

The Relevance of Dance atelier European Dancehouse Network, Dansmakers Amsterdam & Europe by People 11-13 March 2016

NOTE

In this documentation of the Relevance of Dance at Dansmakers Amsterdam I, the writer, would like to start to type down right away: I have been tremendously inspired during and by the three days.

Secondly. **I'm so excited!** Because all projects, lectures, films, performances showed and displayed the 'special power of dance'. As Guy laid out in his lecture as well as the two scientific researches have pointed out, dance is a complex art form that directly confronts and interacts with(in) our bodies. It combines bodily and cognitive experience. This, for me, is why dance is so very exciting. And sharing this excitement is always my starting point.



Central theme and focus

The atelier focused on new audiences, participation and education, inviting speakers, artists and best practices to show what is already happening. However, we still need an atelier like this to empower the relevance of dance. And it might be funny as well as sad, that dance is ancient cultural heritage and we now have to ask this question of relevance. On the other hand, it is eligible to reflect, think and stay sharp as – part of – the industry. The central theme, binding the program together, is how these projects deal with or address social effect through dance. This effect is two-sided: sharing and receiving / experiencing.

The core of what we spoke about during the atelier: The dance field itself needs to open up. When so, new audiences can participate, connect and commit themselves to dance and performance. But how do we do it? How do we make dance sustainable?

DAY 1:

Day 1 stuffed our minds with 3 lectures: The Transferable Skills of the Dance Artist - Dr. Guy Cools in dialogue with Sara Wookey; Artist Talk on Dance and Museum Collaborations - MA Sara Wookey; Dancing science: The relation between audience and performers - Prof. Dr. Tom Postmes & Drs. Kirsten Krans. Best Practice: Dancing Museums. Sharings: Michelle Rizzo, International Choreographers Week, the film: Positions and to top it off: the performance *Relic* by Euripides Laskaridis.

This day zoomed in on choreographic practices and methodologies in the world of art and science. Presenting specific effects of choreographic skills and tools which can be used to trigger new audiences.



Mobile of thoughts

Guy Cools starts the atelier with a confession. Fifteen years ago, during the Swiss Dance platform in Luzern, he made a statement he now regrets. “A lot of craft, but little art”. But craft is just as important he states now. He says he is convinced that:

The future of dance will be as much defined by its craft and the skill sets that come with it, as by its potential as an autonomous art form.

His lecture functioned for me as a framework that kept suspending above my head, like a mobile hanging from the ceiling.

Guy sketched a context and the Western paradigms wherein we can place the making of dance but also, as the above statement shows, what dance can/already contributes to society.

The de-skilled Society - Art vs Craft

Guy led us through three stages.

*The Socio-economical organization – a philosophical framework

How crafts developed into autonomous art forms. The crafts community vs. the individual artist. But, also the development of society’s organization. Taking sociologist Richard Sennett as a guide. Sennett states that most of our Western social and economical crisis’s are due to the fact that we have de-skilled ourselves. To say it boldly: we are no longer able to

participate in this complex society. Artists however are unique, because they do train themselves in skills. The skills of a craft.

- For choreography this means: somatic skills, spatial skills, collaborative practice, ideal training ground to (re)develop social skills.

* The transferable dance skills

There is a need for the transfer of these skills outside the scope of performing arts.

Guy quotes from the interviews he did as part of his research for his new book he is doing in the frame of the Erasmus+ project INCLUSIVE (at the Fontys Dance Academy Tilburg). Erasmus + is a European mobility and exchange program with a focus on skills for employment. The main concern of the INCLUSIVE program is how to increase the relevance of dance and dance education by showing how the skills the dance artist acquires and develops can also be applied outside the scope of dance as stage art. Crucial is that dance artists learn how to use this before the retire from a dance carrier.

Interviews:

- Therapy and wellbeing Dance for Health – Marc Vlemmix and Andrew Greenwood. Andrew gave a lively presentation about this project on Sunday.
<http://www.abcdance.eu/dance-with-parkinson-joining-science-and-art-through-beauty/>
- International Conflict studies – Dana Caspersen
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfQeH3092Sc>
- Spatial navigation and negotiation – in dialogue with Sara Wookey, who also gave a presentation on her work and experience with Tate Modern.

Linked to this last interview is also Dancing Museums. This project shows how dance contributes to the engagement of museum visitors with art and how it enhances their art experience. Kristin de Groot, director of Dansateliers Rotterdam, presented this project on the first day: <http://www.dancingmuseums.com/>



*Training Dialoguing

In dialogue with Sara Wookey, who is like a space navigator. An active example of Guy's own training and of the skills Sara operates in her work. Sara is one of the founders of the reDANCE project, transmitting the dance archive between generations. By transmitting dance, we transmit knowledge, practice, skills, history and awareness.

<http://www.redanceproject.org/>

After their dialogue, Sara shares her experiences of working in the Tate Modern with a group of *young* people: The Experience & Value of Live Art. With this group she worked on the question what they – young people – 'get' from contemporary art. Using choreographic

methodologies, form, notation and collaborative practice. Resulting in a performance created by the group itself. <https://vimeo.com/84577007>
<http://sarawookey.com/home.html>

It is a very noble thought that dance is relevant outside the domain of the performing arts and in my view we do need to cherish and develop this like the above examples, but it calls for an other very relevant question:

Relevant to whom?

The Hamburger Brain

Neuro-scientist Christian Keysers and Valeria Gazzola (authors of *The Empathic Brain* <http://www.empathicbrain.com/#>) very rightly asked us as they ask themselves: relevant to whom?

The Choreographer, the Performer, the Audience? Communities, Governments, Economies? This question is as practical as it is complex.

For their research on kinesthetic empathy they zoom in on the audience. What happens in our brain when we watch movement? Do we simply see dance, or do we feel dance? This research shows that while watching movement the brain parts that are engaged while moving ourselves are active. So watching dance, makes our brain move. Mimicking the movements in our head and connecting it to our personal movements, emotions, sensations and memories.

The Hamburger, with something juicy in the middle = Visual receptor – Auditory receptor, these signals go to the prefrontal lobe where we process thinking and interpretation. But the motor for this process to happen = ACTION.

Action: We are able to see and hear action (mirror neurons). Hearing alone can bring the tendency to take part in the actions of others.

Sensations: We feel both the intention to move as what it would feel like to move this way.

Emotions: We slip under the skin of the dancer, move with them, feel what they feel.

EXPERIENCE is a crucial point of understanding movement. We fill things in with our own experience.

But in watching and, let's call it, identifying lies a very social aspect. The fact that concerts work very well is because people feel invited to be part of a group. They are getting involved.

What tricks can we use to involve people watching dance more or feel more engaged? The more channels you open: see, hear, smell, feel etc., the better!

- Before talks
- Confront audiences with their emotions/experiences before, or, let them think about episodes in their own lives
- Audiences who have taken part in a practice linked to a performance, experience the performance stronger than audience-members who haven't
- Involve people more on forehand, not only before the show: how?

This social aspect, belonging to a group – to be acknowledged, is a very valuable effect in community dance: **Stichting PRA**, who works within elderly homes and young children <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtpfEsmLQAO>. **Dansnest**, a young collective making dance in public places, inspired by people in the streets and public spaces and inviting these users to join in. **Ongoing**, a dance performing group for people over 45, because you're never too old to dance and share.



Intermission – Dance can be experienced in solitude

Michele Rizzo is a young dance maker working in Amsterdam. In the foyer he sits down on a table, takes his phone out of his pocket and starts his introduction.

He shares with us his notion on dance as a contemporary ritual and explains how his performance *Higher* was created.

He takes the social as well as the individual enjoyment of dance, focusing on the club

scene. A contemporary ritual, the cultural and social role of dance, the craft.

Higher evolves around a trance making beat. Building up from the pulsating lights, the vibrant darkness, music and three men, dancing together alone. Performing the same steps, lifting the space and the audience into trance.

<https://vimeo.com/113205167>

<https://michelerizzo.wordpress.com/higher/>

Uncontrollable...Dancing Science!

First, let's go back to Guy Cools' transferable skills. Body awareness, navigation and social skills. Keep this in mind.

Tom Postmes, professor of social psychology at the University of Groningen and Kirsten Krans, Drs. and programmer Studium Generale at University of Groningen and director of Random Collision, joined forces in a very special research: The relation between performer and audience.

So, for the scientist, what is dance? Dance is functioning as the expression of culture and the self – similar to Michele Rizzo's notion and Guy also referred to the cultural historical function of the craft. However, in order to start a research, we need a hypothesis. Deriving from this notion they formulated the following hypothesis:

Society on stage = shaping society off stage.

So, does watching dance influence our social behaviour outside the theater?

They executed two experiments, A and B, showing choreographies based on three archetypes of social organisation and solidarity: Mechanical, Organic and No Solidarity. In order to be able to really measure something, Tom and Kirsten decided that all choreographies show the same dancers, same lighting, same music, same costumes on the same stage.

The execution of the first experiment was done in a very limited time of 5 days. They not only had to create and prepare the choreographies etc. for the experiment, but also deal with Tom's limited knowledge of dance making, which lead to rather funny anecdotes (arts and craft).



In their trial and error, they found out, audiences don't *understand* but *experience* performance. However, as seen in the research of Christian and Valeria, when they experienced parts of the movement from the performance beforehand, they were responding more positively to experiencing the performance. Further they found out, that the audience responds as a group to what they saw on stage. After seeing one of the performances, the audience was led into a room. On one end of the room there were objects. A voice-over asked the audience to bring all the objects to the other end of the room. They got a time-slot and, when lifting an object, they were not allowed to move. It was surprising that all groups, in the end, stood in straight lines across the room, but the way they came into this position mirrored the group organization on stage. Mechanical – the audience almost immediately lined up following a leader. Organic – people started to spread and lift objects, no leading figure. No Solidarity – it took very long before people started to move, no one wanted to be responsible.

DAY 2:

Start the day dancing! In complete contrast with the first day, we started with a playful workshop by Euripides, followed by the lecture of neuro-scientists Christian Keysers and Valeria Gazolla about the empathic brain. They confronted us with the question: relevant to whom? Then a series of best practices, resulting in very practical questions, thoughts and ideas about audience participation. And after we went clubbing with Michelle Rizzo in the performance *Higher*.

Day two presented some very good examples of how choreographic strategies are already applied to or combined with other domains and very specific audience groups.



You are cordially invited to dance

Among the best practices were examples of how to invite and involve people in dancing. It's all about the experience of dance.

On an educational level: *PS Dance!* A film about dance as part of the curriculum in public schools. Here they are again, the skills Guy talked about.

Surprise!: Moving Futures Festival integrates a wide and diverse side program, giving different angles to invite new audiences to experience dance. Scientific lectures, film workshops and movement workshops, public space surprises, talks etc. Crucial for this program is that it is rooted in the city where the festival takes place. During the closing atelier in Olot, Suzy Blok also presented the Moving Futures network and Festival. <http://movingfutures.nl/en/>

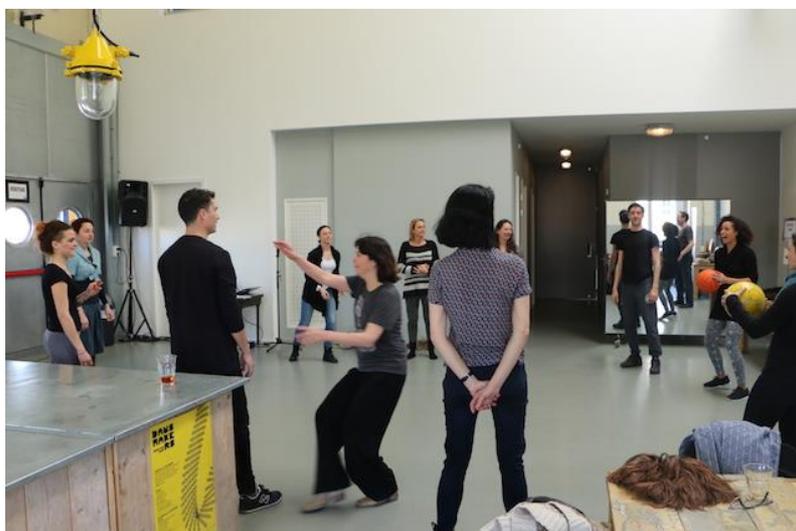
How do we invite and commit: People who like to do dance (amateurs for instance), but don't watch dance –and – people who watch dance, but don't do dance?

OMG, your character is impossible! – The Wig Workshop, transferring in action

“So, here are some wigs, please try, turn them around, see what you like and pick one as yours” says Euripides. And there we are, toddling in front a big mirror, laughing and complimenting each other. Maybe this could give me some ideas of changing my hairdo?

This workshop is actually a way of transferring skills. At the start of the workshop Euripides says rather modestly something like, “I don't know what you guys are going to learn or anything, but we will have fun”.

We start with a game, like the one I know from Summer camps and all kids and staff need to learn the names. But, this game is a little more complicated. It is about creating and learning patterns. Like dancers need to inscribe a choreography. It is about creating a common ground, a safe environment, wakening our body and brain, space, navigation, passing through energy, create awareness, collaboration and I can go on. After his game, we start to play around with the wigs. With every task we are forced to use our imagination and activate our creativity. We were creating and exploring identities by choice-making. Somewhere in his lecture, Guy summarizes Sennett's definition of skills as trained practice: They always begin as bodily practices, which are further developed through how repetition is organized as a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding. And it is exactly this we are doing within this workshop.



The Game: We are standing in a circle and throw around a football repeating and memorizing everybody's names. Not that hard you think? Wait for it! At the end of the game, we throw around three footballs, memorizing every pattern> the blue ball I get from A and I throw it to B, the orange ball I get from C and I throw to D, the white ball I get from E and I throw to F. That's not all! Two tennis balls are going around our backs, always put it in your neighbours left hand. To top it off, when G crosses the circle and taps me on the shoulder, I cross the circle and tap Z on the shoulder. All at the same time. How frustrating! But it activates our brain in a way we also tend to think with our body.

Day 3:

After feeding ourselves for the last two days, we opened the day with a panel discussion led by Euripides. In the panel: Natasja van 't Westende (Dancing on the Edge), Mirjana Smolic (dramaturge, actress, coach), Alet Klarenbeek (communication specialist, initiator community projects), and Pia Kramer (O Espaço do Tempo, EDN). After an intense discussion, shaking it off with Andrew Greenwood's presentation on Dance for Health. Dance improves the quality of life. As we also see, from a different angle in the film *PS Dance!*. About dance education in public schools in New York. Dance in the school's curriculum improves the daily learning process of students and their development as individuals. Ending the atelier with the invitation to Olot.

The last day of this pressure cooker brought things together. Concepts and theme's that were touched upon the days before, became more concrete. But off course also raised new questions.



The artist as community worker = money

One of the questions raised was whether artists are making community projects because that's where they find funding and whether the funding is now too orientated on community. Suzy Blok reflected on this by saying that makers should stay true to themselves and to their honest urgency to create. Some will coincide with community aims and some may not – it shouldn't be a "must". The basic question she often uses is the Triple Why-question.

The WHY question

Why do I want to make work?

Why do I want to make *this* work?

Why do I want to make it *now*?

In Tilburg they yearly organize a 5-day program called: The choreographer as change maker. Not only does this thought involve the *why*-questions, but also questions such as: what is my responsibility as a maker? How can I let an idea shift in my colleague's or audience's head? How do we start this dialogue and how can we maintain it?

We are not out of questions yet

The panel discussion brought other very urgent themes to the table.

Money, Authenticity, Politics, Organization, Responsibility, Dialogue, Urgency, Community, Sustainability

There is no question of choosing one form of dance above the other

- Dance is an organic part of our daily lives. We need to stand up against politic(ian)s to make clear why we, dance, are important.
- Art can be a Trojan horse, to address (reflection on) theme's and force dialogue.
- Money can be a spoiler for authenticity – Did community art/work overtook our funding systems?
- Nowadays dance as community art **and** autonomous art are co-existing.
- **Be** involved in the world. Find new connections, where and what are the physical places to/for dance to make these new connections. High quality artists are able to do this.
- Artistic urgency comes before money. There needs to be space for experimentation.
- We need to keep on dialoguing.
- We can't change the (economical) system at once, but we can try to translate our needs and importance into a dialogue and words the system understands, try to understand their ground.
- Artists should not feel endangered by political decisions based on funding social community-aimed projects vs. artistic aims. Both need to co-exist and be created departing from an honest urgency from the point of view of the artist.

Hot topics presented as hypes are not sustainable, nor do they commit audiences to dance = urgent themes are not worked out in a blink of an eye into (a) valuable work.

The politics of funding need to change. It can be good that funding parties address special themes, but to a limited extend.

To wrap it up with a CONCLUSION

Many questions have been posed during the atelier. We could conclude that the questions have become **stronger** and also more **concrete**.

First of all, the question about "the relevance of dance" can be posed from several angles, like for WHOM?

- Seeing it from the angle of **the dancer** the question is clear, versatile and positive.

- From the **choreographer** as well – also speaking from the creative urgency of the maker to transmit and transfer skills and perspectives.

From the angle of the **audience** however, it's still a **challenge** to answer the question because the "audience" is a large concept.

- Participation enlarges the experience and the kinesthetic empathy.
- Skills from creative practice and group behaviour (in this) are transferable to other domains and therefore relevant to incorporate in other situations.

It's still a question of **how much** "participation":

- as in participating in amateur classes doesn't necessarily enhances audience in theatres. But "participation" directly linked to performances seem to enhance the (live) experience. Audience is attracted **to what they can connect to** – in any way. The connection needs to be made in several ways: education, family, friends, etc.

