

Towards a Fantastic Future

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Dance Bachelor 2

Portfolio 2 | Supervisor: Katleen Van Langendonck

Royal Conservatoire Antwerp | Academic year 2019-2020

INTRODUCTION

In this time in which much has changed, the art world, and even more the performing arts world, is living a moment of great struggle, impotent as it is when physical coexistence is denied. Now, every physical manifestation of this world is cancelled, every shared moment, every drop of sweat is confined in each artist's and audience's private space.

But, just by having a glance to the net and the social media appears clearly that no one who is part of this sector is sleeping: many (companies, artists, festivals...) are operating to keep their visibility, giving free streaming of performances or zoom classes and masterclasses, while waiting patiently the storm to end; drama and dance schools are also continuing their programs via the famous app Zoom; others are offering new platforms in order to allow a dialogue which can bring together people's hopes, desires and ideas for the future and between them someone may have found interesting solutions for the months to go. Mingled to all this is the desire of the digital audience for participation, which in the dance sector finds satisfaction in classes online or repertoire tutorials.

Taking my examples from the Belgian and Italian dance scene I try to distinguish among them two main different attitudes: the former is the one characterized by who is standing still waiting to come back to normality, the latter is by those who are engaging in a dialogue with the present situation and coming out with new and unexplored solutions, mostly coming from a negotiation with the digital world.

Drawing a painting composed by all this variety we will be able to see if the picture of performing arts is in a 'freeze' mood, or if something is moving, going towards a transformation.

NEEDING EYES

With the decree of closing all theatres, museums and any other performance space in Europe and in most parts of the world, artists, directors, choreographers and performers are now home, unable to work and to meet their audience.

But they still need the audience's attention in order not to sink and disappear. They need to remind of their existence and for this they search for people's eyes.

Fortunately, all this is happening on the digital era, in which image and sound can travel from any to any place, and of course artists are taking advantage of that. They surf in the wide net which links us all and send in our private computers their most impressive works or improvise new entertainment on the social media.

Especially in these last ones it is very easy to create questionable surrogates of the scenic action, badly done and poorly shot from low quality phone cameras. 'But even in these conditions the world is asking actors to be present'- wrote Marco Baliani, a famous Italian actor - 'we need to fill ourselves with voices, images, messages, videos, chat to be sure of still existing, it is a society addicted to noise, accustomed to the loud flowing of hectic, bulimic existences' and still 'we never talk of art in itself, we never talk of the necessity for art to exist, even if it does not produce wealth you can measure instantly, even if the gesture of the artist cannot be classified into everyday productivity'.¹

Considering how addicted to images, words and sounds we can be it does not shock anymore to see every day short videos shared on the social media by dancers, performers and actors who try to entertain a distant audience or to feel valuable and 'useful' even now, when the theatres are empty. Who can blame them at the end for trying to be reminded in a moment in which art is not the priority.

With the same purpose are acting many dance companies (Rosas, Ultima Vez, Peepingtom, Damaged Goods for example in Belgium), making available online some of their most acclaimed performances. Sometimes the performances that can be streamed are already repertoire, sometimes the streaming is available just for a week or only within the country the companies are based in. This tells us that behind the facade of accessibility and freedom of art lies artists' need for not underselling their works. They still need their audience to come back and see them in person. Streaming is just a temporary alternative not a solution. And it would be dangerous to accustom to those digital translations of artistic material without wondering if new solutions can be found for companies to work and for the audience to participate, even now.

PARTICIPATION AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Now that the physical activity of most of the population of the world has been confined into strict corridors of allowance, it is even harder to remain physically still for those who are usually on the other side of the camera (who dances professionally or not, who provides us with dance products we can eagerly watch), but fortunately internet comes handy in giving them the alternative of a virtual life. In this virtual life in fact we are no more defined by the place in which we are and therefore we can connect and participate to a dance class, that, for example, is taking place in New York while you find yourself in Italy. In this way, even if the limitations of the virtual dance classes (that have now invaded internet) stand out clearly, it is true that is possible for literally anyone to participate to them, when instead, in a condition of 'normality', you would need to be in the same spatial-temporal frame to attend. Now you can do it easily from your living room. This can be a great chance to have a glance of the work of artists you love, but, while in a concrete situation you would meet a very specific place, group of people and community, now this virtual participation might give you the feeling of being part of a united virtual community, but still, a concrete encounter is missing.

Also, in attempt for inclusion and call for participation are acting some choreographers who posted tutorials for repertoire on their websites. One example is the *Re: Rosas!*, an initiative started in the 2013, when the Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker decided to give back to her audience through a tutorial an extract from her famous piece *Rosas danst Rosas*, which was already going viral on the net. Now this has even a more powerful effect, because just by posting a video of you dancing the piece on the *Re: Rosas!* website, you can feel to be part of the dance community during this quarantine. There is absolutely nothing bad in the act of posting a video dancing repertoire, it is though important to not believe that having people sharing a dance video with repertoire is a sufficient achievement in terms of inclusion and participation.

Another concern about dance tutorials rises while reading an article of the New York Times about the tutorial for '50 looks' solo by Cunningham. The choreographic piece is taught in the video by Patricia Lent, and the article says she has been 'systematically breaking down Cunningham's solo into digestible slices.'² In this way dance repertoire becomes something we can 'eat and digest', and becomes a good accessible to everyone. Maybe this way of teaching repertoire in 'pills' is like creating a new popular dance to share with everyone, even if it is tempting to think at these tutorials as the outcome for commodifying repertoire in order to have free advertisement.

All this considered, what now seem inefficient attempts of artistic sharing and inclusion in a dance community, can be landmarks from which to start thinking of what really is missing us in the time of confinement we are living. The feeling of being lacking concrete exchange between artist/audience, teacher/student, performer/performer and being missing physicality can raise our awareness about useful questions: has the deprivation from shared physicality condemned the performing arts world so much that nothing can be done until we will be all again in a condition of normality? Is it matter of just waiting for the situation to end or is the action of reinventing needed in order to survive? Are there new possibilities of integrating more technology with our personal physical space and not let just communication pass through a screen?

A SHARED THIRD SPACE OF COEXISTENCE

Let's think about all the students that are right now continuing the dance and drama educations having daily class through the famous app of videoconferencing Zoom. Because the option of 'stopping' the academic year in advance it is not an attractive one, this seems to be the best can be done to continue, having a flat screen as the only medium for the class, while before we were thinking we couldn't do without space, physical presence and energy. Students are trying hard to do without these anchor points, but maybe new solutions can come to the aid of online classes.

There is a very interesting article the artist and Professor Paul Sermon posted on the blog creative futures of the University of Brighton. Paul Sermon is an artist who has spent almost thirty years working with videoconferencing in his arts practice, and in the blog he encourages everyone to be creative with their own videoconferencing giving some tips about alternative methods and simple techniques to increase the sense of coexistence in these videoconference encounters.



Telematic Dreaming at Fabrica Brighton 1999

Some examples coming from his own experimentations regard combining and relating distant audiences in a range of familiar settings in social and fictional contexts, from life size projections of remote participants on shared bed surfaces and green-screened TV viewers sitting together on the same sofa to distant gallery visitors seated at the same virtual peace negotiations table and performers sharing the same telepresent stage.

Through these installations he manages to reproduce the proprioceptive choreography of body movements, facial expressions and hand gestures, which are key components to any conversation, allowing the self and the other simultaneous reflection, and by simply combining these views within the same image he says 'we become kinaesthetically conscious and in control of our combined coexistence, escaping our individual isolation while entering into a shared third-space of coexistence'.³ He explains that these installations, although relatively complex, are not impossible to set up at home with bit of video experimentation and some rearrangement of the furniture. And probably it would be interesting for students to try them out and see if technology can extend further than their laptops and come in aid to the isolation even in online dance classes.

SPACES OF DIALOGUE

Something crucial the performing arts are missing during these weird times it is the possibility to perform. And this entails another important consequence: audience cannot go to theatre, cannot experience performance and cannot discuss about it.

'Teatro' (theatre) is an interesting word. From this word comes the term 'teoria' (theory), which in Italian is also used to refer to a line of people, animals or things. Some studies say that this meaning has its roots in the phenomenon of the line of people which was appearing every time a performance was about to start or at the end of it. A line of people talking, reflecting, discussing and sharing opinions about a performance.

This is such a peculiar characteristic of performing arts: people coming together to see something happen and then letting it resonate within themselves in an atmosphere of shared experience.

A community originates around the happening of theatre, and still now, that is not possible anymore to share this experience, it is important to keep discussing of what is happening, keep that attitude of dialogue, 'try to give words to these times and collectively describe this live performance of reality'. These are the words that Lara Staal uses in her article for Belgian art magazine *E.tcetera*. She expresses to be concerned about society becoming solely inward-looking, only worried of what singularly we can achieve from our living rooms, and remarks that a political action lies in what we can do collectively, giving words to this crisis, in order to unify our interpretation.

*'We as artists can generate scripts but instead of singularly controlling the process and outcome of the performance, democracy demands a co-directing approach. We storytellers cannot do much more than materialize our analysis and visions produced from these times; showing and making tangible that this crisis has the potential to transform our world into a better one – in the hope that these visions will leave traces and stick to as much as possible...'*⁴

She talks about 'co-directing' the future of performing arts, which means directing it with and within a community. A community that is coming together thanks to the many online platforms dedicated to this dialogue between artists, curators, art economists, politicians, visionaries, florists... in short, anyone who is interested on the theme.

One example of space of dialogue is *Triennale Milano*, which organized the project *Decameron: storie in streaming* (Decameron: stories on streaming), that provides a daily live stream discussion with artists telling about their works and dialoguing with the interviewer in relation to present state of things in the art world.

Another interesting initiative is *Culture Quarantine*, a new platform of cultural promotion born in Brussels, which launched a call for participation with a video of thirty seconds containing an idea. A simple but very honest way to start discussing and sharing ideas for the future.

Also, the performing arts festival *Santarcangelo festival* in occasion of its 50th special edition called *Futuro Fantastico*, waiting for new solutions to make the festival happen, opened a space for sharing of ideas, with the group *Dream Suq* on Facebook. Inspired to the concentric markets of the Arab



Illustration for Santarcangelo festival 2050 'Futuro Fantastico'

world, Dream Suq wants to be a place of exchange of proposals/dreams/visions: it is asked to imagine your (fantastic) future like in a premonitory dream and describe two minutes and seventeen seconds of it...

While being, somehow, a lesser practical initiative than others, dream suq reminds us of the importance of sharing dreams and hopes for the future, and acts like a funnel for visions which will then feed a shared dream for a fantastic future.

OLD/NEW VISIONS

Now that lively and fruitful discussions have started on the many online platforms, it is also the time to spot those places where some interesting ideas and solutions could be made real. Making some research it is possible to see that it is right from festivals that some new proposals are being born.

‘Those who think at a Festival in times of crisis as a frill, a luxury or just entertainment, are making a huge mistake, for themselves and for the generations to come’. These words are written in the website of previously mentioned Santarcangelo Festival, as a reminder that a festival is the place par excellence where artists’ visions enter in contact and mingle with the social fabric. The call for participation that festivals send to the people of the place is an extraordinary occasion for starting a new season of performing arts with the support of the larger community in which they are born (a community that goes further than the artists’ and insiders’ one).

And is right from the core of the community that Santarcangelo festival is going to start: the square. ‘The Festival itself is going to be (in the respect of the safety distance) a performative gesture, a wide spread cinematographic set on which locals, citizens, artists, technicians, politicians, chef, shopkeepers... the entire community will be the main character of an epic post-apocalyptic movie: this is going to happen in Santarcangelo where we will reshape the main square, the area called Sferisterio and the park nearby Imbosco as new natural stages. [...] Reclaiming the value of our work and labor, we open a hybrid space where physical offline presence in the public space coexists with a digital online dimension’.⁵

If Santarcangelo festival reopens the season fighting the self-isolation by safely gathering audience in the public spaces of the city, the *Kilowatt festival*, looks to the future of digitalization opening a call for applications for four digital residencies.

A digital residency consists in the production of a performative project created specifically for the digital environment, in which is found an efficient tool for expressing the artistic ideas.

It is something new, an occasion to start exploring the new creative horizons, and a way to continue the artistic research when physical residencies are not allowed.

CONCLUSION

Whether new ideas are found by going back to the roots of performing arts (the public spaces, as in the case of Santarcangelo Festival) or by entering into new territories (as the digital residencies of Kilowatt festival) what lies underneath all this as a support is the concept of performing arts as a 'rich web of practices' to which we all contribute and attend, art is the result of 'the knitting of the environments and correspondences, a web of co-survival and support, a continuation through the time as the balls of wool', as the philosopher and performance art theorist Bojana Kunst suggests in her 'letter to the performance artists'⁶. And the needles thanks to which we can knit all our different experiences is nothing else than dialogue.

Dialogue within artists, dialogue with the audience, dialogue with the society, dialogue with the situation, dialogue with the present. Dialogue which can be read also as a synonym of encounter. It is good to remind us that the importance of a dance class lies less on the technical information is passed and more on the encounter the class allows; and the same concerns the going to theatre and the performing itself. To be in dialogue as artists means to let events enter the artistic experience, and therefore, if this time presents us the digital world as the only tool for connection, then this must be acknowledged, and technology may inspire us and let us walk towards a fantastic future.

Notes

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³ Sermon, Paul. 'Be creative with your videoconferencing, make it memorable, it makes a difference'. *Creative Futures*. University of Brighton 21 April 2020. Internet. Available: https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/creative/2020/04/21/be-creative-with-your-videoconferencing-make-it-memorable-it-makes-a-difference/?fbclid=IwAR3L9QDPrT71TP12b1q2fqnpqluwOBpdtfYloKbwbgrdCz_M5ntLOyaF0yk

⁴ Staal, Lara. 'The Crisis Stage'. *E-tcetera*, publisher, N° 160 2020. Internet. 14 April 2020. Available: <https://e-tcetera.be/the-crisis-stage/#>

⁵ Nicolò, Daniela and Casagrande, Enrico / Motus. 'In The Amber Of The Moment'. *Santarcangelo festival 2050*. Mr APP.s, 2020. Internet. Available: <https://www.santarcangelofestival.com/en/nellambra-del-momento/>

⁶ Bojana Kunst, 'Lockdown Theatre (2): Beyond the time of the right care: A letter to the performance artist' *Schauspielhouse Journal* 21.04.2020. Internet. Available: <https://neu.schauspielhaus.ch/en/journal/18226/lockdown-theatre-2-beyond-the-time-of-the-right-care-a-letter-to-the-performance-artist>

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<http://www.kilowattfestival.it/bando-per-la-selezione-di-4-residenze-digitali/>