

Room for Creativity. A Symposium at Karolinska Institutet in collaboration with Akademiska Hus, 7 March 2007-03-13

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**On Room for Creativity and Artistic Portrayal
Travelling with the Artist's Eye through External Spaces and Inner Dimensions**

(Someone working on a government commission of inquiry expressed a concern to me about so many decisions being taken in ugly spaces.)

I would like to talk about the expected and the imagined. Words like “normal”, “common sense” and “quality” are normative concepts that reflect received ideas based on the experience of past events. The work of the artist serves as an impassioned refusal to be compared with what we have previously known. Most of the rooms I enter confirm what we take for granted. Four walls, a floor and a roof. Imagine a house. What are you thinking of?

We are continually voyaging between inner and outer rooms, between mental and physical spatialities. It is in an external space I am meeting you today. We come together as part of an agreement based on the conditions our various professions have established. In what I call my private space I expose my vulnerability to those I know well; it is in my internal space that all that cannot be contained elsewhere takes place while my dreams and premonitions live in my subconscious. I distinguish these spaces and keep them separate through habits, behaviour and qualifications. This is how I maintain order in myself.

My interest in rooms and spaces has to do with the formation of meaning and the relationship between what we see-think-feel and do. It involves inspiring confidence in what we have not yet seen. The thoughts we think, the feelings we experience, the decisions we make, the dialogue we conduct – are all influenced by the space in which they are played out.

A good room has space for the unpredictable. It has clear contours that set limits to the inside-outside dimension. It does not rub expectation up the right way and it isn't “saturated”. It has room for what human beings can bring to it, consciously and intuitively. It has space for encountering others. A good room stimulates movement in both body and soul. A space that is good for creativity is not a predictable one.

I would like to talk about the way colour and light affect the way I see things. I use my eyes differently if a room stimulates my senses. This dynamic is intensified by asymmetry, a brightly lit corner, a staircase, a ceiling... A deeper image is created by eyes that spontaneously look in different directions and levels. Warmth opens up my body, cold closes it down. The room must not be cold. It is hard to think when you are cold and I find it difficult to concentrate when I find the space I am in ugly. Seeing means experiencing with the entire body.

The same sensitivity applies to sound. The noises made by the ventilation system, by appliances, music, the fans on hard disks, traffic, chatter, wind, the hover or a drill, all affect what I see and experience. Match them to other sounds, sounds as colour, as temperature. Let different rooms have different temperatures and you will become more observant as you travel between them. Inside and out. Coolness opens the brain. All the senses take part in the process of becoming aware.

A physical space also conveys a story. What is played out within the boundaries set by walls or fences leaves traces behind. Physical traces like wear and tear; things that have been set out or left behind as markers of style and taste. This all has an effect.

A space is never creative – but it can lay the groundwork for being so. Creativity does not arise as a result of the room. Creativity requires goal-directed work, work that is driven by an aim and fuelled by confidence in intuition. The good room facilitates and stimulates this work.

I would like to talk about the experience of redesigning rooms and spaces. A few years ago I was asked by a company in Stockholm if I would help them to make a more creative environment, a more stimulating workplace. Both the management and the employees were experiencing a sense of stagnation and a lack of creativity. They asked me to reflect upon their situation.

Often there is an intuitive need to be challenged. There were no challenges in the environment and this had the effect of making thought and action uniform. Coming to work should be exciting and pleasurable. I accepted the challenge together with the dancers and other artists in what was then the forum for my work: E.L.D. The working environment was cold, sterile, predictable and everyone sat at their workstations with their eyes locked in a horizontal direction. It was all strangely one-dimensional. My task was to break up the familiar routine and stimulate the staff to think creatively in new and illogical ways.

We brightened up the surroundings by adding colour. We illuminated the rooms asymmetrically. A staircase was provided with lighting, which flowed along the treads... We set up a warm place for reflecting in, bought a punch-bag to hit at and installed bars for pull-ups or just to hang from for a while. One of the toilets was randomly assigned a sound installation with music, poetry reading, city noises etc. We emptied the largest conference room of furniture and filled it with cleaned sea-sand, and created a positive atmosphere with sound and lighting. Then we put back all the furniture and future meetings had to take place with bare feet. This lent an entirely different character to meetings and negotiations. Different kinds of things get said when your toes are hugging warm sand.

By making stages out of various locations we created an awareness of space. Two male dancers began a meeting with a duet, a female dancer performed a solo at the reception counter. We danced on walls, bookshelves and under tables. We introduced the office to “the Friday rush”. Everyone ran as fast as they could to create new energy. The dancers would appear in the middle of the day and deliberately encroach on the working territory of the staff.

The work we did caused strong reactions – from one extreme to the other: some awful and some marvellous, a great deal of laughter and inspiration. Many of the staff liked the fact that something unexpected had happened. People felt provoked, on edge. A feeling arose that anything was possible. Their jobs improved and the reward was the winning of several new contracts during this period.

I would also like to talk about an experience of being sick in an ugly environment. At a different time in my life I was informed of a diagnosis of cancer: the doctor was sitting in a bleak, shabby room in front of a large painting that represented a dead, fire-ravaged forest. Charred black tree-trunks in a dead landscape accompanied his words. I asked him how he could choose such a motif as

the one in the painting, in a profession that so often involved life-threatening diagnoses for his patients. He replied that he had never looked at what the painting depicted. I am fully recovered now.

Recovering from illness requires rest, hope and trust. Having to lie in an ugly room can be devastating. This knowledge about relating healing to rooms is readily available. Where it cannot be implemented, small things can change the experience of the day. A prism suspended at a window can turn my attention away from a surface worn yellow with dirt and usage and to the spectrum of colours created when light is refracted. A movement. Light and colour in motion...why are smells not used as a means of improving the quality of hospital rooms. SAS changes the smells of its planes to make us feel safe. Seven Eleven does it to make us buy more. Why are sounds not used? Lighting? Colours?

The world, or reality, is coloured by our thoughts. If we concentrate on thinking good things, the colours are different than when we despair.

I would like to tell you about a visit to the Sturegalleria (a shopping place in Stockholm). What effect do these shiny, hard aspects of a room or space have on us? As this space increases my vulnerability, my smallness, my feeling of inadequacy is also intensified. Inadequacy is supposed to be cured by consumption. Non-essential items settle around my anxiety and the shiny surfaces dazzle me. My eyes become myopic with all the sparkle and my existence narrows down to encompass only small things. There are few screaming headlines or placards to make me feel ill.

There is the smell of Café Latte and stone (oh yes, stone has a smell once the polishing machine has been over it). Securitas guards are keeping an eye on me. Suspicion is infectious and I try to look as though I am intending to buy something – even though I'm not. I am here to look at living others, alive among so much that is dead.

I would like to talk about experiences of creative portrayal. The stage is often a “black box” – so as to create as neutral an environment as possible for the work to take place in. Sound, colour, lighting, music, objects, human beings - everything is brought into this non-place. The artistic work contains all the components that define the space of this “room” and the circumstances in which you will experience it.

As an artist I am engaged in reshaping so-called reality, creating it anew, so that it corresponds better to my desires and my needs. What I have to make happen is what would otherwise not occur, I have to create the images that would otherwise not be seen, make space for what would otherwise not find room. In dance the kind of knowledge that is not considered acceptable elsewhere becomes important. Our physical memories emerge as events of significance. Events that take place in rooms, in spaces. Scents, tastes, movements, feelings, thoughts... The unarticulated. Every day we tread the paths of memory and wander around in the tracks of what has been. In dance I make use of exterior space in order for the interior to become visible.

Meaning comes into being in the eye of the beholder. In your eye. We all carry with us previous experiences, abilities and memories. These are the only tools we have for interpreting what is going on, whether it is a performance or an everyday meeting in an everyday room. In my work as an artist I “paint” with all the components that affect what you see, what you feel and think in your encounter with the work.

Choreography is movement in space. Choreographic composition is a tool for achieving what I am after. A way of bringing order to chaos and of stretching the boundaries of what is possible. A way of activating space.

The body is our dwelling-place. We move within a context. Walk down Drottninggatan on a Saturday afternoon. Observe the way your fellow pedestrians move and what they look at. The pace is determined by the amount of people in the space. Their gaze is at eye-level. All the information about what is to sold/bought/consumed is placed where the eye is expected to look. The quotations from Strindberg that have been incorporated into the asphalt create confusion as eyes that have discovered a different orientation change the motion of the masses and what is taking place suddenly becomes the object of reflection. Where am I going? And why? Our movement expresses where we are in our lives, and it is through the body that we turn this into experience.

I close my eyes and put my hands over my ears. There is a booming in my head. Through my eyelids I can see dark red and black. The space within is unbelievable large. Endless. My skin becomes a thin membrane between here and there. Fragile.

I am standing on the Arctic ice where the space is an unending white nothingness. Beneath me are three thousand metres of ocean. An inconceivable depth. The ice becomes a thin boundary between light and dark. Or - I am standing on the stage at Dansens hus and the interplay between stage and auditorium is contained by red brick walls.

The space I find myself in is my stage for that part of life that is taking shape right this minute. Right here and now. You who are looking at me and listening to what I have got to say (or what I chose not to put into words) – are listening to what you want to hear and seeing what you want to see. Part of your interpretation is determined by this room, this space.