

Collectiveness as a Form of Autotheory

Annelies Vaneycken

What is *autotheory*? How can autotheory support artistic practice? How can artistic practice develop conventional autotheory methods and formats further? These were some key questions that brought three Master's students of HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design together in September 2019. The trio soon realised that their interests would benefit an enquiry based on a multiplicity of artistic practices instead of just building on their three individual ones. They launched an open call, inviting other creative practitioners to join their project. Their initial questions and the open call led to the formation of an arts-based group, which met on a regular basis to collectively explore the meaning of autotheory for their individual practices, and, vice versa, to collectively explore the meaning of their individual art practices for the development of autotheory methods and formats.

In general, autotheory can be understood as an approach in which writing about the self, personal experiences and the body plays a prominent role in theory formation. In autotheory, the author uses their bodily experience to develop knowledge,^[1] navigating between memoir, poetry, philosophy and criticism, which shows affinities with “theoretical fiction”,^[2] “life-thinking”,^[3] and “fiction theory”.^[4] The Canadian writer, curator and artist Lauren Fornier describes autotheory as “a contemporary feminist practice where artists, writers, philosophers activist, and critics use the autobiographical, first person, and related practices of ‘self-imaging’ (Jones, 2006) to process, perform, enact, iterate, subvert, instantiate, and wrestle with the hegemonic discourses of ‘theory’ and philosophy.”^[5] Although theorising from a first person perspective is well-established within genealogies of feminism, autotheory has been specifically associated with third- and fourth-wave feminist texts that aim to make theory more human.^[6] For such *humanisation*, autotheory offers ways of producing theory that transgress inaccessible academic theories that mainly reproduce the conventional white-male-knowledge canon.

The Argonauts (2015) and *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013) are two key autotheory references. In *The Argonauts*, the American writer Maggie Nelson writes about her personal experiences resulting from her unconventional choices when it comes to marriage, motherhood, pregnancy, birth and family-making. She explains how these choices—her *freedom*—challenge society's norms at the cost of domestic dramas, pain and exclusion. With her autotheory book, Nelson is first and foremost interested in making visible the binaries that rule our cultural practices while aiming to disrupt them. In *Testo Junkie*, the Spanish writer, philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado undertakes a theoretical and political analysis of the “pharmacopornographic era”.^[7] He shows how both the pharmaceutical and the pornography industries control our bodies, and, consequently, our sexuality, gender, and sex. Preciado's autotheoretical approach includes a political self-experiment in which he explores the impact of the application of testosterone gel on the transformation of the body.

Where both these examples use the format of the book, there has been an emergence of autotheory practices

that seek to go beyond this conventional format by exploring other artistic media, such as performance, body art, moving image, etc.^[8] It is within this emerging interest that we can situate the autotheory enquiry of the group discussed here.^[9] Even though the arts-based group also explores new ways of writing, they very much focus on making their writings public beyond the printed format. For instance, for the 2019 PARSE conference on the theme of *human*, the group launched a printed publication with a performance, followed by a discussion involving the audience during which I operated as an externally invited mediator.^[10] Whereas the performance was used to share the preliminary results of their collective enquiry and individual autotheory works, the discussion helped to open up their project to a larger diversity of voices, including that of the audience. This meant that the group discussion with the audience became part of their autotheory *publication*, which, in turn, contributed to extending conventional autotheory methods and formats. I use the word *publication* in its broadest sense here—as an act of making something *public* in whatever form, be it printed matter, performance, sound art, video, installation, etc. Another of their try-outs is the iteration you are about to see and listen to here—in this PARSE journal issue on the theme of *human*. In this example, the group explores how autotheory can be both produced and disseminated in the form of an online audiovisual work.

The strength of the artist group introduced here can be found in their interrogation of artistic autotheory formats. In addition, I would argue that their true contribution to autotheory can be found in their *collectiveness*—in how they collectively organise, produce, and disseminate autotheory. Put differently, their *collective approach to autotheory* is the innovative aspect through which new autotheory methods and formats are being developed.

Looking at the history of the artist collective and other forms of collective-based art practices, we can observe a link between artist collectives and radical innovation. It is due to the assembly around a common interest or concern that individual artists can find the strength to—together and apart—engage with radical change. In other words, artists' collaboration gives them a force to act individually *and* as a group in order to create change. The emergence of artist collectives has also been associated with the expression of dissatisfaction and criticality about society (see the Futurists, for example^[11]) and the urge to bring about change: to improve.

However, despite the constructive empowerment gained through working collectively, we also need to acknowledge that working as a group is a challenging endeavour that requires dealing with opposing ideas and internal power dynamics. The artist enquiry group discussed here promotes a feminist ethos in which equality rules and the diversity of the many 'selves' are addressed with respect. In their collective origination, the nine current members—including visual artists, writers, film-makers, photographers, performance artists—have an equal say in initiatives and decision-making. Although the three initial members of the collective perform extra responsibilities as administrators, these tasks do not provide them with more power, nor does it produce power hierarchies. As administrators, they take care of managing the communication *between* the group member and their external collaborators (e.g. partners), but have no additional role—and therefore they have no further responsibilities and power—*inside* the group. The fact that the group does not have a name also shows how the group prioritises collective exchange and production rather than foregrounding their artistic authorship.

In the work presented in the next chapter: "Script for a Performative Lecture: Exploring Alternative Applications of Autotheory", the group explored how autotheory can be produced through a performative lecture. The work is part of their ongoing arts-based enquiry into autotheory methods and forms, where autotheory can be seen both aim and content, and where the *collectiveness* of the group forms the core that drives their particular autotheory methods, formats and outcomes.

Footnotes

1. Young, Stacey. *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*. London: Routledge, 1997; Preciado, Paul B. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. New York, NY: The Feminist Press at CUNY. 2013; Radchenko, Valeria. "Autotheory". 22 April 2017. Available at <https://vvval.wordpress.com/2017/04/22/autotheory/> (accessed 2020-10-22).
2. Hawkins, Jo. "Afterword: Theoretical Fictions". In Krauss, Chris, *I Love Dick*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e). 1997. pp. 263-276.
3. Samatar, Sofia. "The Pleasures of Reading, Viewing, and Listening in 2015, pt. 28: Sofia Samatar". *Aqueductpress*. 31 December 2015. Available at https://aqueductpress.blogspot.com/2015/12/the-pleasures-of-reading-viewing-and_0.html (accessed 2020-10-12).
4. Brossard, N. *Picture Theory*. Montréal: Fiction/Nouvelle optique. 1982.
5. Fournier, L. "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice". *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*. Vol. 33. No. 3. 2018. p. 643. DOI: 10.1080/08989575.2018.1499495.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*.
8. Fournier, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls'.
9. Because the group involved in the autotheory practice discussed here does not have a name, I simply refer to them as "the group".
10. For more information about the conference, see <https://parsejournal.com/event/human/> (accessed 2020-10-05).
11. Although the Futurists aimed to bring about change in the future, many contemporary artist collectives aim to bring about change in the here and now.