Brennan 2022, Internal report ”Abstract Narration: Am I Human?”

Summary report for the “Abstract Narration”, cluster research project
With sub-project “Am I Human?” sub-project “
Reported by: Adjunct professor Thomas Brennan
Film and Media department, SKH

1. Introduction
In January, 2021 the Stockholm University of the Arts research center approved the funding for the cluster research project, “Abstract Narration”, a collaboration consisting of Mamdooh Afdile, Anders Bohman, Klas Dykhoff, and Thomas Brennan who proposed conducting four pilot studies in the area of abstract narrative storytelling. Our proposal’s abstract was as follows:

“We are four artists/educators who find artistic abstraction relevant to our media art practices. We share the belief that abstract narratives have been underutilized and underappreciated when it comes to audiovisual storytelling. We wish to pursue this debate about abstraction through our unique approaches to artistic research and with research questions related to abstraction and the communication of a story, abstraction and identity, and abstraction of the body/self. Working collectively to realize four individual research results in film, live performance, and performance documentation. our intention is to reignite a discourse around abstract representation and its potential to contribute to storytelling.”

This report presented here will summarize the sub-project entitled, “Am I Human?” (created in collaboration with Robert Hyman, assistant professor of musical figuration, and electronic music composer, Christoph Abé).

2. Project’s Aim
My research question: How is the role and power of abstraction, in the performance of identity, accomplished?

My aim is to seek out that space where identity, character development, and social interaction studies are occurring. To develop a system of analysis capable of measuring the communicative efficiency of a performance, a rehearsal or workshop. In provoking reflection about one’s self image, I acknowledge the power of the abstract strategies we use to maintain that image, that identity, that character who faces the world. Another aim is to perform the body as a location for abstraction, creating narrative lines across multiple scenes. I have approached this project with the intent of connecting an abstract narrative with identity construction and the abstract, performative nature of identity.

My aim is to investigate the body as a location for abstraction, and to reveal the abstract, social, and fluid constructions we use in the formation of an identity. My purpose is to provoke reflection about one’s self-image and to acknowledge the power of our abstract choices to (re)shape the character with which to face an audience or a viewer. As an
amputee I have a unique perspective on body-image, the construction of a self-image, and the performative nature of identity.

Using the methods and techniques from live stage and performance work, the one scene opera will reflect the findings of several weeklong development and improvisational sessions with collaborators in parallel with the pursuit of an academic presentation on scientific grounds.

My prosthesis is an abstraction, not the ‘real me’. How hard is it to present myself as a ‘whole’? It is safe to say that we all craft our self-image through the abstract choices we make in order to fulfill our day-to-day interactions. Such abstractions include, clothing styles, color choices, hair styles, shoe type, ...and any of the appliances needed to see, walk, hear, breath, etc., any of the things which makes us unique and identifiable to others. Who are we when all of our abstractions are peeled away? Are we finally ourselves?

As a knowledge-creating endeavor, to abstract something means to take it out of its normative context. Duchamp’s urinal, collage/assemblage, Cunningham choreography, Beckett’s theater, and Cindy Sherman’s photographic portraits all reflect the power of abstraction to make meaning while at the same time transcending context.

3. Method
I identified the key themes and concepts and using literature searches, narrowed down the focus to an area where identity, performance, and disability overlap. Using my written reflections and in collaboration with an opera singer and music composer, a script developed and we began improvisational sessions.

The exploration of identity, disability and performance through the mix of research literature and interactive improvisation revealed new ways of developing characters. There was also an increased understanding of the motivations of disabled people who do performance work as well as the normative reactions.

4. Results
Practically, this project has generated the material and pedagogic foundation for future workshops, elective and program course modules. Additionally, further research funding into identity formation, revelation, and transformation has been acquired. I discovered a deeper common sense about the abstract nature of live storytelling, and that these abstractions utilize powerful identifiers to guide the audience/viewer through the particular re-enactment in front of them.

As an experience designer with a strong interest in interaction research, this study helped to discover and reinforce an understanding of the mechanisms utilized by ourselves and our characters during a storytelling expression of identity. In addition, the choice to pursue an opera form was done because of opera’s nature to immediately heighten the scene.

Finally, using sociological theories based around multi-modal conversation analysis and the accomplishment of identity (both personal and surroundings), this research relies on the audience/viewer’s ability to build associations into recognizable settings and assumptions about character intentions and motivations. Using these initial findings about the abstract
nature of manipulating audience expectations and assumptions to research the interactional mechanisms required and accomplished by theater/media designers.

Through investigations into the performative aspects of identity, I found that with hidden disability specifically, there is a powerful urge to control the revelation of such an identity due to the seen and unseen, the imaginable and unimaginable consequences of such a revelation. In the follow up to the live on Zoom presentation made during SKH’s research week in January, 2022, I was approached by several of the attendees who expressed their unknowingness of my particular disability due to its hidden nature while at the same time offering their own revelation about a chronic illness, mental or physical. It is this location, the afterwards, that my research seeks to develop further.