

## **Among the Restless and Uneasy**

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I call into question a life lived in search of reasons that may prove convincing enough to go through with it. If living itself is the goal, art is what intensifies our experience of it. Through art I can widen the boundaries of what is possible and challenge my own abilities to the utmost. I want to make use of myself based on an idea of what makes our existence meaningful.

Most often, meaning arises for me out of a dialogue which references philosophy, ethics, to some extent morality, but also aesthetics. I conduct this dialogue both with myself and others, people I know and those I do not. I conduct it with people who are near at hand or far away. Since I believe that our outlook on life determines the way we see reality, the image or representation that art creates is of crucial significance in how we interpret that reality.

*I once died for a moment. When I started to breathe again, everything was new and my awareness was empty. After which everything was unprecedented. Untouched. Then I started to dance.*

I do not want to say what I have said before. I do not want to write what I have written before. There have to be different words! I do not want to repeat myself. When I work with movement, with the body and with space, I very rarely feel that I am repeating myself. Often I allow myself to be surprised. Something always comes into being which did not exist before, even though I know that each movement is the outcome of my own history. Words are often ponderous and are expected to be comprehensible. That expectation paralyses language. Movement is seen as more transient, incomprehensible in a way because it cannot be incorporated into a grammatical structure. That makes using it a lot freer. It makes it usable in a linguistic form.

When I am overcome by resentment, hate or a terrifying envy... When I feel overwhelmed by newspaper reports on human failings or the images on the television news stories of other forms of misery... I stretch out an arm, pass it through the air and am astounded by the traces it leaves. A way of escaping – or an authentic form of exploration and the creation of meaning? I carry with me some knowledge of the

linguistic vocabulary that can develop our awareness about each other and the world. Art for me is political in the sense that it creates identity and reflects society in the process of making us aware.

Art is what is closest to me: art can reveal what is present within us. And yet I still feel that the knowledge that I am creating myself in dance is painful. I dance therefore I exist. I dream choreography, I think movement - it is all interwoven in what I cannot leave behind. Images crowding in ...I have said this before.

Now that I have recently taken on the role as Vice-Chancellor of the University College of Dance, my new day to day reality has also become the stuff of my choreography. The movements are not the same, the actors are different but the compositional technique and pedagogical process - for developing understanding of what it is that creates meaning and new ways of connecting things together – are identical. I am trying to compose the essence of what it is to be alive. That is my survival strategy. For me, being an artist is an attitude to life.

*Inside me I can often hear this clamour for silence. Close all the doors! Leave me in peace! I close my eyes and it takes a lot of willpower to open them again.*

What we call reality is a social construction, which bears the stamp of our ideas about ourselves, society, culture, religion... It is a powerful construction... part of an interplay of forces that dominates everything else and in which our roles have been assigned to us. Who is willing to accept the role allotted to them? Who demands it? Who wants to create that role? Look around you. There are so many people crying out for attention or else huddling against the walls in the belief that they cannot be seen.

For whom is a given object or event what it is said to be? For whom is it everything he or she wants it to be?

For me, art has always constituted a zone of freedom, where the rules of the game can be challenged and replaced by others I have chosen for myself. I see art as a protected space in which honesty, simplicity and beauty can be found: qualities which I very often find lacking in what we call the real world.

**You** are an artist too. You are driven by different forces, you live your life according to different ideals and you are creating your own story. Your working process interests me because it is different from mine. Through your work and what you create I get the chance to see something different from what I am capable of experiencing myself. I learn about myself and the positions I adopt through what you do. My own conception of the world either becomes clearer or grows more obscure as a result. It is difficult on my own to find out anything about either myself or the world. Your work challenges me; it demands that I react, unless I find it so uninteresting that it simply passes by unnoticed.

Before I was appointed Professor here at the University College of Dance, I had no idea of what opportunities the college could provide. The college has provided a challenging environment which required me to come up with a great many answers. I was expected to be able to explain the skills of choreography, create an understanding of artistic methodology and develop the subject known in this institution as choreographic

composition. Underlying this expectation were issues and questions which often seemed impossible to resolve and challenged me in many ways.

The dialogue with the students was intoxicatingly euphoric... So many dreams and expectations cherished by people who have only just begun to approach that state of desirable chaos and the combination of pleasure and anguish that the creative process usually involves. What our work together brought out was a deepened process of reflection about what is knowledge-generative in artistic praxis. This turned out to be a dialogue in which I often felt that what was lacking was the presence of other artists. Why are there not more of us? Where are you?

As a result of being appointed to the professorship, I was also given the space for a deepening and development of my own artistic process. I was given time to spend on the very thing I needed to work on both to improve my understanding of what I am doing and also why and how I can develop my own instrument. I was given space to do research into my own art.

What's it like for you? Where is there space for your questions? How do you manage to balance the commercial demands the market imposes on the "saleability" of our work and your own needs for development a more advanced creative process? Do my questions apply to you? Do you have any sense that my work can have something to add to yours as well? Do you think that your working process, your ideas, your insights – affect other people, or is it only the created work that is of interest?

The knowledge that is generated in the artistic process is something that we are solely responsible for. That is a stand we have to take. We make, and in so doing, new insights are gained for us to formulate out of that "making". The questions generated by artistic praxis can find the space they need in more advanced working processes, which provide new insights into what we need to develop our work.

**We** have a lot in common. Let me tell you about my experience of another choreographer's work. Let me tell you about meeting Jan Fabre in Avignon in 2005. He is an interesting artist who pays no attention to genre boundaries. He does what he has to do and other people refer to him as a choreographer, director, performance artist, agent provocateur, genius, rebel, capitalist and "male chauvinist".

Among the works on display in Avignon was a major retrospective exhibition of his work as a visual artist. Images, sculptures and work on video that reflect a conceptual universe familiar from the character of his works for stage, or as a far-fetched restatement of some extremely ordinary event. Death is made visible but so is the intensified form of being alive that is dramatised in indelible imagery. His self-portrait makes me smile – a coffin wrapped in iridescent beetles with a peacock's head at one end, and the tail-feathers at the other, the dragging wings in the middle.

A sculpture on one of the public squares in the city is being dedicated by the mayor and the minister of culture. It is a shining bronze life-size sculpture by the artist, standing on a tall plinth its face turned towards the sky. The man is laughing out loud at the heavens while simultaneously crying. The laughter is manifested through loudspeakers in the plinth and the tears flow from his eyes. They keep on flowing and a pool forms

on the desiccated ground around the plinth. It occurs to me that his tears will make this spot bloom.

Jan's work invokes a present moment that refuses to be compared with one that has been known before, and at the same time it mirrors something profoundly existential. Revulsion, misery, despair, death, brutalised nakedness – why do so many people want to see and bear witness to the worst? What does that say about our lives, our society? The woman's body wrapped in cling-film with openings only for the mouth the eyes and the vagina. Anyone who has seen his film *Les Guerrières de la Beauté* shown at one of the cinemas in the town will understand my question.

Two scenes form this film: a close up of a very beautiful woman from whose mouth different kinds of beetles are creeping. A lot of them. They go on to creep across her body. I find this a very lovely scene and one that has made me see beetles in an entirely different way. Other members of the audience whimper in revulsion. A different scene. A woman in a bridal gown is crawling over a concrete floor covered in flour together with a naked, sticky man and two monitor lizards. The man keeps falling over the whole time, stumbling over his own feet. The film is full of blood, jam, flour, porridge, snakes, beetles, fats, hard cement, hard steel against soft bodies. All the contact between the human beings is a struggle. It makes me think of human vulnerability, about power and submission, of resignation and pleasure. It makes me think about how art can lay bare being itself and force us to adopt a position.

Jan Fabre talks a great deal about happiness. He says that the moment of creativity is a happy one.

His production *L'Histoire des larmes* which had its premiere on the opening day of the festival is different from his previous work. There is no blood and it is not revolting unless you think that a naked man urinating into a bottle is revolting. It is the most fantastically beautiful performance! Among the most beautiful I have seen in many years. An exploration of tears!

23 dancers, musicians and actors lived and worked together intimately for several months to be able to share this performance with us. The Mistral is blowing hard, the terrorist attacks in London are on the minds of most people. There are some 1500 of us in the audience waiting for the show to begin. The minister of culture is in his seat together with a number of the other VIPs whose presence is obligatory at premieres. A few men start shouting: Get rid of the minister of culture! More and more members of the audience join in their cry. A huge number of people unite together in a demonstration against the minister of culture and the cultural policy provisions that have resulted in reduced funding for the festival. People get to their feet in the stalls and shout. The minister remains seated. Jan Fabre and the director of the Festival come out on stage to appeal for calm so that the performance can begin. They do not succeed. After 45 minutes the harpist in the middle of the stage starts to play the delicate notes of that instrument. We cannot hear much of it. Dancers dressed in white come on stage, lie down on the huge white pillows they have brought with them and start crying in despair. This is the crying and screaming of an infant and as it reaches us, the demonstrators start to subside. The tears of despair take over.

The crying just keeps going on and on. Brief moments of consolation give way to new tears. Bodies contorted with cramp. Like so much of this performance, it lasts for a long time. When I ask him, Jan says that this is to help us find our way into the moment. The

examination of tears gives way to the collection of fluids. The stage is filled with glass vessels of different kinds. The dancers dance rain-dances to persuade the sky to give up its water but the vessels remain empty. They collect tears and urine. For me, one of the most beautiful scenes is when naked men and women lie down to rest on top of the standing vessels. The transparency of the glass makes the bodies seem to hover. I feel so close to the naked, the strong, the vulnerable and the abandoned.

There is a lot I have not mentioned. The man in the guise of a dog, searching eternally for a master, “Je cherche un homme!” ; the original music and the drums, the text, the carrying and all the ladders. The work is full of symbolism but still retains a kind of lightness. S.O.S. – Save Our Souls. White rags along the wall form these words and the rain pours down over the solitary man in the final scene. I speak to the chief technician who tells me that four men and two fire houses are needed to achieve this effect from positions high up on the roof of the palace. It is a oddly beautiful work I am witnessing.

The response of the opening night audience is mixed. Some of them leave during the performance, some applaud distractedly while others are incredibly enthusiastic. The critical response is mixed as well. I read four of the daily papers. From masterly to dreadful. Boring to seductively beautiful. What does it mean? What is it about? The work lacks meaning. Most of the reviewers have been trying to find a dramatic structure. The ones who provide most of the superlatives are those who can read the work in terms of imagery. Jan Fabre creates images of what is not allowed to be said. The existence of a text notwithstanding. When asked why he focuses on tears and crying, he replies straightforwardly, “That’s where life comes from, out of tears. Tears came first!”

Jan Fabre has an enormous ego. He is standing there in the background laughing as the minister of culture inaugurates his gleaming sculpture. He rolls a huge globe across cornfields without the slightest hesitation, dressed from head to toe in the uniform of the patriarchy. He avails himself of the help of male philosophers. Dresses up in armour and cuts his colleague Marina Abramovic in the arm with a knife. He makes use of himself and offers us the chance to participate. The rest is up to us. Confidence or suspicion?

So what do we have in common? The focus on what can generate meaning outside of the everyday? The search for what can lend existence meaning? Am I projecting my own needs onto him? Of course I am – he offers me the chance to do exactly that!

**Other** choreographers would be able to gain a great deal from what Jan is achieving in and through his work. Other artists interested in what is knowledge-generative in the artistic process or what is evolutionary in artistic method would also benefit hugely from. I wish that Jan Fabre had a formal space in which to communicate his process and the theory he is developing in his work. I would like him to be offered the space in which to explore his process, so as to make it accessible by documenting it in such a way that the rest of us can share in it, reflect on it, criticise it and be stimulated by it. I would like him to want that. I do not wish to know how others see his work. I want to know what he himself sees, think and does.

Gaining insight into his working process and methodology could have been made possible if it had been documented, in which case the rest of us would have been able to

share in the insights all that crying crawling and singing had to offer. And we would have been able to reflect on it against the background of our own experience and artistic values. If room had been found for his exploration to be conducted as research, it would have become accessible to many others.

Many artists refer to intuition as a decisive factor in the creative process: relying on “gut feelings” and the conviction that cannot be articulated. For them, reflection is a later part of the process while documentation is without interest unless it exists for their own understanding or as a reminder. However, if the exploratory work of artists is to be accepted by the wider world as a valid form of research, the development of reflection and documentation is vital. We have to communicate the path (the process) and what it is we value as an outcome. This is often not what others see. We have to be bold enough to rely on our own fundamental values if we are to be able to express our needs and the issues and problem areas we want to explore.

I am very interested in the creation of the space and the resources required to make powerful artistic visions accessible as part of the process of knowledge formation. I want the University College of Dance to provide this kind of space for others to inhabit. There is currently very little space available. In order to make this happen, other voices have to be raised expressing an interest, developing the arguments in favour and influencing both cultural and educational policy. Money is required for research into art.

Artistic methods of accounting for the value of the work are often made use within the humanities. Art thus becomes a tool, whereas in artistic research art is the goal. For those artists interested in appropriating scientific method, there is space aplenty available at many universities and colleges. As there is for those who want to work across academic boundaries. But the situation is much more difficult for those artists who want to explore their own process even though this may frequently involve techniques that resemble those of the scientific researcher. The more I learn about contemporary scientific research, the more the similarities appear to be greater than the dissimilarities when it comes to methodology. A key difference is that artistic research has its starting-point in individual expression and subjective experience. This may seem a little simplistic but it provides as a useful distinction.

Other people can do research on Jan’s work, on mine or on yours. Scientific research into art is extremely important and valuable. But the knowledge that can be obtained from artistic practice is one we have to formulate for ourselves. In this way we get to discover more about what a concept is, about courage and cowardice, about human strengths and failings. Artist research is an investigative and exploratory undertaking aimed at acquiring knowledge and understanding of what the artist is seeking to achieve through his or her process. In dance, artistic research is based in embodied experience and individual expression. Artistic research into dance is also vital in terms of widening our knowledge of and about dance as an art form, in order to acquire more refined analytical models, improve our historical awareness as well as raise the status of the art form. A body of theoretical thought different to that of the sciences is being developed out of artistic practice and the idea of documentation is acquiring a new definition through the work of art.

Among my current duties as vice-chancellor is bringing into being the space needed to attract prominent artists to work within the College, to do research and contribute through their work to our overall development. Seeking funding from the Swedish

Research Council means we have to compete with the humanities and other fields. The task we face is to develop the arguments we need to make comprehensible to others what we can contribute to society through the knowledge and the insights that are developed in art.

The art of dance needs a research platform; it also needs the right conditions for the development of the functional modalities that will lead to new insights into artistic methods and processes. The University College of Dance intends to be this platform and, as such, contribute to a collaboration between art and science in the field of dance. The existence of two fully independent partners is necessary if a real exchange is to come about between art and science. Developing artistic research in art can help make this a reality and it is the restless and uneasy who are the promoters.

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