

ARE YOU HERE?

Annette van Zwoll, October 25, 2021

The Forum 'Are you here? Dance and its audience' by The Place and Sadler's Wells (London, UK) was already planned to happen in 2016, got postponed, and now found itself in a totally different reality. A reality in which there is an urgent need for reframing the relationship with audiences as Eddie Nixon, director of The Place, stated in his welcome. Curated and produced by freelance cultural manager Marie Proffit the all day forum offered an inspirational abundance of perspectives on the questions that the cultural field is currently facing.

Brexit, Covid, Black Lives Matters have created a paradigm shift which urgently demands changes in our positions on an individual as well as institutional level. Ankur Bahl, director digital stage and studio of Sadler's Wells, refers to this context and proposes to grab the opportunities this context has offered. "If we don't take this time for radical changes, then when? If we don't take this opportunity to democratise, diversify and realise accessibility and equity in our institutions in a big way, then when?"

The day is loosely divided in two parts: how technical and digital means can diversify the relationships with audiences, and how to enhance these relationships by developing more accessible buildings, structures and ways of working.

WHERE IS THE AUDIENCE?

The day starts with the question of what happened to audiences during Covid. CEO Anne Torregiani of the British organisation Audience Agency actually researched that thoroughly in the context of the UK in different time frames of the pandemic. Pre-covid, audience for contemporary art formed 7% of the British population and existed of young, urban, and educated people seeking for experiences in all kinds of forms of contemporary art. During Covid, the agency regularly researched the potentiality of audiences going back into the theatre once it would be possible again. Consistently, it turned out that 1/3 of the existing audience is happy (or even desperate) to attend, and these are again young, urban people, while 1/3 has reservations and 1/3 wants all the risk gone or is not interested anymore. The last group exists of mainly older audience living in rural areas or small towns. Now that we start to move beyond Covid, contemporary audiences do seem to bounce back, but inequality has increased nevertheless. There is even a smaller chance than before that audiences least interested in culture will come back, resulting in decrease of 3% in general performing arts audiences. This number might be less applicable to the contemporary dance field, because a big chunk of their audience is in the first 1/3 of the existing audiences. But if you talking about expanding and diversifying audiences, it might be even harder now than ever to convince potential audiences in rural areas or older people to come to the theatre. We don't know how this numbers relate to other countries in Europe, but it gives an interesting insight in the trajectory different audiences experience and questions how we should relate to that.

HOW TO KEEP CONNECTED?

The conversations of this day show a deep longing to keep connected to audiences throughout the lock-downs. In the first panel discussion EMPTY THEATRES & DANCE CLASSES ON TIKTOK - WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT OUR AUDIENCES DURING COVID? Atanas Maev, director of Derida Dance Center in Sofia (BG), explained that Covid made them listen to their audience better. The originally streaming they did was not so appreciated and therefore transformed in the hybrid platform 'Teleport'. Performances were shown in the theatre for the amount of audiences allowed, but the physical bodies were at the same time transformed into some quite exciting visual representations, made in collaboration with visual artists. This digital event attracted many online audiences. Additionally, very well prepared outdoor events were organised to create local visibility and continuation. Yvonne Kreuzmannova, director and founder of Tanec Praha (CR), also turned to digital means to connect to audiences almost on a one to one basis. Acknowledging the situation audiences were in, Tanec Prah offered dance for home, dance for home office, VR Reality and online snippets of work and interviews with artists. Even now that life performances have become possible again, people keep asking for the online art works. Atanas and Yvonne both address the benefit of online activity in expanding, diversifying and enhancing audience relationships, especially with audiences that don't live in the proximity of the theatre.

HOW TO KEEP CONNECTED II?

In the following panel FUTURE DIGITAL CONNECTIONS & CO-CREATION, choreographer Robin Jonsson (SE) shares his expertise on creating intimacy through technology. He creates and offers work digitally. Since he has been producing his digital choreographies already for a long time, it's no surprise 2020 has been the most productive year of his career. With his work he offers audiences the chance to be close to the performers, to dance with them, all in a magnificent space far away from the walls of our own house. Even watching a video clip of his VR performances makes me experience the proximity between audience and artists. It's not hard to imagine this digital work made an impact.

Jamaar Burkmar (UK) on the other hand, is pretty new to the technology bit. During the last 1,5 years, he didn't add technology within his choreographic practice, but he started using social media for the distribution of his work. With innovative use of music driven video clips his social media account pretty much blew up. For him, it was not only a way of keep working, but also a way of connecting with audiences. He has developed hundreds of online conversations, basically establishing one to one relationships through the internet, expanding and renewing his audiences.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

"The dance field is progressive in many ways, but very techno-fobic. I would even say conservative." Robin Jonsson expresses. Artist, curator and director of interactive design collective body>data>space - that puts the living body in the heart of digitalisation - Ghislaine Boddington

(UK) is even more bold: *'We are like children with a new toy because we are so behind.* But she explains the digital world as an ever expanding eco-system that nobody really understands and that entails new learning for all. That learning is not to be done alone. Both Robin and Ghislaine stress the importance of collaboration; bring in expertise, not only from the dance field, but from outside. The more diversity in collaboration, the more innovative practices become, the more innovative relations can be achieved.

TACKLE INJUSTICE TOGETHER

Not only in the field of technology we need to learn better. In her pre-recorded lecture ACCESS IS LOVE, Tanja Erhart unravels the lack of equality in the dance field when it comes to people with disability. She defines herself as a one-legged, chronically ill pleasure activist that wishes for more care and access. She as well as others have negotiated digital working opportunities for years, but she always had to show up live for events she was invited for. Why did it take a pandemic to think more about digital working conditions? The unanswered answer is painful: because many of us were not limited by the status quo, and didn't feel an incentive to change it. With still a lot of internalized ableism in dance, many dancers feel not taken seriously. Her statement access = love demands a collective responsibility for access and a reframing of disability from an inferior trait to just a different way of being a body and mind. A paradigm shift is needed to consider accessibility not as a logistic problem, but as an expansion of humanity.

PROCESS, NOT PERFECTION

As Tanja underlines, we all have internalised -isms within ourselves. Ableism, racism, sexism. They are embedded in our hierarchical structures, which allows more space and power for some and less for others. Use of language, lack of consent, lack of power diversion enhance those structures. So how to restructure the space? We hold the structures inside ourselves which can lead to emotional barriers such as shame and guilt. In a world where injustice exists on so many levels, everyone sometimes feels the powerlessness of ones actions. How, as moderator Eva Martinez asks, can we not become overwhelmed and inactive by the fast amount of problems that need to be tackled? The answer seems to be in the doing, in the action and in the informed attempt. Eva concludes: *“aim for the process, not for perfection.”*

In the last panel *WHO IS INVITED* some examples of concrete actions are given that relate to the power structures between audience, artists and art institutions. The Hungarian artists Tamara Zsófia Vadas, Ábris Gryllus and Márton Emil Tóth implemented a new working strategy in which the supremacy of adulthood was challenged by letting children develop and create a performance based on the re-imagining of the earth once it is crashed by the planet Nibiru. Through the process, the kids became responsible for the outcome of the work. Roberto Casarotto (IT), responsible for the dance projects for the Centro per la Scena Contemporanea di Bassano del Grappa, shares the project *Diary of a Move* that came into existence during the lockdown period. Audiences were asked to keep a written, videotaped or voice recorded diary of collected movements. These diary's were sent to choreographer Masoko Matsushita who created a performance out of it in consent and collaboration with the participants. Both are examples of creating a framework which gives allowance and ownership to audiences to create and be part of the art work themselves.

NO QUICK FIX

The freshly appointed Artistic Director of international dance festival Dance Umbrella Freddie Opoku-Addaie (UK) zooms out a bit and reflects more on production systems as well as on the question “Who is invited”. Developing space for invaluable slack time is crucial for him. A space and time to think, reflect, to try out, to invite. As mentioned earlier during the day, collaboration is key to create more diverse and innovative and to connect to audiences in new ways. But what are the audiences? There is a need for hyper local connections, but how to deal with that in a global world? How to imagine a future together when we contemplate on the current present that demands so much of our attention? How to implement care, for artists, audiences and cultural workers alike in our working structures? How to shift the power play? And how do all that while taking care of yourself as well?

People *do* take action, and things *are* shifting. Change seems to have accelerated the last two years, but not fast enough. At the same time, Freddie warns for a quick fix, because there is none and seemingly quick fixes very quickly turn into tokenism, tickboxing, tolerating. These are basically just empty symbols to pretend being inclusive rather than implementing systematic change. In her

reflection, choreographer Rosemary Lee mentions that even today, people were forgotten, referring to the older and people from rural areas that were mentioned in the beginning

Whoever you are working in the arts, the interrelationship between what you want to create (and how you want to create it), the access to knowledge and expertise to expand the possibility of creating and the impact of audiences as well as the context we work in is a complex one. That is what this day mostly brought me; a better understanding of this complexity. A day like this doesn't provide the immediate and radical change we're longing for, but does provide us with the tools to take another step towards a more equal arts context. Collaboration, innovation, learning, listening, informed action on all levels is needed to shift the power dynamics and create a more equal playing field for artists, audiences and cultural workers. There is no quick fix. But if we don't take this time for radical changes, then when?