

Motivation At The End of Times

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A programmer of dance comes up to me and says: “-What do you think of the program, it’s nice don’t you think?” What can I say? As we know, within the neo-liberal predicament that we now live, to object is unthinkable, to have an opinion, to show attitude is a no no of severe magnitude. Metaphorically speaking my answer could only be: “-I’m available.” If I am in the program, I can obviously not not comply and support it, and if I am not, any objection would propose that I’m jealous of those that are in and can thus only comply. Yet, I try to formulate an answer that uses a double rhetoric, proposing that the program is congenial and at the same time saying it’s not. My argument could be based on an asymmetry between established and not so established acts, the lack of representation of non-western artists, weak contingency in the program and so on. It doesn’t matter, independent of my response the answer I receive in return is always the same: “-Yes, you are right, but you know our budget has been very pressured this year. We had enormous cuts for this season, and I’m really happy that we got it together at all.” I accept the argument and nod understandingly.

A few months later, the same programmer shows up after seeing, let’s say the premiere of a new show of mine, insinuating that it didn’t entirely fulfill expectations or was simply not a masterpiece. I respond: “-Yes, you are right but you know our budget was very pressured. We really had enormous cuts for this season, and I’m really happy that we got it together at all.” I don’t think so! Such a line of argumentation is not acceptable emanating from the mouth of an artist. The artistic act, it is assumed is independent of budgets, and if there are cuts, subsidies missing or similar, the artist is supposed to change the format, come up with solutions, sack the producer. Make a duet or solo, use less rehearsal hours, get another co-producer, hire faster dancers. But who would expect a programmer to sack some people in the organization, do the cleaning or accounting, double as a technician or wardrobe assistant? Programmers are victims of external circumstances, whereas artists only have themselves to blame.

For programmers to gain my respect, stop using budget cuts as an argument.

So my response is always implicitly “-I’m available”. Whatever the price, whatever the circumstances, whatever the proposition is, in the era of projects we are all always available. In our current economic flow, as Boris Groys recently argued, it doesn’t really matter if one is in the program or not, what matters is to have a project, in particular to have a project that can attach to enough many surfaces and connect to enough many other projects. In fact it doesn’t matter what the project is, as long as it promotes a specific identity. What the artist today is busy with, is not primarily to make pieces or to articulate concepts but to produce identities that are at the same time specific enough to make a difference and conventional enough to maintain a rather romantic image of what the artist should be occupied with. The really clever artist has stopped making pieces at all, but jumps from residency to residency, from lab to lab, project to project. What matters today is not products, pieces or premieres but activity and

mobility. As Kroot Juurak has proposed, the artist has become a pet, a domesticated creature that bides his time, sits in cafés scribbling in a notebook or being busy e-mailing.

Recently I hear more and more artists proposing the importance of taking ones time. “-I’m slow, I need time to think and develop projects.” No, it doesn’t matter if a project ever gets to be realized, what is important is to just have a project, preferably a long term project, that offers the artist, through a sort of reversed process, to implicitly use the same argument as the programmer.

In a moment when artistic research, for the second time gains popularity – but this time rather in relation to PhD programs than short-term research programs connected to venues and festivals – to slow down and taking ones time has become a **vise** virtue, a sign of thoroughness, and perhaps even worse: is understood as a kind of critique of capitalism. But isn’t this image of the artist precisely what capitalism desire: the artist being a promise of a life beyond nine-to-five working days and pressured schedules? I don’t propose a re-industrialization of labor, where life and labor would again be divided and manufacturing ability the one capacity to be measured, but we should know that there is absolutely nothing radical with the artist’s existence, and to be self-employed is rather the perfect image of the contemporary laborer whose only product is him or her self.

When Paulo Virno argues in “The Grammar Of The Multitude” that the contemporary worker has become a virtuoso in talking, using the dancer as an example of the immaterial laborer he doesn’t presuppose anything positive but rather raises a warning: what do we do now when we *are* labor and there is absolutely no way out. When control has become omnipresent, in and through ourselves, there can be no exit door to sneak out of. “-I’m available” is in our contemporary times substituting any claim of avant-garde or subversive attempt. And for those who still insist, that keep on trying to break rules or conventions, that work too hard, or forget about balancing their presence, not keeping their cool, the culture of availability has only one answer: You’re a fool.

For artists to gain my respect, be foolish and fuck balance.

A programmer of dance announces to me the importance he poses on composing a program for his local audience. I support the argument, but wonder what it is that makes certain dance and performance acts, works by certain artists or groups perfect for every local audience in every corner of Europe? It cannot be because those acts are so generic that they fit everything hence that would dismiss the argument of being susceptible to the needs of local audience. It can neither be because these act are so specific, then they would not be presented in every festival and season program. The argument must be found somewhere else? It is my belief that, what *local audience* imply is not the spectator but local politicians. It means: “-I have to present a program that is agreeable to local subsidy agencies”, and they expect, more or less without exception, a well-meaning mixture of local acts and international reputation.

For programmers to gain my respect, stop using local audience as arguments when what it means is serving local politicians.

An alternative chain of arguments on the same issue emphasize identity production. Working for a specific local audience implies that the programmer feels responsibility to the progression of a local scene and its audience, but then again how come this responsibility without exception includes three, five or ten internationally celebrated artists or groups. Is it possibly so that the programmer rather easily forgets his assumed responsibility and instead seeks confirmation in other programmers? It feels good, and need no further explanation, to say: “- Yes, I’m also showing their new work.” or “-I’ve been keeping my eye on them for several years and I think my audience is ready for them now.”

The same argument is evidently valid for the artist too. It feels good to belong to a context and is obviously uncomfortable to issue one or other conflict. Over the fifteen years that I have been engaged in dance and performance I have never experienced such a lack of conflict as today. The first dictum of contemporary cultural entrepreneurship: Don’t ever get angry!

Don’t be critical neither! Since years critique has been replaced by criticality, the ethical version of the ideologically saturated notion of critique. Criticality is like a touch pad, the theatrical version of pure navigation, the entrepreneur’s variation of risk performing the endless shifts of neo-liberal governance. It’s the slippery escape from any form of responsibility, a snug smile standing in for the lack of guts to stake out a territory. Criticality is good for you, it’s kind of participatory, it’s implements the individual instead of producing public spectacle. In the land of criticality everything is fine. It’s Prozac for cultural producers, personal without passion, skepticism without fundament, the epitome of opportunism.

For an artist to gain my respect, raise your voice and judge. Be, or pretend to be rich enough, to afford being categorical.

It appears paradoxical that at the same time as dance and performance is offered more opportunities than ever, both concerning performances, residencies and other projects, we simultaneously experience an equalization of what is tolerated. The difference between dance performances were probably smaller twenty years ago, but I don’t think it is only memory that plays around with my perception. Danced looked similar, what differed was production value. Not only in economical terms, but in respect of global circumstances. Dance has become professional to extend that it has lost its passion. Dance has become enthusiastic which is another words for shrinking in front of circumstances.

It is my guess that, among other reasons, contemporary educations has become so good in preparing students for established markets that they simply don’t know what else to do then to comply, be enthusiastic and perform criticality. It mustn’t be the responsibility of education to teach students to fit in, rather the contrary: the task should be the opposite, to encourage the student to pursue other paths, different formats to stop confirming existing markets. This can not be done by preaching counter ideology or by blaming the market, but rather through allowing the student not to identify with what a dancer, choreographer or performance maker is, i.e. to appropriate identity. It feels good and is comfortable to *be* a choreographer and it’s a shaky path to create ones own territory.

A few years ago the French thinker Jacques Rancière contributed to the our context with a text entitled “The Emancipated Spectator”, where he argues that theatre per definition is stultifying and as a way out proposed an activated spectator, that without becoming a participant can activate him- or herself not on the basis of identity but rather in respect of individuation, i.e. expanding the possibility for what the individual can be. We should however remember that the emancipated individual is congenial to our present political climate. Emancipation for Rancière does not mean to be, or become more oneself, but on the contrary to contest ones identity and what constitutes identity (in general) in our specific contexts and environments.

For artists to gain my respect, stop pretending to emancipate yourself when what you want most of all is to belong.

A programmer of dance tells me how important it is to engage in the development of the local scene. I wonder, but how does it happen that you pay them, the locals, fees that are peanuts in comparison to what you pay international celebrities? Is that some contemporary form of care? By the way, how does it happen that the local and non-established artists always are presented on the “small” stage and always in the middle of the week? If you are keen on promoting the local scene why not offer them the central venue in the weekend. If the international celebrity anyway brings in an audience (which is always why they are there “-We have to have a few big shows, you know – we need to secure a general audience.” Nobody seems to like it, really.) why not program them on Monday and Tuesday.

A programmer of dance tells me that the development of the local scene is so important that they have created a lab for its artists to engage. A forum for discussion and confrontation, research and development, when what it tends to boil down to is that the lab is an excuse to not have to present those artists properly, and yet swear your-self free from any kind of accusation of excluding the local. And by the way, everybody knows that the participants in the lab never get paid in accord with a performance fee. Labs are cheap solutions, end of discussion.

In commercial industries it is common that 5-7% of the revenue is reinvested in research and development. R&D does not mean to develop a new product or design a new model, i.e. applied research but rather blue sky research. Innovation intensive business such as pharmaceuticals use up to 15% of their revenue on R&D. It is common to understand our field of action as innovation intensive, and it is a business - it's just that our client (like weapon industry) primarily is the state, but I have never – I underline never – heard about a dance festival or season that invest more than 0% on R&D of the revenue. Commerce knows, if we don't upgrade, if we don't invest in blue sky research our clients will beat us to the finishing line, and it is not just about beating somebody else but to stay on top of oneself. R&D is not an evil necessity, it's what makes the difference, what makes it fun to work it.

The lab format gets even more patronizing when it is topped with an international authority giving a two hours introduction to his or her artistic mission, of course after having been presented on the big stage.

During the lab the artistic director, preferably with some international colleagues, shows up – of course unannounced - appearing to be interested in the **artists'** creative process. What happens? Obviously, the artist will present an absolutely safe argumentation that ensures – hopefully – the opportunity to be part of the “real” program next year. I’m available! The so called labs, luckily not so popular anymore, have nothing to do with creativity, sharing ideas or motivating each other. No, it’s a perfect ground for defensive warfare to maintain ones positions. What the artist today sells is ideas and originality so why would anybody think that a lab would function as an opportunity to share. No, labs consolidate the dynamics of the market and function as an eminent opportunity for programmers to surveil any kind of revolutionary tendencies. Only the extremely naïve would consider the idea of sharing, that would be similar to coca-cola putting their secret recipe on their web page.

The central problem with dance programming today, in which programmer and artists are equal part, is that ideology and conviction almost without exception has become subordinate to financial and political circumstances.

So what do we do when the opportunity to object is void and nothing? What do we do when everybody is guilty for nothing and nobody dares to make a move as it always will harm you opportunity to... whatever it is that you do? Nobody is to blame and all of us are gladly participating in a market based on identity and belonging. Programmers as well as artists happily bend over and offer themselves to the whims of the market. Is there anything left except disillusion? The first answer must be no, but perhaps there are measures to take. And look who is talking, the first thing to do is to stop complaining, but complaining is easy as it also consolidates identity.

Over the last twenty years the visual art sector has developed strong curatorial discourses. Perhaps not the entire field but any curator, as well as artist, with ambitions in contemporary art prides himself with an articulation due curatorial practices, never mind if you are on the facilitating or, so to say producing side. An important consequence of such discourses is a disconnection between director and curator. It is today rare that a director of a museum or kunsthalle is one and the same person. The director of a museum is often curating part of a program and are obviously the final voice when it comes to fundamental decisions but a director that put his nose into an assigned curators choices are rare, not to mention incorrect. In the field of dance, choreography and performance the situation is the opposite, it is almost always the director, with financial and institutional responsibility, that articulates the entire program. The emergence of the “independent” curator implies a whole set of new strategies. The independent curator, to the same extent as the artist, offers or sells a concept (a completely misused and misunderstood term) or proposal and is chosen in respect of a competitive landscape. The independent curator of course has to obey economical circumstances but the objective is not to simply stay a live but to produce specificity. This is not entirely true, there are certainly hierarchies, lobby and business as usual, but the very possibility of an independent curator offers a completely different mode of operation. A problem in dance is that directors, doubling as programmers, especially of festivals, occupy their position forever. A director of a festival can easily run a festival for decades. The result is

often that the maintenance has higher priority than the quality of the program. First, if you are director of festival for twenty years of course you are not about to take a risk in programming if it might jeopardize your position, and second after twenty years in one position you have also closed off any other working opportunities. If contracts generally are long-term it is obvious that flux and dynamics will decrease. Thirdly, after twenty years in a position it is very easy to forget that you are the director of a festival and that the festival is not yourself.

So how does the independent curator market his specificity next to producing exhibitions? By engaging in a position, by articulating specific motivations in regard to aesthetics, modes of production, historical accuracy, specific knowledge and, not rarely, through a political strategy, statement or strong hold. Any curator with ambitions in the field of contemporary art negotiates aesthetics and politics through writing; in magazines, publications, catalogues or orally in conferences, seminars or educational frames. In the field of dance similar articulations are extremely rare. Programmers hardly every gives evidence to aesthetic or political positions. Objection, there are often texts in programs etc. by directors and programmers. Correct, but these statements can rarely be read as political statements and are more often similar to magazine editorials trying to justify the content of the current issue. In dance and performance it is rather understood as a big mistake to articulate a position, also concerning the artist. Better not say anything, and you will not be kept responsible.

The amount of literature and magazine press within the field of visual art is immense, whereas in dance we hardly see nothing of the sort. Art magazines, of different quality, flourish all over the world, but in dance there is hardly nothing. With the risk of sounding patronizing, publishing (not to mention translations) and magazine production is most active in the Balkan. In the rest of Europe there is hardly a magazine worth remembering, not a single independent publishing house that I need to keep an eye on. Publishing and book making is not only about identity boast or serving ballet kids with glossy images. Publishing is a means of empowerment, of conflict and not least to produce visibility. Dancers, choreographers, makers and doers, programmers, are you fine with the fact that those who write about your work tendentially consider dance to be at its peak sometime during the early 80's or chicken out on their ideologies because of financial difficulties or demands on sold copies. No worries, let them be but remember it is those write history that decides what is important. Publish yourself, your friends and enemies, and don't put up some petty argument that you are busy with the body not text, publishing is a means, and a good one, to claim territory.

Moreover, the emergence of the independent curator has intensified the development of new formats. Conventional formats are still up and running but over the last two decades we have seen a number of new formats taking form. Among them thematic exhibitions, biennales, shows exclusively formed around commissions or proposals utilizing entirely new media such as books, magazines, the internet or urban contexts. Compare that to the situation in dance and performance where especially the festival format has consolidated itself excessively. I can personally not recall a single festival that has elaborated a strong proposal, or even more rarely a proposal that is controversial or

excluding. The dance festival of today is void of position and is almost always a bric-a-brac of creations of the last 18 months. Lately we have seen a few brave attempts, these should be celebrated even if they are just attempts and might not work for the next fifty years.

Consider that there are approximately 250 conventional black box theaters spread over Europe. How does it come that they all utilize the same marketing strategy and stick to it year after year when the lack of audience always is a central problem. Is there some central agency that has decided that a black box theatre must have a season program presented in the form of an accordion like folder? How is it possible that the imagination of programmers, festival and season directors are so limited that the accordion has become mandatory.

Or turn the argument around, how is it possible that the dance artist spend three months on rehearsing a new piece and twenty minutes on producing the press image when the performance often is seen by less than 300 people, and the program is printed in 25.000 copies? Shouldn't we change the procedure and spend three months on the picture and rehearse 20 minutes? How is it possible that we allow five lines of generic text to present a piece of art that we have spent months or even years in preparing? Every festival and season program presents every artist with the same amount of text, five lines written to fit everybody. Such procedure obviously favors the already established and offer hardly no opportunity for a different conception of what a performance can be to flourish.

A direct comparison with visual art and museum culture is obviously useless as circumstances are very different, and at the same time the pressure to attractive visitors is overwhelming also there, but never the less visual art has developed into a much more heterogeneous field over the last 20 years than dance and performance. It is my firm belief that this has to do with the establishment of curatorial discourse, and it is because of the lack of the same that dance has ended up maintaining aging structures and strategies. There exists an endless stream of publications concerned with curating in visual art and there is hardly nothing of the sort concerning dance. If dance is to have a future it is imperative that we develop our own discourses around programming or curating. We must certainly not invite curators etc. from visual art to inform us about how it is to be done. No, we must do this on our own terms, take up the tough task of producing our own discursive terrain no matter if it will cause turbulence and havoc. There will be collateral damage, but I can ensure you nobody will die. The policy that govern contemporary dance is one of inclusion and everybody-should-be-given-the-opportunity, still we all call for transformation. This is a paradox, if we want change it will happen on behalf of some one. Some things have to go, if we want something new to emerge.

Last time we experienced a stronger shift of policy concerning dance and performance in Western Europe was in the late 70s and early 80s. Young makers and doers, supported by equally young managers, directors and programmers refused to be included and comply to the at the time stale machinery of state theaters and similar. During a few years a line of venues appeared, willing to take risk, often without financial opportunities, and to host young artists and groups.

In Holland, Belgium, Germany, not to mention what later became Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia venues and festivals flourished although the scale was small. With the emergence of new theaters, often considering rather new program policies a new generation of artists and groups established themselves. Three decades later the situation has changed a lot but has it changed enough. These venues, festivals, artist and group are obviously not willing to give up their positions, so to try to force ones way in is not the smartest solution. Why would major such entities offer more than just enough space for young and upcoming artists, when they are good as it is? They don't want to be overtaken or lose their positions. Festival and season programs are children of a certain time and context, we can work to make them a little bit better, a little bit more open, a little bit this or that, but there will be no major changes as long as the economy doesn't simply collapse. So if we want something to change on a more radical level we must simply abandon ship and start from scratch. We must force ourselves to not set up another, perhaps alternative, festival. We must force ourselves not to start a new space. If we do we will just end up in the same position one more time, and the second time we will just look stupid. The curatorial discourses we have to engage must not be concerned with "what can be done", or better with strategic matters. What have to be approached are structural or fundamental changes. Our future is not easy, because what stands in front of us is the necessity to invent new formats and radically new opportunities.

However, the future is bright. Over the last 15 to 25 years our society, our world, has seen a veritable transformation concerning production, communication and economy. 25 years ago manufacturing to a large degree governed the world, but since then we have experienced a strong move towards capacities of distribution, communication and the mobility of value. One could say that the world has experienced a shift of focus from manufacturing, to production of goods, to performance and movement. Concerning art it is obvious that a regime driven by manufacturing finds its accomplice in an art form that focus on objects, namely visual art. If we today live in under a paradigm governed by performance, such paradigm need to finds its related expression in the arts. The future doesn't look bright for visual art, at least not art that is concerned with the reproduction of objects, but for dance, choreography and performance it certainly appears that we can look forward to a bright and flourishing future, but only if we let go of the established models for what those expressions can be. The theatre, festival and season program, does not as e.g. Peggy Phelan as argued promote performance in the sense of its ephemeral status, on the contrary they handle dance and performance as objects. It is with this is mind, that we live in a time of performance, that we have to take on the possible production of new formats, new modes of production and representation. If we do, we can only succeed, but it will imply a fundamental shift in our understanding of what performance, dance and choreography can be. This, however, does not mean that we have to evacuate the theatre and desperately seek new sites for representation. No, what we have to evacuate is the strategic levels of our expressions.

A director of a reasonably big festival recently stated, that he was proud to welcome a certain artist to the festival for the seventeenth year in a row. I wasn't surprised, as this is what happens in more or less every festival (perhaps not seventeen), but what would surprise me is when Tate Modern's director proudly

announces the seventeenth exhibition in equally many years by one and the same artist. That is unthinkable, even considering that it might be a small piece in some overlookable group exhibition that happens every year. Every time we present for-the-n'th-year something else is not presented. Every time we install the big company in the big space, that space will not be available for something else to develop. Every time ballet-this-or-that-big-name is installed in the program, we know that something not ballet-this-or-that-big-name will not be written about in the local or national press. Every time we don't write a kick ass political statement about this years festival, we know that the audience will not upgrade their modes of experience but will maintain their taste and identity and make circumstances to change something next year even smaller. Every time we argue that a festival or season program should have something for everybody, should be available for everyman we have also lowered our ambitions regarding our art form and its future. Why are you making art, why are you programming a festival or season? To please everyman; the general population or audience? I hope not, because if that is our ambition there are certainly businesses that offer much better salaries and fancier parties. Have you forgotten why you are making art or why you set out to realize that first festival? Those pieces, festivals and seasons that we created even though we knew it would costs and would interfere with our personal economies? We did it because we couldn't find strong arguments enough not to, because we had no smaller ambitions than to change the world, because dance, choreography and performance were synonymous with life and death. Pathetic, oh yes, but pathetic enough to forget? Have we forgotten our mission statements, did we change them from "until death" to "until budget cuts".

Fifteen or so year ago networks showed up as the new fad. The motivation was to share expenses, to discover new artist (often from exotic places like the Balkan) and support upcoming artist. What has happened today? Networks is today a means to consolidate power, and hence by definition homogenizing. Oh yes, we loved to support those artists from Balkan but only one year, not 17 in a row. Today a production that is not promoted by an international network is an impossibility. There are exceptions but that is not the issue here, but what is is to what extent we, programmers and artist, are willing to sell out specificity in favor of fitting in. Networks are for dance what ecology is for animals, a restrictive baby sitter that place the poor animal in a restricted area. "-Here you go, play here but not too loud." Stop being so fucking civilized and take the risk of being considered a fool.

Recently I looked into a well-known theater's statistics and found out that one and the same company had been presented in average ten nights per season. Considering that all performances were sold out the total amount of sold tickets would be approximately 10.000. That's a third of the audience that the local out doors concert arena could host in one night. So why not present the big company one night in the Olympia stadium instead of the ten nights in the theatre. The counter argument is obvious. "- Dance has to be experienced direct, it is about presence..." and so on but what is the difference between dance and a concert with Metallica that nobody has a problem to share with 50.000 other people looking at video screens. As far as I can remember nobody had a problem with authenticity when Rolling Stones in 2005 performed in front of 1.2 million

people at Copacabana. So why isn't the big dance company presented on the same beach? It's not because of the above arguments, it's because if the size of the economy gets big enough big money is also moving in. Better continue to present the big company in the theatre so that nothing will change. Tate Modern is a good or possibly bad example that things can change and scale is relative. Ten years ago it was unimaginable that an artist would move into the Turbine Hall and today it's rather obligatory for an artist to reach star capacity. Olafur Eliason and Rolling Stones had more or less the same amount of visitors, Stones just did it a bit quicker, but then why can't Rosas, Jerome Bel or Jiri Kilian have 1.2 million people looking at their work?

The problem with dance is a performed little brother concept, which in fact is just hiding in the corner not to have to compete with the big guys.

Only if our expression develops a decent curatorial discourse can we produce proper arguments against the ridiculous argumentation above, but as long as we don't we will always be subject to whims of local politicians, the well-meaning hand of state cultural policy, and will never be able to defend ourselves against budget cuts and identity hungry misery.