

*Nora Rinne*

## Are you for real: writing verbatim performance with ethnographer's tools

Verbatim technique connects concepts such as 'actual', 'real', 'original' and 'authentic' to theatre, performance art and creativity. In this article, I consider the roles of creativity, art, veracity and reality when composing a performance text that is based on the 'actual words' of 'real people'. What is the truth claim in verbatim performance, and how does it operate together with artistic creativity? My approach is that of an artistic researcher conducting research with children. When I collect materials for my verbatim performances, I use many of the same techniques and methods that childhood studies ethnographers use in their fieldwork. The performative turn in social sciences, with post qualitative inquiries and non-representational methodologies, and the educational turn in art, bring these fields even closer together. Both fields face the questions of veracity and creativity without any simple oppositional structure. I claim that, instead of concentrating on the friction between creativity and truth, it is important to acknowledge that creativity can be needed in order to *lie less*. I argue that ethnographic objects can lie if they are presented to us dead. Although performance art, or *live* art, claims to be the epitome of liveness and immediacy, it actually expres-

ses the impossibility of guaranteed unmediated presence. The creative skills of an artist and ethnographer are needed, to keep the transcript and presented materials alive and communicating, to ensure that research remains reciprocal.

**Key words:** verbatim; performance art; ethnography; creativity; veracity.

### INTRODUCTION

Hey, can anybody hear me?  
Can you hear me? Can you guys hear me?  
(from *Child Service* performance text)

As a performance artist conducting an artistic research project on children and childhoods, I have applied verbatim techniques in my creative research work. I have recorded children's parole, listened to it, transcribed it, learned it, and performed it. The performance *Child Service* (Rinne 2021) in Mad House Helsinki was the first artistic part of my doctoral research project, titled 'Children and Childhoods in Intergenerational Performance Art'<sup>1</sup>. *Child Service* was a verbatim performance whose performance script was based on children's own words and parole.

In my practice-based research project I ask if children's voices and agency could challenge the children and childhood representations and presentations in contemporary

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(performance) art and enrich and improve our understanding of children and childhoods. Intergenerational artistic collaboration and verbatim technique are means we explore together. Researchers in childhood studies and education have been more and more interested in investigating children's views and the ways '[c]hildren participate in society with their own voice' (Hohti and Karlsson 2014, 548). This often means doing the research *with* children than just on them. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 12, states that children have right to be heard (UNCRC 1989). We have an obligation to try, even if listening and hearing is not a simple act.

My methods when collecting materials, the 'data' for the verbatim script, and preparing for the actual rehearsal period, are very similar to the methods of a childhood studies ethnographer doing field work. This intertwining makes me consider creativity and art in relation to the truth claim in verbatim performance and ethnography. Artistic research happens in, with and through art and artistic practices (see, e.g., Borgdorff 2012). My own performance work is an important reference point for everything that I consider here. Artistic research is interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary to the core (see, e.g., Schwab and Borgdorff 2014). There are no pure forms of artistic research; instead, artistic research practices inhabit the territories of many other disciplines. It is not fruitful to imagine artistic research in conflict with other disciplines, such as ethnography or anthropology, but to think of artistic research *with* these disciplines to see what the connections reveal.

My aim in this article is to consider, on the one hand, the position of creativity and artistic skill and, on the other, reali-

ty and veracity when composing a performance text based on the ‘actual words’ of ‘real people’. How does the truth claim relate to artists’ creativity? What happens to my data and my real in the creative process and in the artistic performance space? Are artists doomed to lose the truth and real when they let the creativity loose, or is the entanglement more complex than that? My main claim is, that artistic creativity is not hostile to truth or reality. Artistic creativity and skill are essential to keep ethnographic materials and elements alive and responsive. Presenting reciprocal, communicating, responsive and living things as though they were dead can constitute a major lie.

### CHILD SERVICE RESEARCH PERFORMANCE AND CHILD SUBJECTS

You know when you walk on the street, then all, like, babies – you know when you sometimes see babies – so think, that at some point they are all going to be like old men. Walking there. Outside. Looking at trees and flowers and all.

(from *Child Service* performance text)

*Child Service* (Rinne 2021) was an intergenerational performance conducted together with children, aged twelve at the time of the performance, as well as professional adult artists. The performance was bilingual (Finnish and English), as were the children participating in it. The concept of the *Child Service* performance was my own. I was the responsible researcher, and I conducted the fieldwork to collect the audio and video material prior to the practice period. Over several

months, I recorded children's speech and movements, using an SLR camera, a handy recorder and a mobile phone. I listened to my recordings, edited them, transcribed the spoken words that I selected, and – after further selection, editing and reorganizing – used these transcriptions as the performance text. In the performance, I performed the verbatim texts myself in imitation of the child speakers. I also recited one verbatim monologue with the dancer Katri Soini. Soini's primary task was to imitate the children's movements based on pre-recorded materials. In our imitation practice all of us performers, children and adults alike, also emulated each other's movements during the performance situation. Overall choreography was composed by choreographer Joonas Halonen.



Performers Okko Yli-Vakkuri (left) and Katri Soini practice imitation in *Child Service* performance rehearsals. Photo by Saara Autere, 2021.

The child participants, Aale and Aarni Rinne, Oliver Ter-  
volin and Eero Yli-Vakkuri, provided and created texts and  
movement materials for the performance. They performed  
in many ways, they directed their own participation, de-  
signed and controlled lighting along with the lighting de-  
signer Luca Sirviö, shot live videos, and acted as childhood  
experts-in-experience to guide the adult artists through the  
childhood theme. Translations from Finnish to English and  
English to Finnish were conducted under the children's  
inspection and guidance. The four performing children par-  
ticipated in the movement imitation and other movement  
practices, they vocalized, spoke, acted in characters, and read  
their prewritten texts on stage, but they did not take part in  
delivering the verbatim content.

To gather the performance text, I usually recorded situa-  
tions that I did not initiate – for instance, children playing  
video games, discussing things with one another of fulfill-  
ing the daily routines. Occasionally, I also asked the children  
some specific questions. It was typical for children to initiate  
the conversation, at which point I would ask whether it could  
be recorded. There were a few times when I asked whether  
the children could repeat something that they had just said  
outside of the recording. If I initiated a more interview-like  
situation, this decision was always inspired by my desire to  
hear more about the things that I had heard the children dis-  
cuss. This does not mean, that the children were unaffected  
by the recording or the research situation, I am fully aware  
that was not the case. I am more describing my own inten-  
tions and interests here, rather than trying to prove that my  
materials were unaffected by my presence.

Through my own verbatim performance, I wanted to see

what happened to the act of listening when the words of a child are mediated to the audience through an adult body. So, I did not aim at finding the most neutral way of presenting the gathered material, but to make the moment of performing very much perceptible. I wanted to make the act or perception *perform* through this strangeness of the adult body trying to embody the child's speech. This attempt to break the authenticity and naturalness spell of the child was central for me since it is often the Child, along with the so-called primitive peoples or people with disabilities, that are convicted to represent the unmediated, unspoiled 'authenticity'.

All of the children in the performance group contributed to the performance text and focalization, but the children who provided the main body of spoken words prior to the rehearsal period were my 'own', twins aged eleven to twelve at the time. Being the mother of your child subjects, is not an ethically unproblematic situation. The non-institutional everyday setting can be so all-encompassing, that the children do not perceive the outside of it or recognize any alternative to it. Moreover, the mother-researcher-professional artist's position carries a great deal of power and authority. I used the written consent form also with my own children, but when I asked them for consent, and received it, this was only the beginning of a process of listening, feeling, and inquiring into their stances. I repeatedly questioned our relations and positions to one another during the process, and still do. Nevertheless, I believe (as do Viljamaa and Kinnunen 2021, 199–200) that motherhood, although it may be very special position, is still only one of many positions available to the ethnographer-artistic researcher. Ethnographic research

happens in relations, and we are always somebody to one another.

My method of collecting the material without predetermined themes and planned interviews was quite inefficient. I needed to record a lot of content, wait and be patient. It was a great help that I was able to share same household with two of my research subjects. The artist-researcher Tuija Kokkonen uses concepts of ‘weak actors’ and ‘weak action’ in her work, and I have adapted them to my verbatim performance making process. For Kokkonen, weak (human) action is ‘a prerequisite for the perception and participation of non-human agents’ (Kokkonen 2011). Even if Kokkonen is thinking specifically about the human – non-human relation and the possibility to overcome anthropocentric perceptions, her concept is also relevant to my work with children. In the western tradition, being an artist and an author has long been about strengthening one’s agency and silencing any distracting voices to find and to express ‘one’s own voice’. For my work, and for that of many others, the ability to occasionally be a weak, spongy and porous actor, receiver and listener, has become an important skill in the arts. The active act of listening was the constitutive act and objective for the *Child Service* verbatim performance.

### VERBATIM AND ITS TRUTH CLAIM

The term verbatim means word for word. According to *Collins Online English Dictionary*, it means that ‘you use exactly the same words as were used originally’. In verbatim theatre, the play text is generated by recording and transcribing the



words of people or by using existing records such as the transcripts of a council meeting. A performance based on word-for-word transcriptions of 'real people's' spoken words, statements or testimonies, which have been edited into a script, is then seen and heard performed by actors or performers onstage or in a gallery room. Among the theatre scholars, verbatim theatre is now studied as a genre or style, and the field is thriving.

In the UK, verbatim theatre is often used synonymously with documentary theatre. My use of the term 'verbatim' is more orthodox: it is about the exact words and the way in which they are uttered. I agree with Will Hammond and Dan Steward, the editors of *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, who state that 'verbatim is not a form, it is a technique; it is a means rather than an end' (Hammond and Steward 2011, 9). In my view, likewise, verbatim is a word-for-word technique, not a way to refer to the general field of documentary theatre.

Writers and dramaturges who compose verbatim plays have been busy convincing critics and spectators that the verbatim play writing process is as much creative and artistic as that of any other kind of playwriting. The verbatim theatre makers and playwrights who present their work in Hammond and Steward's book, understand that artistic skills of the playwright are needed when the writers take their research materials and use them to create a full dramatic play for the audience or, as Alecky Blythe puts it, 'a good evening's theatre', (Blythe 2011, 94). Even in these post-postdramatic times, verbatim theatre makers like Blythe, Robin Soans and Max Stafford-Clark seem to emphasize the importance of a strong narrative, conflict, and drama. The playwright should

find the story within the subject. (see e.g. Blythe 2011, 95, 101-102; Soans 2011, 26; Stafford-Clark according to Hammond 2011, 49) '[A] verbatim play should still be built around a narrative', states Robin Soans, 'and it must still set up dramatic conflicts and attempt to resolve them' (Soans 2011, 26).

As a performance artist and dramaturge who creates live art performances and performance installations, I do not usually offer my audiences a good evening's theatre. In my own artistic work, the performance text is not a dramatic play, but a live art verbatim performance text – that is to say, a collection of spoken language without a clear dramatic structure or a plot. Anchoring my artistic creativity as a writer to my ability to create a strong narrative with conflict and drama is not a possibility. For me creative writing in verbatim theatre or verbatim performance is more the art of a dramaturge working in the expanded field of dramaturgy (Trencsényi and Cochrane 2014; Turner and Behrndt 2016, Romanska 2015). I organize, select, choose and arrange, look for connections and reciprocities. Different elements – textual as well as others – need to be constructed into a performance.

I uphold an embodied way of doing dramaturgical work, because I perform myself and because I work with the text and its dramaturgy throughout the whole process of performance-making. First, I just listen and observe. I listen to the sound universe that my research subjects are occupying. Second, I select certain areas and, in mutual understanding with the research subjects, bring a Zoom recorder into these situations. 'Here the technological post-postmodern meets oral theatre culture', as theatre scholar Carol Martin writes in 'Bodies of Evidence' (Martin 2010, 17). I begin to record the

sounds and the language used. At some point I have these hours and hours of recorded sounds, including speech, voices, laughs, sighs, screams, hums, croons and silences. I listen, select, and edit. I listen, transcribe, read and edit. I organize, reorganize, choose and edit. When I have the first version of a script for the performance text, I return to the audio file and edit a file that matches the script. I listen and practice. With the script in my hands and the audio track in my ear-phones, I listen and practice and listen and practice. I make notes and corrections on the script. New processes of organization and editing begin again. Perceiving and listening are followed by writing and the embodied imitation practice, but the method is more a cycle than a linear continuum. And all the parts of the process aim at hearing. For me, verbatim practice is a whole-body listening practice.

Even if verbatim were not an actual genre, its 'claim to veracity' would connect the otherwise very diverse performances that use verbatim techniques. Many verbatim theatre makers use pre-performance materials, press releases, advertisements, briefings and the programme, to announce that their pieces are verbatim plays. Hammond and Steward write that 'a verbatim play acknowledges, and often draws attention to, its roots in real life.' (Hammond and Steward 2011, 9) I did not use the word 'verbatim' in the *Child Service* PR materials, but I wrote the following in the performance programme:

All the texts in the performance, except Nora's short researcher's intro in the beginning, are written or originally spoken by the children. The movement material is based on documentations of children's movements.

Through the sentences quoted above, I introduced my truth claim. I did not write ‘real children’ or ‘actual children’, but I referred to the real-life origin of the transcript. Verbatim theatre cannot escape from terms like ‘real’, ‘actual’, ‘original’ and ‘truth’. In the wake of poststructuralist theories, creators will need to manage all of the inconveniences and complexities that these terms bring to the discussion. Social reality and its representations are constructed. ‘There is no “really real” anywhere in the world of representation’, says Martin (Martin 2010, 23). What are these ‘real people’ speaking this ‘original speech’, then? Are the actors or performers not as real (or as unreal) as the persons quoted? How unoriginal is this original speech to begin with?

The very concept of verbatim refers to the origin of the words that are used in the performance and in verbatim practices there is an obsession with what someone really said and how they said it. Verbatim performance and theatre’s many different variations claim ‘specific relationships with events in the real world’, as Martin formulates it (Martin 2013, 4). Thus, verbatim already sets the stage, and it makes the spectators alert and aware of the dynamics: these words that they are now going to hear are those that someone has already uttered, somewhere else, at another time. These are words that have been recorded and transcribed by the performance makers. There was an ‘original speaker’. Verbatim theatre cites reality or recycles it for the stage. Writing verbatim theatre means taking these negotiations into consideration.

Through these claims embedded into its method and name, verbatim theatre obligates not only the makers but its spectators to consider questions of truth and the real. Hammond and Steward state:

This claim of veracity on the part of the theatre maker, however hazy or implicit, changes everything. Immediately, we approach the play not just as a play but also as an accurate source of information. We trust and expect that we are not being lied to. (Hammond & Steward 2011, 10)

Verbatim performance makes the spectators consider the questions of origins, the authentic and the real by invoking the found text, making that text perform. The audience becomes positioned within this performance, and they have to deal with 'the performance of these truths', as the documentary theatre scholar and practitioner Amanda Stuart Fisher writes in her book *Performing the Testimonial* (Fisher 2020, 2).

The audience negotiates without needing to place any inverted commas<sup>2</sup> around the stage to start this negotiation. Audience members take neither the spectacle nor the real as a definitive conclusion. As the theatre and performance studies scholar Janelle Reinelt observes, the promise documentary performance makes to the spectator is not a promise of 'unmediated access to the truth in question' (Reinelt 2011, 9) – and still the document has significance and something to offer. Using the verbatim technique matters, to the audiences and the artists. Documentary performance is a negotiation and a dialogue between the world and its writings. I believe that spectators who are interested in these forms are open to this dialogue and negotiation, rather than eager to reach the final truth after uncertain times. These complexities and ambivalence are not something that should be resolved or gotten rid of.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer here to Stella Bruzzi, who writes about (film) documentary spectator's ability to understand these reality – spectacle negotiations without signposts or inverted commas (Bruzzi 2006, 6)

### JOURNALISM AND BEYOND

Hammond and Steward find that verbatim theatre overlaps with journalism in its truth claim. Verbatim theatre's link to journalism is strong and it is often repeated when theatre theorists, critics and performance makers write about verbatim theatre. During the research phase, a playwright's work can be very much like that of an investigative journalist. According to Fisher, many documentary theatre pieces and tribunal plays are '[r]ooted in a collaboration between theatre and journalism' (Fisher 2020, 74). For some verbatim theatre makers, such as the Finnish director-playwright Susanna Kuparinen, verbatim theatre is journalism, not merely like journalism or connected to it. Kuparinen states: 'This is live journalism. We act according to the guidelines for journalism, meaning that we attempt to follow the cases 'till the end'<sup>3</sup> (Kuparinen according to Laari HS 5.10.2021, my translation).

Journalism's ethical code comes into use when evaluating verbatim theatre. On the one hand, verbatim plays can receive criticism for failing to meet the standards of ethical journalism when the artists create the dramatic narrative. In *Theatre of the Real* Martin writes that: 'Theatre of the real can also oversimplify, inflame prejudices, and support one-sided perspectives' (Martin 2013, 120). For example, Martin's book extensively discusses the *My Name is Rachel Corrie* case, a controversy provoked by a verbatim play about young activist woman killed in Gaza by an Israeli soldier in 2003. For Martin, this is 'an issue-based play from a singular and ad-

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3 'Tämä on live-journalismia. Toimimme journalismin pelisäännöillä eli asiat pyritään seuraamaan loppuun asti.'

mittedly a-historical perspective'; she finds that in this play 'rational discourse is disabled' (Martin 2013, 136). There are many examples, perhaps less dramatic than *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, in which documentary theatre has been accused of being poor journalism, because it is too opinionated, partial, emotional or heavily dramatized. Citing is not a straight path to truth.

On the other hand, the critiques might praise how a verbatim performance 'transcends journalism and emerges as a work of art in its own right' (Taylor 2005). Sometimes, it is difficult to say whether the reviewer sees verbatim theatre's out-of-the-ordinary take on journalism as a positive or a negative phenomenon. One critic in *Helsingin Sanomat* writes that the director and playwright Susanna Kuparinen's *Sokea piste*, a documentary theatre piece based on town council meeting transcripts and interviews, 'stretches the ethical code of journalism to its extreme'<sup>4</sup> (Hallamaa HS 7.10.2021, my translation). The critic gives the performance four stars out of five and seems to think that, although the piece occasionally crosses the lines of journalistic ethics, these crossings are valuable or even necessary.

Is it because verbatim is 'just theatre' that these crossings do not matter as much as they otherwise would? In one way, it is exactly so, but we art- and theatre-makers should not feel offended. The gap between the artwork and the so-called reality to which it relates is an asset. Art is able to create a situation, a way of receiving, that is simultaneously affective and distanced. The receiver-spectator has the space and

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<sup>4</sup> 'Susanna Kuparisen *Sokea Piste* venyttää journalismin eettistä koodistoa äärimmilleen.'

time to take in, feel, be affected, and contemplate, in a certain safety. This is not the space of an uninterested, impartial and all together distanced individual receiver; it is the space of an interested, partial, and relational one. Artists and the (active) recipients of art imagine the gap in order to think about themselves and their ways of organizing, living and being. They do so in order to dare to become more open to recognition, movement and the possibility of change.

Spectators 'are both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them', the philosopher Jacques Rancière argues in *Emancipated Spectator* (Rancière 2011, 13). This role of the spectator is valuable and important. There is no need to try to save theatre from itself – that is, from theatre, theatricality and spectacle. That is not the task of documentary or verbatim theatre either, even if these genres or techniques intensify the contemplation of reality and make claims about 'something we call reality', as theatre scholar Laura Gröndahl phrases it (Gröndahl 2017, 71). Outside of the performance space, and art in general, the intertwining of phenomena and things is so dense and the stakes are so high, that it is difficult to step out of the habituality, observe and perceive the world differently. It is exactly art's ability to imagine the gap, theatre's ability to be 'just theatre', that makes it more, or other from, journalism.

### ETHNOGRAPHY AND EVERYDAY MATTER(ING)

Journalism is not the only field from which verbatim performance makers adopt working methods. There is also a clear connection between verbatim performance and ethnography



and this connection has been most relevant to my own work. Performance art and performance studies have a long joint history with anthropology and ethnography. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's (1920–1983) study on liminality and performance has profoundly influenced the performance studies field as well as the thinking of performance studies pioneer Richard Schechner. It is not possible to overestimate the degree to which sociologist Ervin Goffman's (1922–1982) ethnographic study and his use of theatrical metaphors (e.g., dramaturgy and people as actors) have impacted the performance art field. The same is true of linguist J. L. Austin's (1911–1960) study of performative utterances and speech acts, cannot be overestimated. Nonetheless, my interest here focuses not so much on these theatrical metaphors or on the study of the world as performance. Instead, it focuses on ethnographers' and verbatim performance-makers' ideas of reality and representation, and on the fieldwork that is imbued with shared tools, methods, fascinations and entanglements.

My method – which centers more on recording the speech and parole than on conducting interviews based on predesignated themes and topics – is more like the practice of an ethnographer doing field work than it is like anything that a journalist would do. How something is said, not merely what is said, is very important for me, not just what is said. How are the sentences structured? Other than recognizable language, what kind of sounds come out from the subject's mouth? What is the proximity or distance between the speakers and how can this be heard? What exact words are used amongst whom, and how does the language change according to the context? When do the words come out flu-

ently and when is there more hesitation? These are not the kinds of questions that journalists usually ponder with, but ethnographers explore these territories.

A performative and affective turn has been taking place in social sciences for many decades and its origins can be traced back to the rise of performance studies in the 1970's (Roberts 2008). The contemporary material, non-representational theory and post qualitative inquiry understand creativity as an important part of sense-making (for new materialism and impersonal creativity see, e.g., Orlie 2010, 130–135; non-representational theory and creativity Vannini 2015, 318 and Thrift 2008, 118–119; post qualitative inquiry and creativity St. Pierre 2017, 604–605). The contemporary new materialistic take on childhood studies (see, e.g., Hohti 2016a & 2016b, Hohti and Karlsson 2014, Komulainen 2007 & 2020 and Spyrou 2011) is an especially significant source of inspiration for my work. Post-qualitative, non-representational ethnography offers tools to consider my methods and tools as well as the knowledge production that occurs in and through art.

These movements have brought ethnographers closer to verbatim theatre's techniques when they consider how to execute, present and publish their research. Researchers are exploring non-traditional presentational formats that value intimacy, affect, corporeality, sensuality, and involvement in understanding. Researchers are recognizing that cultural practices are strongly bound to context. Contemporary non-representational ethnography emphasizes corporeality and sensuality (see, e.g., Vannini 2015, 321–322) and in post qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre 2018) the abundance and copiousness of performance and art is no longer seen as a

problem. The rich, uncontrollable, corporeal and reciprocal performance situation is an opportunity, when rigorous, systematic method and endless pruning is no longer seen as the (only) way to knowledge.

The attempt in contemporary ethnographical research to make something of unnoticeable and unimportant matter (see, e.g., Hohti 2016b, Rautio and Jokinen 2015) resonates with me. Finding ‘data’ where none seem to exist is one way to challenge the existing paradigm of facts, truths and knowledge. In her dissertation (Hohti 2016b) about mattering as object of inquiry, childhood studies ethnographer Riikka Hohti writes that ‘What matters to the children in the classroom [...] can be something tiny, and regarded as “nothing” by adults and educators’ (Hohti 2016b, 73). Because this mattering is simultaneously meaningful and heavy with matter, so that its meaningfulness cannot be immaterial or detached. It is “traffic” between meaning and matter’ (Hohti 2016b, 17).

As Rautio and Jokinen (2015) observe, what does or does not matter to children is rarely considered when ‘the ones who are beyond the developmental phases children are vied as representing’ (3) describe, interpret and make meaning of children’s lives. The messiness of everyday life can also be a problem for science because it might be difficult to define and frame the subject area. Too many things change, move and interlock at the same time. Everything is interrelated, reciprocal and dependent. Artistic research involves working in and accepting messiness, as does the new materialistic ethnography.

For *Child Service*, for example, I recorded children playing video games. This online playing involved a great deal of

speech and communication, but for me – as for many parents with gaming children – it was background noise without much significance or content. I started to hear the *matter*ing of this language little by little. When I finally performed this part in the *Child Service* performance, the scene had a new weight, and, for me personally, it became perhaps the most dramatic and affective of all the scenes. According to one audience member's feedback, this experience was not mine alone. This adult audience member, the father of a 'gamer' son, came to tell me after the performance that it was an interesting moment for him to hear me speak this gaming language in a performance context. Above all, he appreciated how the sounds of gaming were performed without any judgement placed on the playing children or the contents of the fighting game. In this unfamiliar context, and without adopting a parenting approach, he found himself really listening to the spoken language and the sounds, which were so familiar even though he had dismissed them as background noise in his home.

Come here build and res and then when he comes just pull him.

Do the bum bum with the AR Shotgun. In the sniper range.

Just go rush him.

Oh.

Fourteen health.

Ok.

Ayyy, wolverine, woop, woop...

## Scriptum 2/22

Let's play the Marvel stand off.  
Right that we can like, right that we can...

Hey, can anybody hear me?  
Can you hear me, can you guys hear me?

[...]

You have to... yes you can... you have to do the... make the things that you want in the preset and then press Y to save.

Why aren't I regaining health? Why aren't I regaining health?  
But before I was!

I don't want to die. Yes! Got one. I've got four kills.

Be careful, you are on your last life.

[...]

Sit ku sä oot tehny ne kaikki, sen hiilaamisen ja damagen, ni sit sä saat... sun pitää vaan eemouttaa Wolveriin kaa. Eemouttaa, eemouttaa!

(from *Child Service* performance text<sup>5</sup>)

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<sup>5</sup> The child players spoke both English and Finnish while playing and this text is the transcription of the original tape without translation, as it was used in the performance. The players occasionally mentioned each other's names during the playing session, but in this text as in the performance the names have been left out.

Because transcription requires listening, the verbatim performance writer is first of all a listener. The audience listens to something that the performance-makers either heard or really wanted to hear. The artists recorded it, replayed it, listened to it again, transcribed it, read it, listened again, performed it, recorded it, listened to it, listened to the original tape again, and... Even if the audience members do not think about this process in so many words, or so concretely, the active and persistent act of perceiving is part of the verbatim experience. The audience shares that experience with the artists. When encountering verbatim performance, people think about themselves as listeners.

There has been preoccupation with children's voices in childhood studies. Childhood anthropologist and sociologist Spyros Spyrou (2011) recognizes how this preoccupation is necessary to generate valuable ethical research about children and childhoods, but he also calls for criticality and introspection. Similarly, sociologist Sirkka Komulainen (2007 & 2020) has drawn attention to the ambiguity of human communication, and to the individualizing tendencies in voice research. There are both challenges and possibilities in listening to children's voices, and 'more listening may not inevitably mean more hearing' (Komulainen, 2020). As Hohti and Liisa Karlsson point out in their narrative ethnography article on children voices, '[v]oices have been shown to be ambiguous: they are easily shaped by established ideas about the participants and the anticipated research results, and they can be *used* to prove what was going to be said anyway' (Hohti and Karlsson 2014, 549, emphasis in the original). It might also happen that researchers only notice and repeat 'active, agentic voices that are readily heard' (Hohti

and Karlsson 2014, 549). ‘Yes, it’s a child’s voice, but it is not a golden road to truth’, says childhood studies scholar and editor of the journal *Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research* Daniel Thomas Cook in an interview, ‘It is fraught like anything else, just fraught differently’ (Cook according to Greene 2015, 67–68).

Research often relies ‘on the “authenticity” of voice while aiming to empower children’ (Spyrou 2011, 2). In an artistic research project, it is tempting to rely on this claim to authenticity: this was *actually said by real children*, participating children *chose to* do this in the performance space, they *wanted to express* themselves through these means. I recognize how compelling it is to seek approval of and legitimacy for artistic decisions by assuring that children made the de-



Performers from the left: Oliver Tervolin, Nora Rinne, Aale Rinne (reading), Okko Yli-Vakkuri and Aarni Rinne reading the ends of the stories in *Child Service* performance rehearsals. Photo by Saara Autere, 2021.

cisions and voiced their opinions, that children's authentic voices were heard and that those voices are presented to the audience as the children themselves wanted to present them. It is vital to try to listen and hear, but it is equally vital to be critical towards these dreams of authenticity.

(RE)PRESENTING THE REAL IN VERBATIM PERFORMANCE

I had a conversation with my child about death, and I recorded the conversation with the child's consent. Here, I would like to present three different ways to represent the conversation and thereby to present the truth of this experience:

First, I could write that a child aged eleven, whom I interviewed, felt that death was a difficult concept. For the child in question, it was hard to understand what happens to one's mental capacities, one's memories and to oneself as a person when one dies. Moreover, the finality of death caused bafflement and even fear. At the same time, it seemed that the child was ready to accept the inevitability and finality of death as a circumstance that all people will need to face in the end.

As a second option, I could transcribe the child's speech into a script:

That when you die, what happens then, like... What happens to you, if you are the one who dies, what happens then when you are dead? When you are completely dead. Like...

That...

I can't ask it so well, but what happens then?



[the interviewer starts to explain something inaudible about the bodily functions failing, but gets interrupted:]

Or not what happens in your body, but... to you... like all memories, all your... that you remember all things, and then everything just stops working. Like then you just – bum! And then... And then it's like forever like that. Forever.

Think, that when you are dead, then you are going to be forever, like... it's hard for me to explain. [*lets out a deep sigh.*] I cannot explain.

[pause]

Forever.

[pause]

Iii, jeee, I'm afraid.

Never, like...

[pause]

Think about when you die.

[*yawning:*] Except that everyone dies in the end.

(from *Child Service* performance text)

Thirdly, I could perform this short monologue live and read it aloud, according to the instructions given in parentheses. In *Child Service* I performed this text following the exact rhythms, sighs, pauses and tones of the original speech as exactly as I was able to. This is something that I cannot reproduce in this text, my readers need to try to do it themselves, without the audiotape. Or, my readers can imagine me, an adult female actor, performing these words alive to the audience in a performance space constructed in an old industrial warehouse – a former slaughterhouse – in Helsinki. To make this imaginary scene more vivid (or more true), I could share that the room is cold and draughty. It is November in Fin-

land and the room is poorly insulated. It is already quite dark outside. You sit close to the performers and the other audience members. Perhaps you are wearing your winter jacket and a hat. I am using the mic, even if the space is not very big. All the quiet, insignificant ‘hms’ and ‘has’ can be heard. The dancer is moving. The children are sitting on the floor pillows, and they are either listening to me or absorbed in their own thoughts. You can see the audience, the performers and the whole space from your seat. I am imitating not only the rhythm and alterations, but also a bit of the ‘childlike’ way of speaking and the tone of voice. You might find it a bit uneasy to both look at me and listen. You might feel that it is inappropriate, perhaps – but now, I am already interpreting too much into this.

None of these three representations directly deliver the ‘original’ to the reader or listener. They all use different means and methods when aiming at veracity and when striving to create *the feel* of the real and the authentic. Different layers of authority can be recognized withing these ways of presenting the material.

The first method, the descriptive prose, claims to be truthful in its way of peeling back all the excess, distilling the main points from the spoken words and expressing the facts without emotional or poetic tricks. This method uses a style that aims to be neutral, and its truthfulness is constituted through this literary, direct and unemotional tone. The reader is prompted to assume that neither emotions nor opinions are not leading the writer, whose only aim is to deliver the facts.

The second method, the transcribed text, makes its truth claim quite differently. This method includes direct address,

hesitation and unfinished sentences. Readers feel that this is someone speaking to someone else and that no one has analysed, reorganized or straightened these sentences for the reader. This is the performance of natural speech; and herein lies its promise of truthfulness and authenticity. The text ensures the readers that they receive the experience in a raw form.

The third method, the (now imaginary) embodied live performance that exactly imitates the rhythms, sighs, pauses and tones of the original speech – reproduces the speech act. In the spoken form, which has been transcribed and uttered aloud, the material neither looks or sounds like knowledge. Perhaps because of this, however, it sounds authentic and true. True as a spectacle (the absent is here!) *and* true as a presence (the absent is not here!). In this embodied practice the artists are turning archive into repertoire, as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor enunciates (Taylor 2003). On the one hand, this third mode of representation comes closest to the original event because it reproduces the actual act of speaking, happens live and offers the spectator-listener a multisensory experience. On the other hand, the third mode gets too close; when it tries to imitate the original experience directly, it ends up highlighting differences, distances and absence. Performance emphasizes the situation and the happening, the act, and in doing so it emphasizes that the context is now different. The time, place, listeners and speaker are all different. In all its reciprocity, the live situation seems to be ambivalent. In this verbatim performance, both veracity and dubiousness are located in the same place, they are embedded in the same attributes and qualities. Here, it is impossible to bypass the context.

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written [...] as a small or large unity, can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. (Derrida 1982, 320)

These audibles, these '*objets trouvés*', cannot be given as to the audience as such, as an unmediated presence, a present from the world. In fact, the artist-researcher cannot possess them in the first place, let alone offer them as such to someone else. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian has been sensitive to this question of presence in ethnography. He argues that '[P]resence must / can be experienced; it cannot be picked up, handled, or whatever is required to store something. As every reading of a text has been said to be a new creation so is every listening to recorded voices' (Fabian 2008, 44).

As art theorist Amelia Jones writes with respect to Marina Abramović's performance *The Artist is Present*, 'the live act itself destroys presence (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident)' (Jones 2011, 18, emphasis in original). The performance of unmediated presence ultimately performs the impossibility of presence: '[T]he event, the performance, by combining materiality and durationality [...] points to the fact that there is no 'presence' as such' (Jones 2011, 18). In the popular strategy of re-enacting previous performance art pieces in contemporary art, Jones sees the activation of 'the tension between our desire for the material (for the other's body; for "presence"; for the "true event") and

the impossibility of ever fixing this in space and time' (Jones 2011, 19, emphasis in original). Performance art and live art have always been about real, present, live, authentic and true, about events happening here and now. Re-enactments of performance art pieces address the same desires and ambivalences as the re-enactments of the real in verbatim theatre.

### CREATIVE RECONTEXTUALIZING

Anthropologist Nicholas J. Long elaborates on the connection between verbatim theatre and ethnography in his article 'For a verbatim ethnography' (2015). He states that 'theatre can be a powerful and popular medium through which to present ethnographic materials to a public audience' (Long 2015, 305). Long writes about the possibility of communicating anthropological knowledge through documentary theatre. Even if this communication comes with its own limitations, he sees it as an exciting possibility, especially because anthropology is undergoing the 'affective turn' (Long 2015, 305). Long's model includes ethnographic knowledge and materials, presented to the public through theatre – a medium that supports a deep understanding of and an affective relation to that knowledge.

Seeing theatre or performance art as a media for communicating knowledge composed and produced elsewhere is somewhat problematic. Long does not pay much regard to the knowledge and the knowing produced in and through art itself. Performance art is not, first and foremost, a medium for presenting knowledge gained elsewhere. Art is actually a lousy tool, because it is a 'strange tool', as philosopher

Alva Noë (2016) insists. '[A]rt is bad design in purpose', Noë writes, 'It calls attention to itself. It begins precisely with this ungroundedness or absence of utility, this free fall.' (Noë 2016, 101.) Art is not a tool for distributing ethnographical knowledge to people, but it could be a strange tool for unveiling ourselves to ourselves as ethnographers, as creatures who do ethnography, who have this kind of practice.

If we try to use theatre as a stage for neutral mediation of knowledge produced elsewhere, we are no more dealing with theatre as art. If we use verbatim performance as a medium for distributing ethnographical objects as uncontaminated specimens of reality, we doom them to death and impotency. When we consider writing and performing verbatim perfor-



Performers Aale Rinne and Katri Soini practice imitation in *Child Service* performance rehearsals. Photo by Saara Autere, 2021.

mances artistic creativity is not the enemy of reality or truth, it is the hope.

Time not abstracted from experience is central here. In 'Time and History' (2007 [1978]) philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that 'The Western experience of time is split between eternity and continuous linear time.' (Agamben 2007, 114) 'The experience of dead time abstracted from experience, which characterizes life in modern cities and factories, seems to give credence to the idea that the precise fleeting instant is the only human time.' (Agamben 2007, 105) *Kairological* time is an attempt to think beyond chronology. Agamben's notion of kairological time can only be understood through life, and its time in a contextual and qualitative sense.

Agamben's idea of modern time as dead and abstracted from experience, has also been voiced by ethnographers who call for critical consideration of the ethnographical research, writing, archiving, presenting and representing. In *Time and the Other* Fabian addresses the importance of coevalness, of facing each other at the same time. (Fabian 1983, 155) He criticizes anthropology for creating representations that place the Other outside of the flow of time: Through various and subtle techniques, for example through categorical statements, anthropological representations freeze the society represented, presenting it as unchangeable, repetitive, predictable or conservative (Fabian 1983, 81). The 'Other' is placed outside of the flow of time, and the privileged position of the West can be protected.

Denying of the contemporaneity of subjects and placing them in temporal frames other than those that encompass the ethnographers and their readership, is a practice that

Fabian calls the denial of coevalness. There are many challenges in the idea of coevalness, but Fabian's book is very importantly drawing our attention to the ideological nature of temporal concepts; 'there is a "Politics of Time"' (Fabian 1983, x). Timeless things are also things outside of politics.

In 'Statues also die, even...: Time and Agency of Museum Display' (2014), María Íñigo Clavo, curator and researcher in the field of museology and coloniality, defends the view that time is a fundamental component in the political activation of neutralized objects. Clavo writes about how 'African' or 'indigenous' and contemporary art become politically neutralized and reactivated 'within the white walls of museum' and there are two strategies in this process of neutralization. The first denies the object's contemporary nature, and the second denies its potential to provoke through by reducing it to 'an object of study' (Clavo 2014). For Clavo, neutralized artworks are dead artworks.

In order to reactivate the parole in verbatim theatre and to make the speech live and potent, time needs to happen on the stage. If the speaker from whom the parole is borrowed – that is, the 'Other' voice – falls out of the shared time of the professional artists and their audience, the research subjects end up being used as exotic objects, frozen in their natural state as 'real people'. Performance creators must endeavor to write the verbatim subjects into the same time that the professional performing artists and their audience inhabit.

Although performance art, or *live* art, claims to epitomize liveness and immediacy, it actually expresses the impossibility of guaranteed presence. With or without dramatic narrative, there is no promise of shared present time in performance art. Performances can also die. Hammond calls verbatim 'a



recontextualizing process' (Hammond 2011, 73), or rather asks if it could be called that. My answer would be yes, provided that recontextualizing also means *retemporalizing*; it must concern not only spatial but also temporal dimensions. The task of bringing time on stage, and of keeping the stage alive by activating the present tense, is exactly the task that demands artists' agency and creative skills. Dramaturges of verbatim performances should praise the act of listening and the capacity to hear. They must restore the temporality of the monologues, dialogues, or polylogues, and create a performance space defined by the possibility of coevalness and reciprocity. When we write and rewrite the reality, creativity is needed in order to lie less.

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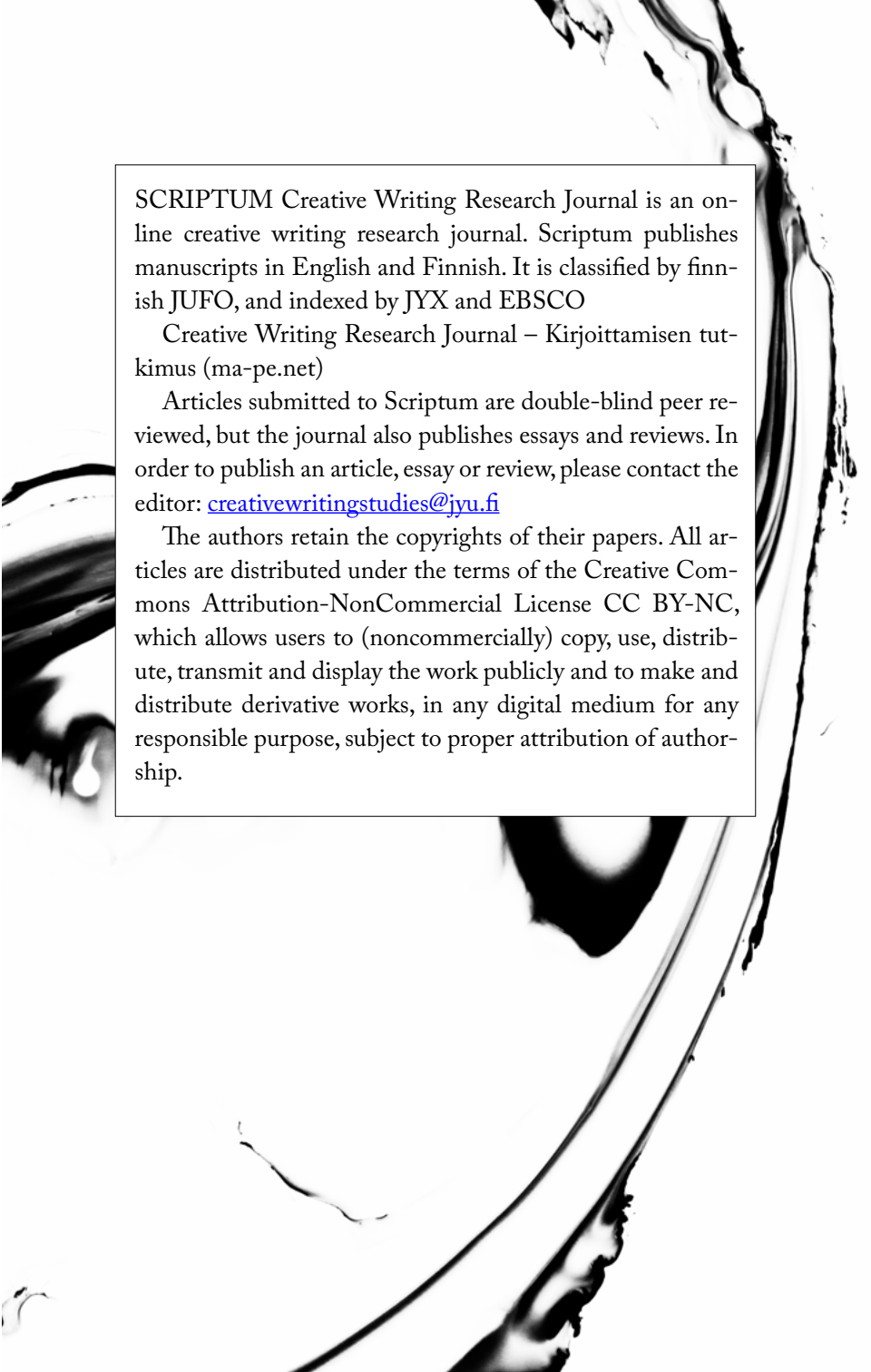
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### RESEARCH PERFORMANCE

Rinne, Nora. 2021. *Child Service - Lapsipalvelus*. Live art performance. Venue: Mad House Helsinki. Premiere 13.11.2021, six performances. Concept, composition, video, and artistic research: Nora Rinne. Choreography and directional guidance: Joono Halonen. Performers: Aale and Aarni Rinne, Oliver Tervolin, Okko Yli-Vakkuri, Katri Soini, Nora Rinne. Lighting design: Luca Sirviö and Okko Yli-Vakkuri. Building of the installation elements: Ilmari Paananen. Technical help: Viljami Lehtonen. Little Red Riding Hood adaptation by Aarni Rinne. Poem by Aale Rinne. Endings of the stories written by Aale and Aarni Rinne, Yli-Vakkuri and Tervolin. Duration: 45 min. Performance languages: Finnish and English. Child Service is the first artistic part of Nora Rinne's doctoral research project "Children and Childhoods in Intergenerational Performance Art" (University of the Arts Helsinki's Theatre Academy's Performing Arts Research Center). Supervisors: Tuija Kokkonen and Mika Ojakangas. The main funder of the research is Kone Foundation. Other funders of the performance and the research project: Art Promotion Center Finland, Otto A. Malm Foundation, Helsinki City, University of the Arts Helsinki's Performing Arts Research Centre.



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