Who Told Me – and Why? Two or Three Things I Have Reason to Believe about Magnus Bärtås

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The following observations, three in number, are first and foremost the result of my engagement with *You told me. Work stories and video essays* (2010), Magnus Bärtås' practice-based doctoral dissertation in the field of fine art. In addition, they have benefited from my taking part, among the audience as well as on stage, in as many research seminars organized by the Faculty of fine, applied and performing arts at the University of Gothenburg.

The first one, *Art text*, took place in the fall of 2009 and resulted, among other things, in my first encounter with Bärtås' notion of "work story" which I subsequently came to employ in my own dissertation. Two years later, The living archive further heightened my sensitivity to the common ground between research in the fine and the 'not-so-fine' arts – that is, the humanities. *Writing with practice*, third and last, gave me the opportunity to really grapple with the implications of Bärtås' proposal.

Which, incidentally, brings us up to the present day and the present text. So, without further ado, here are my own, altogether personal conclusions regarding Bärtås' research, art and criticism.

1. Magnus Bärtås' research isn't really artistic (whereas some research is)

Now, a statement such as this clearly requires some qualification. At first sight, it may well seem like a conscious contradiction, perhaps even a provocation. In fact, it is nothing of the kind. Let me explain why.

Although artistic research is, by any standards, still a fairly young academic field, the debate on what it could, should or would entail has already started to feel rather old. So instead of rehearsing some well-worn argument about research into, through and for, in one mode or the other, I will take the liberty of starting out with a brief and deliberately naïve observation.

Here goes. As far as I have been able to tell, the working definition of most artistic research carried out today – at least in Sweden, and at least for the time being – is first and foremost concerned with the artistic process as such. That is, with what artists do when they do what they do and, even more importantly, with how they do it.

In an altogether stipulative fashion, I will call this the *formal* conception of artistic research, since it directs our attention either to the form (the 'what') or to the formation (the 'how') of the work of art. Indeed, granted that my claim on its behalf is reasonable to begin with, we could even go so far as to call it *the* conception, period, of artistic research.

With the work story as its methodological centrepiece, Bärtås' dissertation may well seem to fit squarely with this definition. Even though he does not subscribe to it explicitly, at several points throughout his argument (e.g. 15, 69) he seems to take it more or less for granted. This comes out especially clearly in Bärtås' threefold distinction between the various levels of storytelling at work in You told me.

First of all, there is the *narrative* as such, the particular stories recounted in the five video works which make up the core of the thesis. Second, there is the process of narration – that is, what Bärtås does when he does what he does. And third, there is the metanarrative of the work stories, the actual account of how he does it (46–7).

Now, out of these three levels, only the last two are said to be "naturally at work" in artistic research (47). *You told me*, on this – that is, its own – account, is all about the 'what' and the 'how', the process of narration as accounted for in the work stories. The formal conception in a nutshell. Case closed?

Well, not really. To begin with, what it means for any of the three levels of storytelling to be 'naturally at work' anywhere is far from evident, at least to my mind. Does it imply that the first level, that of the narrative itself, is not 'at work' at all? Or rather that it is, but only in some 'unnatural' manner? The first of these propositions strikes me as quite absurd, the second as all the more intriguing.

Furthermore, Bärtås makes another claim that remains to be accounted for. In the light of the preceding argument, how are we to understand the inseparability of method and subject-matter, of storytelling and the story told, announced in the very first sentence of the dissertation (9)? In other words, what does it mean for the work story to be simultaneously "behind and within" the work (11), "a sequence of doings" and at the same time "a meta-activity" (12)?

A paradox if ever there was one. On the one hand, the work story is made to play a decisive role in the context of research – but, on the other, it is also described as an "integral part" of the work as such (12). With this gesture, Bärtås effectively short-circuits the hierarchy of levels that he is about to install, confounding the methods of art and science in the process.

A paradox indeed, but not without a performative twist of its own. What this apparent contradiction achieves is, in fact, something altogether remarkable. If the metanarrative is really an 'integral part' of the narrative itself, then conversely, the latter must also be 'at work' – if only 'unnaturally' – in Bärtås' dissertation.

Which, in turn, means that his research isn't really artistic in the sense stipulated above. It is concerned, that is, with something else over and above the artist's own process, something besides the 'what' and the 'how'. For the sake of argument, let us call it the 'why'.

From my perspective, whether or not this is a premeditated move on Bärtås' behalf is entirely beside the point. It is, quite simply, a necessity. With this subtle act of infiltration, the artist seems to acknowledge that the real interest of his work rests with *the stories themselves*, work stories included. The real interest rests with the 'why'. And, come to think of it, could it have been otherwise?

2. Magnus Bärtås' art isn't really conceptual (and no art really is)

This statement also requires some qualification, even though the debate on conceptual art surely feels even older to most readers than the one on artistic research. Luckily, this time around, I will be even *more* naïve, hence even more brief.

Bärtås situates himself in the tradition of conceptual art. The notion of the concept, however, clearly plays a quite different role in his work, and perhaps in conceptual art generally, compared to your run-of-the-mill definition. Here, concept is not opposed to narrative, as it frequently is in philosophical theory. Rather, it is conceived precisely as a narrative, as a 'grasping together' in the form of a story. In other words – those of Hayden White, rumour has it – as an emplotment.

Which, in turn, brings us back to the 'why' of the stories themselves, to that "narrative urge and desire" (15) which Bärtås cannot help but embrace, as well as to the whole plethora of events, places, characters and situations that it inescapably involves. Is it perhaps this desire that, time and again throughout his argument, keeps turning the work story into an 'extended' work story?

At this point, let us, for a just moment, pause to consider the entire breadth of Bärtås' work. Irrespective of medium and including the collaborations with Fredrik Ekman, we find his choice of motif ranging over such wildly different things as twins and clones, the camp and the cute, brainwashing and psychedelic drugs, age-old sects and New Age cults, closed societies and secret intelligence services, animal experimentation and diagnostic controversies in child psychiatry…

And, as an underlying yet all-pervasive theme, the constitution of personal as well as collective identities – or, even more exactly, the paramount importance of apparent banalities in such processes. With this bewildering scope of the narrative in mind, it is no great wonder if the metanarrative – that is, the work story – would become ever more extended.

Hence, however 'slight' they may seem, each one of Bärtås' works is already something else – or, at the very least, something more – than a mere 'concept', 'score' or 'protocol'. In contrast, conceptual art arguably retained a lot of the minimalism from which it originated. It was propelled, not by a positive urge to tell stories, but rather by a negative urge to escape the oppressive confines of the commercial art world. In this, it largely relied on the aesthetic effect produced by the very tangible absence of the 'work' expected by the audience, frequently but erroneously described as its 'dematerialization'.

Bärtås' works, on the other hand, are all about presence. Not, of course, that absolute, omnivorous presence derided in so much of current 'theory', but rather the deeply problematic presence that we all experience in our own day-to-day existence. If only for this reason, and in spite of his pronounced 'conceptual' interests, I see Bärtås less as a conceptual artist and more – indeed, much more – as a storyteller.

But what kind of storyteller? In trying to answer this last question, let me begin by returning once again to *You told me* and its notion of work story. Judging from the author's own argument, the crucial fact about the latter seems to be that it is always told "in retrospect", that it entails "a reconstruction after the fact, a 'post-construction' as I like to call it" (13).

In other writings, he goes even further. The introduction to *Innanför cirkeln* [*Inside the circle*] states: "Vårt arbete kom att utveckla sig spontant, nästan slumpmässigt. Först långt in i processen började vi se ett tydligt mönster (*efterkonstruktioner är den sanna källan till utveckling och självkännedom*). [Our work developed spontaneously, almost at random. It was only far into the process that we started to see a distinct pattern

(*'post-constructions' are the true source of development and self-knowledge*).]" (18, my italics)

Leaving the slight hint of cynicism evident in the Swedish wording aside for the moment, I will cleave to my initial perspective by posing a deliberately naïve question. What kind of storyteller is known to always tell his stories 'in retrospect', even as 'a reconstruction after the fact'? Indeed, Magnus Bärtås isn't just any kind of storyteller. He is an historian – or, to be even more precise, *a contemporary audiovisual microhistorian*. An ugly duckling if I ever saw one.

But let us save that story for another time. Instead, I will pose one more of my deliberately naïve questions – only this time around, what concerns me is not the conspicuous presence of an historical dimension to Bärtås' artistic practice, but its equally conspicuous absence from his theoretical argument. Which, incidentally, brings me to my third observation.

3. Magnus Bärtås' criticism isn't really critical (and no real criticism really is)

Rather predictably, this statement too requires some qualification – and there is no better way to go about it than by spelling out the question just alluded to. So, with Bärtås' historical bent in mind, how come he never actually refers to history as a field of inquiry, let alone as an academic discipline, relevant to his own?

Well, in a way he does. In particular, at several points in the introduction to his dissertation (e.g. 12, 37, 52, 91), Bärtås refers to both of Paul Ricœur's major contributions to the philosophy of history, *Time and narrative* and *Memory, history, forgetting*. Symptomatically, though, he treats them less as such and more as accounts of general narratology. The plot thickens.

My personal hypothesis reads as follows: Bärtås never refers to history explicitly because it already fulfils an implicit function in his argument. More exactly, it is made to assume the tacit role of the 'other' with regard to narrative practices in the field of contemporary art: the official story, the hegemonic account that the artist passionately seeks to contest, to 'deconstruct' and reassemble in new and hopefully 'different' ways.

But at the same time, and for practically the same reason, history is an inevitable accomplice – a partner in crime, even. The most striking way to make this point is perhaps by returning to Bärtås' paradoxical claim that the work story should be conceived as an 'integral part' of the work itself.

As it turns out, an important corollary to this claim is that a whole range of self-reflective gestures already employed in contemporary art practice can be qualified as artistic research *ante litteram*. With that, I have no qualms whatsoever. Only, this continuity between artistic and scientific practice necessarily works both ways. If some kinds of art, that is to say, may already be qualified as research, then some kinds of research, by implication, may already be qualified as art.

Which, in its turn, and employing the same kind of "productive anachronism", implies that artistic research takes part in an "already established history" not only by relating to 'research' practices conducted outside of the "institutional framework" of science (68), but equally in confronting 'artistic' practices conducted within that very framework.

History, for instance, could well be considered such a practice by virtue of its inescapable narrative predicament – and the fact that precious few of our professional historians would agree is of little consequence.

More important is the realization that, today, crucial factors are aligned for a productive confrontation between history and contemporary art: a common rejection of the social imaginary of the nation, a common embrace of the notion of public space, a common task of maintaining "a place in between collective and personal memory" (15). Wishful thinking? Well then, all the better.

Most importantly, on no condition should this relation between history and contemporary art be construed as a question of objective versus subjective, general versus particular, public versus private. In fact, both the one and the other are most at home in the grey area between such dichotomies – and both can hope to produce something of true value only by working in *grisaille* rather than black-and-white.

Instead, it is simply a question of how the artist's 'narration-in-life', a notion that Bärtås (55) adopts from Mika Hannula, can further and be furthered by the historian's 'narration-of-lives'. It is the question cited by Bärtås (54) but originally posed by Alasdair MacIntyre: "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" This is the exact point at which the artist's defiant micronarratives invariably verge on the history of our common world.

And, to finally explain myself, it is for this exact reason that Magnus Bärtås' criticism isn't really critical. For all the potential cynicism of 'post-construction' (see above) – or, for that matter, the unlimited malleability of the work story (13) as exemplified by the highly career-conducive myth-making of Gordon Matta-Clark (59–61), the "propagandistic and idealizing features" of the narrative (52), the "mediated and manipulated situation" of the traditional documentary (88), and so on and so forth…

Indeed, for all the potential cynicism of 'post-construction', there is something more at stake in Bärtås' preoccupation with banalities than just

an impulse to criticize the prevailing order. His redemption of the overlooked detail is motivated, not by the sheer fact that the detail has been overlooked by the powers that be, but rather by the conviction that it is somehow important in its own right.

This, to make a long story short, is the 'why' that, at least for me, comes out so very strongly in Bärtås' work. Against the prevailing formalism, it seems to entail a *substantial* conception of artistic research – a conception where the matter itself, and even the substance of the matter, takes pride of place.

Hence, the first of my three statements could just as well be inverted: Bärtås' research is really artistic – indeed, it may be the only kind to really merit the description – because it takes its inquiry out of the studio and into the world.

Which is also why I am still not sure whether it is actually two or three things that I have reason to believe about Magnus Bärtås.

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So here, just in case, is just one more thought, concerning the same substantial side of Bärtås' work. Is this, perhaps, why the five films of his thesis seem to become more to-the-point, more factual – or even, indeed, more historical – over time?

To begin with, the *Who is… ?* series strikes me as very much 'constructed' and, at the same time, very much about 'construction'. *Kumiko, Johnnie Walker & the Cute*, in its turn, achieves more or less the same effect through its juxtaposition of largely unrelated stories. But the last few minutes of the film, where Kumiko gets to speak of herself in her own voice – do they not constitute something like a 'truth', both of Chris Marker's original work, and of Bärtås' own 'post-construction'?

Finally, *Madame & Little Boy* could seem to approach a rather coherent narrative, situating the off-kilter details of his intertwined stories in a wider historical perspective. But, inevitably, this very perspective also invites a whole range of new and partly different questions. Why these events, places, characters and situations? Why this particular juxtaposition of stories? And why the Cold War as a master narrative – all the more important for being implied – rather than, for instance, the consequences of the fall and rise of China for the regional dynamics of power? The US might have been the major player in post-war commercial cinema, but it is unlikely to decide the fate of present-day Korea.

Questions remaining to be answered. Which, of course, is just what research is all about.

Performing History – Re-Enactment as a Curatorial Practise

Niclas Östlind

What is left when an exhibition is finished? The works are sent back to its owners and reinstalled where they used to be or, which often is the case with institutions, put in storage. If a catalogue was printed it can function as a documentation of the content and the ideas behind the exhibition. Correspondence, floor plans, lists of lenders and other documents are filed in archives and reveal the administrative tasks an exhibition production involves. In clippings one can read the critique and learn about how it was received. Installation shots are often kept here and they give a picture of how it all looked like and which of the works were placed together. But an exhibition is something else and more than these scattered and fragmented parts. What the documents tell, more than anything else, is how ephemeral exhibitions are. The question of what remains, is crucial to the study *Three Exhibitions. Three Decades.* The study is based on a curatorial praxis and is part of a PhD-thesis produced within the artistic research program at the University of Gothenburg.

The objectives of the investigation are two fold. First, it aims at writing a history of photography in Sweden from 1970 to the 90s through a close reading of three exhibitions. Secondly, it is a study of exhibition making within the field during the same period of time. Since what could be found in the archives was very limited I have addressed the problem in a more practical way through recreating the exhibitions. They all took place in what is called recent history and therefore it was possible to collaborate with the persons who curated them. The selection of *Verkligen?!* (Really?!) 1978, *Bländande bilder* (Dazzling Pictures), 1981 and *Lika med* (Equals) 1991 was guided by the fact that they were shown at times when different ideas about photography were in conflict with each other. People competed for legitimacy and the right to decide what should be considered good photography, as well as about positions and possibilities. The three exhibitions were effected by these tensions and played a part in the power game.

When I first approached the people involved and asked if they were interested in participating they agreed without hesitation. But they also