ljudstråk*] you can hear three people who use their everyday life surroundings to push the ordinary into something extraordinary. They once pretended that they were homeless and begged for money at the main square. Another day they kicked down one of their friends in front of a crowded cafeteria to see if anybody reacted and would interfere. Nobody came up to tell them to stop kicking the girl, but our storytellers heard afterwards that there were roomers about what weird people they were.

ÅS: Does anybody want to make any final remarks? I mean final... Anything? Ok? So, I press stop.

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Email conversation between Jay Koh and Åsa Ståhl/Erik Sandelin

Insightful conversations with you know who you are.