



# Method

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GOU

Nameless  
Acting  
*Kim Einarsson*

Framework and characters:

A staged interview by Kim Einarsson with the spokesperson of the artist collaboration Goldin+Senneby about the project Headless.

Time:

The present, stretched out over one day.

Place:

Various locations in Stockholm. All the scene settings (Prologue, Scene 1-4) have been borrowed, sometimes slightly modified, from the text *Indoor Language* by artist Hinrich Sachs and curator Barnaby Drabble. Indoor language refers to the informal professional language, the language used behind the scenes but never or very seldom revealed in public or to an audience. As Barnaby Drabble points out in Scene 4, the term *indoor language* implies that "talking about the work must not be mistaken for the work itself and that is why it's a bit 'indoor'. From the outside it has to seem as if the work just came into some kind of visual existence."



Prologue:

*Stockholm, interior of an artist's studio. Crisp late-autumn light floods through large windows as KE and SP sit on low chairs at an unusually high table. The sound of children playing filters in from outside.*

KIM EINARSSON (KE): Shall we get started?

GOLDIN+SENNEBY'S SPOKESPERSON (SP): Absolutely, shoot.

KE: This conversation is supposed to be about Goldin+Senneby and their working process in the project *Headless*. Quite honestly, I had expected to meet them in person, so I have to begin by asking: who are you and why are you here?

SP: I am their spokesperson, or their press secretary if you prefer. My task is to communicate their project to the public and to the press, so my own identity isn't especially important in these circumstances. It mostly gets in the way, and would become just another unnecessary barrier between the reader and G+S's project.

KE [*in a taunting tone*]: So it is because you don't want to "get in the way" that you're not telling me your name?

SP: Exactly. For me it is very important to remain anonymous in order to maintain a kind of openness in the project and in this conversation. It is important not to put restrictions on the ways in which things can be understood, but instead to open up the project and find new ways of making it accessible. I think it was Geoffrey Crowther, one of the early editors of *The Economist*, who put it something like this: "Anonymity keeps the editor not the master but the servant of something far greater". See me as a servant.

KE: Well, I'm not so sure that your anonymity opens up for other readings. You're not exactly well-known, so I can't see what problems could be caused by people knowing your name.

SP: I kindly have to ask you to respect these terms, otherwise you will have to manage without this interview. [*pause*]

KE: Okay, I guess I don't have much of a choice. Shall we begin?

Scene 1: The Project and the Research

*KE and SP return carrying a lower, more practical table which they place next to the other, moving the chairs and resettling*

KE: Tell me about the *Headless* project. Goldin+Senneby call it a research project. What exactly is the focus of this research?

SP: It's a project that has been going on since the autumn of 2006, in which Goldin+Senneby investigate the offshore company *Headless Ltd*, which is registered in the Bahamas. G+S are interested in the fictitious character of this kind of business.

KE: And what exactly is an offshore company?

SP: It's a type of business venture that has an important function in the global economy, as it facilitates the anonymous moving and reallocation of circulating capital. Offshore companies are nurtured and protected largely by the finance industry... Old British colonies and protectorates is where the groundwork is laid for offshore companies. They are established in tax havens, or offshore financial centres if you want to use the proper terminology. What we're talking about are companies that are officially registered, while the owners' identities and the actual business being pursued remains secret. Companies can be set up in these places because local political history has established them as legal exceptions, in which it is possible to work unseen. Add to this a cast of international players who make creative interpretations of concepts such as nationhood, legal responsibility and affiliation, forms of business, and citizenship, so that their capital can evade domestic political regulation. The whole system is a fiction upheld by the many players who act it out.

KE: Does the fact that offshore companies run legally ambiguous businesses interest G+S at all? That they facilitate tax evasion and money laundering and thereby indirectly contribute to other criminal activities?

SP: No, not primarily. They are interested in invisibility and withdrawal, and what kind of mythology the invisible generates. For them, an offshore company is a kind of dramatic fiction, acted out against the backdrop of the geographical places that the business is connected to. This gives rise to virtual situations in a physical world. In short, they are both interested in how legal and financial logic can create a sphere of invisibility and how social withdrawal is mythologized. In *Headless* G+S's point of departure is the far fetched hypothesis that Headless Ltd is a contemporary incarnation of the philosopher Georges Bataille's secret society *Acéphale* – which means “the headless” – which he initiated at the end of the 1930s. We know almost nothing about what the society actually did because they were so secretive. It is just as unclear and shrouded in mystery as Headless Ltd's business activities.

KE: And why was *Acéphale* started?

SP: I'm not an expert, but as I understand it, Bataille was driven by the idea that secret societies were a tool for the achievement of radical change. For Bataille, the invisible was a space for mythologization, and subsequently a way to create a “counter-publicness”. Another form of public sphere, which could develop a different understanding of society than is presented in existing public debates.

KE: So, what's the connection between the *Acéphale* and Headless Ltd, more than both of them dealing with obscure activities and the play on words? Do they have similarities regarding organisation, goals or ideologies?

SP: No, not as far as I know. It is rather that G+S use the ideas Bataille had about the act of withdrawal to understand Headless Ltd. and the idea of offshore companies. I guess they're trying to mythologize the unknown business of this company.

KE: How do G+S perform their research about the company?

SP: The ways in which most people carry out research, nothing special. At one stage they hired a private detective agency. But as I

said, it's not the company itself that is of interest, but its deceptive nature.

KE: And how is the result of their research presented? And what do G+S actually know about the company Headless Ltd?

SP: Not a great deal, at least not yet. We know that it is administered by another company called Sovereign Trust. All the information G+S gather through their investigation is forwarded to writer John Barlow who reworks the material into a docu-fiction also called *Headless*; something in the style of the *Da Vinci Code*. The writing develops in parallel with the project, and the directions taken by the author influence the subsequent actions by G+S.

KE: So the plot of the novel and the evolution of the project develop co-dependently, like a dialogue?

SP: Precisely. And the project has until now been publicised through an arranged series of readings from the prologue to *Looking for Headless*. The author of this book is presented as a fictional character and has the same name as a person who works for Headless Ltd. The persona of the fictional author is performed by different actors on each occasion.

KE: Okay, but wait a moment... all research material is handed over to author, John Barlow, who writes the docu-fiction *Headless*, right? But in the novel *Looking for Headless* both Barlow and Goldin+Senneby are characters. And the author is... fictional... performed by different actors at each public reading. It's all very confusing. Who is actually the person holding the pen?

SP: As I said earlier, it's a fictional author.

[pause]

Unfortunately, G+S have been threatened with legal action by lawyers representing Sovereign Trust if they did not remove the name of the fictional author from all public communications. Consequent-



ly, the fictional author's name has been removed, as is the case with my name.

KE: What a mess! This must mean a new direction for the project? As the fictional author seems to play a crucial role in their narrative?

SP: True, but they have just removed the name, not the character. Also, this kind of legal encounter becomes a part of the project's continued narrative. G+S's strategy is to establish a framework in which all reactions are positive, in that they can be incorporated in the development of the project. In this sense the project can never fail.

KE: But isn't that a very opportunistic approach? And does this mean that whatever further demand Sovereign Trust makes, G+S will adjust their project and still think they have maintained artistic integrity?

SP: That is decided from case to case. But I believe that G+S are quite uninterested in exploring the limits of legal systems. *Headless* is not a project about transgressing boundaries. It is more about the possibility of hidden circumstances or situations within existing systems – situations that can be found within delimited boundaries.

KE: But what is G+S's artistic achievement in this project, and what risks do they take?

SP: They form an understanding of withdrawal and concealment as mythological actions, while also examining the practicalities of how a business or organisation "performs" this withdrawal. Subject, method and artistic narrative intermingle in G+S's work and cannot be separated from one another.

KE: But again, what do they jeopardize by doing so?

SP: Can we please take a break?

## Scene 2: The Performative and the Public

KE and SP are sitting in the Café Rembrandt, an Asian-run fast food restaurant where they periodically dip fries into a pool of mayonnaise, ketchup and peanut butter, a mixture called "Oorlog" (war) sauce in Dutch. Teenagers and other clients come in, dogs and their owners stroll past the window, barking and birdsong can be heard in the background.

KE: Is the novel *Looking for Headless* the only aspect of the *Headless* project that has been made public so far?

SP: So far, it has been an important aspect of the public presentation of the project, but a short film has also been made and G+S give lectures on a regular basis at different art institutions. You could say that *Headless* is revealed to the public in fragments, or scenes. No, not scenes, that implies a theatricality that the project does not aspire to. But they usually describe their project as an ongoing performance, the parts of which, both internal and public, contribute to the narrative.

KE: Which roles do they play themselves in this performance? The role of the artist, the actor, the researcher or the detective? Or are they just directors, handing out roles in this drama to other people?

SP: They play all these parts simultaneously. They direct the action by arranging the conditions under which the events are to be played out, but can never retain control of the sequence of events, or the reactions that arise.

KE: What about the audience? Doesn't it follow that a performance should have an audience? Where does G+S have theirs? And I don't mean for the book readings from *Looking for Headless*, but during the "performative" working process?

SP: There are several audiences. The audience encountering the project as presented in various art institutions, the readers of secondary information published by others. But also a number of individuals connected to the project as mentors, expert advisors, collaborators *et cetera* who form an audience as well as contributing

to the performance. When the novel *Looking for Headless* is completed, it will be presented to a readership outside the art world. Novels have entirely different potential channels of distribution, and hopefully *Looking for Headless* will be a bestseller...

KE: If we were to talk about G+S as characters in a self-composed drama, is Brecht or Stanislavski directing them? Brecht's concept of *epic theatre* demanded that actors should keep a certain distance to their characters to avoid developing a sense of empathy that could hinder a critical examination of their roles. This is a way of maintaining a kind of "double agency" in which the performance subject – in this case G+S – neither represents their characters or themselves as individuals. Stanislavski's *method acting* on the other hand, means that fictions are granted legitimacy by the actors erasing their individuality for their roles.

SP: Well, G+S aren't actors and their projects are absolutely not pieces of theatre, but if I understand you correctly, seeing the Brecht and Stanislavski models as metaphors for how they place themselves as characters within the project...

[pause, then after some thought]

Hmm, I'd like to think of them as somewhere between the two models, but with an obvious leaning towards the Brechtian. They see the actual staging of, and participation in, the drama they have initiated as a way of experiencing the project's implications.

[a cough, and then with a firm voice]

But I really must underline that they want to step away from theatricality. G+S's work goes into already existing dramas and always attempts a self-critical approach to its own position and actions. As when entering into the world of offshore business and appropriating its methods, language and strategies. They allow for the possibility of a performative reading.

KE: What do you mean by "allow for the possibility of a performative

reading"? That is totally incomprehensible. To me their project is theatre, maybe closer to improv or role-playing games, but still... very much theatre.

SP: I totally disagree. Think of the performative as a perspective. It's about understanding, in this case, business, organisational life or the act of withdrawal as essentially performative readymades. G+S attempt a position that at the same time acts from within and reflects from without.

KE: You mean like any other conscious process?... My dear friend, this is, at best, hairsplitting.

### Scene 3: Method – Fiction and Virtuality

*Back in the studio, KE drinks coffee and SP drinks tea in an attempt to remove the taste of oorlog sauce.*

KE: Where can we see the fiction in G+S's work?

SP: I don't know if I understand your question correctly, but *Headless* isn't about the contradictions or dynamics between fiction and reality. It has more to do with the relationships between the visible and the invisible. Fiction in their work exists and is reproduced on many parallel levels. In the story of the novel, but also on the level of the fictional author. And another important aspect is that G+S's own work allows itself to be controlled by the fictional writing.

KE: When I have heard G+S talk about their projects, both about *Headless* and earlier projects, they often use the word virtuality. What does this idea signify in their works? I get the impression they use the word in a much broader sense than what is normal.

SP: As I understand it, they apply the word to a range of different constructions that are maintained through social conventions and agreements. Many of the ideas that are in focus in *Headless* – simulated systems, and the changing loci of values, norms and ideals – grew out of their earlier projects in the online world Second Life.



KE: In a way, fiction and virtuality seem to overlap each other. They both depend on the acceptance of a suggested reality, and on sustaining the coherence of that reality. Do you have any idea of what G+S think about the relation between these two ideas?

SP: I'm not sure what they would say themselves, but I see fiction in their work as a way of describing the virtual aspects of their projects. The fiction is the rhetorical method, a way of talking about the virtual. The fictional storytelling helps in understanding the constructions they examine and explore. It helps to exemplify but also to create new layers of interpretation.

[pause]

For me, their projects are like a collage of readymades, only their readymades aren't objects but abstract constructions and systems. Thinking of Headless Ltd as an incarnation of Bataille's Acéphale, but also letting people employed by the Sovereign Trust play their roles within the framework of the offshore consultancy drama... G+S generates new fiction from the raw material of existing fictions.

KE: Somehow, there seems to be lots of hidden agendas within this project's different layers of fiction. Could the entire project be fictitious? Could it be the case that all communiqués, correspondences and other documentation of the project are just made up? That the narrative lies in creating a fake story?

SP: No, absolutely not. Their projects aren't about fooling people, and as I just said, they aren't interested in separating or playing with the concepts of fiction and reality.

KE: How can you be so sure they're not fooling us?!

SP: Of course you can't be sure. But on the other hand, what is the difference if it's real or not? There is still a story.

KE: To me it matters a lot! I don't know what your idea of reality

is, but in my book offshore companies exist and are causing a lot of damage to the world. It seems like G+S almost have a phobia of giving any normative statements about their objects of study. They don't make value judgments or even state any opinions about offshore businesses or the economic system that upholds and supports their existence. Instead G+S are focusing on occurrences of withdrawal, instability and double-crossing, and manifest this through fiction.

SP: [*in a sarcastic tone*]: And what do you suggest they should do instead?! Film a documentary with shaky hand-camera about Headless Ltd, exhibiting the victims of the company's activities? And then knock it up in a white cube installation, projected on MDF-board with a wall covered in small print?

KE: No, that's not what I'm suggesting. But can't the fiction be seen as a way of hiding? Not daring to stand up for anything?

SP: Yes, fiction can be a way of hiding, but so can the documentary format. I think G+S take a very clear stand – in their choice of subject, in the way they allow different stories to meet and intersect with each other, and not least through the method by which they choose to present their projects. It takes courage to be able to carry out a project like Headless and to allow it to retain its complexity even in its presentation.

KE: Such empty rhetoric! "Courage"! What's heroic about using obscurity to exhibit obscurity? Maybe it takes integrity, and a bit of elitism, to dare to present something difficult to comprehend in a time when a lot of art institutions and galleries appreciate the immediately intelligible and easily digestible. But can it really be called "courage"?

SP [*pause, and then in a provocative tone*]: I do hope this interview will be intelligible, and that it will leave the future reader in a satisfied and clear-sighted state when it comes to Headless and the working methods of G+S.

KE: That depends on your answers.

SP: Or on your questions...

Scene 4: The Method of Cooperation

KE and SP sit facing one another on a train leaving Stockholm, its nearly dark outside. The train fills with people and the outline of a large mosque passes the window behind them as the train pulls out.

KE: An aspect of G+S's working method that I feel is worth commenting on is that they, like businesses, outsource certain parts of their project. They pay others to carry out pieces of research, to be co-creators of the work and sometimes to present the project. I'm thinking of the detective bureau that is helping them to find material about Headless, the ghost writer who plots out the novel, the actor playing the role of the fictional author at the book reading of *Looking for Headless* and so on, and so on.

SP: Well, in other art projects, one might pay an editor to edit a film, an assistant to glue your collage and so on. That's not so very different from this way of working...

KE: But it strikes me that they give other people a lot of space to manoeuvre within their project, which in one way of course is generous and allows for many co-creators of the project. But couldn't it also be a facade, an attempt to conceal fears or laziness – that it's actually comfortable to let others formulate one's project?

SP: You could say that about any collaborative project. Sometimes you need outside expertise and sometimes you need to borrow someone else's voice.

KE: Is *Headless* a collaborative project?

SP: Yes, a collaboration between Goldin and Senneby. I see everyone else as a mixture of audience, fellow travellers, external consultants, distributors and expertise.

KE: And what roles do you and I play in this?

SP: It's up to us to formulate ourselves. What role do you believe you will play? For instance, what will you do with the outcome of this interview?

KE: I will edit it, and publish it.

SP: And why will you do that?

KE: I have to. I'm paid. I'm doing this on commission.

SP: Hm, thought so.