

Nederlandse  
Dansdagen



**Where do we stand as far as Dutch Dance is concerned  
– Friday, October 1, 2021**

*Where to begin? A lot is going on in the world, both near and far. A lot said, shouted and written about the bizarre period that shook the foundations of the world and entered the Netherlands in March of last year. We cannot ignore it.*

March 2020.

Suddenly, everything came to a standstill.

It caused confusion and panic. It happened to me too.

I felt displaced and, at the same time, seriously concerned. What about my ensemble? What would happen to my dancers, my staff, and the artistic team? All those people who, as far as work is concerned, depend on us – on me. What does it take to stay connected?

The moment the first lockdown was issued, we were in the middle of the final weeks of a tour, and we were about to embark on a new big creation.

Suddenly, all that went dead. We were staring into a gaping void.

To my great surprise, the silence turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

I was walking through a quiet city. From my Katendrecht studio, I was staring across a silent square. It felt like being in a movie. How nice, I thought! To be alone with my thoughts...

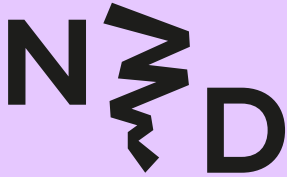
I did not have to feel guilty for not attending a performance. I did not have to run from pillar to post, from meeting to gathering, I was liberated from continuously doing things on the fly.

I was freed from huge pressure. I could just sit and stare, roam around inside my head. Not because I was lazy or I was to blame about something, but simply because that was the way things were.

Loss and rediscovery that is what it was. Frustrating and liberating, at the same time, intense, cathartic and confusing.

Recently, somebody asked me: What did you gain from corona? On the one hand, it is everything that emerged from my - from our - search for openings, for what remained to be possible – small-scaled projects, experiments, encounters with our audiences.

However, more importantly, what did I, personally, experience? I realized that we – myself, together with so many other people in the cultural domain – had been under a continuous and immense pressure, without being aware of it.



It is like the frog in the bathtub: bit by bit, the water is getting hotter, but, as long as you are in the bath, you will not notice it. Only when you get out and go in again, you will notice that the water is really piping hot.

In the meantime, the world surrounding us is on fire. We seem to move from crisis to crisis: flooding, wildfires, extended over an area of millions of acres, famine, poverty, climate change. Afghanistan and these multitudes of people, all around the world, suffering and dying from COVID-19. We are overwhelmed by all these events. Moreover, here, in the Netherlands, we are stuck with a caretaker government and politicians unwilling to move beyond their egos.

Everything is connected and in a stranglehold. A tangled knot of apparently conflicting interests. Groups of people, standing up against each other, fighting for their own causes. Solidarity that diminishes when self-interest is at stake. Head and heart muddled. Even more so after all the turmoil of the last eighteen months.

The question of how things are as far as dance is concerned is, also, about how we, as human beings, are coping.

How do we, as artists, relate to this bizarre period in time?

How can we preserve all the things corona brought us, in terms of time, reflection and contemplation? How to avoid self-interest as a leading principle, how to act in solidarity? How do we take control, claim our place in society and, at the same time, assess what is going on in the world around us?

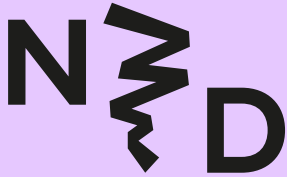
In short, what now? What do we need?

*So first: more solidarity*

For us in the cultural sector, the consequences of COVID-19 made it clear that all of us that are part of that sector, both in front of and behind the scenes, suddenly found themselves next to each other.

We all went through the same; there was no exception. The consequences had an impact on all of us, transcended disciplines, hierarchies, institutions. Whether it was a large established company or an upcoming talent, a museum or a gallery. Everything and everyone came to a standstill.

At first, my focus lay completely on my team, my dancers. How to keep them in shape, mentally, physically and artistically? How to inspire them? With our



own workhouse, including two fantastic studios, in the Katendrecht area, we moved to shortly before corona emerged, we, the Conny Janssen Danst team, could keep on working. Develop new plans, eventhough the circumstances were bizar. You could also say that we were lucky. It was not until the second instance that I was overwhelmed by the notion that many makers and dancers found themselves trapped in a vacuum. Makers without their own studio, dancers with no contract; for them, everything came to a standstill, everything was cancelled. So there you are. No place to work, no team, no money, no assignments. Fallen between two stools.

What or who was it that kept them going? How did we, as members of the same field of work, respond? Did we take care of each other? It seems to me that we were too busy tackling our own problems, forgetting about them and each other.

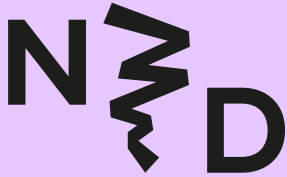
It made me realize how urgent the importance is of a tight-knit network in which each of us must play a part by keeping in touch and collaborate. And there must be solidarity. Share what we have achieved. Show an interest without judging. We could, no we must take more care of each other. Make sure that the other does not burn out.

What is holding us back?

Do we feel secure enough to create chances for other makers, for each other? Or are we too busy trying to maintain our own survival strategy? Do all the duties imposed upon us by those surrounding us, such as politicians, and our own ambitions, swallow up our focus, time and financial means?

Can we enforce possibilities for young, beginning, dance artists by offering them accommodation so that they can experiment, conduct research, develop their own dance language and find audiences? Where a beginning dance talent is granted a more extensive time path to evolve from a student into a professional dance artist? Where we can take risks? Where it is no big deal when, every now and again, an experiment fails?

Let us, together, argue in favour of creative workhouses where makers and dancers can meet, throughout the various stages of their development, in search of their own answers. Sometimes on their own, sometimes in dialogue with each other. A nest where the search for a personal identity does not increase the contradictions but, on the contrary, creates intensification by getting to know the other and the unfamiliar. Where exclusive thinking is converted into inclusive thinking: no 'or' but 'and': urban and modern,



experimental and traditional, young and experienced. Where our investments for the future will be sustainable by encountering, coaching and the passing on of knowledge.

In short, a professional and safe environment where dancers and makers can evolve to become the artists they potentially are.

*So on to the second point: taking control.*

Every four or two years, or even each year, an assessment of the cultural field takes place, based on the spearheads proposed by politicians, policymakers and members of committees in various analyses, reports and recommendations. We can score points if we meet the demands they expect us to do. The political priority agenda indicates what route we must take, and...submissively, we all move along. This could represent the danger that we all are doing exactly the same thing, instead of focusing on what our individual uniqueness, power and skills entail. Creating your own signature and constituting a good work practice is a delicate process and requires time. The circumscribed periods are obstacles in these processes. Four years sounds like a long period, but the Arts Plan period has barely started when, already, reflections on the next one are a necessity.

We are treading water, gasping for breath, and look upon each other as mutual competitors.

I do not have the answers. But, let us, at least, dedicate ourselves to propagate, time and again, that the development of art, of dance, cannot be encapsulated in bite-sized chunks; they are processes that require time. Processes that largely transcend the one, two or four year straightjacket. And let us raise our voices against the 'panting' nature of the subsidy criteria and spearheads that, sometimes, steer us in the direction of economic interest and profit, at other times in the direction of talent development, or that of social issues.

Not every maker attracts full houses, not every maker has to adorn a complete educational programme or dedicate himself to talent development; not every maker can guarantee, as his main objective, to address themes like diversity and inclusiveness.

Why don't we create a fine-meshed network of diversity and do so collectively? Why don't we suggest politicians to define a more comprehensive framework that would enable every company, every maker to demonstrate,

by using his own expertise, autonomy and drive, what colours they add to the palette, instead of all of us walking the same route?

In the current situation, the same yardstick is applied to everyone; all accounts are settled in exactly the same way. Let the call for diversity also be heard in our field, let subsidy conditions and performance requirements 'breathe along' with the extensive diversity of the sector, to enable everyone to participate to the fullest, based on a personal core and strength, and thus, take full advantage of the subsidies granted.

And let us invest in a solid foundation, the base, to build a structure strong enough for further development of the field, with its various layers and perspectives, along extensive lines.

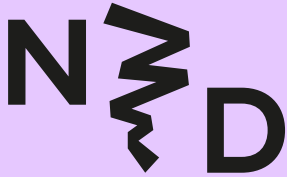
The point is that we must stick to the contents of our trade, our uniqueness – the essence of art – something that is not possible if we are forced to run into a different direction, each and every time. The latter turns us, unintentionally, into mutual competitors. If all our accounts are settled in exactly the same way, we gradually will become the same. Then it is a matter of either you or me!

The essence of all of this is that the arts should be taken much more seriously. The current political climate generates a lot of stress; repeatedly, every balance, scarcely found or recovered, is brought down. For we, as the arts sector, must continually prove ourselves. How miserable is that? To tell invariably how important you are. Then the battle is already lost right from the outset.

In many dictatorial regimes journalism, education and the arts are under pressure. Art is regarded as being threatening. Dangerous. Artists evoke imagination, something authorities cannot control, and so they have to restrict it. It tells us something about the impact the arts can have. For why else would one want to confine it?

And yes, in the Netherlands, too, there are parties which consider supporting the arts is of minor importance, or even unnecessary. However, art lies within our souls, in the core of society. Art is part of our lives.

And yet, when I speak these words, I sense a certain embarrassment, particularly now, since we are confronted with urgent situations, in the health service, to mention one field. Maybe that is why artists keep their voices down. Because we empathize, care about other global issues.



Nevertheless, I like to point out that, from now on, we all must speak out, clearly and loudly, against the huge pressure we, incessantly, are subjected to, against all the rules and regulations, all production demands, the settlements, the achievement grids et cetera. I understand that we must be held accountable. Yet, it feels as though we are constantly mistrusted. But let me tell you something: I have yet to meet the first artist who is doing nothing, sitting on his arse, staring at the sea, all day long.

Making, creating, there is no end to it. Because it is not about what we do but who we are.

We create high expectations for ourselves and are inclined to exceed our limits. Particularly when the outside world – politicians, policy makers, corporate companies, event organisers – demand it.

That hassle in Zandvoort – where artists were asked to perform for free: it was not the first time this happened. Even when they do not pay us or fob us off with a pittance, many of us still say 'yes'. Because we keep going, no matter the circumstances. And because, by now, we are used to the idea that, in budgetary terms, artists are at the bottom of the list.

*That requires pause for reflection, my third point.*

The silence that fell upon us created space for reflection.

The realization of emptiness, a void, is essential.

The realization that emptiness brings about innovation, from which emerge new ideas, helping you to get to the core.

Freedom to unfold other initiatives.

Because the pressure caused by an incessant urge to achieve disappeared.

Because the pressure attached to obligations vanished.

Because the pressure of expectations was eliminated.

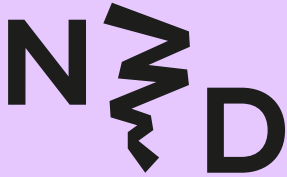
Since the agenda literally was cleared, there was space to start thinking from point zero, from this very moment, about what is important *now*. And not from something that was written down, years ago.

Free space. And the notion of having lost it.

How do we preserve what corona has yielded?

That is something we cannot do on our own. We need each other: politicians, policy makers, the corporate sector, artists... everyone has to collaborate.

Authorities and artists have narrowed the gap between them, although it took a bit of a fight. How do we hold on to it? How do we achieve that everyone realizes that things must change?



Certainly not by retiring to our own island. We must take account of all the developments in our country and in the world at large; we must keep in touch with what is going on. We are vibrating with everything that surrounds us and helps to determine how we are perceived, what support there is for the arts. But we are allowed to, no, we must stand firm and make sure that, amidst all the social issues, the arts will not be blocked out. The last eighteen months have taught us that only when the worst comes to the worst and the circumstances are extreme, an issue will draw attention.

So,

The silence that descended upon us may have been a chance to stay alert. To dwell on the question of how to gain more control and to facilitate and boost what we consider to be important. Not because we have to meet the demands regarding political themes, stipulated in the subsidy conditions, but because we, ourselves, feel the inner need to take responsibility for investing in both young and established artists and offer them the opportunity to evolve freely. To, collectively, secure a strong sustainable future of our arts sector, in which diversity and uniqueness will prevail and in which we will touch and enrich society with our narratives.

In conclusion.

The arts cannot solve all the problems of the world. However, they have the capacity to make people feel part of a bigger whole. Art is a meticulously designed encounter that opens you up, touches and amazes you. An encounter that transforms the other and the unfamiliar into something that you know.

The mirror of society is in the theatre.

Maastricht, October 1, 2021,

Conny Janssen  
Artistic director Conny Janssen Danst