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How Did I Get to Princess Margaret? (And How Did I Get Her to the World Wide Web?)

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Abstract: The paper explores the growing use of tools from the arts and humanities for investigation and dissemination of social science research. Emerging spaces for knowledge transfer, such as the World Wide Web, are explored as outlets for "performative social science". Questions of ethnics and questions of evaluation which emerge from performative social science and the use of new technologies are discussed. Contemporary thinking in aesthetics is explored to answer questions of evaluation. The use of the Internet for productions is proposed as supporting the collective elaboration of meaning supported by Relational Aesthetics.

One solution to the ethical problem of performing the narrations of others is the use of the writer's own story as autoethnography. The author queries autoethnography's tendency to tell "sad" stories and proposes an amusing story, exemplified by "The One about Princess Margaret" (see [Appendix](#)). The conclusion is reached that the free and open environment of the Internet sidelines the usual tediousness of academic publishing and begins to explore new answers to questions posed about the evaluation and ethics of performative social science.

Key words: *autobiography, autoethnography, ethics, evaluation, Internet, narrative, performative social science, relational aesthetics, World Wide Web*

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1. Background

A not so quiet revolution is currently taking place in the application of qualitative research in the social sciences. The use of tools from the arts and humanities, in both investigation of concerns and dissemination of data, is gaining critical mass (JONES, 2006). Photography, music, dance, poetry and so forth have been added to the researcher's investigative toolbox and "performance"—in the widest sense of the word—has become a catchphrase for the work of qualitative researchers no longer satisfied with typical PowerPoint conference presentations or journal restrictions. Those engaging in a new "performative social science" are changing these boundaries or pushing beyond them. These qualitative investigators are courageously developing arts-based research methods and dissemination techniques in order to both investigate deeper and reach wider audiences. This is good news, not only for participants in research studies, who can often be involved in producing subsequent performative reports, but also for the larger community to whom findings should be directed. [1]

Exploring the possibilities of a performative social science, for me, grew directly out of dissatisfaction with limitations in publication and presentation of my own biographic narrative

data (JONES, 2006). I began, therefore, to look to the arts and humanities for possible tools which might be transposed for use into new forms of dissemination of narrative interview material. In doing so, my presentations became "performative". My published work had begun to reflect this new aesthetic (see JONES, 2004) as well. My expectation was that these sorts of efforts will do two things:

1. honour the people who gave me interviews in the first place, and
2. find new audiences for these stories, thus insuring that they are not just buried in academic journals. [2]

Through this shift in my efforts, I began to reconstruct the interview in DENZIN's terms: "not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society" (DENZIN, 2001, p.24) where "text and audience come together and inform one another" (2001, p.26) in a relational way. In fact, LAW and URRY (2004) informed me that research methods in the social sciences do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it (2004, p.391). They are performative; they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover (2004, pp.392-93). Indeed, "to the extent social science conceals its performativity from itself it is pretending to innocence that it cannot have" (2004, p.404). French educator Pierre LÉVY (1991) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge and supports the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving and non-linear. This belief convinced me to eventually explore the World Wide Web as a new outlet for my performative works. [3]

2. Questions of Ethics

Performative social science creates new ethical questions for social scientists. Although interviewees normally agree to publication of their interview material (typically, in academic journals), what about the performance (and, therefore, further interpretation) of these materials and, indeed, their lives in other media? Should interviewees be included in approving, producing and even performing such "events"? Considering these ethical issues, I decided to investigate the use of autobiography as the raw material for a performative audio/visual production. My assumption was that by using myself and my own history, I could sidestep this particular ethical question and further develop my performative social science, subsequently returning to the original ethical question of performing the stories of others with fresh and alternative solutions based upon my own personal experiences. Initially, I felt a bit like the brave (or foolish?) scientist who first tries her/his vaccine on her/himself. [4]

3. Questions of Evaluation

At the same time, I began to explore the problems of evaluating our new performative social science. This grew out of the criticism that, in order to justify this work, it somehow needed to fit within a narrow framework of academic excellence and criteria. My gut reaction was that, no, different criteria are needed to judge these new endeavours. I decided that outputs using tools from the arts should be judged by an arts-based philosophy—aesthetics—and I began to look for contemporary thinking in aesthetics that had resonance with work which was beginning to appear that could be considered performative social science. I came upon the Relational Aesthetics of Nicolas BOURRIAUD (2002) which seemed to fit with what we are attempting. [5]

Building upon BOURRIAUD's relational principles, I am able to begin to reform the questions that we might ask of our work:

1. Do we consider the effects that our fabrications have on our audiences as well, allowing for their own participation in a dialogical, creative social exchange?
2. Do projects involve the public as co-creators of our work?
3. Is there is a preference for contact and tactility?

4. Are there elements of interactivity?
5. Do projects bring people together to increase understanding?
6. Do they achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another?
7. Do they encourage the reduction of the inter-personal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive and associative aspect of communication?
8. What does this new kind of contact produce? [6]

I felt that performative social science, like BOURRIAUD's relational art, could also capture inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality as proposed by BOURRIAUD. Evaluating our work in his terms:

- Projects are considered successful if the work allows us to take part in the dialogue.
- Works are judged in terms of the inter-human relations that the projects show, produce, or give rise to.
- Performances should occupy time, rather than occupying space.
- The emphasis should be on collaborations.
- Attention needs to be paid to concepts of improvisation and spontaneity.
- We evaluate projects' outcomes in terms of co-operation, relationship, community and a broad definition of public spaces. [7]

WITTGENSTEIN admonished, "Don't look for the meaning of things, look for their use" (cited in SIMPSON, 2001). Relational art always leaves space open for the viewer to complete the experience. Sometimes that space is silent too. SONTAG (1967, p.XIII) explains that the artist's pursuit of "silence" is provoked by a "perennial discontent with language" where "thought reaches a certain high, excruciating order of complexity and spiritual seriousness. [Words become] crude and dysfunctional". According to SONTAG, this compels artists to attempt to demote language to the status of an event; to administer "silence" as a form of cultural shock therapy. These philosophies encourage us to see our texts as a tools leading to performances, rather than text as an end in itself. Text becomes one stopping point along a continuum which also can include visual communication, music, dance, theatre and even silence. [8]

4. First Autoethnography, then Princess Margaret

Eventually, I got to autoethnography. Here's how. I create audio/visual productions based on my narrative interview work for use as conference presentations. Sometimes I am often asked about the "ethics" of "interpreting" through performance, someone else's story without their knowledge or specific permission. [*This sort of criticism ignores the assumed god given right of scholars to "interpret" as long as it is textual and buried in academic journals that no one reads much anyway.*] This seemed like a BIG question, nonetheless. I needed a creative answer to it. [9]

I began to read about autoethnography and joined the [email discussion list](#). I grappled with the question, what are the key components of "good" autoethnography? In doing so, I kept returning to one puzzling question: Why does it seem that autoethnographies so frequently tell "sad" stories? Is this one way of reaching an audience, by emotionally capturing it? I am not unfamiliar with sad stories in my narrative research and I have put a lot of energy into telling other people's sad stories in order to engage audiences. I wondered at the time, are there are other ways to write/perform autoethnography? Can you do autoethnography and tell a funny story or an amusing story? Will it still work and have the same impact? I concluded that I would like to investigate whether an amusing story of my own could capture an individual's identity in the swirl and context of time and place, portraying identity as socially constructed, impacted upon by historical and time effects. [10]

Thus, "The One about Princess Margaret" was born—a tale about one night in my life in 1965. I remembered having just told that story to a friend and I thought it would work well as a test

case of this particular question. In the process of writing it, I did a lot of the self-examination that any story based in our own experience requires. I confronted the tendency to gloss over small misrepresentations in order to put myself in a better light. I think I overcame that natural inclination. [11]

The story itself is a "party piece"—one that I have often told after dinners with friends. In performative pieces, I am particularly interested in how by focusing on and capturing a specific moment in time, the overarching gestalt of biographic narrators' lives can be expressed. By using the raw material of autoethnography, I quickly realised that I was confronted with creating—with a critical honesty—a reportage of "who I thought I was" at the time of the story. On the other hand, this story reinforces my belief that, in retrospect, our sense of self is fluid and flexible and always constructed by our experience in the present moment. [12]

As autoethnography, the piece describes its creator as a member of a culture at a specific time and place: being queer in 1965 on one night in New York City at a famous (straight) mod nightclub, "Arthur". Themes include being different, the celebration of being an outsider, seeing oneself from outside of the "norm", and the interior conflicts of "coming out" within a continuum as a (gay) male in a straight world. These observations are set within the flux and instability of a period of great social change, but which is often viewed in retrospect as consistent and definable. Being straight or being gay also can be viewed in a similar way within the wider culture's need to set up a sexual binary and force sexual "choice" decision-making for the benefit of the majority culture. Still, the piece does not unpack or analyse these phenomena, but rather, is descriptive, a reflective interpretation of the confusion and self-doubt that such rites-of-passage typically present for gay and lesbian youth. Moreover, the presentation itself engages its audience in its own introspection and interpretation in a creative way. As autoethnography, it documents minor transient personal moments of everyday life: something transitory, lasting a day. Through the device of the fleeting moment, the story interrogates the certainties and uncertainties of the "norms" of modernity and sexuality. [13]

5. Producing Princess Margaret

After several months of writing and rewriting, I then began the process of turning the script into an audio/visual presentation; that took another three months time. The audio/visual production ("The One about Princess Margaret" can be viewed and/or downloaded at <http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=876851065821614838&hl=en-GB>) pays tribute to DENZIN's post-modern narrative collage, the shattering of the traditional narrative line, a montage or *pentimento*—like jazz, which is improvisation—creating the sense that images, sounds and understandings blend together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. Audio and visual elements seem to shape and define one another and an emotional gestalt effect is produced. The images and sounds are seen as combined and running in swift sequence, producing a dizzily revolving collection of events around a central or focused sequence, thus signifying the passage of time (c.f. DENZIN, 2001, p.29). It is documentary in style, creating an illusion that the audience has direct access to a particular reality and a personal relationship with it. Words, sights and sounds become a means or method for evoking the character of the narrator and the time. [14]

"The One about Princess Margaret" has now been shown at four UK universities (Bournemouth, Sussex, Cambridge and Bristol) to receptive audiences. After I show it, audience members come up to me and start talking about where they were and who they were in the 1960s. Younger audience members excitedly relate it to their parents' generation—as though they have been given a special insight into their parents' pasts. One time, however, an audience member asked, "What about scholarship? Where's the scholarship?" I immediately replied, "It's in the footnotes!" (See the script with footnotes in the [Appendix](#)) What I meant by that was that the scholarship had been back grounded in order to foreground the more immediate experience of being a member of an audience, sitting in the dark without the usual academic expectations and with suspended disbelief. I believe that this approach produces possibilities for the reduction of the inter-personal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive and associative aspect of communication. What still pleases me most, how-

ever, is when someone wants to talk about "production values", software programmes, etc.—the "craft" of making it (more about this later in "9.") and some of the more subtle cultural references embedded in the piece. [15]

6. From Performance to the Wide World Web

During his six-week sojourn as a visiting scholar to the Centre for Qualitative Research at Bournemouth University in the Summer of 2006, Dr. Daniel DOMÍNGUEZ (see a report of Daniel's visit at <http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/ihcs/rescqrdrr.html>), first inspired me to upload the shortest of my video productions to the web (to *YouTube*, but later, I uploaded all of them to *Google Video* where the screen size is better and files are downloadable). When Daniel talked about *YouTube* that summer during his visit with us, I thought, well, put your work up and let's see what happens. [16]

Daniel was very right in his summation that it would be an experiment to see what the viewings would be and how the larger world would react. Some viewers emailed me and asked if it was okay for their students to download it or if they could use the video in their teaching. Of course I said yes. This is the nature of the web, a free and open platform. It is an environment which sidelines the tediousness of usual academic publishing, reviewing, and a hierarchical and closed club of academics too often protecting their own turf. Shortly following this success with the first video, I uploaded six more videos. As of this writing, more than 700 people have viewed Princess Margaret on line; nearly 5,000 viewers have watched all seven of my videos which were uploaded a year ago in September 2006. [17]

The exponential growth of the Internet presents challenges to the methodological-philosophical foundations of knowledge. At the very heart of this matter is knowledge transfer. As the network age dawned, groups with the same needs and interests began to communicate directly across vast distances without the need of publisher, broadcaster or knowledge mediator. When knowledge is inscribed on paper, it encourages a hierarchical system. In the world of the Internet, conductors of information find themselves made redundant along with editors, curators and ticket collectors. [18]

French educator Pierre LÉVY (1991) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge and supports the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving and non-linear. LÉVY states that since the end of the 19th Century the cinema has given us a kinetic medium for representation (LÉVY, 2003, p.3). In fact, "we think by manipulating mental models which, most of the time, take the form of images. This does not mean the images resemble visible reality, they are more of a dynamic map-making" (LÉVY, 2003, p.4). By extending our potential beyond the usual journals and books when seeking outlets for our findings, to new technologies and knowledge providers (such as fugitive literature, web pages, web logs, personal narratives) we open the doors to new understandings and resources. [19]

7. Then Why a Published Version of "The One about Princess Margaret"?

The reasons for a "published" version of the script of "The One about Princess Margaret" are two-fold; first, I wanted a written document that would act as a reference for the video production; second, I wanted to document the research that went into writing the script through the use of footnotes. Footnotes (rather than endnotes or no notes at all) harken the reader back to academic practice of the 1960s (the historical setting of the piece) when they were plentiful in scholarship. I also find that the use of footnotes on the page (as well as other "interjections" more generally such as boxes, comments, images, graphics, links, etc.) create an active dialogue between the author and the reader and this is something that I am also very interested in exploring. How do we "speak" to our readers when we write "academic" texts? How do we contribute to BARTHES' belief that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (BARTHES, 1967)? [20]

7.1 "What programme did you use? Where did you find the images?"

The use of the lyric from Bob DYLAN's song, "*Rolling Stone*", which opens the script (and is heard faintly in the backing track in the audio/visual) is ironic on several levels. The fact that he speaks of a "*princess on a steeple*" fits nicely with the story's title character. The "*pretty people, drinkin' thinkin' the got it made*" refers to youth culture (of any era) getting their first tastes of freedom, usually lubricated with alcohol. It is particularly ironic that the DYLAN song itself had its public debut in the same year and at the same location in which this story takes place (see footnote 1 [in the script](#)). [21]

The song, "*A day in the life of a fool*", becomes a leitmotif running throughout the production. For me, it represented in a paradoxical way how we view ourselves in retrospect. This particular rendition of the song uses the English lyric written for *Manha De Carnaval* (*Theme from "Black Orpheus"*) by Antonio Carlos JOBIM and Luis BONFA, recorded in the 1960s by SINATRA amongst others. The meaning of the lyric can represent a backward glance at the foolishness of youth, but also a reflection on the foolishness of fame and position in society that is represented in the narrative. The title line repeats throughout the storytelling, reminding the audience that this is only a day, only a memory of a day. The sequence that follows the narration, where contemporaneous photos, depicting the settings and characters alluded to by the narrator, flash by in rapid sequence, are accompanied by a contemporary modern version of the song playing in full on the soundtrack. The updated rendition of the song reminds the audience that youthful exuberance and perceived cultural changes are rites-of-passage for every generation. [22]

The technicalities of the production deserve mentioning. As DOMÍNGUEZ asks in another setting, "What programme did you use? Where did you find the images? ... It must have taken you a long time to do it, mustn't it? ..." (DOMÍNGUEZ, 2007, par.14). Very early in the process, while the script for the narration was just beginning to be written, a visual landscape of psychedelic projections came to mind as a backdrop for the narrative. I explored what was available, found a short (less than one minute) kaleidoscope moving image and then built the 20 minute long visualisation that forms the background to the storytelling upon this short piece, using software to morph and extend the initial graphic file to the 20 minutes required by the narration. I wanted to capture the mind-altering graphic projections of the 1960s, but also allow the narrator's voice to become the central focus, a bit like listening to a radio programme. Nonetheless, the psychedelic projections compel the audience forward towards the punch line and, finally, to the dénouement of flashing images that reinforce the narrated scenes previously only imagined. The hypnotic qualities of these projections were commented upon by many viewers after the performances. Snippets of pop songs (all original recordings from the year 1965) fade in and out during the narration. Sound effects produce the heightened atmosphere and underscore the narrative. [23]

The visual production begins with black and white psychedelics, slowly changing to colour, followed by a riot of colour then back to black and white at the end of the narration, just before the photographic images are shown. This lent a feeling of theatricality to the production and supported the mostly black and white photos in the final section. Photographs from the 1960s (including ones of the "characters" described by the narrator) were compiled to form this final part of the production—a three and a half minute photo montage in swift progression (DENZIN's post-modern narrative collage), accompanied by a contemporary rendition of the song, "*A Day in the Life of a Fool*". Early versions of the production were comprised of two parts: the visual images as films and stills embedded in a PowerPoint platform and the audio track engineered using Music Maker. Later, I combined the two parts (audio and visual) into a movie file using conversion software which was then uploaded to the Internet. [24]

The piece is 23 minutes long, exactly the same length as a primetime sitcom (without the commercials). The title itself is a play on the titles for "*Friends*" episodes (e.g., "The One Where Rachel Finds Out") and humorous stories ("*Have you heard the one about ...?*"). I wanted the production to be clearly placed within the genre of popular culture, but reinvent it for an academic setting. Most conference presentations allow for 30 minutes; this gave me just enough time for a short discussion following the 23 minute showing. [25]

8. Did I Answer my Questions?

Questions of the ethics and of evaluation of performative social science began this discussion. I wondered about performing the stories of others, seeking their permission (even their participation in the production), then sidestepped this issue by using my own story instead. This personal journey has been an interesting one—being open about who I am, telling others who I am in an audience setting and then, finally, opening up my story to the whole world through the Internet. It has been a procedure and exercise in gaining a sense of personal security at each stage of the process. Incorporating such a staged progression of involvement and reflection when seeking permission to use and include the narrations of others in our performances seems one way to tackle this ethical issue. By engaging with those whom we study in a "process" of production, they will be afforded opportunities to decide what to reveal/how much to reveal to an audience. This experience itself can prove transforming and self-affirming for them. [26]

In evaluating the piece, I ask, "What does this new kind of contact produce?" In this case, by moving the piece from writing to production to performance and, finally, to the World Wide Web and an international audience, I was able to produce a work which is malleable, open-ended and changing and that included feedback and revision at every step of the journey. Fortunately, the use of technology makes this kind of contact practical, intuitive and associative. Terms such as co-operation, relationship, community and a broad definition of public spaces (particularly the virtual space of the Internet) were foregrounded, encouraging me to see my text as a tool leading to performance, lending new powers to ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experiences. [27]

I asked if there are other ways to write autoethnography that might include telling a funny or amusing story. "The One about Princess Margaret" is just that—a one-liner really (*"I didn't mind at all, giving up my seat for your friend"*) told as a "shaggy dog" story. The first time that the production was shown, it played to a silent audience. Afterwards in discussion, one audience member commented that he didn't feel that he had permission to laugh in an academic setting. Sad as this was, in future showings to academic audiences I introduced the audio/visual by giving the audience permission to laugh. This phenomenon may be, in fact, at the crux of the matter and why it seems so much more humanising to find alternative outlets for our work, including the Internet. [28]

As autoethnography, I think that the piece meets BENNETT's (2004) requirements:

- An analytical/objective personal account
- About the self/writer as part of a group or culture
- Often a description of a conflict of cultures
- Often an analysis of being different or an outsider
- Usually written to an audience not a part of the group
- An attempt to see self as others might
- An opportunity to explain differences from the inside
- An explanation of how one is "othered" [29]

Recently, I was listening to a radio programme and was startled to hear a piece by a classical composer who was unknown to me. I say "startled" because my hubris assumes that I have heard just about all of the classical composers after a lifetime of listening to music. The composition was Alfred SCHNITTKE's (1934-1998) "Concerto for Choir". I scurried to the Internet to find out about him. Noted, above all, for his hallmark "polystylistic" musical idiom, SCHNITTKE wrote in a wide range of genres and styles. The composer once said, "The goal of my life is to unify serious music and light music, even if I break my neck in doing so". Ah, I identify with that! To paraphrase SCHNITTKE: *"The goal of my life is to unify serious scholarship and popular culture, even if I break my neck in doing so"*. "The One about Princess Margaret"—the research, the original script, the hours of production involved in the audio/visual presentation, the performances and feedback from audiences and, finally, its rebirth within the community and broadly defined public spaces of the World Wide Web—

contributes to a performative social science and a *relational* scholarship with renewed signs of vitality, sociability and yes, even fun. [30]

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Appendix

[The One about Princess Margaret](#) (PDF file, 67 kb)

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