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Who's afraid of representation?

### **Meeting Connor, Maaïke and Luis: Processes of creation and understanding dance**

After our first meeting with Connor Schumacher, Maaïke Schuurmans and Luis Rios Zertuche, I remember feeling a bit 'high'. High with new ideas, new insights, and a new understanding of what cooperation might actually mean within an artistic process. Connor is both choreographer and dancer and works together with his dramaturge Maaïke and concept developer Luis. For over three years he has been working at Dansateliers, a place in Rotterdam that supports emerging dance makers in various ways. Though Connor is up till now the one who creates as well as performs his pieces, you might say that Luis and Maaïke have an equal share in this creation process as well. As it occurred to me after the second talk, since we were lucky to have a second one, all three have a shared vocabulary by which they can easily understand each other. Yet, they also have their specific points of interest considering the work of Connor. In that sense their working together could be characterized by this idea of the network, a mode of being inter-connected in an organic way.

Accordingly, we weren't just presented with a description of what their artistic working process looked like. Rather, they introduced us in their way of working by almost literally doing it during the talks. In the way they complemented each other, but also in their way of relating back and forth to performances and other material they had come across during creation. Nevertheless, it wasn't like we were presented with a uniform body that consisted of three people. These three people, all from their own specific point of view, were sharing an understanding of what might be interesting for artistic research as well as what dance could be like. So, how did all three speak about creation and their position within this process?

#### **“Looking at dance through content”**

This was almost the first characterization Connor came up with when explaining how he worked with concepts and turning them into 'dance'. This way of putting it already referred to what we would talk about later, namely the layers of a dance performance and what dance could be more than bodies moving through time and space. Related to that was Connor's observation that he could not move just for the sake of moving. It seems connected to what he is looking for at the beginning of a rehearsal process. That is to say, he tries to put himself in a

different state of being by using immersive light, lasers, smoke machines, roller-skates. This different human experience than functions as a springboard to the rest of the rehearsing process. Rehearsing though is only one part of the whole process of creating. As it came across, the creation process seemed to start already by talking through what the work would be about with Maaïke and Luis. So, the rehearsals are much informed by these earlier talks. After being in the studio for a few days for gathering material, Maaïke comes in to have a first look at what Connor created. No special method is used, though for *Boy oh Boy 2: God's first creature* (2014) the process of creation was also influenced by a butoh workshop that took place at the same time of the rehearsing. The process of rehearsing seemed to me rather short or even limited. For example, for a program such as *One Night's Dance* at Dansateliers you will only have two weeks for working on your material. As a consequence you need to know more or less what your performance is going to be about or what you want to find out during these two weeks beforehand. This short time span might also be one of the factors why Connor, Luis and Maaïke have the feeling that a performance sometimes just presents the material, but does not succeed in communicating a truth founded during rehearsing.

Despite this fact of not communicating a truth and the performance not being finished in that sense, Connor still has to convince himself that the performance is worth being performed in front of an audience. Furthermore, when you consider the performances of Connor being part of the overall process of developing yourself as a maker, you might conclude that creation is an ongoing process and never ends. This is also reflected in the way the website is designed (Connor Schumacher 2016). As you can see on the opening page, the works of Connor are numbered. This is not so much to indicate a sequence of progress but rather reflects the fact that Connor's works are different chapters of a book which has no end yet. In one way or another the creation process thus has different instances of 'being finished' e.g. the different chapters of the book. Also, since Luis, Maaïke and Connor keep referring to past works when talking about the recent performance of *The Fool* (2015), the six performances so far share a strong connection and inform each other as such.

Since the rehearsal process never starts 'randomly' but is already informed by talks between Maaïke, Luis and Connor, it is interesting to have a closer look at the role of Maaïke and Luis in the creation process. As I mentioned before, after a few days of rehearsing Connor needs Maaïke to come and have a look. Connor does not perceive himself as being his own director and therefore needs someone to give him feedback on what he has been doing so far. Maaïke however fears this first moment, since she's afraid that one day she will not like the

material. So far though it still worked out. In this first encounter with Connor's material, Maaike questions if what Connor has found is a good idea but perhaps not working yet, or if the things he does are a 'good doing' but not in line with what has been discussed beforehand. From that point onwards Maaike becomes more and more part of the creation process. Maaike told us that during this process she is aware of the fact that her feedback influences the process in a certain way and therefore has to be carefully delivered. It reminded me of the way Maaike Bleeker (2015) describes the role of dramaturge in a working process. In her article "Thinking No-One's Thought" she namely points out the following with regard to her understanding of creation being more about "the process of becoming something that has not arrived yet" (Bleeker, 72). Related to that is the observation that "This requires a mode of thinking which does not stand outside the material, attempting to bend it towards pre-existing ideas, but rather which emerges through it and through an interaction with its possibilities" (Bleeker, 72). It seemed to me that all three interact with the material in this way, but that Maaike, from her point of view as dramaturge, is even more aware of the overall development in the creation process and the direction it might take.

Whereas Maaike gets more and more involved in the creation during rehearsing, Luis appears to be less directly involved. In the beginning however, he plays an important role in "scrapping away the bullshit," as Connor puts it. Luis, so to say is the one who 'bites' and is critical in that sense that he is working out the many implications of a certain idea or concept that informs the performance. He thus speaks frequently about the layers in a performance. Amongst others it is about questions of why you make what you make and what you show. Additionally, the societal context also plays a role. For example, the shootings in Paris on the 13th of November influenced the way the performance of *The Fool* was perceived that same weekend. Luis related these questions to the idea of meta-modernism by which I recalled a text on postmodernist dance by Susan Leigh Foster.

In his book *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, Philip Auslander discusses the implications of Foster's thinking on "political art practices viable within a postmodern culture" (1997, 74). In his essay Auslander explains amongst others how Foster tries to move beyond the, at that time, dominant theoretical tradition of perceiving the contemporary American concert dance as "a medium that can return us to vital energy and an unalienated sense of wholeness, as well connecting that tot the mystification of the processes of making and performing dance, to render dance "unspeakable", inaccessible to discursive analysis (Auslander, 73-74). Although Maaike, Connor and Luis are less fond of artworks that, by engaging in postmodern practices, leave it

completely to the audience to decide what the work was about, they are still working on issues Foster talked about too, namely: “who or what is speaking through the body and in what language, of what discourses are inscribed on/in the body” (Auslander, 76). So basically there are two elements that mutually inform the artistic process of creating a performance, namely on the one hand Connor’s inspiration, for example his background and on the other hand, ideas on what dance is and can communicate. From that point of view the question of when do you consider your work a success or when does it fail doesn’t have one specific answer but is depending on the context the work was in and how it was made.

### **“Failure doesn’t always look like failure”**

This is what Luis said when reflecting upon the performance of *The Fool*. It was performed on the 15th of November in Amsterdam as part of the Moving Futures Festival. The audience, according to Luis, thought the performance quite funny and had to laugh about it. Although I saw the performance myself a few weeks later in Theater Kikker and had to smile from time to time, the overall reaction of the audience was attentive and sincere. In *The Fool* there is this question of what you see. Is it a performer imitating a robot or something in between a human and robot? Actually, it’s quite a disturbing image. Apparently in the light of the shootings in Paris the context of the performance changed in the sense that the audience as well as Connor were affected by it, but it was complicated to integrate that fact in the performance. Although laughing in itself might be perceived as something positive, having people laugh while they are not realizing what they are actually laughing at was in that sense a failure. The context also played an important role for the perception of the work *I trust in this life we will have another moment alone* (2014) which was performed at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen as part of the Performing Gender program. This work is by all three considered to be a success, in the sense that it was actually finished and that it reached its full potential or “all you could hope for,” to quote Maaïke. It happened and needed no more explanation or words. In Boijmans van Beuningen an exhibition space was left empty and inside the space a giant ‘bubble’ was present. Connor was inside the bubble, which consisted of garbage bags taped together. He could move around, but visitors didn’t know at first that someone was inside. Though you might expect that people don’t touch museum pieces, some visitors were quite aggressively towards the bubble, trying to touch and interact with it. Instead of perceiving the bubble as something human, it thus became an object. The exhibition space though provided a nice context for experimenting with this situation. Nevertheless in a different context, namely at the Witte De With festival in Rotterdam, the

bubble didn't work out. Since most people were drunk and didn't understand the precarious state of what this did to someone being in the bubble looking for a way of establishing contact. It was being categorized as something 'fun' whereas in the museum context, it was much harder to categorize the bubble as 'something'. Although the other works so far have been designed for a theatre space, Maaïke, Luis and Connor are taking into account the different codes and expectations that are part of e.g. theatre and museum spaces. It influences the way the piece communicates and does or doesn't work. Generally speaking I found it interesting that as a maker you aim for something, but that this aim cannot always be achieved and that it is not always in the work itself, but maybe because of context that something 'fails'. In her book *Failure*, Lisa Le Feuvre (2010, 12) also point to the inherent tension between the realization and expectations of an artwork. Failure is in that sense very much part of a making process since expectations and the realization of these expectations probably always differ.

Notwithstanding, in Connor's way of working this element, the tension between expectations and realization, seems to have a processual character and is approached as such. By this I mean that failure and success are not necessarily fixed entities, but rather part of a process. As Connor puts it: "Success doesn't always feel like success."

## **Process**

As I have pointed out a few times now is the processual character of the working process and the networked way of working that exists between Connor, Maaïke and Luis. In a way this might be compared to how Eugenio Barba writes about his way of doing dramaturgy. Though we haven't talked about dramaturgy that much, you might say that the working process itself has a kind of dramaturgy. In this I see a resemblance with Barba's text on the empty ritual. Especially since he understands part of his dramaturgy as being an organism, whereby different components and parts can be distinguished. Apart from these parts, it is also important to be aware of the different levels of organization (Barba 2010, 9). Looking at the cooperation between Luis, Connor and Maaïke, you can say that the three of them are one level in the development of the work. Next to that there is a level of thinking about dance. Furthermore there is this level related to inspiration, a level related to context, and more additional levels which might become apparent during the working process. For instance for *Boy oh Boy 2*, which I will discuss hereafter, the working process was influenced by a butoh workshop as well as an earlier research in *Boy oh Boy 1* and Connor's question about form and identity and his upbringing in a conservative Christian family in Arizona. The work never

starts from movement alone and is rather a mix of all the above mentioned levels which are related intrinsically to the way Maaike, Luis and Connor work together.

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