Script for a Performative Lecture: Exploring Alternative Applications of Autotheory
Performative Lecture during the third biennial PARSE Research Conference *Human,* November 2019, Gothenburg University.
Biography

The autotheory group was formed in 2019 through an open call, inviting participation in a workshop series about Exploring Alternative Methods of Autotheory at HDK-Valand—Academy of Art and Design, University of Gothenburg. The group would come to consist of nine individuals: Gloria López Cleries, James Duffy, Kolbrún Inga Söring, Linea Kornum Rask, Lucy Wilson, Maja Daniels, Nika Helia Persson, Riikka Gröndahl and Tove Posselt.
Introduction

In 2019 the Autotheory group participated in the third biennial PARSE Research Conference *Human* (13-15 November 2019) giving a performative lecture titled *Exploring Alternative Applications of Autotheory*. The performative lecture looked to expose the vulnerabilities and frictions of workshopping within an institutional setting, as well as those that emerge when attempting to deconstruct hierarchies and individual authorships while developing ideas on a collective of voices.

The performative lecture consisted of a number of lines, stemming from our collective work and sometimes conflicting thoughts on autotheory. The script was assembled and edited through a collective process, which hid original authorship in order to detach individuals from hierarchies of performed knowledge. It was written to be read by an undefined group of people, with the only instruction that each new line (“Voice”) was to be recited by the person to the left of the previous speaker, and that “Voices” was to be read in unison. According to the number of participants as well as who began, the lines each person in the group would speak would differ with every reading, thus enabling a conversation blurring and mingling the authors.

Along with the performative lecture, an open-ended publishing was produced, consisting of the script presented below, as well as individual autotheoretical texts and visual work created during the workshops. The open-ended publishing functioned as an extension to the performative lecture, exploring passive participatory engagement via its open-ended format.
Workshop with the autotheory group at HDK-Valand in October 2019 (top) and open-ended publishing as presented during PARSE Human (bottom).
**Script**

Annelies Vaneycken introduces the group.

**Voices:** The performative presentation starts. A table is situated in the space, and the group and the audience sit down around the table.

**Voice:** Should we begin with an introduction circle? We could include names and pronouns and maybe why you are interested in autotheory.

**Voice:** I don't know that much about autotheory, but I think I might be using it.

**Voice:** I googled autotheory before coming here, did a little research on it.

**Voice:** Yeah, me too.

**Voice:** Does anybody really know what it is? It seems to be very fluid, without a really fixed definition.

**Voice:** But wait! How are we calling ourselves? Are we telling people about who we are?

**Voice:** I think that is a bit confusing. Do we mean calling our group or ourselves as individuals?

**Voice:** How can we present multiple voices concerning autotheory? Should we leave out our names from the presentation and speak as a collective of voices?

**Voices:** ... and speak a collective of voices.

**Voice:** But how can a collective of voices possibly work?
Voice: It's going to be chaos, no one will understand us!

Voice: The question was: how can we present multiple voices concerning autotheory?

Voice: Within the format of academic seminars and conferences, the author and their authorship is always present.

Voice: We shouldn’t be afraid of being generous with our process.

Voice: Being transparent means including the vulnerability of feeling that we should meet some kind of institutional conference standards.

Voice: Because probably they don’t meet our standards.

Voice: What do you mean by they? Are we othering the audience? Or are they also us?

Voice: I agree... but let's focus on the topic!

Voice: It could be interesting to reveal our experiences through a performative action, allowing everyone else to participate, to think with us and follow the process we have been involved in.

[pause 5 sec.]


Voice: I think it would be interesting to introduce the material we prepared for the first session workshop. And also introduce our approach as a research group on the concept
“autotheory”. I’m sure the people here in the audience—who are now also participants—want to know what all this is about.

**Voice:** On the first page you can find a good description. The artist and writer Lauren Fournier uses the words “emergent term” to describe what autotheory is. I think that can be an interesting starting point for our discussion.

**Voice:** Yes! Basically, the purpose of this workshop, as you know, has been (and is) to create our own definition of autotheory.

**Voice:** If it is an emergent term, how do we know how to use it? Can anyone use it? Or is it conditioned by the authors who have already used the term?

**Voices:** The exercise: the group is divided into smaller groups of three people, where each group has one text to discuss. Each group will identify the resources of autotheory in their allocated text and then they will share their findings with the rest of the participants.

*[pause 2 sec.]*

The questions to look at:

— What do we pick up from the texts that could be considered autotheory?

— What conclusions can be made on a definition of autotheory? And, what is the use of this method?

*[pause 2 sec.]*
After one hour and thirty minutes the groups give a summary of how they have understood autotheory in relation to the text.

**Voice:** Our group read Haraway's *Situated Knowledges*. We discussed what is theory within autotheory. If theory is a proposition, or a collection of propositions to illustrate the principles of a subject, then every theory is subjective.

**Voice:** We deconstructed the word auto-theory. Does auto mean automatic? Or auto as in *self*?

**Voice:** We also discussed the relevance of theory. How can one go against something if we can't name things? We need the power of naming. The power of language allows us to create counterpositions.

**Voice:** Yes. And we would like to propose a new term, which is *situated autotheories*: an exercise of empowerment, renaming and re-claiming what has been imposed by “abstract masculinity”.

**Voice:** Does the *we* then become a collective political position? How does it differ from the neoliberal and narcissistic *I*?

[pause 5 sec.]

**Voice:** Our group read and discussed *Naked Lunch*, by William Burroughs. I don’t know if Burroughs’s text was autotheory or if it was fiction. Maybe we are projecting autotheory upon the text. Situated knowledges seem to be applied regardless of whether it is fiction, and it seems that the author wants us to think that everything here are his own thoughts, with an occasional reference.
Voice: It was confusing at first, and I think that the text was a good addition to the reading material, even though I personally don't think that it is autotheory. We did look for examples—but perhaps the theory was too obscure and not as clean-cut as in the examples from Preciado's and Nelson's texts.

Voice: Perhaps the Burroughs text was more focused on depicting a worldview rather than allowing for a subject to interact with theory—as in a worldview outside or partly outside the subject. Here, everything is already a given. In the Burroughs text, the theory that is presented is woven together with an altered state, a psychedelic, intense, alternative world. We are allowed to enter into a space with a theory and answers of its own.

Voice: The text requires intense reading, there is no pause, no breather, no break. It crashes across the pages, it will not stop to reflect or explain. The writing style seems intent on fitting the content and it does. I am finding it hard to breathe as we read the text out loud. I feel as though I am being pulled into a world through my reading...

Voice: I loved it when you said: “Dr Benway must have been a fan of his own knowledge.” I think tote bags should be made with the sentence “A fan of my own knowledge”.

[pause 5 sec.]

Voice: Our group read parts of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*. We analysed the text to try and find signs or markers of what makes it autotheory.

Voice: We discussed what implications and effects the
markers of autotheoretical methods have on the writing and reading of the text. And what power structures are challenged in its form. Here are some examples of our discussion:

Voices: All participants open their folders and take out Maggie Nelson’s text.

[pick up and hold the mask in front of your face]

Voice: We identified block quotes from theoretical works woven into the rest of the text, with only an author reference in the margins, without explaining why it was there...

Voice: In relation to quotes... Maggie uses decontextualised quotations from different perspectives, from perspectives other than the author’s within a narration of lived experience. For example, on page 83 in *The Argonauts*, something Nelson finds in a pregnancy magazine in the ob/gyn’s office clashes harshly with the reality of Nelson’s theoretical and personal experience.

Voice: In this example, an external voice is revealed: a voice that feels clearly heteropatriarchal and cis-sexist in relation to the rest of the writing.

Voice: In the quote, a question is posed by someone expecting to go into labour, who put their partner’s sexuality as a major concern in relation to being in labour—of the husband not being able to find the wife sexy ever again after seeing a baby’s head in her vagina, the quote reveals constructions of gender, sexuality and other power structures.
Voice: There’s a certain type of critically relating to hegemonic theory and holding it up as non-universal, as not being objective (as it might say it is). For example, on page 79 in *The Argonauts*, Maggie references Žižek, Baudrillard, Badiou, etc... and then goes on to sarcastically say “These are voices that pass for radicality in our times. Let us leave them to their love, their event proper”—ridiculing them by using their own language.

Voice: We also found splicing—supposedly “objective” theory within narration of lived experience, laid out in all its emotion and grittiness.

Voice: We can also identify the repeated use of poetic devices within the text, for example on pages 83-85 referencing a “falling forever” in italics, used both on its own and then again within passages “How does one submit to falling forever, going to pieces?”

[pause 5 sec.]

Voices: After reading and discussing the different texts, the group moves into discussing how autotheory can be applied in artistic practices.

Voice: OK, so, let’s look at alternative applications
of autotheory. Possible examples could be Dimitris Papaioannou’s *Primal matter* or Cassils’ work *Cuts*—*A traditional sculpture*, for example. But it’s more like an assumption I put on these works.

**Voice:** Can autotheory be assumed in an art work? I mean, can it stand on its own without being verbal or textual?

**Voice:** I liked that Annika Wilke example, *Through the large glass*, but I also think that if you hadn’t told us the background story, and who made the work Wilke was using, then we would be missing so much.

**Voice:** Even with text-based autotheory, we still have to know a bit about the writer and the context for it to be considered autotheory. Like with Preciado, the fact that we know he is trans makes a difference; it confirms it as a body essay. He extends the personal into the theory. But, if we didn’t know about Foucault then what would happen to the text?

**Voice:** Can the auto in autotheory come from the spectator, the reader, the viewer, the listener? Can we assume our own autotheory method upon works, or is the intention of using situated knowledges to elaborate and expand upon theory what makes it autotheory?

**Voice:** If we can assume that, then doesn’t everything become autotheory? The subjectivity of our gaze and understanding can hardly be separated from how we see things.

**Voice:** Maybe we should think about it in a different way: not that visual work becomes autotheoretical, but rather how we can visualise autotheory.
Voice: I thought about the difficulty of translation. That is, from written words into visual art—and from visual art into this performance...

Voice: If you don't have visual literacy or knowledge of art theory... is visual art an efficient way of communicating theory?

Voice: The act of translating, making and/or building one's own understanding of the world, as a visual representation, can create difficulties in communicating with a subjective and “unique” visual language, because everyone has different relationships to visual material.

Voice: Especially if we are comparing it to the concrete appearance of text.

Voice: I think Shelley Barry is a good example of an artist possibly visualising autotheory. That is, how she explores the aesthetics of cinematography from the perspective of a wheelchair user.

[Pause 5 sec.]

Voices: Can we find five points to define autotheory?

Voice: One: embodied experience.

Voice: Two: situating of the self—explicit positioning of the self.

Voice: Three: critical engagement with the content; can you write/make autotheory if you cannot or are not willing to contextualise yourself socio-politically?

Voice: Four: counterposition against abstract masculinity, the
canonic, legitimate knowledge.

**Voice:** Five: it must be an invitation, show the connections between and the theories used, reveal the process, the doubts and the chaos. An invitation to continue to think with... Being inclusive with both the lived experience and the process of critical thinking. Processing, digesting theory, knowledge and ideas.

**Voice:** So how can we expand it, or make it so that is clear without the textual element?

**Voice:** The process can be autotheoretical, rather than the outcome. Or does that make the outcome also autotheoretical?

*[pause 5 sec.]*

**Voices:** Workshop two. The discussion about the non-publication.

**Voice:** We can play with multiple authorships in the open-ended publishing we are actually supposed to be presenting here at PARSE.

**Voice:** I don’t like this idea of "multiple authorships". I prefer “multiple voices” instead.

**Voice:** If we are going to talk about definitions, why open-ended publishing?

I think I wasn’t there when you came up with that.

**Voice:** We were having a lot of conversations around how a publication becomes this fixed and final version of itself. Of something. And we didn’t want to have a deadline, because
we don’t want it to die after PARSE, this is just the beginning.

**Voice:** It’s more like a lifeline.

**Voice:** Yeah, lifeline, I like that!

**Voice:** An open-ended publishing lets us be in a process and be generous and open and vulnerable against this expectation that we put on ourselves.

**Voice:** Kind of like Maggie Nelson’s birth example, that the partner’s desire, the cis-male heterosexual partner’s desire drives this fear of being or not being sexy.

**Voice:** It is so present in everything. And now we are sitting here, giving birth with this knot in our stomachs, because we want to be thinking together, but we are so afraid of showing this not knowing.

**Voice:** Using this example of Maggie is interesting, because we are fighting this fear of revealing our perineal tear scar according to some fixed unspoken rules of academia.

**Voice:** What is a perineal tear?

**Voice:** When a person gives birth, sometimes the vagina can rip all the way to the asshole. We kind of want the scars to be visible in this project. Maybe it’s a silly comparison. But essentially we are up against similar structures as those Maggie Nelson is describing.

**Voice:** Maybe by allowing people to experience the process we allow them to watch the birth happen, while expecting all the different ways it could be.

**Voice:** Are we performing knowledge somehow?
Voice: I don’t think we are necessarily performing knowledge, it feels more like we are performing the learning process.

Voice: So, could we say that, in a way, we are embodying institutional critique right now?

Voice: Yeah, channelling the self, ourselves, through theory by setting up a system to navigate the problematics we encounter in this process.

Voice: How to even subvert the game of performative knowledge?

Voice: I guess it is always going to be complicated, because there are so many power structures coming from every direction that play into this.

Voice: We spoke a lot about footnotes actually, and the way they could be performing knowledge. In the sense that they seem to reveal that you have read all of it, and have this knowledge, as the author I guess.

Voice: On the other hand, they can also be a tool for generosity, of giving people access to what inspired and influenced our work.

Voice: Maybe it is standardised quotation that performs the knowledge. Like Harvard, Oxford, Chicago and whatever other ones.

Voices: Are we performing academic writing as an artistic practice?

Voice: But, what about the margins?

Voice: We decided to use the space in the margins because
there are many ways of siting the / within the format. How can we make room for as much autotheory as possible in terms of the form without removing the amount of autotheory in our own individual form?

**Voice:** This is us trying to do something with the form. Claiming the margins.

**Voice:** We are trying to challenge the thoughts of what kind of level of design norms are expected with publishing.

**Voice:** But wait! We are claiming the margins not only for ourselves, but also so that whoever holds the documents can freely use that space. In contrast to the often full pages of academic writing, where there’s no space to breathe or question the institutionalised format.

[pause 5 sec.]

**Voices:** Workshop three. How can we use autotheory in our artistic practices?

**Voice:** I haven’t had time to work on this! I am super anxious... I need to put something in this open-ended publishing but I am feeling so much pressure.

**Voice:** You said that you wrote your text and, the next day, you read it again and you saw it differently. You used the word vomit, and you thought that you should edit yourself. How much of that is being self-conscious, instead of self-reflexive or self-critical?

**Voice:** Yeah! I was really shocked, how fast these powerful feelings changed in me! There was definitely something primal going on. From writing this rant, this stream of
consciousness, right after coming out from our first meeting I felt so empowered by the Maggie Nelson text. The raw and unapologetic way of expressing her experiences...

**Voice:** After reading my text again, I was overwhelmed by this wave of shame, of feeling *too much*, being *too angry*... That’s why I didn’t dare share it until the end! I really had to force myself. I feel so blessed by your encouragement and enthusiasm, otherwise I would probably have contributed with some little neat text about, er, art history instead.

**Voice:** I am returning to something I did years ago, that seems autotheoretical through the autotheoretical lens that I’m looking through now...

**Voice:** Now I’m thinking about Michel Leiris...

**Voice:** Who is Michel Leiris?

*pause 5 sec.*

**Voices:** A summary of notes:

— Critiquing power and power structures of theory and performative knowledge

— The pressure of authority and vulnerability

— The method of handwritten notes

— Intuition in the process of writing

— The control of the text: the text and the performance

**Voice:** Is this our voice?—not really with the same definition as the previous times we spoke like this, in unison?
Voice: Didn’t we agree, with the participants, that we would speak at the same time for description only? To help structure this performative presentation?

Voice: I don’t know. And it’s OK to not know everything.

Voice: The reason that we are now performing the process is part of this exploration of autotheory. If that unspoken game ensures the rules, the dynamics, maybe we can perform the unknowing as a whole, as a power play.

Voice: Yes, in a similar way as we are claiming the margins, and how every decision that we have taken in relation to our open-ended publishing has been driven by conversations around this unknowing, this power play, the footnotes, the comments.

Voices: Subverting and queering the power structures of the chess game.

Voice: The utilisation of information as a power play. People don’t always know they are doing this and I would suggest it is prevalent in men of older generations where ownership of knowledge would be a method of control, or of leadership, of masculinity.

Voice: But do you think it is possible to reveal and to subvert this when we see it first-hand? Can we expose oppressive structures?

Voice: What do you mean by oppressive structures?

Voice: I’m getting real emotional here—is that OK? If I start crying—is that OK?

[pause 5 sec.]
**Voice:** When working with autotheory we find ourselves immersed in experience and these experiences produce emotions, often for reasons that we cannot comprehend. Autotheory is an attempt to comprehend.

**Voice:** I see it more as autotheory being a lens through which we can critically engage with reality.

**Voice:** I see autotheory as contextualising itself. I’ve tried to contextualise myself with this script.

[pause 5 sec.]

**Voices:** The notes we took during the workshop are now being used as a script.

**Voice:** This script can be part of an experimental platform. We are using the platform of PARSE to expand and explore what is possible in the framework of a public presentation. For the benefit of our own research we decided to create a space to de-construct the limits, and think about what is hidden. To further explore our situated knowledges by placing our voices and our bodies in the format of the conference.

**Voice:** It’s difficult to re-enact our experiences and disagreements.

**Voice:** It’s kind of like trying to speak together in unison, even though it’s hard to keep the same rhythm.

**Voice:** That’s because we wanted to explore it as a collective exercise, to embody the difficulty of working together.

[pause 5 sec.]
Voice: What do we do now?

Voice: How do we see this past PARSE?

Voice: I think what we are doing is very exciting. It’s quite difficult to explain the gap, to contextualise what is not visible and to show the process.

Voice: The workshop has been an excuse to create a space, not for being taught, but for learning. A platform to speak out loud. Even though we found more questions than answers. This is just the starting point.

Voice: Everything keeps changing.

[pause 5 sec.]

Voices: The performative presentation ends.

Annelies Vaneycken introduces a ten-minute break, followed by questions and/or discussions.
You can find more information about the performative lecture and the open-ended publishing process on:

autotheoryworkshop.wixsite.com/mysite

Contact — autotheoryworkshop@gmail.com