

The Queer Afterlives of Texts

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I first met her on my birthday at the breakfast table. I had wanted to talk to her the day before but the ever-changing constellations of conversations around us killed the possibility. There was always someone else who grabbed her with words, always someone else who cornered me with an endless exchange of niceties. She appeared so frail, so fragile, so far away. And then suddenly she was there sitting beside me.

“Happy birthday! Are Leos really good keepers of hearth and home?”

She is Art, I am Academia, both shifting and balancing between small and capital As. Serious representatives of our fields – or at least aspiring to be – and caricatures of ourselves at the same time, blown out of all proportion. We speak in separate tongues, light years apart. Twisting, turning, touching, almost, but not quite. She sends me photos, I send her texts. She is puzzling, obscure, intimate, fragmentary, elusive. I am self-explanatory, overcautious with words, distant, but appear to be complete, together. Two mismatched worlds, each unsure about the other. She has what I have been looking for. She is what I have been looking for. A case study, an object/subject of analysis, ample material for testing theories and methodologies. I have what she yearns for with her body. Words, concepts, theories, explanations. (Koobak 2013, 119)

Four years after I published my thesis *Whirling Stories: Postsocialist Feminist Imaginaries and the Visual Arts* (2013) on Estonian queer feminist artist Anna-Stina Treumund, the artist took her own life, after years of struggling with depression. In utter shock and deep grief, I posted a part of the text above on social media. An interlude in the thesis, it captures my memories of the moment when we first met at a three-day feminist workshop in a small coastal village in the north-west of Estonia. Through an ethnographic engagement with Treumund’s photographic self-portraiture, the thesis explored the role of geopolitics and visual arts in producing feminist knowledge about time, space, gender and sexuality. In the process, we became good friends; which as many feminist researchers know, poses multiple challenges for research. Interested in the margins, the interstices, the spaces in between, I wrote a rather experimental thesis, putting experiences, bodies, subjectivities, words, and images at the centre of attention, while never losing sight of context.

Reposted after her death, the excerpt took on a new life; it became a eulogy of sorts, offering the Estonian feminist and queer community who mourned her words for the feelings of loss when I had none at that moment. People quickly responded; the post was viewed and shared widely, and when the Estonian feminist blog *Feministeerium* asked to repost it on their website,¹ along with a dreamy black and white self-portrait of the artist with her eyes closed, it turned into a meditative, poetic farewell. When our writings move across time and space and are encountered in new contexts, unexpected novel aspects come to light, while other things become obscured. Most of all, her death and the text now brought up a whole range of raw emotions.

Put in a new setting, it not only filled a sudden void and lent words to grief in a moment of need, but also made me rethink my collaboration with the artist, the aims of my research

project, and the very way I wrote my thesis. How is it that the first hello could read like it had always been the last goodbye?

Anna-Stina's untimely death evoked complicated feelings in me, as both friend and researcher. I was consumed by guilt, shame and sadness as I wondered if in the process of doing research and writing my book, I had not, in fact, missed something. I questioned, as researchers often do, whether I had given a "full" account of her. Even if I had aimed to write openly and in an embodied way, I was now haunted by the idea that I might have downplayed some topics and silenced certain emotions when I was writing. As Avery Gordon (2008) writes, "[b]eing haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition" (p. 8). In the past few years, I have revisited my fieldnotes, re-played my conversations with the artist in my head (it still felt too soon to re-listen to my recorded interviews with her) and re-read the book to make sense of the whirlwind of emotions. In this essay, I thus consider what a "posthumous reading" of my research on the artist might offer other feminist researchers. Through tracing and unpacking my emotions surrounding the work I did with and on the artist, I want to stay with the trouble and argue for the importance of emotions in reflexive research beyond the paralyzing effects of guilt.

Looking for Signs

The day I heard of Anna-Stina's passing, I was teaching a chapter from my thesis on the affinities between her art and queer temporalities and amidst a whole range of emotions, I was overcome by regret. Regret that despite having worked with her closely over many years and becoming friends while doing research, I had not seen the "signs". Had I (dis)missed her fight with depression? Had I been insensitive to her struggles? Should I have *known*? What difference would it have made if I had? Could I have done something to prevent it? I kept going over her last email, sent on the day she took her own life, in my mind. Now in retrospect, it all made sense. She wanted to gift me a series of artworks I had written about. When I asked if she was sure – I had indeed planned to buy them – she said yes. In response to my question about how she was doing, she wrote the ominous words: "I'm feeling determined, happy and scared". My prompt and concerned reply yielded no answer. Re-reading the message later, I felt that I understood: this was her getting ready, taking care of the fate of her artworks. This was an expression of gratitude for our friendship and collaborations. This was her good-bye.

On my way home, disoriented from the shock of the news, when getting off at a stop I thought was going to be mine, I found myself in a metro station I had never been to before. Five stops from the central station. While my math was correct, I had gotten on the wrong train. The world didn't make sense under the weight of her loss. Tracing my steps back to where I had gone wrong, I thought of the catalogue, the accompanying small publication from the last exhibition that Anna-Stina had given me a month earlier, the last time I saw her. Since then, it had sat on my coffee table, unopened. As soon as I got home, I frantically screened the catalogue's artist interview, looking for clues. There they were, at the very beginning, her words:

I see myself and my actions as a whole.

My art, my activism and my private life are all means of communication and they all speak a queer-feminist language.

This summer I will be 35 and I have been puzzled for a long time: over the last 13 years, I have had the luck of studying, saying what I think and feel, using my art and other activities to start discussions about the LGBTQI community, I have exchanged my biological family for a political one, I have opened personal exhibitions, offered a home for many cats waiting for one and I found my princess Pipi, who works as a surgeon, on a horse, but I still label myself as an unemployed housewife who is an ex-photographer and swallows pills.

This gives rise to a comedic situation when the employee at the unemployment office doesn't know where to place me or where a taxi driver says that lesbians aren't truly lesbians.

Or when the money received from the Cultural Endowment for a personal exhibition actually goes to the construction shop and people framing my works.

I inevitably feel that I'm in a no-man's-land and can be used. (Artel and Treumund 2017, 1)

The signs of her pain had always already been there, in the words. Now they both haunted me and comforted me. I had to break a space between the sentences to leave some air for the pain to breathe, to feel the impact of each word:

I think the best title would be a "queer/feminist artist from the post-Soviet world".

All of these words hold a negative meaning for people.

At the same time, since there are not many of us, there are no rules or traditions and I can do what I want.

It feels like the 1990s. (Artel and Treumund 2017, 1)

Would I have read these words with the same sense of eeriness had I read them when I first received the publication? I don't think so. There is always more meaning in our texts than we intend, always more to be uncovered. All texts are continually changing. Yet, there is nothing like death to make us aware of the instability of meaning, the layers of meaning.

Backtracking my thoughts and memories of that day, those emotions, the frantic search for clues in the hope of making sense of this enormous loss, I was not able to stay with the silences. What had I left out? Put aside? Omitted? My own silences kept slipping away. I circled around them, not daring to go too near, afraid of what addressing potential gaps and erasures would *really* entail.

Eventually I noticed that I stopped myself in the process of looking for signs of *knowing*. I resorted too quickly to the conclusion that I had not known of her death wish even if I recognized that the signs were there. It was easier to put them aside. File them away. Done. I'm done. But these silences, my silences, kept nagging me, insisting on finding a voice, a space out in the open. Counting the number of drafts, this must be at least the 14th attempt to

stay on the topic of silences. Getting over the feeling of being stuck becomes unbearable. Writing this is not a linear, clearly bounded process.

So, I scratch most of the text and start again.

“To begin (writing, living) we must have death”, writes Hélène Cixous in *Three Steps of the Ladder of Writing*, “The School of the Dead” (Cixous 1994, 7). When I first read that book in a PhD course on writing, I took her to mean death in a metaphorical sense – even if I knew that Cixous also referred to the actual death of her father.

Now I ask: What does it mean to begin writing, again, with Anna-Stina’s death? What kind of writing does her death allow, make possible, or even demand? How has my perception of her art changed now that I can no longer consult with her? How does my perception of my thesis change with it? What are the silences and myopias revealed by her death?

I remember now. I *knew*. I had always known. The truth is that I could not have written about it, not then.

Writing with Insider Knowledge

OMG, what did I do? So sorry, I’m very clumsy today. I spilled influence all over, contaminated my research data, ruined the results! She read my text, she responded. She asked me if she should change her title. She asked me if she should change. Am I allowed to affect my research subject, to mess with her mind? Can I analyze and criticize her art project idea before it makes it to the gallery? Can I teach her, give her advice, point out what I think are her theoretical blindspots and then write it into my thesis? Who am I to guide Art?

But what if she asks for it? What if she wants to be taught, criticized, pushed further? I don’t understand her. I don’t understand art. She hides it all so well between the lines. She is teaching me, isn’t she? We are both each other’s teachers. Where do we draw the line? Would we necessarily have to be bounded? (Koobak 2013, 120)

During the thesis writing process I wrestled immensely with the question of ethics. Since we became friends while I conducted research, I constantly questioned what belonged to her private life, what thoughts she relayed to me as a friend and what belonged to, or could be turned into, the context – “the stuff” – of research. The blurring of boundaries was dizzying, so I made a conscious choice to write about these ethical conundrums and challenges, often in the form of those small lyrical interludes, side stories of sorts, hovering in the background, yet always with important repercussions to the main story.

Writing this essay demands that I relive the impact of her sudden passing on my research, on our friendship. It happens in stages.

At first, there is surprise at the absurdity of my conviction, that my interlude-turned-eulogy must have contained something that subconsciously had monumentalized her art, her activism, uplifted her in a way that obituaries of artists often do. How else could I explain the way my thesis words lent themselves so easily to being mobilized as a eulogy in a moment of grief?

Then there was a long moment of puzzled disbelief: I couldn't have known, could I? A long, long period of avoidance to really think about it, followed by a revelatory shock: I *had* known.

I knew of Anna-Stina's struggles and of her suicide attempts and I chose to not write about them. I chose *not* to know. The shock of her death is not so much about "I wish I had known" as it is the shock of realizing "I had known" all along and chosen to be silent about it.

Now what?

What was and is my responsibility as a friend who got to know of her struggles and what was and is my responsibility as a researcher who got to know of the struggles of a "queer/feminist artist from the post-Soviet world" (Artel and Treumund 2017, 1)? Is my *knowing* this as a friend different from my *knowing* as a researcher?

It is that silence, suppressing that knowledge, that haunts me, a certain sense of guilt but also shame.

When I return to my thesis, which I haven't been able to since the shocking news over five years ago, I realize that part of my grieving process has involved constructing a story in my head about how the thesis *never* mentions Anna-Stina's precarity and struggles with depression. Grief has made me believe that the thesis denies that part of her reality and that I shouldn't have done that, while guilt has convinced me that I do not present a "full picture" of her.

Reading it again I find that the truth is I *did* write about it.

In another interlude, reflecting ambivalences around how to address Anna-Stina's art in the context of the "lag" narrative that is used to frame Eastern European feminist art and activism, I describe meeting her friend Minna Hint, a documentary film maker and artist on my way to Anna-Stina's exhibition opening.

I find this curious comment:

On a small side note, almost a year later, when I accidentally saw Minna's film, conspicuously entitled "Gross National Happiness" on TV, I discovered that it was in fact Anna-Stina who was one of the "unhappy artist friends" interviewed in the film. Not that I had not known about Anna-Stina's struggles, but somehow seeing her interviewed on TV, talking about very personal battles with depression, I felt she suddenly stood in stark contrast to that strong-willed woman, boldly looking back from the pictures of the You, Me and Everyone We Don't Know exhibition where she seemed to be challenging the viewers, holding the remote control of the camera, head held high, fully in charge, utterly passionate about women's agency and their right to self-expression, not least importantly through sexuality. (Koobak 2013, 130)

It is not just that I knew – the whole world knew! She had not shied away from sharing her experience, even publicly on national TV. How does this become a side note in the narrative that I construct? And how have I blocked writing about it from my memory? The thesis is so centred on her struggles for recognition as a queer and lesbian feminist artist and my own

struggles as a feminist scholar from postsocialist Eastern Europe trying to find an opening in the Western feminist theory that does not place her or me as always already lagging behind.

I had my own agenda.

Should I have been even more thorough, more elaborate, more centred on her depression, her precarity, to give a fuller picture? What *is* the full picture? Does it become fuller, a full circle, only after death?

Yet no matter how much “you” disclose yourself, “I” disclose myself, “we” disclose ourselves – “you”, “me” and “everyone” we know or do not know can never reach full disclosure. Even with these strikingly public self-revelations, both in her photographs and in her friend’s documentary, there is a lot that remains unknown and inaccessible, even to herself. There are only new webs of relations to be formed, new layers of meaning to be woven together. (Koobak 2013, 130)

My thesis was thus not just a critical close reading of the artistic production and imagination of an artist. It was an (auto)ethnographic study that aimed to carve out a conceptual and discursive space for postsocialist feminist imaginaries. I did that by drawing heavily both on my dialogic engagement with Anna-Stina and my reflections upon various art exhibitions and conferences on feminism and queer activism that I attended at the time.

Yet, in her death, even with all this embodied reflection and open discussion of the instability of meaning, of risks, [of accountability], of vulnerability, it still feels like my work was dominated by my own agenda. Can a researcher ever be without agenda? Did mine have any harmful effects, even if I was careful to avoid them? What kind of meaning does that agenda have for me now?

Just as I had forgotten that I wrote about her depression and precarity in the thesis, I had forgotten that we did two photoshoots, not just one, where she wanted me to pick a feminist figure from Estonian history that I would like to enact for her new photo series. What I will never forget is that in between those two photoshoots I experienced a severe burnout and Anna-Stina was one of the friends to help me through it. She understood breakdown in the academic world in a way that many did not. Perhaps I forgot about one of the photoshoots because I was in that blurred state of being on the brink of falling apart. Perhaps revealing that was never even an option in a thesis – after all, it was supposed to be about Anna-Stina and not so much about me. Yet where do we really draw the line between life and research?

Writing with life, death and survival

*“Death enters into the life of the survivor, making the latter the long-term subject of death, the continuous subjective locus of that which has happened to another but which now ‘lives’ in the permanently bereaved.”
(Pollock 2013, 21)*

There was a moment in her apartment after the funeral with her mother and family and friends. My book was there on the table. Her mother didn’t know me or some of the other people in the room, so there was a bit of awkwardness. We did a round of introductions. I told her mother “I’m the researcher who wrote a book about Anna-Stina. *This* book on the

table.” It suddenly had an entirely different meaning. It wasn’t just my thesis anymore; it was a book about an artist that will monumentalize her in some way. A book written perhaps prematurely – usually someone’s *oeuvre* is not judged until they have passed away. More will surely be written about her art but there will never be another book in such close dialogue with her. In that moment after the funeral I felt that I had had too much of my own agenda in the book, and not enough of hers.

She did tell me things as a friend. But would I have been able to write about her as an artist the way I did if she hadn’t become my friend? Perhaps my work can also be viewed as a gift I am giving back to her. Maybe she is making me responsible for things that I am not responsible for. But she is also giving me the responsibility. What to do with these blurred boundaries? How can we think about them ethically?

Anna-Stina Treumund, who more than anyone has enabled “my feminist writing otherwise to perform the feminist gesture of breaching the rigid separation of knowledge from experience, thought from affect” (Pollock 2013: 23), keeps challenging me as a scholar even after her passing. It took me a long while to arrange to pick up the *Mutsu* series she bequeathed me. I couldn’t immediately face the artwork in my grief. From where I was sitting at the table after the funeral, I could see these works packed, on top of a closet, with my name written on them. Just like she had prepared them days – hours? – before her death. And here we were, sitting in the very same room where it happened. I wasn’t ready. Then, suddenly, two years later, when the series finally made its way to my living room wall, Anna-Stina’s presence became a part of my daily life. With it, I made peace with my grief. It doesn’t feel like she *was*. It feels like she *is* and always will be.

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ⁱ <https://feministarium.ee/she-is-art-treumund/>