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What Kind of Art?

Notes on conventions in a new artistic field

This text is based on Lise Hovik's presentation at the seminar GREAT art for young children at Dansens Hus, Oslo, Norway 4 December 2018. She introduced dramaturgical perspectives and conventions of the field, and presented her analyses of the three performances Lulla, Sans og Samling and We are Symphony. For DRAMA, the text focuses on the general conventions in performances for early years.

Insider and outsider perspectives

Being a children's theatre researcher within *Theatre for Early Years*,¹ and artistic director for my company Teater Fot, making theatre for the youngest children since 2004 (Hovik, 2018), I am usually an insider, both as an artist and as researcher. This time I will attempt to take an outsider perspective. I wish, in this specific context, to present what I think has become a new field of art, and what now seems to be the conventions in this field. My descriptions will still somehow be coloured by my insider experiences, and must be examined in light of the ongoing development in Arts for Early Years.

Arts for Early Years

Children under the age of three were defined by the Norwegian *Klangfugl* project (DansDesign, 1998-2002) as a new audience. The young children's relation to different artforms was explored by professional artists in playful and experimental ways, and the *Klangfugl* project provided a springboard for the European *Glitterbird* project (DansDesign, 2003-2006). During the era of these

two projects, a new field of art was established (Hernes, Os, & Selmer-Olsen, 2010). Both projects were funded by Arts Council Norway, and was followed up some years later by *Kunstløftet* (Kulturrådet, 2008-15), a more general commitment to art for children and youth of every age group. This period was a golden age of art for the very young in Norway. A new and playful aesthetics was obviously crossing the borders of traditional genres. To understand and value the playfulness of these artworks, research was conducted, and the research field expanded in Norway (Blixrud, 2010; Böhnisch, 2010; Fredly, 2007; Hovik, 2014) and internationally (Fletcher-Watson, 2016; Osten, 2009; Schneider, 2009; Warteman, 2009; Water, 2012).

What kind of art, and what kind of audiences are we talking about? Would it be possible to define this new art in terms of inter/intra/cross/multi/trans/disciplinary aesthetics? Looking across the multitude of expressions, the hallmarks would be:

- Inspired by Children's Culture
- Play/playing/playful performances
- Experimental attitude
- Performance Art/Theatre/Dance crossover
- Postdramatic and relational theatre aesthetics
- Open, improvised dramaturgy
- Participatory/Interactive approaches
- Power relations and dilemmas of participation
- Artistic versus pedagogic challenges



GREAT ART FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:

- **Through the Dansens Hus project *GREAT Art for Young Children (STOR kunst for små barn)***, funded by Savings Bank Foundation DNB, three new performances were presented at Dansens Hus in 2017 and 2018.
- **The performances were *Sans and samling* by Becker/Fiksdal/Langgård, *We are Symphony* by Oslo Koreografiske and *Lulla* by dybwikdans.**
- **The performances were gathered at Showbox 2018 for a small festival.** At the festival seminar Professor Leif Hernes and Associate professor Ellen Os (both OsloMet) led the discussion where the artists shared experiences and thoughts about creating performances for children aged 0-3.
- **Associate professor Lise Hovik was invited to comment on the performances and the significance of art for the very young, both in Norway and internationally.**

Conventions

Even if this new interdisciplinary artform breaks up theatrical conventions, it will be possible to identify some new conventions in the field. They are sometimes referred to and disregarded as clichés, but I would suggest something else: clichés can instead be regarded as new conventions of arts for early years, and we *need* conventions to be able to interact with each other. Throughout the last twenty years, Arts for Early Years has been establishing some new conventions, which can be both useful and good. Let's instead talk about how the conventions are conducted through some dramaturgical perspectives of time, space, body, text/fiction, genres and play:

- Time – Organizing timespan, beginning, events and ending
- Space – Organizing space, size, focus, scenography, visuality, materiality
- Body – Organizing bodies, movements, touching, gazes, expressions, affections, attunements
- Text – Languages, narrative, story, theme, fiction, fantasy, significance, symbols, meanings – or not
- Theatre, music and dance – interdisciplinarity playing with genres, characters, roles, figures, mimicry, instruments, technology, singing, sound qualities, energies, rhythms, ambience, choreographies.
- Playing – Improvising artists, participation and interaction, invitation to play, integration of play, risky play, unpleasant, dark play, presence in play
- Presence – Being present, having presence and making presence
- Affect – Materialities and the emotional potential of art
- Pedagogy – Child and childhood perspectives, children's culture, children's rights

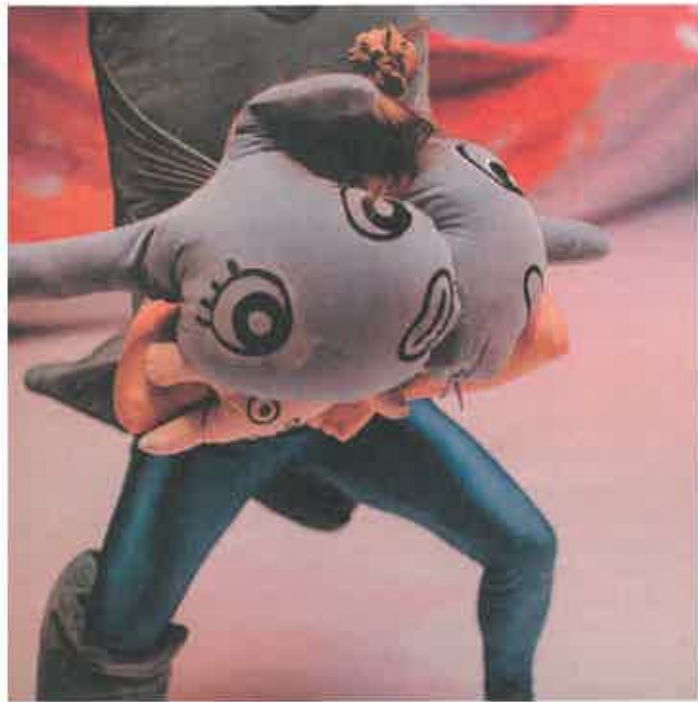
Pedagogy

To start with the last point: I think it is not a convention in this art field that the artists must have pedagogical considerations, maybe quite the opposite. There might be a common and general understanding that pedagogy

is boring, it strangles artistic freedom and establishes unwanted power relations between adult and child in the performance space. Still, there are always pedagogical considerations taken along the way, maybe without the artists knowing it. Sometimes it would have been helpful to point out and ask for knowledge in issues concerning children's perspectives, culture or rights. Very often the field of arts for early years overlaps with the field of pedagogics, as we will see in the following sections.

Time

In general, performances for babies will not exceed forty minutes. They will usually have a framework with an introduction for the adult audience, explaining how to behave, and guidelines for the event. The performance will also usually give the children an opportunity to stay for a while after the show, to play and to let them explore on their own interests.



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Space

The space can be limited inside a tent, to provide a safe place within a larger public space, but this is not a general convention. Large theatres or dance spaces are also used, and have another function of inviting the children to be more bodily active.

Body

A majority of performances for babies and toddlers are based in dance, and will have bodily communication as the main entrance to the artistic work. Nevertheless, multi-disciplinarity will expand this bodily communication into objects, materiality and musicality. Puppets and figures will interact with actors in an open and play-like mode. Audience interaction might also involve bodily participation.

Text

There will be, in general, no verbal text, except for the introduction. Because of the lack of verbal text, we can talk about an *expanded performance text* made out of other artistic languages like visuals, music, dance and theatre. *Postdramatic theatre* is also a common reference, and the structure will be episodic rather than dramatic, «more like a poem than a play» (Fletcher-Watson, 2016). If the performance invites the children to play, this would be the turning point of the performance. There might be a verbal instruction or invitation at this point, often towards the end of the play. The verbal parts about participation are seldomly directed towards the children.

Theatre

In performances for babies, there will not necessarily be character acting. Who are the actors? They often act without pretending to be someone else, and instead act with presence and attention. The babies often become actors in the play themselves, but they are obviously not aware of this. Dancers can be actors too, and play characters that might be difficult to identify as characters or roles, even if the dancers themselves will have the conception of taking on a role. Often dancers will disclaim this theatrical function.

Music

There will be no strict conventions of music, but maybe an idea about a gentle atmosphere. Often there will be a soundscape of synthetic ambient music in the background. The human voice will also be introduced, singing in a calm and comforting mode. Rhythm will often invite the audience to move and dance. Live music creates possibilities for making a good connection between artforms, because of the listening attentive quality of actors and audience being present together.

Play

There will be playful actors and dancers, and most often there will be an invitation to play, either from the very beginning, or during the play, or afterwards. The playing invitation will always be ambiguous, because of letting the control pass over to the audience and the children's unpredictable behaviour.

Presence

Presence is everything. Presence in play means to work in the present moment of interaction between actor and fantasy, body and space. Improvising, being flexible and adjust to the needs of an untrained audience. Presence can also be a question of make believe, or being bodily close up and together. Presence in play can be focusing on the following aspects (Power, 2008):

- Making presence – playing the game of *as if*
- Having presence – playing with the actor/dancer/musician skills
- Being present – playing in the performance space together with the children

Presence in play comes with training and with experience. These are the professional competences of performing in Theatre for Early Years.

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Affect

Art is always working with affects, and artists are *inventors, creators and presenters* of affect (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Affect connects more than anything to young children both through the materiality of artistic expression and emotionally. With lights, colours, tangible materials and objects, the children will be able to feel, see and listen with their whole sensuous apparatus. Emotional expressions in play will also be able to affect the body and senses of the child. Affective attunement (Stern, 1985) will be a possible way of communication for both actors and children.

Presence is everything.

WHAT KIND OF ART? Hovik at the seminar at Dansens Hus.

FOTO: Janne Brit Rustad

Interactivity

To define this new art in terms of participation, interactivity or interdisciplinary aesthetics would be easy (Nagel & Hovik, 2016). The cross- multi- or transdisciplinarity of this field of art is obvious. The arts merge in the perception and experiences of young children of early years. Still, we might look to new theories within early childhood research and learn that the term rather should be *intra-activity*, pointing to the agency of non-human actors, like the space itself, light, air, surfaces, furniture,



textures, and so on (Barad, 2003; Taguchi, 2012). Acknowledging the intra-activity and agency of both human and non-human actors, calls for new ways of entering dramaturgical analyses. New theories will help discover

material and affective qualities that will expand the conventions mentioned above. I believe that merging artforms and theories of intra-action and interplay in Theatre for Early Years will give way to new dramaturgies in the field.

NOTE

1. This is the most common British term.

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