

Efva Lilja

## **The Body as an Archive in an Art Laboratory**

Jammed in my seat on the bus, squeezed and stuck, I make believe that I'm a tree. Even the pushiest of the men, young and restless, can lean against me as if I were a trunk. My skin, my bark, is scarred by all it has been through. The scars make an imprint on his tired face. I let out a little twig to scratch his cheek. It gives him a fresh mark.

The messy, milling crowd that fills the square where I alight as a human body, has provokingly many disparate aims. I freeze and once again turn into a tree. I stand still as the tree that makes all the others choose, round me, wonder...until a woman with a pram runs straight into me. This time my body is scarred (not the bark). Still provoked I find myself challenged to think up strategies for acts of penetration and exposure. I train myself in the ability to distinguish in this mess that which can be considered warm and positive. I too need something to lean on.

My body is an archive for all it has lived, its memories and experiences of concrete meetings, events, historical heritages, cultural and philosophical attitudes. It is an archive with many departments. According to the encyclopaedia I check with, an archive is a society's collection of documents. My collection has not found its material form. My bodily archive collects itself in different layers of consciousness.

To make use of all that shapes *the me* and *my now*, I need a space. That's how it has been. That's how it is. The space can be physical, mental or maybe digital. The space is where and what I decide that it must be. Sometimes a room with a floor, with walls and with a ceiling. The space is my body and my lab. I move in where I for the moment want to live and to be.

To develop, to engage in and to produce art in a research context makes the lab important as an abode, a place to be. The risk you take when you engage in an advanced artistic process is experimenting with supposedly known facts. You need the lab. What is there to lean against? At times the work feels like a deadly threat to all I've taken for granted. At times. Otherwise you just trod on, repeat yourself and get lost in the ruins of established conventions that scream out what is proper. Those are the days and nights when the lab is closed for repairs.

The young man has followed me from the bus stop. He walks determinedly to catch up with me. He wants something from me. My tree identity offers no cover. He has already seen through my stillness. I'm convinced that he is carrying a knife. A knife that will easily peel off both my skin and my bark. A knife that can carve new signs in the choreographic texture of the body and create new files in the archive. So – I welcome him with an air of warmth and heartiness. But in fright.

I've worked as an artist for thirty years. Always in exploration, experimenting with the seemingly impossible. For fifteen years my work has also been that of a researcher. That work has always found itself inside the mental and physical spaces where I reside, spaces that both create opportunities and put up barriers. The positive laboratory room comes in the shape of a studio, a work-shop, the Arctic ice, a cafe, an interval, a web site, an edit suite, another interval, a shaded bench behind a house, a lovers nest or a fight... I cannot build myself into a context that I'm unable to reproduce. If I have to meet the young man I will. If I don't, the narrative stops here and now. Okey. I will.

My research gets its nourishment from meetings. It demands a challenge, critical reflection as a trigger to give my own resistance enough power to reformulate (reframe) itself. Through his new voice I can envisage new spaces and opportunities to penetrate. I have to risk being not just scratched, but scarred. And we meet. You can call it research bonding if you like.

We have so much fun! He laughs. I laugh. Then we work silently side by side in different think spaces. Then we dance. Then we talk more and say that we wish for more and to go further, but in different ways. The physical spaces where we exist must give room for creativity, talkativity and seclusion, since at least I very soon will come to the point where I cannot stand so much closeness. The outer spaces frame much of the development of the inner ones. Our creativity evolves in relation to the support or the resistance offered by the space. My work cries for that which cannot compare itself with what we knew before. Most of the spaces I enter, confirm what we take for granted.

The continuous journey between inner and outer spaces, between mental and physical rooms is quite tiring. I separate the rooms by habit, behaviour and determination. That's how I keep track of myself and continue to expand my archive.

One of the conversations with the young man (who is now less funny and not tired at all), is about what constitutes meaning and the coherence between what we see – think – feel and do. It is about how to create trust in that which we have yet to see... The thoughts we think, the emotions we feel, the decisions we make, the dialogue we engage in – all of that is affected by the space in which it plays out. We agree that a good space is a space with room for the unforeseeable. It has clear contours that set limits for the inside-outside dichotomy. It doesn't "run with the grain", it isn't "saturated". It has enough room for us to contribute, consciously or intuitively. It has room for meetings. A good space stimulates movement in both body and mind. A good space for creativity is not predictable.

I now want him to move on. Make company with others who mill about, or lie down, or jump a little, or something.

I close my eyes and think how differently I use my eyes if the space stimulates my senses. People inhabit and man. I let my thoughts wander in the space I long to encounter.

The dynamics of a room is enhanced by asymmetry, a highlighted corner, a staircase, a ceiling... The image deepens if your eyes spontaneously scan in different directions and levels. Warmth opens the body, cold closes it. It mustn't be cold. It is hard to think when you are cold and I find it hard to concentrate if I find the room ugly. Similarly with sound. Sounds of ventilation, machinery, music, hard-drives, traffic, chatting, wind, vacuuming, drilling – all of that will affect the way I see and experience. Matched against other sounds, sounds as colour, as temperature. Let different rooms have different temperatures, so that you become more aware when you move between them. Inside and outside. Coolness opens up the brain, but all senses are a part of your perception. Physical traces like wear, objects placed out or left behind express style and taste. All of this affects you.

The space where I am (the bus, the square, the studio, the large stage, the grocery store), are the spaces in which *my now* is played out. You who see me and read what I have to tell (or choose not to tell) – read what you want to read. Part of your reading depends on

the room where you are just now and what you are prepared to file into your own archive. Are you among those who mill about and jostle, or do you make new way or are you a tree?

*Efva Lilja, Choreographer, Professor of Choreography and the Vice-Chancellor at DOCH, University of Dance and Circus in Stockholm. More on [www.efvalilja.se](http://www.efvalilja.se)*