

Living Up to It: The Challenge of the Self-Experiment in Researching Life as Art

Ivan A. Kirchgaesser

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Text

Auto/biographical enquiry blurs the boundaries between private and professional, personal and political, subject and object, life and research. Whilst useful in some contexts, these separations no longer make sense if one's interest lies in tracing transformative learning processes in the most immediate way – namely, as they unfold in one's own life. The more so if one conceives of life as art – as a permanent creative, formative process of activism: as social sculpture (Joseph Beuys). What are the (ethical) implications of such a radical stance? How to deal with the vulnerability invoked by exposing one's most intimate experiences, for the sake of creating an opportunity for learning and empowerment for others? And why make such a commitment in the first place?

These and other questions feature in my transdisciplinary, practice-based PhD research. Starting from the premise LIFE=ART, it draws connections between the social sculpture theory of change, transformative learning theory, and queer theory. A self-experiment in the spirit of feminists Donna Haraway and Paul B. Preciado, the research employs an auto/biographical lens to investigate what it means to LIVE these paradigms of emancipatory life praxis. Drawing on creative nonfiction as well as experimental film and poetry to create 'thinking pieces' that are shared on my blog www.artistsofsociety.com, the research also explores how findings can best be shared to make an impact. It challenges academic conventions by reconsidering who the research is by and whom it is for, in what contexts it may be relevant, which topics are deemed appropriate, and how language and images can be used to authentically represent and communicate the 'data' of lived experience.

As a case study within the larger matrix of my PhD enquiry – which in itself acts as a platform for my life research – this paper focuses on my recent experiences of coming out as queer and nonbinary. It is a contemplation of my personal attempt to live up to the challenge of conceiving of life as art and research during this phase. I reflect on how I've found myself

torn between attending to this intense personal transformation *as it happens* and wanting to analyse and contextualise my experiences to turn them into a learning opportunity for others. Referring to the work of Hélène Cixous, I deliberate on how life-writing as a creative process not only traces and documents, but by making space for reflection and new insight, also changes the course of events – as do interactions with other people. Finally, I consider choices I made regarding the use of different platforms, including social media, my blog, and this paper to share my findings.

Question: What can different lenses of gender, sexuality, culture and politics bring to our research?

Key words: Auto/biography, activism, gender, social sculpture, transformative learning

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