

**Pearl Diving for the Fabled Artist:
An Interview with Marius Presterud**
by Oslo Apiary's Eco-philosophical Radio Station

Abstract: *In this interview with Oslo Apiary eco-philosophical radio channel, Marius Presterud (artist, poet, Cand. Psychol.) describes the process of making the first part of the work series Pearl Diving. In Pearl Diving, swallowed pearls are located and extracted from the artist's body. Presterud describes the production procedure, how the work was inspired by his interdisciplinary background, and offers his reflections on Somaesthetics. Interview took place in Oslo, 11.09.2015*

Keywords: *Pearl Diving, somaesthetics, embodied art, immersed articulation, cross-disciplinary art, video-art, health, psychology, gastroscopy, Oslo Apiary*

This interview took place via chat between Marius Presterud (artist, poet, Cand. Psychol.) and Mikkel Dagestad, September 2015. It was construed as a pilot for Oslo Apiary's eco-philosophical radio channel, a social oriented art practice run by the duo. In the interview, Presterud describes his experience from the process of making part one of the work series *Pearl Diving*, where swallowed pearls are located and extracted from the artist's body. Presterud describes the procedure, how the work was inspired by his interdisciplinary background, and offers his reflections on Somaesthetics from the perspective of a clinical psychologist.

Oslo Apiary (OA): Welcome new listeners. Today we will be talking about pearls. Presterud: "Culture pearls!" That is to say, they are freshwater pearls from oysters that have been cultivated to develop pearls by having small grains of sand force-fed into their shell. Traditionally, pearls were harvested from oyster banks, but for the last hundred years, culture pearls have flooded the market, making it hard to economically justify harvesting them patiently from the sea. They're still surprisingly expensive though.

OA: You've told me the first question everyone asks, is how did you get this done?

Marius Presterud (MP): I had the procedure done at the gastrolab at Oslo University Hospital, Ullevål.

OA: Did you just ask them?

MP: Basically. I sent them an e-mail. But of course, that they knew I was a health professional doing an art project and that must've given me some good-will.

OA: Were you scared?

MP: Oh, I was worried. There is always a risk of complications; stomachs have been punctured

by cam sticks in the past. And that the gastrolab answered “yes” without much hassle, also made me contemplative. But the doctor and his assistant nurse gave off a good presence and you could tell they had obviously done similar procedures on drug smugglers an innumerable amount of times, so that kept me calm. I had a photographer with me as well, Margit Selsjord, who had worked as an assistant at a gastrolab during her studies, so I had a chance to talk through the whole séance with her before arriving. She brought a simple looking analogue camera so as to not stress the doctor and nurse. I’d say it was well prepared. What I wasn’t prepared for though, was how unpleasant it would be. It’s not as much a tube, as a cane, that you are asked to swallow. A cane with a bulbous fish lens at the end that goes down your throat, and once it’s in, you’re supposed to keep breathing, which you can, because nothing’s blocking your windpipe, only your stomach tract. It was surprisingly disturbing.

OA: So this is your stomach. Did it need to be a human stomach? Could it have been a pig’s stomach or someone else’s for it to work conceptually?

MP: My dad owns a swine. And no, not for me. As both viewer and participator, my own experience of the procedure was an inseparable part of the work for me. I was being presented live images of my own insides and you don’t get to experience that that often in depth and in lengthy dosages. There is a lot going on in there. An engulfment in me, bubbling with activity, with pulsating muscles, writhing tubes, bile filled, acid filled, violent, dark, ever churning. And literally - through my outer appearance - contained. We have little control of what’s going on inside of us most of the time, and since we place high value on self-control and self-containment, we spend time covering these things up. We hide our sweat-stains, wipe away our tears and feel ashamed when our stomach growls. The body humbles us. And with our intestines especially, we are confronted with our pitiful interdependence on the world and its messiness. So let’s dive inside, you know?

I attempted to make room for some of that vulnerability as I let parts of myself that was beyond my control and projected identity be filmed. I had no idea if it would go well, how it would look down there, where the pearls had landed. I had given the doctor next to no narrative to work with, knew little about the equipment or quality of the film, and was unable to instruct during filming, making the authorship of the raw material somewhat open-ended.¹

OA: What was it like seeing yourself from the inside?

MP: In appearance, my stomach has an aspect of the abject² to it. It has shapelessness and disorder as its form language. It’s something I have a hard time recognizing as myself, but that I am forced to recognize. My insides are both subject and object at the same time, and I’m still not quite sure if anyone else should see it or not? It feels private, even though it’s just a continuation of my mouth, maybe because I can’t control the look of the parts that are being exposed. I’m still kind of shameful every time the camera passes my pyloric valve. And I take an illogical amount of pride in how healthy pink my stomach lining looks. I automatically take responsibility for things that are contextual in origin. These introspections supplemented my understanding and further analysis of the imagery produced. And there, lying in my rampaging midst, the pearl with its radiant beauty, perfection and circular integrity. Mirroring me mockingly.

OA: It is both extremely disgusting and fascinating at the same time.

1 Note, the video has been edited for presentation and sound has been added.

2 Kristeva J., (1982). Powers of horrors: An essay on abjection. New York, Columbia University Press.
Descriptive link: <https://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/61009.pdf>

MP: Don't you think I'm beautiful?

OA: I've seen you describe Pearl Diving, part 1 as a Somaesthetic exploration of a contemporary, Western model of selfhood. What is Somaesthetics, and how is your work a Somaesthetic exploration?

MP: Yeah. I may have appropriated the term somewhat haphazardly at this point, but why be so academic about it. I adopted it from a lecture held by Richard Shusterman at Kunstneres Hus this spring,³ seeing it as a fitting term for describing strivings at moving past verbal language and signs as a way of understanding and appreciating art's irreducibility, relying on the inseparability of our cerebral and bodily register in an attempt to match this irreducibility. Was that coherent? I found the term snug for describing PD#1 after reading *Journal of Somaesthetics* (Vol:1, Nbr:1, 2015). Which, to my delight, also introduced me to Stelarc's "Stomach Sculpture" from 1993.

OA: I think it would help if you were a bit more concrete.

MP: For me, Somaesthetics's most interesting and useful contribution comes through Shusterman's distinction between representational foregrounding and experimental foregrounding. As I've understood it, the latter becomes relevant to the degree that an artwork requires the self-directed perception on the part of the recipient for aesthetic appreciation. This suggests that experimental foregrounding may be mediated in at least two ways: One, by the degree that a work evokes or relies upon engagement on the part of the perceptive recipient. Two, by the recipient's personal receptivity. Which raises the topic of how different people can be differently receptive to experience art, depending on their relationship to their own body and ability to be present. I was certainly a perceptive soma during the making of PD#1. But it can also be argued that you are as a viewer too, because of our bodily commonality and your empathic response - many people hold their breath as the camera goes down my throat. While the act of making yoghurt using one's own vaginal bacteria culture,⁴ on the other hand, would be an example of an art experience that may not be available to you and me, 'because we are not in possession of the corporal starting point for the self-directed perception to begin with. We can sympathize, but not empathize.

OA: That's a pity.

MP: But by the commonality of our embodied selves, analytical Somaesthetics should also offer vocabulary, and thereby, legitimacy to certain social oriented practices.⁵

OA: Which is our kind of thing, so that sounds good. At the same time something makes you sceptical of Eastern influences being put to work in a Western, neoliberalist context?

MP: Shusterman unquestionably deserves credit for his work at revitalizing the epistemological status of the body, through his proposed field of analytical Somaesthetics. When it comes to Somaesthetics' pragmatic and practical side though, I predict growing scepticism from my contemporaries⁶. If the suggestion is that solitary exercises and mind-body practices will service the world by giving people the means to mesh art, life and philosophy, I would argue that at this

3 Richard Shusterman: Pragmatism, Somaesthetics, and Contemporary Art, Kunstneres Hus, (20.04.2015).

4 Vaghurt, (27-29.06.2015). <http://fugt.org/>

5 See f.ex. Flatbread Society's Bakehouse project at Bjørvika, Oslo, where the physical presence, labour and eating, seems to be at the center of the project. <http://www.FBS.com>

6 See f.ex. Madsen, O., J., (2014). Det er innover vi må gå - En kulturpsykologisk studio av selvhjelp. Universitetsforlaget.

point in time, in this part of the world, self-cultivation isn't something that seems to be lacking in our lives. There is already considerable mythology surrounding the use, health and training of our body and mind, how our individual potential can be grown, harvested, directed, how to find solutions to life's challenges within ourselves. And as a clinician, I'm certainly invested in things like inner processes - thoughts, feelings, pleasures, traumas, fantasies, embodied habits and schematas - and in empowering people through self-awareness and self-leadership. But what is helpful to an individual in a clinical setting, isn't necessary good for society as an imperative trend. In our current context, I have the impression that more often than not, self-knowledge and self-creation with the aim of improved living, becomes a lonely project. A project of autonomy and self-care suspiciously fitting contemporary demands of adaptability and personal agency (and personal responsibility) of Western man. People like Shusterman and health professionals like myself, may unintentionally be sustaining this development through our respective practices. Shusterman is familiar with criticism along similar lines.⁷

So at first glance, I have a hard time locating the social oriented practice that goes with Somaesthetics. Research into the lives of people we perceive as privileged, reports that being self-sustained, self-indulged, non-dependent and unobligated to the everyday operations of society around you, can lead to very unsatisfying, pacifying and estranged lives.^{8,9,10,11} Through examples from the art world, I'd like to see the link made between practical Somaesthetics, art production and the deepening of commitment to friends, loved one's, family or community. Given the bodily commonalities that bind us together, this should be a productive topic for Somaesthetics to delve into. I hope to see later editions of JOS be devoted to the subject.

OA: So putting you to the same challenge, what does the work, PD#1, have to offer me?

MP: As a viewer, right. Well, I have to leave that partially to you. But we do share figures of speech and I think there is an obvious metaphor in plain sight; we find a treasure inside the artist. What's it like to have a thing of value inside of you? What is this popular idea that "we all harbour beautiful things in our depths" that only needs to be fished out? Shouldn't it then be fished out? What are you supposed to feel if you can't find it? How long should you keep looking? Should you seek help to find it? Here we are at the heart of the questions that inspired the imagery of PD#1. The idea of the minable individual - that we have this inner, unlocked potential to turn to - is in its pure form, a critique worthy internalization. It can lead to a neglect of the lifelong relational aspect of human development. It can lead to an idealization of the potential of the individual and an underestimating of the resistance in the system. Individualizing that, which might be contextual, is a deeply moralizing discourse. The belief in the unlocked potential of the individual goes hand in hand with the mythologization of the lone, genius artist, too. A very cherished fable.

Contemplating instead how bound we are to our body, this earthly, self-determined mess, how dependent we are on other human and non-human entities for our sense of separateness, relatedness and even physicality at a cellular level, can birth a whole bunch of everyday ethical, political and practical reconsiderations that could potentially force forth a new/old humility concerning our position in this world.

7 Shusterman, R., (1999). Somaesthetics: A disciplinary Proposal. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 57, No.3, 299-313.

8 Blouin, B., Gibson, K., & Kierstad M. (1995). *The legacy of inherited welt - Interview with heirs.* Trio Press.

9 O'Neill, J., H. (1997). *The golden ghetto - The psychology of affluence.* Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.

10 Schervish, P., G., Coutsoukis, P., E., & Lewis, E. (1994). *Gospels of wealth - How the rich portray their lives.* Praeger Publishers.

11 Willis, T., C., (2003). *Navigating the dark side of wealth - A life guide for inheritors.* New Concord Press.

No need to worry about that though, because in contrast to everyday life spent searching, in this film, we actually find "it!" Hurray! Or, actually, we find a placeholder, I couldn't locate "it." But good enough for a pedagogical study. We knew that it was in there somewhere!

OA: Bliss.

MP: But the climax also gives way to an inversion, as our eyes stray from the prize and on to other things. What is the clam doing? What's that like? Who cultivates these pearls? What do we do when it's out? What else have we been swallowing? Who sent us here to look for it? What ideological purpose does this inward-looking and searching serve? How's the water?

OA: Does being a clinician automatically make the work interdisciplinary?

MP: I have a multidisciplinary background, which among other things includes working as a clinician with people struggling with eating, one-to-one and in art-therapy groups. It can be called interdisciplinary in the sense that the film was originally inspired by this work and envisioned as a happy-ending, spin-off on theories on eating disorders.

In medical conditions where people have trouble eating, one lead understanding is that what causes problems is an inability to verbalize feelings and sensations at the level of thought - abstractly. In lack of language, we attempt to control inner turmoil through the concrete - the body. By not taking in food, sensations stemming from inside are dampened, and so are interconnected feelings. People who wilfully don't eat, can in a very non-abstract way be saying "no" to what the world has to offer them. Or, at the other end of the pool, strong bodily sensations, like hunger pains, self-mutilation or eating until your stomach hurts, can be used to drown out or change the state of feeling. We all do these things to a some degree of course - the slap on the cheek to wake up - without it becoming a problem for our everyday functioning.

OA: Speaking of eating, I haven't had breakfast today.

MP: What people who eat too little or too much often have in common though, is that when bodily sensations are numbed down or jacked-up instrumentally, inward-looking becomes an unreliable source of information about oneself. Without the means to look inward for reference, the need to look to others grows. This can lead to becoming over-invested in others people's impressions, competing and comparing oneself to others. Conversely, in the video my insides are presented as a gem-filled horn of plenty, which is then explored and harvested. Quite a foreign imagery to many people who struggle on a daily basis, I wager.

OA: In this transition from having a private practice to mainly doing art, you still seem oriented towards the relational. Alas, I can't say your video helped me build an appetite.

MP: No, of course not. It is disturbing on several levels. What I have done, is that I have taken this hope, this belief we have, that if we only chisel away at ourselves long enough, our potential and this inner beauty will finally appear - I've taken that belief, that is so dominant in our culture, but also the cornerstone in the attitude of someone who uses eating instrumentally - I've taken that, and I have played it out for its improbable finality to blossom and flower before our eyes. And I haven't done this through language - my preferred tool - but by using my concrete body. It is an attempted empathic reach-out to the languagelessness in us all. Which reminds me of a passage in the book *Papillion*¹², where pearls are chewed and swallowed as a sign of matrimony. But I digress. Yes, I put my trust in human relationships, rather than the

¹² Henri Charrière (1969). *Papillion*. J. W. Cappellens Forlag AS.

isolated individual.

OA: How did you finally get the pearls out?

MP: Uhm... With patience. One was netted, the others came out through traditional methods.

OA: How many did you swallow?

P: Three. Two white, one metallic black. Fished one up, let two pass. It took one day for the white pearl to pass and three days for the black one, strangely enough. It's really fascinating to see how they've taken color from the process, taken color from the labour of my body, unbeknownst to me. The white one has turned slightly pink, the metallic black one looks slightly rusty now. They were temporarily a part of me, and were transformed by this. I've become their "pater perlum" - father of pearl, of sorts.

OA: This is a work series, so there will be other works?

MP: Yes. Pearl Diving will be a set of works that revolve around the longing for personal cohesiveness and uniqueness, and fumbling attempts at reaching this state. Related terms are separateness, boundaries, perforation, dissolution, embodied meetings, interrelatedness, belonging, inclusivity, exclusivity, love, loneliness, success, failure and translucency. Next in the series will be a jewellery set, a dinner, a book of poetry, private performances, a set of sculptures and installations, and some wall writing, in no particular order.

OA: Is the sound on the video the original sound?

MP: No, then you would have heard me heaving. The breathing on the vid is the sound of me wheezing after a self-enhancing jog.

Notes

Title: The production of Pearl diving, part 1 - A work series by Marius Presterud.

Material: Freshwater pearls, stomach sack

Technique: Gastrological examination video

Length: Approximately 2 min 30 sec min

When: November, 2014

Where: Ullevål Hospital, Oslo

Filming: Ullevål Hospital Gastrolab, Oslo

Cutting and editing: Marius Presterud

More information

www.facebook.com/osloapiary

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Photo credits

Gastrolab - Margit Selsjord. Selfie - Marius Presterud

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