

Sindre Andreas Nilsen

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A performative exploration of teenage masculinity

Master's thesis in Arts Education

Supervisor: Rose K. Martin

Co-supervisor: Elena Pérez

June 2023

NTNU  
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# English Abstract

This master's thesis is a practice-led research project that culminates in a theatre installation and a written thesis. Both the creative practice and the written component are intertwined research products that have developed throughout the research process. The master's project is embedded in a Performative Deleuzian-Baradian research philosophy, employing New Materialist perspectives, and seeks to explore diverse understandings of masculinity through a devised theatre process and performance. The study aims to investigate how a workshop process leading up to the creation of a theatre installation, as well as the installation itself, can shed light on different understandings and perspectives of masculinity.

Drawing on the principles of New Materialism and the Performative research paradigm, the research materials for this study are generated through a series of theatre workshops. These materials include poems, video-poems, other video materials, and personal objects from the participants' own boys' rooms. Together, these elements form the theatre installation, representing an intertwined aspect of this master's thesis. The research process has been documented through video recordings, researcher journals, and photography.

The theoretical lenses employed in this study encompass New Materialism, perspectives on masculinity, and vulnerable pedagogy. New Materialism offers alternative perspectives on materiality, considering all matter as significant. Masculinity is explored through various frameworks, ranging from hegemonic to performative understandings, while vulnerable pedagogy challenges traditional notions of distance in teaching, embracing a position of vulnerability for the teacher-researcher in arts education.

Through the practice of shared vulnerability in theatre workshops, this study reveals that traditional masculinity norms and teaching norms can be disrupted, allowing for an intimate and ethical exploration of vulnerable masculinity. By considering the agency of materials in a teenager's boys' room and presenting them in a theatre installation, diverse understandings of masculinity can be uncovered. The research findings are situated within the context of this practice, and the knowledge produced is viewed as an act of creation.

This practice-led research project has yielded valuable insights into the transformative power of reciprocal vulnerability, the material context of masculinity, the complexity of human identities, and the provocation of new materialist concepts.



# Norsk sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven er et praksisledet forskningsprosjekt som resulterer i en teaterinstallasjon og en skriftlig avhandling. Begge delene er forskningsprodukter som er uløselig knyttet sammen og har utviklet seg gjennom hele forskningsprosessen. Masterprosjektet er forankret i en Performativ Deleuzian-Baradian forskningsfilosofi som benytter perspektiver fra nymaterialisme. Prosjektet stiller spørsmålet: "Hvordan kan en anvendt teaterprosess og fremføring utforske ulike forståelser av maskulinitet?" Studiets formål er å utforske hvordan en verkstedprosess som fører til skapelsen av en teaterinstallasjon, samt selve teaterinstallasjonen, kan utforske ulike forståelser og perspektiver på maskulinitet.

Gjennom bruk av nymaterialisme og den performative forskningsparadigmet genereres forskningsmaterialet gjennom en serie teaterverksteder. Forskningsmaterialet består av dikt, videodikt, andre videomaterialer og personlige objekter fra deltakernes egne gutterom. Disse elementene utgjør teaterinstallasjonen, som representerer en uløselig del av denne masteroppgaven. Forskningsprosessen er dokumentert gjennom videoopptak, forskerjournaler og fotografi.

De teoretiske rammeverkene i denne studien omfatter ny materialisme, perspektiver på maskulinitet og sårbar pedagogikk. Ny materialisme gir innsikt i nye måter å betrakte materialitet på, der all materie er viktig. Maskulinitet kan forstås på ulike måter, fra hegemoniske til performative perspektiver, og sårbar pedagogikk utfordrer tradisjonelle forestillinger om den distanserte læreren og omfavner en posisjon av sårbarhet som lærer og forsker innen kunstfagdidaktikk.

Gjennom praksisen med delt sårbarhet i teaterverksteder viser denne studien at både tradisjonelle normer for maskulinitet og undervisningsnormer kan bli utfordret. Dette åpner for en intim og etisk utforskning av sårbar maskulinitet. Ved å vurdere materialenes betydning på tenåringsgutters rom og presentere dem i en teaterinstallasjon, kan ulike forståelser av maskulinitet komme til syne. Forskningsfunnene plasseres innenfor denne praksisens rom-tid. Forskningsfunnene er betraktet som en skapende handling.

Dette forskningsprosjektet har avdekket verdifulle innsikter i den transformative kraften av gjensidig sårbarhet, maskulinitetens materielle kontekst, kompleksiteten i menneskelige identiteter og provokasjonen av nymaterialistiske konsepter.

# Preface

This Master's thesis stands as the culmination of a remarkable journey, marked by the generosity, patience, and brilliance of many who have accompanied me along the way. To each and every one of you, I extend my heartfelt gratitude.

In particular, I must convey my warmest thanks to my exceptional supervisor, Rose Martin. Your unending dedication and support have not only made this thesis possible, but have kindled within me an unquenchable passion for research. Your patient guidance and caring mentorship have served as an inspiration to me, indelibly shaping my academic journey. I am also deeply thankful to my co-supervisor, Elena Pérez. Your brilliant and gentle support challenged me, sustained me, and prompted me to think outside the box.

My sincerest gratitude goes to Tone-Pernille Østern for enlightening me about the potentials of performative research and exciting world of post-humanist research philosophy.

I am deeply indebted to my unwavering pillars of support, my family. To my father, Rune, and my sister, Siv, your constant encouragement and unwavering belief in my abilities have been instrumental in the successful completion of this work. Your love and support have carried me throughout this endeavour.

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Finally, my never-ending gratitude goes to my research participants in the pilot and the final practice who shared their life stories, vulnerabilities, and their precious time with me. You are my heroes!

In conclusion, this thesis stands as a testament to the transformative power of collaboration, mentorship, and unwavering support.

Trondheim, Norway 8th day of June, 2023.

Sincerely,

**Sindre Andreas Nilsen**





Dedicated to my dearest mother, my greatest fan,

**Kirsti Irene Nilsen**

1952-2021



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# 1 Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding masculinity has become increasingly complex and challenging to navigate, particularly for young men. The influence of various toxic actors, such as Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate, has dominated much of the landscape, shaping societal expectations and perceptions of what it means to be a man. Moreover, this influence has not been limited to specific regions but has spread across the Western hemisphere, including Norway.

The Western world, once believed to be making significant strides toward inclusivity and acceptance, is experiencing a concerning trend of anti-LGBT sentiment. Unfortunately, this trend is not isolated but also observable within Norway, a country known for its progressive values. It is within this context that the difficulties faced by young men in navigating the masculine discourse emerge.

The Me-Too movement, which gained momentum worldwide, shed light on the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault, predominantly experienced by women. While the movement was crucial in highlighting the experiences of victims and promoting gender equality, I felt it inadvertently led to some unintended consequences. I experienced that the space for some men to express their perspectives on vulnerability or discuss the challenges they face in society has been diminished and, at times, met with hostility.

My experience is that teenage masculinity suffers from fixed and narrow stereotypes, which can lead to othering and alienation. This process of othering is supported in research (Jeppe Fuglsang & Sune Qvotrup, 2014; Rosales, 2010; Sune Qvotrup, 2010; Vedran & Helene Toverud, 2011). I believe theatre has a capacity for creating multimodal, immersive “third spaces” (Bhabha, 1994) where people from different background can engage with each other in a safe environment.

My master project is grounded within the performative research paradigm. It is a performative inquiry into how a devised theatre process with teenage boys can explore diverse understandings of masculinity. It is practice-led with an artistic practice component. My hope is that this research may foster deeper understanding and lead to new embodied insights in both me and my participants.

This practice-led master project is guided through in main research question. This is the principal question that I ask and that has driven the project from the start:

*How might a devised theatre process and performance explore diverse understandings of masculinity?*

My main research question is broken down into 2 sub-questions. These sub-questions emerged from the research material during workshop process and the assessed theatre installation, “BoysRooms”. The choice of sub-questions due to the nature of my research. It’s a practice-led master, therefore it is natural to analyse material from process. There is no room to analyse the entire process, so I narrowed it down to a pivotal moment in a workshop exercise called “The Spectrum Exercise” and ask:

*How does the “the spectrum exercise” facilitate the process of sharing vulnerability?*

It is also a master with creative practice, so it falls natural to analyse that creative practice, specifically the theatre installation. The installation is a creative artefact which makes up one half of the assessed master in arts education, the other half being this thesis. In the performative research paradigm, practice is held up as significant, so it’s natural to analyse the creative practice that is an important part of this thesis.

*How does theatre installation materials produce diverse understandings of masculinity?*

This master project is comprised of two assessed components: one written dissertation and a creative practice. The creative practice is split into two. A pilot and a final practice. All these components are separate in modalities but intertwined and mutually entangled into one research product.

## 1.1 Significance and rationale

I believe masculinity to be a deeply embedded norm and identity marker that can both shape and sometimes undo young men of different backgrounds. The vulnerability of male self-perception, as highlighted by Røthing (2014) , may stem from the narrow and confined nature of traditional masculine gender norms. Understanding and addressing the impact of these norms is crucial for fostering a supportive environment for young men.

This study holds immense importance to me as I delve into vulnerability perspectives among teenage males and introduce vulnerability as a teaching position within the teacher-student relationship in drama and theatre education. By exploring the intersection of masculinity, vulnerability, and theatre education, I aim to shed light on the significance of providing opportunities for young men to explore their emotions and personal backgrounds.

Drawing upon my experience as a high school drama teacher, I have witnessed the transformative power of drama and theatre exercises that require students to delve into their own feelings and emotional backgrounds. These exercises have proven instrumental in facilitating personal growth and self-reflection.



However, I raise the question of whether it is ethically justifiable to demand vulnerability from students without reciprocating as the teacher. Shouldn't vulnerability be a mutual undertaking? This study challenges the traditional educational ethics that promote distance and detachment between educators and students. Instead, it advocates for vulnerability as a shared experience, fostering an environment of trust and empathy in the teacher-student relationship.

By examining these dynamics and questioning traditional educational ethics, my research aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive and emotionally engaging approaches to education. The findings can inform educational practices and strategies that support young men in navigating their gender identity, fostering emotional intelligence, and overall well-being.

In conclusion, my journey explores the constraints imposed by masculine norms, emphasizing the significance of vulnerability perspectives among young men in drama and theatre education. By acknowledging vulnerability as a teaching position and challenging traditional educational ethics, I seek to foster a more inclusive society that celebrates the diversity of experiences and emotions in all individuals, regardless of their gender identity.

## 1.2 Chapter outline

### **Chapter 2: Literature and Praxis Review**

In this chapter, I will provide a comprehensive review of the literature that supports the theoretical framework of this thesis. I will also place my master project within an empirical and artistic context, highlighting its relevance and contribution to existing knowledge.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Chapter 3 will outline and contextualize the research philosophy guiding this study. I will explain my practice-led method of generating research material and elucidate my research position. Additionally, I will discuss the ethical considerations inherent in my research design.

### **Chapter 4: Analysis**

Chapter 4 will present a diffractive analysis of two significant events from my practice. The first event will focus on a pivotal moment during a workshop exercise, while the second event will analyze the theatre installation *BoysRooms*, which constitutes the assessed second half of this thesis.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

In Chapter 5, I will bring together the research questions, methods, theories, and analysis, providing a comprehensive discussion of all the research elements. This chapter will demonstrate how these components intertwine to contribute to a deeper understanding of the research topic.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The final chapter, Chapter 6, will serve as the conclusion of this thesis. Here, I will reflect on what I have learned throughout the course of this master project and present my findings. This chapter will offer insights and reflections on the research journey undertaken and highlight the key contributions made by this study.

## 2 Literature and practice review

This chapter serves as an amalgamation of both a theory chapter and a literature review of relevant empirical studies. It aims to provide an empirical, practical, and theoretical context to understand this master project and demonstrate its alignment with established research. Given that this master project is practice-led with an artistic component, I have chosen to organize the literature review, theory, and review of relevant practitioners into a single chapter, hence the term "literature and practice review."

The chapter is structured into three sections: concepts, context, and praxis. Under the "concepts" section, I will explain the ideas and theories that underpin this thesis, offering an understanding of the "what" in relation to my research. The "context" section will provide examples of situations and empirical data relevant to my thesis, illustrating the "where" of my research. Lastly, in the "praxis" section, I will introduce you to theatre practitioners who have explored masculinity in various ways, offering insights into their work. The chapter will conclude with a summary.

The review of literature and practice for this master project has been an ongoing and organic process, spanning a significant portion of the project's timeline. My primary search engine for articles has been Oria, the Norwegian university library search tool. Additionally, I have utilized Google Scholar and ERIC for specific searches. My search queries focused on topics such as teenage masculinity in theatre education, male youth theatre education, teenage boys in drama education, and similar variations.

By combining theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence, and insights from practitioners, this chapter establishes a comprehensive foundation for understanding the master project within the broader research landscape.

### 2.1 Concepts

This master's thesis is supported by the concepts of new materialism, masculinity perspectives, and vulnerability. In the following sections, I will explain and contextualize these theories and their relevance to my research project.

#### 2.1.1 How matter (be)comes to matter

In my master's thesis, I embarked on exploring teenage masculinity through a creative practice. However, due to the vastness of the topic, I needed to narrow down my focus. As I delved into

performative and new materialist theories and literature, I found myself contemplating the direction for my creative practice. That's when it struck me: "The Boys Room." I became fascinated by the belongings and materials that surround a teenager in their personal and private space, and how these elements impact their experiences. I began to question the significance of matter in a boy's room and how it shapes their identity. To grasp the philosophical implications of this inquiry, it is essential to turn to the insights of the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze (1994).

Deleuze's contributions have brought about a profound shift in our ontological perspective of the world. While Heidegger's established view regarded the world as stable and existing in a state of "is-ness" (Østern & Dahl, 2019), Deleuze challenged this notion by emphasizing the continuous, spatial, and temporal nature of reality. Instead of considering the world as fixed, Deleuze taught us that it is constantly in a state of becoming (Harstad, 2018).

Expanding on Deleuze's ideas, Karen Barad introduced the concept of onto-epistemology, which combines the notions of being and becoming. Drawing inspiration from particle physics, Barad (2007) argued against the traditional subject-object dichotomy, asserting that we are intricately entangled not only with one another but also with all forms of matter, whether human or non-human. According to Barad, all matter possesses agency, and our entangled state necessitates a new understanding of our relationship with the world. This understanding is framed through the concept of "intra-action," a term coined to distinguish it from mere interactions. Barad posits that interactions imply separate entities coming into contact and then acting upon each other, whereas intra-action implies that these entities were never truly separate but instead fundamentally entangled from the start (Østern & Dahl, 2019).

In this entangled web, we find ourselves connected to all forms of matter, spanning the realms of the human, the non-human, the living, and the deceased. All matter, in its various forms, exerts agency and significance—each element holds importance and matters in its own right.

Deleuze contributed to an ontological shift of how we see the world. The established ontological perspective from Heidegger was that the world is stable, something that "is" (Østern & Dahl, 2019). In a way we say that Deleuze didn't have ontology. From him we learn that reality is created continuously, spatially and temporally. The worlds *is not*, but *becomes* (Harstad, 2018). Karen Barad builds on this and creates the term onto-epistemology. A merging of being and becoming. Drawing from particle physics, Barad (2007) argues that the traditional subject – object dichotomy is false. We are entangled, not just with each other, but with all matter, human and non-human. All matter has agency, and our entangled state calls for a new understanding of we relate to the world. We are entangled with the world through *intra-actions*, a neologism distinguishing it from interactions.

Barad argues that while interactions follows that two separate entities comes into contact and then act on each other, intra-action predicates that these two entities were never separate to being with, but in fact entangled (Østern & Dahl, 2019). We are entangled with all matter, human, non-human, dead and alive. And all matter has agency, all matter matters.

New materialism is a grouping of theories belonging to posthuman research philosophy. It encompasses new ways of looking at materiality, where both human and nonhuman matter matter. American physicist Karen Barad's theories on Agential realism draws from the realm of quantum physics. Her term onto-epistemology draws from Deleuze's (1994) negation of ontology and puts forward the notion that the world is in a constant state of becoming rather than existing of a set of fixed instable entities(Barad, 2007). There is no clear distinction between being/becoming or knowing/ learning (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 43). This is interesting for this project when looking at masculinity and learning. If we are always in the process of becoming, then knowledge, gender and sexual identities are also in a state of flux and not finite. The world is a process, ever changing, always becoming, as are we ourselves. It's perhaps then not surprising that practise-led research has often taken new materialist perspectives close to heart. Barad goes on to hold that all matter, human and non-human has agency, and it exert influence through intra-action, which is different from interaction. Intra-action holds that two separate entities have always existed in a state of entanglement. This perspective negates prior dualisms such as subject/object, theory/practice, mind/body as well as discourse/materiality (Dahl & Østern, 2019).

Affect theory is another perspective often linked to posthuman and new materialist theories. Affect notes how one becomes moved or touched, emotionally and bodily. There is disagreement on the links between affect emotions and feelings. Brian Massumi Interprets Deleuze and Guattari in pointing out that affect is not the same as individual feelings or socially constructed emotions. Affect are intensities that moves us, independent of our consciousness and therefore often surprising and astonishing (Massumi, 1995).

### 2.1.2 What makes a man – perspectives on masculinity

There can be and are many forms of masculinity. George L. Mosse, a German American historian, holds that the modern male gender role can be traced back to the early 1800, where the prevailing consensus was that the male body was ought to be strong, healthy and in harmony. The body was seen as a reflection of internal values, so it follows that the male psyche should be equally strong, heathy and harmonious. Together this created the modern male stereotype (Mosse, 1996, pp. 62-63). This stereotype was contingent on countertypes, such as "the homosexual". Moss points out, as

does Foucault (1978), that “the homosexual” was a category created in the latter half of 1800. From this we can draw that identity's are created in contrast to one another.

The Australian sociologists Raewyn Connell analyses gender as body reflexive practises. She holds that our human body is on one side biologically given, but also that the body throughout its life span undergoes changes depending on our actions, on what we do. And what we do and how we and others understand our actions are shaped by culture and the society will live in. Connell claims therefore that one cannot conceptualise masculinity as a fixed thing, it is dynamic and changeable. Masculinity and femininity are gender projects conforming to specific social relationships (Connell, 2005, p. 72). She goes on to claim that gender projects must be understood in relation to one another; To become a man in relation to the heteronormative ideal means for example to have a sexual desire and towards women, and to reject the feminine in oneself. With this, Connell expands the concept of what masculinity can be and points to different forms of masculinity standing in relation to each other.

There can be and are many forms of masculinity. While there can be *a* black masculinity and *a* working-class masculinity, Connell advises against oversimplification. She proposes instead a meta-framework with 4 pervasive forms of masculinity: hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinity, complicit masculinity and marginalized masculinity.(Connell, 2005, p. 76). The masculinity with the most authority and value compared to other gender roles in a society is hegemonic masculinity. Homosexuality is the dominating representation of subordinate masculinity. Gayness is easily connected to femininity and in a traditional heteronormative society it is oppressed and positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men. When it comes to complicit masculinity, Connell points to gender practise of those who have advantage of the Patriarchy, but at the same time don't live up to all the expectations to the hegemonic masculinity. At last marginalised masculinity comes into play when a group who conforms to the hegemonic masculinity are denied the status and privileges that comes with conforming to that norm, due to either social economical class or race.

Judith Butler, noted American theorist, sees gender as a performative act. She claims that:

“... gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority.”(Butler, 1988)

Butler goes on to explain that gender is neither true, not false, neither real not apparent, but a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication. Performing one's gender wrong produces societal punishments. Performing it well produces a reassurance that there is a essentialism of gender after all (Butler, 1988).

### 2.1.3 Risking vulnerability as a teaching strategy

In this project I have used mutual vulnerability as a research strategy and as a researcher position. When asking my participants to share personal and intimate stories and perspectives, I have met my participants by also sharing my stories and perspectives. I chose this to create trust and to narrow the status gap between us. Narrow, but not eliminate, I want to point out. Being twice their age, and having a history of being their substitute teacher, as well as being the researcher, there was always going to be a gap between us, but it need not be as vast as a professional distance between teacher and student often is demarcated. Risk and vulnerability might come across as a less viable strategy when it comes to teaching. We are often told to promote self-confidence and meet our students prepared for every eventuality in the classroom. However, there are voices within educational research vying for just risk and vulnerability.

Late educational researcher Geir Stavik-Karlsen argues against the stoic and distanced teacher ideal that often presented as an ideal. “[...]the teacher daily meets people who strive with issues of growth and development, where the distanced clerk to a small degree succeeds in meeting their needs.”(Stavik-Karlsen, 2014). Karlsen notes five areas that describe teacher’s professional conduct: planning, reflection, distance, restraint and prediction. This leads teachers to seek protection by distancing themselves from their students and planning teaching moments into such excruciating detail to feel safe. Karlsen navigates his teaching strategies with inspiration from Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s writings. Buber’s dialogue philosophy is centred around the concept of the “meeting”. He presents *I-you* as a word pairing which reciprocates meaning to each other (Buber, 2003; Stavik-Karlsen, 2014).

The educator I am referring to lives in a world of individuals, of whom a group is occasionally entrusted with his protection. In each of these individuals he gets to know the disposition of a unique, this once existing person. He sees each individual as bearer of a special mission in life, fulfilled by that very person, and only through her. (Buber, 1995, p. 56)

Buber calls for a teacher who sees the other for who they are. In order to facilitate teaching moments that allows teacher to really see their students, the teacher must strive for authenticity. Karlsen notes the intersubjectivity at play in “the I-You meeting”(Buber, 2003). It predicates that one must leave ones elevated position of entrenched security, and instead moves into the unknown, the unspoken and unexpected (Stavik-Karlsen, 2014).

Inspired by both Karlsen and Buber I therefor created my own position and strategy of mutual and reciprocal vulnerability. Tell me your story and I will tell you mine, I told my participants. They did so, and so did I. We met and our meeting produced stories, perspectives, collaborative poetry and video poems and the theatre installation itself.

## 2.2 Context

Conducting a literature review for this project, yielded very little relevant results on theatre and drama education and masculinity and/or teenage boys. It seems that where these topics intersect lacks proper study. It is a possible research gap. To position this master project with in relevant empirical research, I had to broaden the scope to include “arts education and identity”.

A review article from 2022 investigating 36 different studies found that Arts-Education programs can foster personality traits such as extraversion and conscientiousness(Grosz et al., 2022) . A Greek study, also from 2022 finds that using drama-in-education in an elementary school in Athens empowered students from diverse cultural identities toward mutual respect, understanding and coexistence (Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022). An article from Holland in 2021 finds that drama and performance are vital in teaching the whole child, whether taught as a discipline or used as a teaching tool. This means, the author claims, educators, neuropsychologists, and theatre and drama specialists have to have open minds and be willing to step out of comfort zones and together make a case for using theatre and drama methods as a way to improve human lives (Water, 2021).

## 2.3 Praxis

In this context praxis refers to artistic practitioners in the realm of professional theatre, there has been a dedicated focus on men and masculinity through artistic exploration. One notable long-standing practitioner in this field is Frantic Assembly's Ignition company based in the UK. Ignition is a talent development program launched by Frantic Assembly in 2009, specifically catering to young people aged 16 to 24. Initially offered exclusively to male adolescents, the program has evolved to embrace aspiring talents of all genders, providing them with valuable opportunities for growth and artistic development. (Frantic-Assembly, 2023; Graham & Hoggett, 2014).



**Figure 2-1 Devised production from the Ignition company at Frantic Assembly**  
(<https://www.franticassembly.co.uk/learn-and-train-1/ignition>)



In the spring of 2023, physical actor Eline Hallem embarked on an extraordinary artistic endeavour that delved into the complex world of toxic and non-toxic masculinities, fearlessly embodying the character of Alpha, a larger-than-life pick-up artist who had taken the concept to extreme lengths. With her boundless creativity, Hallem created a captivating drag king persona that went beyond mere entertainment; it was an



**Figure 2-2 Alpha- Eline Hallem's hypermasculine drag king character. (<https://www.alphakonge.no/gallery>)**

interactive performance and a transformative master class that left a lasting impact on the audience. The interactive nature of the performance/master class added an extra layer of engagement and immersion for the audience. Hallem skilfully created a space where participants were playfully provoked and "bullied" into to question, discuss, and challenge the ideas presented.

## 2.4 Summary of literature and praxis review

This chapter is organized into three distinct sections: "concepts," "context," and "praxis," each of which contributes valuable insights to the overall discussion.

In the initial section, "concepts," I delve into the fundamental theoretical underpinnings that inform this project. Here, I provide an overview of New Materialist theories, which explore the agency and materiality of non-human entities in shaping our understanding of the world. Additionally, I address the significance of masculinity and gender perspectives, examining their relevance to the project at hand. Lastly, I explore theories on vulnerable pedagogy, discussing their importance in creating inclusive and empowering educational environments.

Moving forward, the subsequent section, "context," encompasses a compilation of empirical studies that have investigated the relationship between drama and art education and the process of identity formation. By delving into these studies, we gain valuable insights into how artistic practices can influence and shape individuals' sense of self, providing a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of arts-based education.

Finally, in the concluding section, "praxis," I spotlight artistic practitioners who have made significant contributions to the exploration of masculinity or have specifically focused on the experiences of young men. By examining the work of these practitioners, we can gain a nuanced understanding of how artistic expressions can shed light on the complexities of gender, masculinity, and youth, allowing us to envision new possibilities for creative engagement and personal growth.

Through the careful organization and exploration of these three sections, this chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of the concepts, context, and praxis relevant to the overarching goals of the project. By integrating theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and artistic practice, this chapter aims to foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter and contribute to the broader discourse on education, identity, and the transformative power of the arts.

## 3 Methodology

In this chapter I explain how I conducted my master research. I provide context and justify choices made and link my method to relevant theory. I start with the wider philosophical principles and why I chose a performative path forward. I then explain my practice-led method of gathering and creating material. Following that I go into the selection of research participants, before explaining how I prepared and executed my practiced led inquiry. I end the chapter with an overview of the analysis I have employed and lastly explain my positionality.

### 3.1 A Performative Deleuzian-Baradian research philosophy

In this study, I have chosen to use a Performative research design. In the performative research paradigm, practice as a method is emphasized (Haseman, 2006). Practice leads the research, and hence we call it practice-led (Smith & Dean, 2009). Performative methods such as practice-led research are well suited when working practice-oriented with artistic disciplines. The purpose of this study is to investigate how theatre and theatre workshops might explore diverse understanding of masculinity. This study operates with research material and not research data as a research product. It is based on the premise that research is an act of creation (Østern et al., 2021), and not an external truth that is uncovered or discovered. This is a methodological study that does not aim to uncover any new truths around masculinity, but rather seek to explore how theatre, with its multimodal, artistic and relational possibilities, can explore a vulnerable topic such as masculinity in teenage boys. As this is a vulnerable topic, it makes sense to work practice-oriented and grow the research along the way, where practice and theory operate in a feedback loop. It is this interaction between exploratory practice, informed by and contextualized with theory, and then again tested in practice, which in turn is pointed to and again contextualized and theorized with theory that creates the quality of the research product. This is a master's study with a creative practice in the form of a theatre installation, constituting one half of the total research product together with this written dissertation. Performative research is also found in qualitative research, while my application in this study is more post-qualitative which emphasizes practice and where the performative, the acting and the active are important perspectives. This has consequences for how the research material is produced, the ethical issues that arise, and the researcher's position. All of which I will now explain further in detail in this chapter.

The last few decades have seen a determined evolution of a performative research paradigm, outside of the traditional quantitative and qualitative traditions (Østern et al., 2021). Performative research puts practice at its centre. As Haseman (2006) explains, "there has been a radical push to not only place practice within the research process, but to *lead* research through practice" (p. 100). While quantitative and qualitative research is often oriented around a specific problem to be solved, performative research seeks to create experimental practical projects, start practicing to see what emerges (Haseman, 2006). Performative research adopts Deleuze's concept of "becoming" (Deleuze, 2014), where the world is understood not as something stable, something that "is", but rather in a perpetual process of "becoming". Deleuze does not necessarily distinguish between ontology and epistemology (Harstad, 2017, p. 30) Karen Barad builds on this understanding and creates the term onto-epistemology, where the being is merged with becoming. This creates consequences for both research and learning. From Deleuze and Guattari we see an effort to move away from the search for definite answers to already given problems, and rather discover new problems, create new terminology and to seek to understand the world in new ways (Harstad, 2017, p. 30). From the performative research paradigm, we can understand research as creation:

"It produces something new in the world, something that was not there before, regardless of the researcher's involvement. Therefore, research is understood as non-representational, not aspiring to represent a part of the reality that existed independently of the researcher before the research." (Østern et al., 2021, p. 2)

Through Barad's theories of intra-actions, learning is understood an act of creation. It's a relational process where creation takes place in intra-action between human and non-human elements (Dahl & Østern, 2019, p. 53).

Understanding that both research and learning as creation, that they both put something new into the world, intrinsically links them to the artistic realm. Theatre as an artform puts new multi-modal artefacts into our world. It is my experience as a theatre educator, that artistic practice, such as theatre, can often be chaotic. The creative process in the theatre, fits well within a non-linear state of becoming. A theatre performance can therefore be seen as always underway, in production, evolving and becoming. During a process of devising or staging a theatre performance, many creative pathways converge and intersect in such a manner that to trace the origin of each artistic choice is difficult. A process of artistic creation such as this can be understood as a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987a), a concept widely adopted in performative research. It is due to the many similarities between this research paradigm and the creative process, that I have chosen to ground my research in the performative paradigm.

## 3.2 Positioning

What is positioning? A researcher's positionality can be read through their choice of methods, theories, and philosophical framework. But to position oneself as a researcher one can't simply dismiss one's personal background.

"when researchers go into research settings, they also take their own intellectual baggage and life experiences with them. Inevitably, their gender, age, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, politics, religious beliefs, and life experiences – their worldview – are the lens through which they see their research"(Croker, 2009, p. 11)

My researcher positions can of course be read from the totality of this thesis, but aren't my human positions also important in order to understand my research? To follow Croker, I can position myself as an adult, cis-male, gay Norwegian whose professional background marks over a decade in secondary drama and theatre education. All these identity markers have shaped my understanding of my profession, of teaching, of research and the world. They have also influenced each other. My lived experiences have led me to my researcher positionality, which can be summarized this way: I place this master project within a posthuman post-qualitative, performative research paradigm. I am present and in(becoming) with my research and not distanced from it.

As a gay, cisgender man, the topic of masculinity holds personal significance for me, as it is an embodied practice in my life. My journey of self-identification as a cis gay man has involved navigating the masculine-feminine dichotomy in various ways since my childhood. I have occasionally embraced and continue to embody feminine physical expressions, flamboyance, or other gendered practices that have led others to label me as feminine, gay, or queer. Conversely, my appearance—large body, beard, and baldness—along with other gendered practices I engage in, have sometimes resulted in me being perceived as masculine and straight. This unique positioning informs my perspective within this master project.

## 3.3 A master dissertation with a creative practice

This master project is comprised of two assessed components: one written dissertation and a creative practice. The creative practice is split into two. A pilot and a final practice. All these components are separate in modalities but intertwined and mutually entangled into one research product.

The creative practice in this master project is 2 theatre installations examining diverse understandings of masculinity and their corresponding processes. The first practice was a pilot project during the spring of 2022 and the final practice began during fall of 2022 and was concluded during the spring of 2023. Each of these had their own process which included both live and online

platforms in creating the final artistic output. The live platform was organized as theatre workshops and the online platform was organised in Microsoft Teams.

### 3.4 Production of research material

In practice-led research, the practice can function both as a method for generating data and as the data itself (Haseman, 2006; Smith & Dean, 2009). This dual nature is particularly interesting when analyzing the data (see Analysis section). Workshops offer the unique benefit of combining elements of observation and interviews without being strictly defined as either (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 78).

To document my practice, I employed photography, video, and a researcher's journal. Photography was utilized to capture the organization of the workshop space and to record moments from the live theater installations. Videos documented the various methods employed in live workshops as well as the theater installation itself. Additionally, I maintained a researcher's journal to chronicle my personal experiences, challenges, artistic and theoretical discussions, and reflections throughout the entire process. Also, all the creative material for the theatre installation and the theatre installation itself with all its material abundance are also research material for this master.

### 3.5 Preparation and execution

In preparation for the pilot installation, several steps were taken. First, participants were identified and recruited for the project. Then, the first workshop weekend was arranged to kick off the collaborative process. During the course of the project, digital communication was used to maintain momentum and facilitate collaboration.

Upon completion of the pilot installation, it was showcased to an invited audience, including the project supervisors. Feedback was gathered through evaluations with both supervisors and a selection of audience members, allowing for reflection on the project's success.

The process of preparing the final installation began with finding new participants and arranging the first workshop. Unfortunately, a pause in research and field work was necessitated due to health reasons. Once resumed, the third and fourth workshops were organized to continue the creative process.

During the execution of the final installation, materials were assembled, and the installation was presented to an invited audience, the supervisor, and peer-reviewers. Following the closing of the installation, a short conversation was conducted with the peer-reviewer to discuss their impressions and gather further feedback.

The preparation for the final installation was halted midway after the second workshop in the autumn of 2022. Due to health reasons I had to pause the project entirely. My research participant met this with compassion and stood ready to take up the work again in the early spring of 2023.

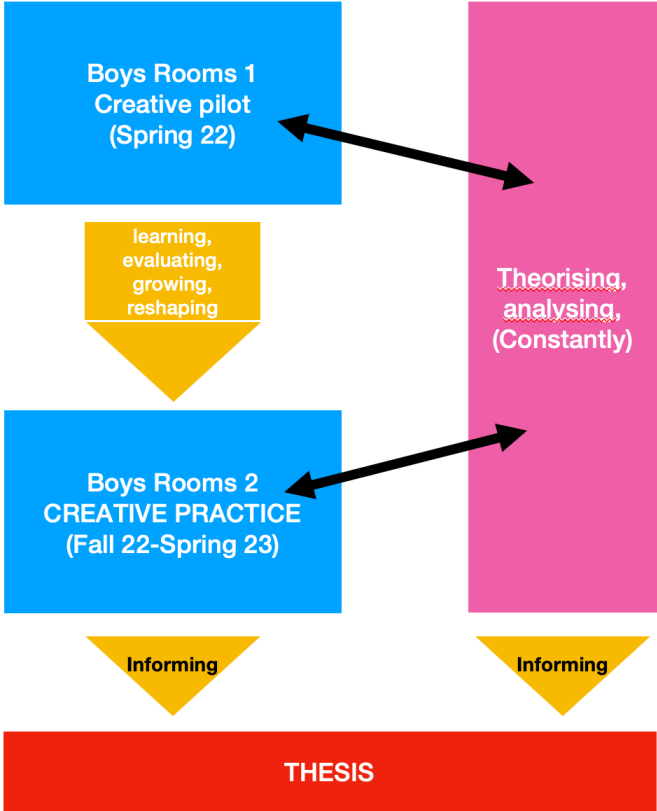


Figure 3-1 The relationship between the practice and the thesis

3.5.1 Research participants

The participants in this master project were male high school seniors focusing on drama as the main subject. They all attended the same high school where I served as a substitute drama instructor. To recruit participants, I utilized my professional connections as a theatre teacher within the school. Initially, I recruited five students for the pilot practice, all of whom actively participated throughout the pilot phase. For the final practice, which led to the assessed theatre installation, I recruited four senior high school students from the subsequent school year at the same institution. However, only three of them took part in the assessed final theatre installation. To maintain confidentiality, the participants' names have been changed in this thesis, even though they willingly used their real names during the theatre installation. It is important to note that the thesis, as a printed or digital product, has a longer lifespan compared to the interactions between the audience and the

participants in the theatre installation. In this thesis, the participants are referred to as Alex, Michael, Simon, and Nicholas.

### 3.5.2 The workshops

I divided my research practice into two parts: a pilot practice and a final practice. In this text, I have organized the description of the workshops to reflect this structure. Each round of practice is accompanied by a set of exercises that form the workshop process for that particular round.

The pilot practice served as a preliminary stage where I could test and refine my research approach and workshop activities. Based on the insights and feedback gathered during the pilot, I then designed the final practice, ensuring a more robust and effective workshop experience for participants.

#### 3.5.2.1 The Pilot practice.

The pilot practise was structured as two weekend workshops one at the beginning of the process and one at the very end. Between these live workshops production of creative materials for the theatre installation was tasked to the participant online and organised through Microsoft Teams.

Online tasks for the participant between the live workshops included: taking pictures of masculine motives in the neighbourhood of each research participants, recording a guided tour of the research participants room, viewing and responding to and commenting on the documentary movie “Me and My Penis” by British photo artist Amaju X and director Jenny Ash (2020) and uploading photos of each research participants from their childhood to the present day.

During the pilot study, a range of exercises was employed, and participants were assigned reflective tasks between two workshop sessions. To establish a collaborative approach, I articulated a guiding principle for the process, emphasizing my willingness to share personal experiences and perspectives on par with the participants. The exercises included:

1. **Sharing Significant Objects from Boys' Rooms:** Each participant presented an object of personal significance from their boys' rooms, highlighting the importance of these items through sharing stories with the group. This exercise aimed to explore the agency embedded within these objects and their connection to masculine identities.
2. **Improvisation Exercises and Cultural Stereotypes:** Participants engaged in improvisation exercises that playfully explored cultural stereotypes associated with masculine behaviour. This activity encouraged critical reflection and challenged traditional notions of masculinity.
3. **Poetic Reflections on Boys' Room Agency:** Participants were invited to write poems reflecting on the agency present within their boys' rooms. This exercise encouraged



participants to delve into the transformative potential of their personal spaces, further examining the impact on their individual perceptions of masculinity.

4. **Provocative Music Video: Discussing Masculine Agency for Teenagers:** Participants collaborated in the creation of a provocative music video that facilitated discussions on masculine agency, particularly within the context of teenagers. This exercise provided an opportunity for participants to express their perspectives and explore the complexities of masculinity through a multimedia format.
5. **The Spectrum Exercise: Assessing Perspectives** Utilizing a spatial representation of opinions, participants were guided through the Spectrum Exercise. The room was divided into six parallel vertical zones using masking tape, with participants initially positioned on the middle line. Provocative statements, including "I am worried about my penis size," "I support the #MeToo movement," and "I am comfortable showing emotions," were presented to participants. They then moved left or right of the middle line to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Following this positioning, participants were given the opportunity to articulate and defend their stances, fostering in-depth discussions among the group and myself.

These exercises generated material that informed the development of a pilot theatre installation. Feedback from participants, the audience, as well as guidance from my supervisors, guided the refinement and focus of my methodology before proceeding to the final creative practice stage.

The total sum of the process of the pilot study, including feedback from the research participants, the audience and my supervisors after the pilot theatre installation was utilized to refine my methodology in anticipation of my final creative practice. The one that would lead to the theatre installation assessed with this thesis.

### **3.5.2.2 The final creative practice**

The final practice consisted of four structured workshops. Initially, I had planned for three workshops to be conducted during the autumn of 2022. However, due to health reasons, I had to take a break from the master project after completing two workshops. Upon resuming the project a few months later, in the late winter of 2023, I decided to add one more workshop weekend to reinvigorate the project. In summary, the final practice comprised the first two workshops in autumn 2022 and the final two workshops in spring 2023. Similar to the pilot practice, I assigned participants "homework" tasks to be completed between the live workshops, aimed at generating creative materials for the theater installation. These tasks were organized and facilitated through the use of Microsoft Teams.

The online tasks assigned to participants were consistent with those employed during the pilot practice. These tasks included capturing photographs of masculine motifs in their respective neighborhoods, providing a guided virtual tour of their rooms, viewing and commenting on the documentary film "Me and My Penis" by the British photo artist Ajamu and director Jenny Ash (2020), and uploading childhood and adolescent pictures of themselves.

Exercises in the final practice series of workshops.

1. **Building Rapport: "Show and Tell" Exercise**

To establish rapport and facilitate personal connections, participants were instructed to bring four objects from their rooms that held personal significance. During a group session, participants shared stories about the chosen objects and elaborated on their significance. This exercise allowed for the recognition of the agency embedded within these objects, highlighting the narratives and emotions associated with them.

2. **Exploring Musical Preferences**

Participants were prompted to share their favourite music and engage in discussions on how these preferences related to their understanding of masculine ideals. The conversations aimed to uncover patterns and themes in musical choices, providing insight into participants' perceptions of masculinity as reflected through their musical preferences. Furthermore, the resulting "vibing" video was integrated into the theatre installation, adding a multimedia element to the exploration.

3. **Childhood TV Shows and Masculine Ideals**

Similar to the previous exercise, participants were encouraged to discuss their favourite childhood TV shows and examine the ways in which these choices conformed to their own understandings of masculine ideals. This exercise aimed to reveal the influence of media and cultural representations on the development of masculine identities during formative years.

4. **The Spectrum Exercise: Assessing Perspectives**

Utilizing a spatial representation of opinions, participants were guided through the «Spectrum Exercise». The room was divided into six parallel vertical zones using masking tape, with participants initially positioned on the middle line. Provocative statements, including "*I am worried about my penis size,*" "*I support the #MeToo movement,*" and "*I am comfortable showing emotions,*" were presented to participants. They then moved left or right of the middle line to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Following this positioning, participants were given the opportunity to articulate and defend their stances, fostering in-depth discussions among the group.

The outcomes of the aforementioned exercises culminated in the creation of the theater installation titled "BoysRooms," which served as a tangible representation of our collective exploration of masculinity. One of the creative methods employed was "Water poetry," a technique developed by Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos. In this approach, participants were given a specific topic and allotted a short timed deadline to contribute a line, stanza, or a predetermined number of words on a piece of paper. The papers were then passed on to the next person in the group, creating a collaborative poem. This method aimed to evoke the fluidity and rhythmic qualities of water, with each line representing a wave, crash, or droplet within the poem. Our collaborative poems emerged as a creative expression of our joint exploration of masculinity.

These poems served as the foundation for the creation of video poems, where each research participant recorded a short video narrating the poem over accompanying images they had recorded. This multimedia approach added depth and visual engagement to the exploration of masculinity, capturing the essence of the poems through personal interpretations and expressive performances.

Furthermore, as a result of our discussions and exercises, a compilation of slang names for the penis was curated. This compilation was transformed into a video, with one participant reciting each slang word in rapid succession while maintaining direct eye contact with the camera. This video compilation provided a provocative and thought-provoking component to our exploration, shedding light on the diverse and often playful ways in which masculinity is represented and discussed.

These creative outputs collectively offered profound insights into the nuanced dimensions of masculinity. They exemplified how personal objects, music preferences, childhood TV shows, and perspectives on provocative statements contribute to the construction and negotiation of masculine identities. Through these artistic and expressive endeavors, our understanding of masculinity was enriched, providing a deeper appreciation for the complexities and diversity within this realm of human experience.

### 3.6 Theatre practice as a research method

In this project, five male high-school teenagers have participated in a hybrid live/digital set of theatre workshops to produce a live theatre installation exploring masculinity. The project began with a 16-hour live workshop over two days. In the first day, the parameters of the projects were explained, and a rough framing of the theatre installation was created, before exploring both my own and the participant perspectives on masculinity, providing us with a common framework to continue exploring. Then followed six weeks of digital content creation on Microsoft Teams, where weekly the

participants would be given tasks and provocations to respond to, i.e., take pictures of masculine imagery in and around your town. Their responses were documented on each participant's phone and then uploaded to our closed Teams room. The creative practice ended with a final workshop where all the artistic content was puzzled together into a theatre installation of a performative boy's room with live and dead materials to experience and engage with.

### 3.7 Analysis

The nature of a practice-led research is such that a straightforward narrative or linear structure rarely manifest themselves. In this project I often experienced myself being placed in the middle of a chaotic and unpredictable endeavour. A seemingly unending state of becoming where the artistic threads intersected, diverged, and converged as in a massive underground root system. Creative impulses and ideas were seemingly always in the middles of its growth, and our attention were often not on their origin or the final state. Deleuze calls this root-structure phenomenon "the rhizome", describing it as a non-linear network that "connects any point to any other point" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987a).

When analysing this root mass of material, I cannot read it from a distance looking at it as something different and separate from myself, as I quickly realize that I am a part of the material I am trying to look at. I find myself entangled with my practice. Therefore I will make use of diffractive analysis, an analytic method where «the data is itself understood as a co-constitutive force, working with and upon the researcher, as the researcher is working with the data" (Taguchi, 2012, p. 272). This interconnectedness builds on Deleuze's understanding of Subject and Object. It leads to looking at the body and mind as connected (bodymind) and not as separate. Barad expands on this with the term intra-action, where Taguchi goes on and explains the diffractive process:

In this event, the bodymind of the researcher becomes a space of transit in the encounter with data. The event of analysis thus becomes a transcorporeal engagement (Alaimo, 2008, 2010), in which the researcher is attentive to those bodymind faculties that register the flows of smell and the intensities of touch, level, temperature, pressure, tension and force in the interconnections that emerge in the engagement. (Taguchi, 2012, p. 267)

I will analyse two auto-narratives from the final practice using this method. These are subjective accounts from my own point of view of what unfolded in my practice.

Unlike traditional reflective analysis, diffraction involves the engagement of multiple theories and materials to illuminate points of intersection, leading to the production of different interpretations. Through this methodology, phenomena can be read in a multi-faceted manner, revealing the performative agents at play, and the ways in which they intra-act with one another. To diffract is to cut apart and diffraction an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling (Barad, 2014). Barad argues that all materials, human and non-human, dead and alive, all intra-act with each

other. This is not to be confused with interaction, which is two separate entities acting on each other, but intra-action, where these entities were never separated to begin with but were always entangled and acting with each other (Østern & Dahl, 2019). Utilizing diffractive cuts, each auto-narrated episode will be analysed through a range of perspectives and theories, yielding a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under examination.

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

Each research project presents unique ethical challenges, and although most researchers agree on the fundamental principle of doing no harm, additional dilemmas may arise specific to individual projects. In this case, the project intersects education and arts, necessitating a dualistic ethical approach that includes both research ethics and the ethics of authenticity.

Research ethics can be explored on micro and macro levels. The micro approach focuses on the project itself, requiring full transparency and disclosure of methods and methodology, as detailed in this chapter. Notably, concealing the research participants identity becomes complicated when incorporating a performative element, where participants are visible and engaging with the audience with their own faces, bodies and personal.

To address this concern, I maintained transparency with participants from the project's onset, and the installation was a closed, invitation-only event to protect their privacy. The process leading up to the installation emphasized building relationships with participants, encouraging them to discuss vulnerable masculinity topics and preparing them to share their stories in the installation. A mutual sharing of personal stories and perspectives was necessary to not only gain access to material, but also to some extent lessen the status gap between me and them. Of course, at the same time it doesn't take away the power imbalance that my researcher role creates, which is only strengthened by my age and my part time role as their substitute drama teacher at school.

My method to gain access to my participants stories and perspectives on masculinity shared dialogical vulnerability, fostering trust and a safe space for exploration. One might argue that this approach resembles a communal therapy project. While there is a possibility for this, the I would argue that between the more traditional researcher role and a therapy role there exists a researcher position of compassion and care. While some aspects of the practice may have therapeutic effects, it is not therapy. Drama therapy is a distinct research field with its own guidelines and facilitative processes.

The methodology I employed to access participants' narratives and perspectives on masculinity involved fostering a shared dialogical vulnerability, thereby creating an atmosphere of trust and

promoting a secure environment for exploration. Critics may contend that such an approach bears a resemblance to a communal therapy project. However, it is essential to note that between the conventional researcher role and the therapeutic role, there lies a researcher position imbued with compassion and care. Although certain aspects of the practice may yield therapeutic outcomes, it is not synonymous with therapy. Drama therapy constitutes a separate field of research, characterized by its distinct guidelines and facilitative methodologies.

The macro approach encompasses a consideration of the wider social and political ramifications associated with the research. Given that the project serves as a master's thesis, its primary objective is to showcase competencies and skills as a researcher. Nevertheless, the scope of the project's aspirations and potential contributions to the field of arts education is not confined to this purpose. My ambitions for the project and its prospective impact on the discipline are elaborated upon in the conclusion.

The ethics of authenticity become particularly relevant when considering the creative artifact—a theatre installation simulating three participants' bedrooms. This data is not neutral, as the simulated rooms have been artistically altered, resulting in a creation that resembles but does not fully replicate the original rooms. The installation is designed to evoke a gamer room aesthetic, complete with the smell of cologne, cluttered and tidy areas, numerous physical objects, and video poems playing on loop.

The immersive nature of the installation means that visitors must choose their engagement, as it is impossible to interact with every element or person. This raises the question of how to evaluate the artistic artifact as research, given the varied experiences and interpretations may arise from interacting with the installation.

Because I chose to do my creative practice as a theatre installation with an audience I was not able to conceal the identity of my participants. They were present in the theatre installation with their own faces, bodies and names and personal stories shared to the outside audience. This was a necessity due to the nature this research. To safeguard my participants, I chose to limit their exposure to the audience by operating with closed viewings.

### 3.9 Challenges and limitations

It's hard to discuss the challenges faced during this project without mentioning the impact of COVID-19. When planning the project, the ongoing pandemic led me to take a cautious approach when gathering research material. To address this, I opted for a hybrid method of creating research

materials with the participants. This involved limiting physical meetings and moving a substantial portion of the work and communication with the participants online, using Microsoft Teams.

Moreover, it's worth noting that this master's project has undergone several changes throughout its duration, as life events can often impact research. During this master's program, I suffered the loss of both my mother and my grandmother, which deeply affected me. In the aftermath of this loss, I had to take personal time off and extend the project's timeframe twice, adjusting my plans to accommodate these unforeseen circumstances.

The assessment of research quality within the performative research paradigm poses a unique challenge. Generalizability of findings is not feasible in this context, as research is conceptualized as an act of creation. This perspective necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional notions of research quality. In this paradigm, research quality emerges from the intricate theoretical engagement, its entanglement with the research materials.

It is also important to emphasize that this is an artistic methodical exploration of masculinity, not a psychological or sociological field study. I am not proposing new representative findings on the masculine gender role, I am proposing a methodological roadmap to explore an intimate and difficult subject through theatre.

### 3.10 Summary of methodology

In this master project, the methodology employed is rooted in a Performative Deleuzian-Baradian research philosophy, which places emphasis on a practice-led approach. The aim is to investigate the exploration of masculinity in teenage boys through the medium of theater workshops, ultimately culminating in a theater installation that serves as the primary research product.

The methodology integrates various elements, including education, trial and error, and student engagement, all within the framework of a practice-led approach. This approach recognizes the importance of positionality, which is influenced by the researcher's personal background and experiences, in understanding and interpreting the work conducted.

The participants in the study consisted of male high school seniors who had drama as their primary subject. They engaged in hybrid live/digital theater workshops, which provided a unique platform for exploring masculinity. The workshops ultimately led to the creation of a live theater installation that served as the focal point of the research.

Practice-led research not only acts as a method for generating data but also constitutes the data itself. To document the process and outcomes, various means of documentation, including photography, video, and a researcher's journal, were employed.

In the analysis of the research data, diffractive analysis was utilized. This analytical approach acknowledges the interconnected web of material, going beyond traditional dichotomies and recognizing the complexity of the subject matter. Additionally, the study examined research ethics at both micro and macro levels, considering the ethical implications and ensuring research authenticity.

Throughout the project, challenges were encountered, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected personal life events. These circumstances necessitated unforeseen changes to the research process, highlighting the adaptability and resilience required in such endeavors.

It is worth noting that evaluating research quality within the performative research paradigm is a complex task. This investigation represents an artistic exploration of masculinity rather than a conventional psychological or sociological field study. Therefore, the assessment of research quality takes into account the unique nature of the project and its artistic objectives.



## 4 Analysis: Cutting apart and together

In this chapter, an analysis of two episodes from my creative practice will be presented, employing the method of diffraction (Barad, 2014). They are both auto-narratives from the final practice. These are subjective representations from my own point of view of what unfolded in my practice. The first episode is taken from the workshop process, and the second episode is from the theatre installation itself. I have changed the names of the research participants. Both episodes are perhaps too large to be referred to as diffractive cuts, so I refer to them as diffractive episodes. In each case the analysis will first present the diffractive episode, then diffract it, cutting it apart to look at the performative agents intra-acting. Then I will cut it together to create new meaning.



**Figure 4-1** The workshop space is being divided in zones to prepare for the Spectrum Exercise

### 4.1 Diffractive episode 1: Feelings

During the fourth round of the spectrum exercise with my second group of participants, the boys once again gathered in the centre of the room, flanked by three zones on each side. The room, a dimly lit black box with a stage lights, served as a neutral backdrop for this exercise. As the facilitator

of the exercise and the one filming, I presented the viewpoint for the round from behind my iPhone: "I am comfortable showing emotions." With three rounds already under their belts, the boys knew what to do. They listened to my statement, took a few moments to consider their response, and then moved to the appropriate zone in the room that represented their level of agreement or disagreement with the claim. The zones, arranged from right to left, ranged from "fully agree" to "fully disagree," with several intermediate levels in between.

#### 4.1.1 Presentation of episode 1

Alex takes the lead, standing much shorter than the others with short black hair and a snug hoodie. He expresses that he disagrees a little with the statement and shares that he's not comfortable sharing negative emotions, particularly at school when someone asks him how he's feeling. While he can show emotions, he admits that he's not very comfortable with it.

Michael, tall, lanky and curly haired follows. He places himself on "I somewhat agree". He begins by saying that he now feels comfortable showing his emotions, but it took him 14 to 15 years to get there. Michael acknowledges that it can be difficult for men to show emotions in society and that some men are even attacked for doing so. He shares an episode from his childhood where if he fell and hurt himself, he was expected to brush it off, but if a girl the same age hurt herself, the adults would be overflowing with care and emotion. Michael feels that he has been told to keep his emotions contained and not show them so much. He shares that when he was three years old, his parents told him that he had to take responsibility for his brother, which he feels has had a negative impact on his life, even now that he's almost an adult. Michael then pauses and allows Nicholas to jump in.

Nicholas, slender with long brown hair and glasses, says he can't talk about his feelings; the word doesn't even exist in his vocabulary. He talks about his upbringing, mentioning that he was given lots of love when he was younger and that he had feelings as a young boy. However, now if someone tells him that they love him, his response is confused. "I have emotions, but they're extremely deep inside," he says.

Alex speaks up and shares that he used to cry a lot in his upbringing, but he learned to hide it. He explains that his parents had loud arguments that upset him, and he remembers how his older brother used to take him away into their room to distract him from their parents' fighting. Alex's parents are divorced, and the situation makes him sad. He admits that he still tears up in family situations where people get angry, but these days he has grown accustomed to his feelings and has learned to tolerate sad moments, making them less upsetting for himself. However, he feels like he has "deafened" his emotions.

Michael asks Alex if his "deafening" is in the sense of how he shows emotions to others or how he feels them himself. Alex responds that it's both ways. He goes on to explain that he feels bad when his father asks if he's okay and to tell him if he's struggling. Alex admits that he just uses acting techniques he's learned at school and tells his father that he's fine, even if he's not.

Michael expresses concern and asks Alex, "How do you feel about us?" Alex responds that he hasn't shared with anyone except the group that his parents used to argue when he was young, and there are other experiences he's not ready to share. Michael doesn't let Alex off the hook and continues, "If you're struggling at school, can you share it with us? Can you cry in front of us? Can you at least tell us that you're not doing so great?"

Alex responds, "I can tell people I'm sad, but I'm not comfortable going any deeper than that. If people ask if there's anything they can do for me, I never let them know. It's good just to be close to you guys, that you're close by."

Simon, the tallest of them, says that he doesn't find it difficult to show emotions. Throughout his upbringing, he's felt a lot of feelings and has no problems expressing them. In his family, they talked about feelings a lot, and it's made him very confident in managing them in a way that allows him to have control. If he's sad, he doesn't break down - he's learned techniques to keep himself steady. In fact, he mostly feels that he is the recipient of other people's emotional problems. He describes himself as a kind of hobby psychologist for his classmates and people around him. This has given him perspective.

Michael injects, but I've rarely seen you vulnerable. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen you vulnerable as long as I've known you. Do you feel like you must be a bedrock for other people and that you can't show vulnerability in the same degree?

Simon responds, I'm just not very vulnerable, I think. He says he answers people if they ask him. But he agrees that he's been emotional support for many people and that maybe one day he will breakdown himself and when that happens it will not be pretty. "But in my 18 years I have experienced a lot and I've learned that if you have a crisis, it will pass, and you will get stronger for every crisis you have", he says.

Several boys take the word and starts interjecting but Simon presses on, "My cousin took his life five years ago, which was very difficult for the family. I observed my aunt, who is a nurse and psychologist, closely after the incident. She used to be a very lively and happy person, but I can see that she is not the same anymore. Losing a child to suicide is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a family. It puts everything in perspective. My aunt has struggled a lot, but she has also learned to accept the reality of the situation. She will never get an answer as to why her son took his

own life. It's a painful memory, but she must make the best of what she has. It's sad and horrible, and she has every reason to be sad, but it doesn't help to sit and think it all through. We must accept that life can be difficult and there are situations that are going to be hard. We may never be the same again, and we must move on for the sake of everyone involved, including ourselves."

After this revelation, there is a moment of silence before Michael speaks up. "I would like to delve a bit deeper into the topic of vulnerability, particularly for men. I don't mean to generalize, but I believe it's a claim worth exploring that many men struggle with being vulnerable."

Alex nods and says he very much agrees.

Michael continues and says he felt like it was difficult for him to say that he loved people, or at least he used to, but he got better at it because he worked on it. He grew up with his grandparents and his brother since he was five years old. He was close to his mom and stepdad, but he didn't have a close relationship with his biological dad, so he never told them that he loved them. He didn't tell his stepfather and his mom that he loved them until his stepfather died of cancer in 2015 on New Year's Eve. Failing a little over a year, his mom took her life. He felt very guilty that he didn't express his love and appreciation for them and regretted it. Although he moved on from it, he tried to train himself to show more emotion after that. He couldn't bear to sit back and regret not doing what he could have done, which was so small. Last spring, his grandmother died after about a year of illness. She was the closest he could get to a mother. He managed to say goodbye and felt that just because he was able to be vulnerable there, he could move on from it relatively quickly. He sighs and I can see that this is tough to speak of.

After this I breathe heavy feeling hit by such an intense story of loss. I feel dizzy and I want to stop filming and give everyone a hug, but before I can move, Nicholas follows up, almost immediately with an equally tragic story. He shares that his mother made repeated suicide attempts when he was little, but never received hospitalization. Her difficult childhood and grandmother's attempts to remove him from the home left a lasting impact on him. Child Protective Services removed him from his mother's care when he was three years and seven months old. Despite his mother's objections, he was taken away. When he shared this story with friends, they laughed, which made him reflect on his emotional detachment. He is comfortable expressing love and affection to people he respects but does not communicate with his biological father. He goes on with another story where at his first institution, he met a girl who had a history of suicidal thoughts. They developed a close relationship despite not being allowed to be together romantically. It was a bit of a Romeo and Juliet story. Nicholas felt he taught her that life was worth living and they developed strong feelings for each other. However, on the day he was leaving to move for school, she took her own life after realizing he was leaving. She had

previously expressed gratitude to Nicholas for saving her life but was unable to cope with his departure. "You know, she loved the wine gummy skull candy, but she didn't like the liquorice part, so she would always give it to me. I still buy this candy from time to time. Sometimes, when I see a stranger at a bus stop, I will offer them the liquorice part of the candy. Please share it with me it means so much to me, I tell them".

Then it's my turn to reciprocate. They have shared, and now it's time for me to share. I position myself on "fully agree." I inform Michael, Alex, Nicholas, and Simon that I am very comfortable sharing my emotions. I am in touch with my feelings. I look at each of them and express how their stories have impacted me. I acknowledge their pain and recognize the emotional toll that discussing this has on them and on me. I appreciate the efforts they are making. "I see that each of you has different strategies for coping with difficult feelings," I mention and continue to tell them that I'm not here to judge whether they are right or wrong. I explain to them that I haven't always been good at expressing my feelings comfortably. I share a story about my shyness as a young child. My mother, aware of this, once offered me a box of sweets to share with the kids playing further down the street, hoping it would help me connect with them. However, my shyness was so overwhelming that I merely stood at a distance, observing them. Paralyzed by my shyness, I unintentionally ate all the sweets without mustering the courage to approach the other kids. I turn to Michael and reveal that I, too, have lost my mother. About a year ago, she developed ALS, a devastating incurable disease that progressively took away her control over her limbs and nerves. I understand what it means to lose one's own mother. "I feel your pain, Michael," I convey to him. Michael expresses his gratitude and shares that his grandmother also passed away due to ALS. "I know that disease," he says. "It's awful. I can relate to what you must have gone through." We exchange a brief glance, and he kindly smiles at me. I shift my attention to Alex and express my empathy for the distress he experienced while witnessing his parents arguing and shouting during his upbringing. He silently nods in response. As I look at Nicholas, who has endured such traumatic experiences, I find myself uncertain about what to say. So, I convey this to him. "It's heart-breaking to hear your story, but you narrate it with such clarity and composure. I'm impressed," I tell him. "Perhaps, as you mentioned, it's because you bury your feelings deep inside, but you sound remarkably thoughtful and mature for your age." We continue to discuss our stories for a little while longer before I close the exercise. I had originally planned a few more rounds of the Spectrum exercise, but feel I am full. Full of sad stories, full of empathy and care, filled to the brim with pride and impressed at the vulnerability that we all shared. So, we end it there and do a causal debrief before the day is over. Later that evening I phone all the participant to tell them I am impressed by their vulnerability and the stories they shared and ask how they are doing. All responding in various ways that they were fine with the exercise.

#### 4.1.2 Cutting episode 1 apart

So, what is happening in this exercise? Which performative agents are intra-acting, facilitating this level of emotional vulnerability and sharing?

First, let's look at the space where we are in. It has agency; it's a black box. With black walls, floor, and curtains, the space provides a neutral, sensory-deprived environment that blocks external stimuli, enabling participants to work from a neutral perspective. Consequently, whatever occurs in that space is emphasized and made clearer, like colors on a black canvas. This room type is familiar to my senior year high school participants, who have drama as their core subject. Although the workshop didn't take place at their school but in a separate black box space, the spatial agency of the workshop room is transferrable. Its familiarity elicits notions of safety and encourages creative and emotional exploration.

The black box or any drama space serves as a performative agent with intertwined properties that facilitate transformative learning, helping us create knowledge, but also to grow as human beings. A recent study (Bruun & Steigum, 2022) investigating mental health perspectives connected to drama spaces reveals that "the intra-active dance between the drama space and the participants represents complex processes of sense-making, including making sense of mental health experience." The study also found that "the participants perceived the drama space as an inviting and actively co-creating companion for entangled meaning-making, transgressing the formal educational aims of the curriculum."

The relationship between the research participants and myself was nurtured through the process leading up to this exercise, which involved various exercises and discussions. This created a space for reciprocal vulnerability with the students, fostering bonding through exercise, the sharing of personal stories, and discussions on masculinity ideals and their impact. All the work done prior to this point played a role in the moments of these emotional revelations.

Additionally, my brief stint as the substitute drama teacher at their high school, teaching them about theatre history and Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," influenced my relationship among the research participants, who had been classmates throughout high school. These relationships acted as performative agents, intra-acting with us, the room, and the exercise.

Filming the exercise was another factor. I moved around with my iPhone, capturing their positions and discussions. When it was my turn to share, one of the participants took over my iPhone and filmed me and the others. However, this exercise was the last one during the second workshop weekend, allowing us ample time to get to know each other and, hopefully, reducing any discomfort associated with being

recorded. Nevertheless, the iPhone exerted agency and intra-acted as a performative agent with the exercise.

Our masculinity is also at play here, not surprisingly. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) would perhaps agree that we produce our own situated masculinity with this process, in this space, with each other and the relationship we have with each other. Our gendered practices meet each other. Our different bodies meet each other. My masculine practice embodied in the way I speak, move, gesticulate, opinionate, and facilitate the exercise meets Alex, Michael, Simon, and Tom's own embodied masculine practices in the way they speak, move, gesticulate, opinionate, and participate. Our embodied practices intra-act with each other. So perhaps we create a new masculine practice entangled with the room, our relationship, our process together and our own histories? A situated masculinity entangled in spacetime at that particular space, at that particular time.

The emotional and poignant stories possessed their own agency. Each story served as a catalyst, paving the way for the next one to unfold. Vulnerability in one narrative prompted reciprocation with another, creating a continuous interplay among all the stories.

#### 4.1.3 Cutting together episode 1

Having examined the performative agents individually, I will now explore how they come together to create a safe space that fosters shared vulnerability. The safe space created through the convergence of these performative agents not only allows for shared vulnerability but also encourages a deeper exploration of personal experiences and perspectives. Within the black box, participants feel a sense of liberation to express themselves authentically, free from judgment or societal expectations. The familiarity of our relationship, developed over time through my role as their substitute teacher and the workshop process, further enhances the atmosphere of trust and support.

As the participants engage in various exercises, discussions, and the filming of the exercise, each element contributes to the creation of a space where masculine norms can be critically examined and challenged. By actively asserting agency and intra-acting with the performative agents, the participants play an active role in shaping the process and the outcomes.

Through this collaborative and reciprocal exploration, a new tapestry of meaning emerges. It becomes clear that the practice-led research, grounded in the dogma of reciprocal vulnerability, has the potential to transcend societal constraints and provide a platform for intimate and profound self-reflection. The situated expression of masculinity that arises within this shared spacetime is unique, existing in the fluid dynamics of our interactions and the materiality of the room.

Crucially, the topics addressed in this research process delve into the depths of personal experiences and emotions that are often left unspoken in other contexts. The act of sharing vulnerability reciprocally serves as a catalyst for connection and understanding, lessening the inherent risks associated with opening oneself up. In this way, the ethical balance of my role as a teacher is recalibrated, as I am not solely demanding vulnerability from the participants but actively engaging in it myself.

This convergence of researcher, participants, physical space, materials, shared history, and purpose creates a profound and complex phenomenon. All these performative agents interact and assert their agency, intertwining to facilitate the shared vulnerability experienced during the transformative "Spectrum Exercise." It is within this multifaceted tapestry that new insights, perspectives, and possibilities for reimagining masculinity emerge, challenging existing narratives and forging a path toward a more inclusive and nuanced understanding.

## 4.2 Episode 2: The installation

The second episode is the entire installation at the day it was showcased for the audience the examiners.



**Figure 4-2 The BoysRooms theatre installation without the audience**

### 4.2.1 Presentation of episode 2: The room

The theatre installation took place in a black box space at a university college, which had previously been used for our workshops. The room was rectangular in shape, surrounded by black curtains to block out external light, with a black wooden floor and theatre lights embedded in the ceiling. Within



this space, there were three "boys' rooms" positioned on opposing sides, each filled with personal items from the research participants' real-life boys' rooms.

Nicholas' room was filled with a plethora of objects. In addition to his high-performance PC gaming setup adorned with RGB lighting, his space was cluttered with plates of leftover food, various LEGO structures, soda bottles, clothes, a virtual-reality kit, a lava lamp, and a Tesla lightning lamp, among other things. Above his workspace, Nicholas had hung a set of wooden Asian-fantasy swords that he had made himself. Behind his desk, he had displayed his extensive collection of neatly organized Donald Duck comics in folders. Surrounding them were numerous pictures from his childhood and teenage years. The space was literally littered with materials.

Alex also centred his space around his own PC gaming setup, but his area was more tidily arranged. In front of his desk, he had placed a mini refrigerator with a transparent door, stocked with energy drinks glowing in blue neon light. Behind his desk, there was a collection of large photos from his childhood. To the right side of his desk, he had a table adorned with a Manga figurine, an Eiffel Tower letter-opening knife, and various other small trinkets and objects.

Michael approached his space differently compared to Nicholas and Alex. He created a sofa and TV area with a heap of clothes scattered on the floor. Behind the sofa, there was a small camper bed with bedding. A side table with a lamp, a pride flag, and some books stood next to the sofa. Adjacent to the TV, Michael showcased a diverse selection of photos featuring himself and his deceased family, along with a display of different colognes he uses.

Two wide sheets of paper were hung from the ceiling's lighting rig, creating a projection space for a set of video-poems related to masculinity. These video-poems were created by the participants and distilled from all of our combined experiences and perspectives. They played on a loop throughout the installation event.

On the back wall, there was a large projection screen displaying a slow-motion looping video of the participants enjoying their favorite energetic music. The video had been edited with a rough filter to emphasize the shapes of the boys while blurring other details.

In the center of the room, there was an iPad placed on a pedestal. The iPad played a looping video of Michael, who looked directly into the camera and recited a long list of colorful and local slang terms for the penis. Below the iPad, on a wide sheet of paper, these words were written out in different colors and handwriting styles. 3 marker pens in different colours were left at bottom of the sheet.

#### 4.2.2 Presentation of episode 2: the installation event

The event began in the college's atrium, outside the main installation space. I welcomed the audience and provided instructions on the "rules" of the installation. I explained that this was not a conventional theater experience where you could observe from a distance, but rather an immersive one where you had to actively engage and dig for information. The focus of our exploration was masculinity, both its general aspects and how it engaged with us personally and as a group. The participants had stories and perspectives to share, but it required curiosity on the part of the audience. They were encouraged to explore the room, examine the materials, and engage with the boys to get to know them.

With that, I opened the doors, and the audience entered the space. Originally, I had planned to casually move around the room like everyone else, absorbing the atmosphere, listening to conversations, and taking it all in. However, there was an issue with the iPad that was supposed to loop the video of colorful slang words for the penis. So, I positioned myself at the pedestal where the iPad was placed and manually reset the video repeatedly throughout the event.

Being in the center of the room allowed me to observe how the audience engaged with the materials and the research participants. However, my role became more than just an observer. People stopped by to share their experiences and congratulate me. Some mentioned how the room resembled their own teenage son's space, commenting on the mess and gaming rigs they recognized. The audience's reactions varied, with some being captivated and wide-eyed, others becoming emotional and teary, and some remaining serious and attentive. Standing there, manually looping the video, I became an nexus point between the different installation spaces where different experiences and readings of the space and the material intersected. I had the opportunity to engage with the audience in a more direct way than I had initially planned. I recall one audience member in particular who came over emotional and teary eyed: They told me they had asked Michael about a picture in his space. The picture was of him and his mother and stepfather. This had led to Michael telling them about how he lost them and how that affected him. Another audience member asked me how I got them to be so open and forthcoming with the emotions and personal stories. I told them that this was an instrumental part of my practice. To create a space for shared and for reciprocal vulnerability. I told them that the exercises we had done, were done together. I asked nothing of the research participants that I did not answer myself. Another audience member commented about the looping video poems and was impressed when I told them the fact that the young research participants had recorded the films, edited, and done the voiceover for the poem. The poems themselves were a collaborative effort between all of us, including me, I told them.

Part from the many conversations I had, being a nexus point in the installation, I remember observing the flow of the audience mirroring slow body of water trying even itself out over a textured landscape. It was organic. At one point the audience split into two main groups huddled around the looping videos showing the video poems, while a few others were absorbed in conversations with the participants and a few stragglers roamed the spaces walking slowly. A moment later the landscape was totally different, now many of the audience members drew close in around the three boy's rooms and observed the conversation other audience members had with the participants, while a few stragglers were watching and walking between the video poems. This was a recurrent event as the organic movement of the audience filled out the textured materially diverse space.

#### 4.2.3 Cutting episode 2 apart

So, what is happening in this installation? What performative agents are at play? How does the theatre installation materials produce diverse understandings of masculinity? Let's break it apart. I would like to start with me, the researcher. I am a performative agent, I intra-act with the audience in my many exchanges with them during the event, but before all that I have exerted my agency over the installation even quite directly at the start, by instructing the audience to engage, explore and get to know the participants. My word and vocabulary, my big body, my bald head and my glasses and my nervous gestures, all intra-act and are entangled and produce a masculine practice which assert agency over the audience and therefor the events of the installation. Likewise, the entangled complexity that are my research participants assert agency over the production of different understandings of masculinity, because they are all different. They have different bodies, faces, voices and clothing styles. Michael was tall, curly haired, speaking eloquent with piercing eyes. Nicholas was also tall, with semi long flat hair under a dark hat with a semi wide brim, speaking energetically and very fast. Alex was quite a bit shorter, with short black hair and a deep nasal voice, dressed in thick hoodie. They all express themselves differently and they all produce diverse perspectives of masculinity just being who they are in the space.

Their boy rooms spaces consisting of a vast array of objects all intra-acting with each other, and entangled they produce a material masculinity of PC and console gaming, messy and organised spaces, perfume scents of citrus and sandal wood, Asian pop-culture and nerd culture.

The video poems have agency in their own right. They produce a more poetic and thoughtful perspective on masculinity. One of with expressing itself abstract and though images. This stands in contrast to the vibing video where the participant headbang, slash into the air and dance as if in combat, all in slow motion. This produces a more expressive, energetic and aggressive perspective on masculinity.

The penis slang space with its video of rapid slang words shot out at rapid pace with those very same word written out underneath. This produced a comical, coarse and phallic perspective of masculinity.

#### 4.2.4 Cutting together episode 2

Now that we have examined the different performative agents individually, we can begin to weave them together and create new meanings. It's similar to crafting a collage using scraps from various magazine clippings. The amalgamation of these diverse performative agents creates a rich tapestry of masculinity, challenging preconceived notions and celebrating its multifaceted nature. It defies simplistic categorizations and reveals the complexities inherent within masculinity itself. This is in line with Connell (2005), who argues that one cannot conceptualise masculinity as a fixed thing, it is dynamic and changeable.

By incorporating rough and coarse expressions alongside poetic and thoughtful ones, the installation highlights the wide spectrum of masculine experiences. It showcases masculine bodies that defy societal norms, encompassing individuals of various heights, sizes, and shapes. This produces an idea that masculinity is not confined to a singular physical archetype, but rather exists in a multitude of diverse forms.

The presence of scents like citrus and sandalwood hints at sensory dimensions within masculinity, evoking a sensory exploration of identity. Asian pop culture and nerd culture intersect, underscoring the influence of different cultural contexts and subcultures on the construction of masculinity. Meanwhile, the inclusion of PC gaming as a performative agent speaks to the ways in which technology and digital spaces have become integral parts of contemporary masculine experiences.

The juxtaposition of slow-motion aggression and phallic comedy offers a playful examination of masculine tropes and stereotypes. It encourages reflection on the performative nature of masculinity and invites viewers to question societal expectations and norms.

Above all, the installation emphasizes the inherent diversity within masculinity. It challenges the notion that masculinity is a monolithic construct by showcasing a multitude of expressions, experiences, and perspectives. It acknowledges that while certain elements may align with traditional notions of masculinity, there is also room for vulnerability, artistic expression, and shared storytelling. The act of inviting strangers into personal spaces and engaging in conversations further reinforces the notion that masculinity is not a closed-off fortress, but rather a dynamic and evolving concept that can be explored and understood through human connection.

In its entirety, the installation creates a dynamic and thought-provoking exploration of masculinity, inviting viewers to question, challenge, and expand their understanding of this complex and ever-evolving facet of human identity.

### 4.3 Summary of analysis

In this chapter I have made use of diffraction to analyse two episodes from my creative practice, which are auto-narratives from the workshop process and the theatre installation. Each episode is presented first, then diffracted, cutting it apart to look at the performative agents intra-acting, then cut together to create new meanings.

“The Spectrum exercise” created a space for reciprocal vulnerability with the participants, fostering bonding through exercise, the sharing of personal stories, and discussions on masculinity ideals and their impact. Factors such as me being their substitute drama teacher and the exercise itself, can act as performative agents in creating a safe space for vulnerability and deeper exploration of personal experiences. Our masculinity is also at play, as we produce our own situated masculinity with this process. Through the convergence of these performative agents, a safe space is created that fosters shared vulnerability and encourages a deeper exploration of personal experiences and perspectives. This creates a sense of liberation to express ourselves authentically, free from judgment or societal expectations. Performative agents, human and non-human, intra-act to create a space where masculine norms can be critically examined and challenged. This collaborative and reciprocal exploration leads to a new tapestry of meaning, which can transcend societal constraints and provide a platform for self-reflection. The act of sharing vulnerability reciprocally serves as a catalyst for connection and understanding, challenging existing narratives and forging a more inclusive and nuanced understanding.

The installation event took place in a black box space at a university college, with three "boys' rooms" positioned on opposing sides. Each room was filled with personal items from the research participants' real-life boys' rooms, such as a PC gaming setup, a virtual-reality kit, and a Tesla lightning lamp.

The installation explores the diverse performative agents of masculinity, defying simplistic categorizations and celebrating its multifaceted nature. It showcases masculine bodies that defy societal norms, encompassing individuals of various heights, sizes, and shapes. The presence of scents like citrus and sandalwood, Asian pop culture and nerd culture intersect, and PC gaming as a performative agent speaks to the ways in which technology and digital spaces have become integral parts of contemporary masculine experiences. The juxtaposition of slow-motion aggression and

phallic comedy offers a playful examination of masculine tropes and stereotypes, encouraging reflection on the performative nature of masculinity and inviting viewers to question societal expectations and norms. Overall, the installation emphasizes the inherent diversity within masculinity, challenging the notion that masculinity is a monolithic construct.

## 5 Discussion:

This discussion will be broken off into topics before I summarise the discussion in the end. I have chosen to focus the discussion on 4 topics. First the three research questions, the two sub-questions before the main research question, before I at last discuss an emerging aspect of the dynamic between the workshop process and the theatre installation product.

### 5.1 How does the “the spectrum exercise” facilitate the process of sharing vulnerability?

This exercise operates on the fundamental concept of reciprocal vulnerability, serving as a performative agent that fosters a safe and collaborative environment between the participants and the me as the researcher. While it may not eliminate the status gap between us, it does mitigate it to a certain extent. The exercise encourages active listening, empathy, and compassionate discussions, allowing participants to engage in a meaningful exploration of our personal stories.

By embracing reciprocal vulnerability as a central dogma, the spectrum exercise acknowledges that vulnerability is a shared experience between the participants and the myself as the researcher. It breaks down the traditional barriers that exist in research settings and transforms the dynamic into a collaborative undertaking. The participants are no longer mere subjects of study but active contributors to the research process. This shift in perspective cultivates a sense of equality and empowers individuals to openly share their vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or criticism.

Within the exercise, an essential element is the act of actively listening to each other's stories. This process entails genuinely hearing and understanding the experiences shared by participants. Through attentive listening, participants can develop a deeper level of empathy and compassion towards one another. They can recognize the commonalities and shared struggles, fostering a sense of connection and support within the group.

However, it is crucial to exercise caution and remain mindful of certain considerations. One such consideration is the possibility that participants may indulge me. This could arise from a genuine desire to help or a willingness to conform to the ongoing narrative of sad stories. Researchers must be aware of this potential bias and strive to create an atmosphere of trust and authenticity. Encouraging participants to share their stories truthfully and without embellishment is vital to maintaining the integrity of the research.

Furthermore, emotional storytelling inherently involves an unspoken mechanism of seeking equilibrium. This phenomenon is a common occurrence in everyday conversations between individuals. When I share a personal story that evokes sadness or presents a less flattering portrayal of myself, an imbalance is created in our status relationship. As a result, the counterpart often feels compelled to reciprocate by sharing their own story. This desire to restore balance and equilibrium within the conversation can contribute to the collective sharing of vulnerability but can also lead to embellishing stories or the fabricate them in order to avoid the uncomfortable stigma of not reciprocating.

In conclusion, the spectrum exercise serves as a valuable tool for facilitating the sharing of vulnerability. By embracing reciprocal vulnerability and fostering a collaborative environment, it allows participants and researchers to engage in open and honest discussions. Active listening, empathy, and compassionate dialogue enable a deeper understanding of each other's experiences. However, researchers must remain aware of potential biases and the tendency for conversations to seek equilibrium, ensuring the authenticity and meaningfulness of the vulnerability sharing process.

## 5.2 How does theatre installation materials produce diverse understandings of masculinity?

The research question explores how a theatre installation generates different understandings of masculinity through the intra-actions among participants, material objects, video material, the audience, and the researcher. Participants bring their unique bodies and embodied masculine practices into the installation space, where they interact with personal materials, shaping the room around themselves. These materials encompass a wide range of items, including RGB-lit gaming computers, PlayStation consoles, figurines, discarded items, clothing, Donald Duck comics, energy drinks, perfumes, and childhood and teenage photographs. The interplay of these materials intra-acts and gives rise to diverse expressions of masculinity.

The convergence of various cultural influences within the installation is notable. Gaming culture, Disney, fragrance scents, Asian manga and anime culture, hoodies, computer games, and Netflix content all intertwine, creating a complex and multifaceted representation of diverse material understandings of masculinity. The intra-actions between participants and these cultural artifacts contribute to the rich tapestry of interpretations within the installation.

Crucially, the interaction between research participants and the audience is a vital aspect. Each audience member is likely to have a distinct experience when encountering and engaging with the participants. The level of exploration and willingness to engage determines the depth of



understanding that audience members can attain. Every object within the installation carries its own stories and significance, and the photographs act as gateways to numerous other narratives. These variables alone yield a multitude of diverse readings and, consequently, foster different understandings of masculinity.

In addition to physical materials, the inclusion of digital elements further contributes to diverse interpretations. The digital materials, including Netflix movies playing on Michael's TV, games played on Nicholas and Alex's computers, lyrical video poems, an assertive vibing video, and a comical penis slang video, all play a role in shaping understandings of masculinity within the installation.

One potential counterargument is that despite the diverse range of materials and intra-actions within the theatre installation, the resulting understandings of masculinity may still exhibit a degree of homogeneity. While the individual objects and cultural influences may vary, there could be underlying societal norms and expectations that limit the potential for truly diverse interpretations. Social constructs and gender norms might influence participants' choices of materials and practices, ultimately leading to shared or similar understandings of masculinity. This argument suggests that the influence of broader societal factors could overshadow the potential for radical diversity in the interpretations generated by the installation.

Another counterargument is that the understandings of masculinity produced within the theatre installation may be heavily influenced by the pre-existing beliefs and biases of both the participants and the audience. Participants may already hold certain preconceived notions of masculinity, which could shape their choices of materials and their embodied practices within the installation. Similarly, the audience members' interpretations may be influenced by their own existing beliefs and societal conditioning. This argument emphasizes the role of individual perspectives and biases in shaping the understandings of masculinity, suggesting that the installation may not fully transcend or challenge existing stereotypes and norms.

In summary, the theatre installation creates an environment where diverse understandings of masculinity emerge through intra-actions among participants, material objects, video material, the audience, and the researcher. Participants' embodied practices, combined with the materials they bring, give rise to unique expressions of masculinity. The convergence of various cultural influences and the interaction between participants and audience members further enrich the interpretations. The incorporation of both physical and digital elements amplifies the breadth of understandings, highlighting the complexity of masculinity within the installation.

However, counterarguments suggest that societal norms and pre-existing beliefs may limit the extent of diversity in interpretations. Participants' and audience members' biases can also shape their

understandings. Despite these considerations, the theatre installation remains an engaging platform that invites multiple perspectives on masculinity, contributing to a broader conversation in contemporary society.

### 5.3 How might a devised theatre process and performance explore diverse understandings of masculinity?

To delve into diverse understandings of masculinity, it is essential to acknowledge the intricate entanglements that both human and non-human elements contribute to the construction of masculinity. While masculinity is embodied in individuals, it is also a socially situated practice shaped by non-human factors.

In order to explore diverse understandings of masculinity, it becomes imperative to challenge and disrupt the societal norm of hegemonic masculinity. This can be achieved by creating a safe and inclusive space that encourages the exploration of vulnerability, even in the face of toxic masculine ideals. By establishing an environment that counters the pressures and expectations associated with traditional notions of masculinity, participants can feel empowered to examine and express various aspects of themselves.

Central to the process is engaging in a collaborative exploration where the researcher becomes intricately entangled with both the research material and the participants. It is crucial for the researcher's perspectives to be present and acknowledged, but without dominating the exploration. This approach fosters a shared sense of ownership and agency among all involved, promoting a more balanced and equitable research dynamic.

To ensure a safe space for all, the principle of reciprocal vulnerability is employed. This principle dictates that the exploration is a mutual endeavour, where the researcher does not impose personal questions or request vulnerable perspectives from participants without being prepared to reciprocate in kind. This ethical approach creates a sense of fairness and respect within the researcher-participant relationship.

One counterargument is that a devised theatre process and performance may still struggle to encompass the full range of diverse understandings of masculinity. While the exploration of vulnerability and the creation of a safe space are valuable aspects, there is a risk that certain perspectives or marginalized voices may be overlooked or underrepresented. There are no non-binary or trans-masculine participants or even participant who hold more conservative masculine positions. Despite my best efforts to be inclusive, my own inherent biases and limitations in the

research process may inadvertently perpetuate existing power dynamics and fail to fully capture the breadth of diverse masculinities.

Another counterargument is that the interpretation of the devised theatre process and performance may vary greatly among participants and audiences. While the intention may be to explore diverse understandings of masculinity, individual experiences, personal biases, and preconceived notions can influence the way the material is received and understood. This variability in interpretation may lead to a fragmented or inconsistent representation of diverse masculinities, potentially undermining the overall goal of the research.

However, I still believe by implementing a devised theatre process and performance that embraces these principles I have presented above, the exploration of diverse understandings of masculinity can thrive. Through this collaborative and inclusive approach, participants are encouraged to engage with their own experiences and perspectives, dismantling the constraints of traditional masculinity and paving the way for new, nuanced understandings to emerge.

#### 5.4 Frictions between the workshops and the theatre installation

The workshop process leading up to the "BoysRooms" theatre installation and the installation itself occasionally encountered frictions due to their inherent differences and distinct needs. While the workshops focused on participant engagement, learning, and collaboration, the installation placed emphasis on artistic expression and the final presentation of the researcher's creative vision.

Ensuring safety and vulnerability, crucial aspects of the project, was more manageable during the workshops compared to the final weekend when the installation was assembled and showcased. As the facilitator, I maintained patience and fostered a collaborative environment throughout the workshop process. However, as the deadline for the installation approached, my impatience grew, and my role transitioned into that of a theatre director, striving to meet both artistic and research aspirations. Striking a balance between the visually appealing nature of the installation and its reflective exploration of the workshop's themes required me to be more assertive and directive than before.

Collaboration and reciprocity were emphasized throughout the entire process leading up to the installation. However, during the final weekend, the demands of the artistic vision and my research needs took precedence. This presented challenges in balancing my roles as a facilitator and an authoritative figure, particularly when participants grew tired or lacked motivation.

Time and resource constraints also posed difficulties. The workshop process allowed for a comfortable timeframe, allowing the process to evolve naturally. In contrast, during the final

weekend, strict schedules had to be adhered to, including the transportation of materials, room assembly, stage lighting, video production, and technical aspects such as connecting projectors and creating looped videos. Furthermore, once the gaming setups were in place, the boys grew increasingly comfortable, treating the black box as their personal space, engaging in online gaming and communicating with friends. While this successfully transformed the boys' room into the installation space, it sometimes proved challenging to interrupt their immersive experiences and motivate them to contribute and complete the installation.

To navigate these points of friction, it was crucial for me to find a position that respected the shared process with the research participants. I emphasized that the installation belonged to both them and me, but for it to truly be theirs, their active contributions were necessary. Simultaneously, I offered guidance on modifying certain aspects to enhance visibility, highlight specific elements, and facilitate the flow of the audience. Overall, this approach proved effective, but there were instances where I felt like a father asking his sons to complete their chores.

The frictions between the workshop process and the theatre installation highlight the complex dynamics and challenges inherent in merging artistic vision, research goals, and participant collaboration. By maintaining open communication, navigating time constraints, and fostering a shared sense of ownership, it became possible to mitigate these frictions and create a cohesive and meaningful "BoysRooms" theatre installation.

## 5.5 Summary of discussion

In this chapter, I have delved into four central topics of my practice-led master project. Firstly, I have explored the main research question: "How might a devised theatre process and performance explore diverse understandings of masculinity?" This question acknowledges the complexity of masculine practices, recognizing their embodiment as well as their material and spatial dimensions. By understanding that masculinity is multifaceted and situated within specific contexts, it becomes crucial to adopt a collaborative and inclusive approach. This approach ensures that participants engage with their own personal experiences and disrupt traditional constraints associated with hegemonic and toxic masculinity.

Secondly, I have examined the sub-question: "How does the 'spectrum exercise' facilitate the process of sharing vulnerability?" This inquiry emphasizes the importance of embracing vulnerability within the exploration of masculine practices. It recognizes that vulnerability can be fostered through the spectrum exercise, which encourages participants to share their personal stories and experiences. By

creating a safe and compassionate environment, participants can engage in meaningful dialogue, challenging societal norms and expectations.

Thirdly, I have explored the question: "How does theatre installation materials produce diverse understandings of masculinity?" This investigation highlights the role of materials within the theatre installation process, emphasizing how they contribute to the formation of diverse interpretations of masculinity. The convergence of various cultural influences, objects, and personal items within the installation creates a complex tapestry of understandings. This highlights the potential for challenging and expanding traditional notions of masculinity through creative expression.

Lastly, I have discussed the frictions that arise between the needs of the workshop process and the needs of the theatre installation. These frictions stem from inherent differences between participant engagement and artistic expression. Balancing the focus on collaboration, learning, and safety during workshops with the demands of artistic vision and final presentation requires careful navigation. Effective communication, allocation of sufficient time, and fostering a shared sense of ownership can help overcome these frictions and create a cohesive and meaningful theatre installation.

By addressing these topics, this chapter has provided a comprehensive examination of the research questions and explored the complexities and challenges that arise throughout the devised theatre process. It underscores the importance of collaborative and inclusive approaches, vulnerability, and effective communication in the pursuit of diverse understandings of masculinity.

## 6 Conclusion

Throughout this practice-led research project, I have embarked on a journey of discovery, learning, and gaining valuable insights. This endeavor has shed light on various aspects, revealing the transformative power of reciprocal vulnerability in both teaching and researching contexts.

One significant revelation has been the recognition that we must perceive masculinity within its material context, intricately intertwined with the human experience. It is imperative to acknowledge that all matter holds significance and contributes to the construction of masculinity. This understanding challenges conventional notions and emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human materials.

Moreover, this research has affirmed that individuals are multifaceted and resist easy categorization into stereotypes. As people we are complex beings, influenced by a myriad of factors that shape our identities. Acknowledging this complexity enables us to move beyond limiting assumptions and engage with others in a more nuanced and meaningful manner.

The exploration of new materialist concepts has been particularly thought-provoking, disruptive, and liberating. These concepts have the capacity to generate fresh meanings and perspectives, offering exciting avenues for further exploration. However, it is important to acknowledge that working with these concepts is not without its challenges. Delving into the realm of new materialism requires grappling with complexities and navigating through struggles. Nevertheless, I am glad to have discovered that it is through this process of friction and tension that new insights emerge, and profound learning is produced.

One unexpected discovery has been the realization of the commonalities between myself and my teenage research participants. Despite our diverse and complex individualities, it has become evident that we are not as different as initially perceived. This realization highlights the importance of fostering empathetic connections and bridging perceived divides. By recognizing our shared humanity, we can create spaces for understanding, dialogue, and collaboration.

And this is something I want to encourage my arts educational practitioners to take to heart. Arts education, no matter what discipline often demands students to be vulnerable, to share and to incorporate their emotions in their creative work. Ethically we need to recognize that this is not a compassionate practice unless we also are prepared to meet our students in the same way.

Reciprocal vulnerability in arts education can bring us closer together, facilitating a holistic and compassionate teaching practice.

In conclusion, this practice-led research project has uncovered valuable insights into the transformative power of reciprocal vulnerability, the material context of masculinity, the complexity of human identities, and the provocation of new materialist concepts. It has demonstrated the significance of embracing friction and tension as catalysts for growth and learning. Moreover, it has reminded us of the common threads that unite us as human beings, transcending apparent differences. This research serves as a testament to the profound potential for personal and collective transformation that lies within the realms of teaching, research, and human connection.

## 7 Literature

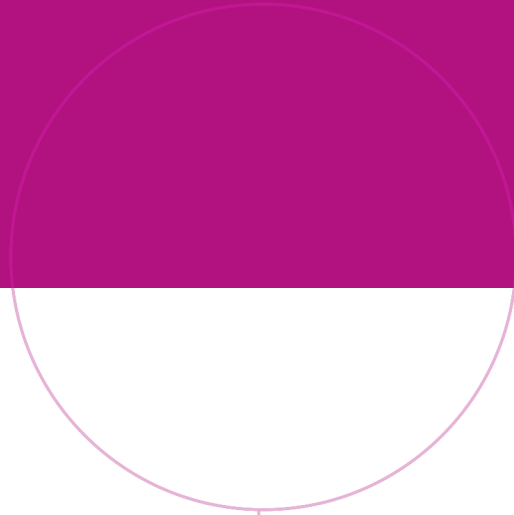
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