

## **Am I Human?**

A written project summary by Thomas Brennan, Stockholm University of the Arts.  
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### **Purpose:**

“Am I human? is an exploration into the performative possibilities of identity construction, revelation, and transformation from a disabled and post human perspective. I limited my concerns to 4 themes: identity, disability, performance, and post-humanism. I am attempting to provoke reflection about the assumptions we make and expectations we have when we are introduced to live and mediated identities, (characters). I start from the premise that identity is both an abstraction and a storytelling pursuit and has relevance in the performative space for disabled artists specifically. This project is also a reflective one intended to explore my own hidden disability. The stories I want to tell are abstracts of my life and pivot around the absurdity of identities as they are constructed, revealed, or transformed. I am also looking to pursue through scenic and staged interpretations, the larger idea of a human identity and what it means to be human and to portray our various and unique positions on the spectrum of humanity and human identity. Other objectives include the challenging of normative perceptions of identity, of amplifying marginalized voices, and contributing insights into the performativity of identity from a hidden disability perspective.

### **Method:**

My methods are a mix of academic research into the journals, research visits, and writings within identity, disability, performance, interaction, and posthumanist studies. Running parallel to the academic research are methods based in theater traditions such as improvisational sessions, rehearsals, and the interaction analysis of these theatrical methods. Driving these methods is my systematic work in an art practice based on live performance.

Specific method areas included:

- communications with several international dance, theater, and opera companies who work with disabled performers.
- a one week writing workshop at Bard College in New York entitled, “Creative Nonfiction: Hybrid Narratives and the Power of Voice”. This workshop allowed me to focus on developing the librettos for both scenes.
- a visit to composer, Miguel Noya’s Venezuelan farm-studio. We discussed post-humanist approaches to music and performance in addition to experimenting with various sound triggering devices and software.
- After a year and a half pause, Robert Hyman (SKH Opera Program Vocal teacher), Christoph Abé (drum and bass composer), and myself began meeting and reimagining the transformation salon scene. We added two sopranos, a short prelude scene, and transformed the ending.

### **Primary results:>>**

Early in my research, I limited my search on disability to hidden disabilities with one study by Evans (2019) shows that individuals employ multiple disclosure strategies,

while another study by Aimee Velarus proposed that, quote, “Persons with a hidden disability ... make daily decisions about which identity to embody. They are constantly negotiating when, where, why, and how to disclose and adopt the disability identity... These decisions have reverberating implications for one’s whole self-concept and social relationships” Likewise, there are performative expectations for people with hidden disabilities to perform as normatively as possible, and a similar standard is enforced for those visibly disabled, an expectation of disabled performativity. Fitzgerald and Paterson (1995) and Scott (2010) argue that for the disabled person, there are performative aspects to their identity that are unique and problematic.

Through the conversations with performing arts companies that utilize disabled performers I gained a better understanding of the different approaches one could use in the depiction of disability, as well as the broad scope of possibilities when developing concepts and characters. In relation to our sound triggering experiments, our intention was to have the cradle scene populated by a series of sensor based triggers. However, our research never fully reached the practical application stage. Also, I intended to use the multi-modal interaction analysis tools used in micro-sociological studies. These tools would be used to analyze the interactions between collaborators during our creative work processes with the goal of gaining a better understanding of how we as people construct and transform our identities/characters/compositions within a particular context. However, for various reasons, the project began and continued to be a series of one-on-one meetings with me and the 3 main collaborators. At the time it did not feel suitable for analysis and the recording sessions were abandoned.

#### **References:**

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