

State of Dance in the Netherlands
Presented by Ann Van den Broek
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Good afternoon, everybody,

Welcome to the State of Dance in the Netherlands.

It is an honor for me to be asked to assess the State of Dance in the Netherlands this year.

It immediately begs the question: Does dance in the Netherlands actually exist? I'll come back to this question later.

But first: What is the State of Dance, really? A state suggests a position, a moment of stagnation. Dance doesn't recognize such a state, because the development of the art of dance is always in a state of flux and the art of dance in itself is limitless.

Perhaps the state is more of a snapshot in time from a particular perspective of what is happening in the dance world. This means that there is not just one state, but many different ones. For me to say anything at all about the State of Dance, I have to go back to what it is all about for me as an artist – and many other artists with me: The essence, the core of one's artistic calling.

To me that core is made up of idealism, of hope and of imagination that allows you to be a driving force, a champion of society, not bound by any style or discipline.

The essence on one's artistic calling lies in what one does – whether it is pure dance, or exploring its relationship with theater, or making socially-committed work. Young creators, solo artists, small or large companies, we are inspired people – all of us.

What you want to achieve with your artistic vision touches on the notion of transformation. Not that you necessarily because you want to change things, but that you want to reflect what is going on in society and how that manifests itself. You can do that with art!

Always wanting to raise the bar is inherent to one's artistic calling. Artists do not aspire to a comfortable position. Stagnation is not an option. To keep growing you are constantly searching for a new balance. You are also looking for people around you who are willing to raise the bar along with you – an artistic community. In the artistic community I am referring to the essence of art is of primary importance – content comes before everything. As an artist you meet a lot of people; I also get a dynamic feeling from a number of places. And I also find artistic communities in the international art world – the results of the interaction in these encounters are exhilarating.

The intrinsic motivation of the entire dance field is an essential factor. The motivation for art must already be present even before you know where you will end up with a performance or project. So, as an artist, you need people who can latch onto that and can support your train of thought. In your immediate environment these people include dancers, musicians, composers, designers, business managers, production managers, PR people, technicians, board members of your organization, as well as the people in theaters responsible for programming and publicity. Not only to sell a production, but also to support and expand ideas that emerge from an artistic vision, that they are personally committed to. To achieve that we need motivated people in the arts who are willing to commit and are not afraid to keep taking the next step.

To me it is my life's work; in that sense my motivation is different from the people that work in this field. And yet, I believe that the intrinsic motivation of the people who choose to work in the arts is at least as important as that of the artist. Characteristics that are essential to me for a successful collaboration are: Thinking out of the box, empathy, immunity to stress, flexibility, integrity and able to give support. All aspects that are also mentioned in the Fair Practice Code. This is from an artist's perspective. But I am curious about the intrinsic motivation of all the people in different positions in the field. What exactly is it that drives you?

As I mentioned earlier, a state certainly does not mean stagnation, but a state does suggest a situation, a condition. In my early work I searched for a method to analyze such situations. To obtain an image of the State of Dance, I will apply that method here one more time. My image of the State of Dance is a positive one. Nevertheless I want to break it into little pieces in order to get a sharper image. I see the state as a situation that can be analyzed through emotions. In other words, a state comes in many forms.

The first state is one that I call the **STATE OF EUPHORIA**. That is the 'ideal state' of dance. An ideal state that is brought forth by the passion of creating art through dance.

The reason why I came to the Netherlands long ago is because I could see and feel that passion here. The art scene in the eighties in the Netherlands was revolutionary.

Later, when I was given the opportunity to create choreographies, I was extremely grateful. When you are young and you are starting out, it is fantastic. Also because there were people to support you.

Through the eyes of someone from another country, many things in the Netherlands were very well organized.

But that is only part of the reality. Another part of the reality is the state I call the **STATE OF ANXIETY**. This state can be explained various different ways. The English word 'anxiety' has several meanings. It is a continuously ambiguous state in which artists find themselves. Anxiety can manifest itself as worry or distress, as well as in longing and desire.

The latter – the longing or the desire to create – is obvious. But there is also the other side: Worrying if there will be enough time, whether there is enough money to create what you originally thought of as an artist. So anxiety can also indicate restlessness. And that is the state I experience constantly in my daily activities.

I would like to go into those daily activities a little deeper, although to many of you this will sound quite familiar. There are several cycles at play in the dynamics of leading a small company, each with its own rhythm. In order to create a new piece, plans and proposals must be written, grants must be applied for and schedules must be made. At some point you are informed whether or not a project is approved. If approved, then everything concerning the project will be in full swing until the last performance. While on tour new performances are scheduled, some are canceled. We are a small company with a core of permanent members that is far too small. This means that some of the co-workers are involved in more than one artistic project at the same time. This can cause scheduling conflicts that need to be resolved, which takes a lot of time and money. Every time this occurs the artistic director and the business manager must readjust the schedule. As a result, many of the timelines get tangled up. The work pressure and the ever-changing working hours of the co-workers are a huge burden on the organization and on the artistic director who is constantly trying to safeguard the rhythm of the new creation.

As a choreographer I create autonomous work, but in practice it is anything but. As an artist I am depend on my environment to realize my ideas. A great portion of my work consists not of working on my creation itself, but on everything that is happening around my creation. During a creative process I am at one with my subject – Memory Loss, Pain & Anxiety. But I'll come back to this later.

At the same time, my responsibilities as company director also include all the other processes that are going on in the organization. That is why a division was made in the Netherlands between the artistic director and the business manager. As such it is a good solution, but only in a secondary way. In my position as general manager of a small company that was founded to realize my artistic vision, it is imperative to first build an organization based on that artistic vision. After that is in place, then the division can be implemented for practical reasons.

However, it often does not work that way in the Netherlands: Institutions issuing subsidies and grants demand divided responsibilities, a supervisory board believes it is protecting creators from having to attend to too many day-to-day activities. And that makes it difficult at times for an artist to operate in his or her own organization, because it is impossible not to feel that responsibility.

Artistic leadership automatically carries a double responsibility. I am responsible for the people that work together with me to realize my projects. At the same time, I am solely responsible for the end result of my productions. In other words: If it fails, for whatever reason, it all comes back to me.

Ever since I started creating, my work has been evolving. At first I focused on creating my own dance vocabulary, but these last few years my creations have been a mix of dance, performance, film, music and technology and each time I explore new layers from a different perspective.

In my experience, another way of working requires another way of producing and presenting the work. A constant concern is how to present my work to audiences. Theaters decide which productions they want to present to their public and how. While we want to involve audiences in my work in a different way, but our organization is far too small to do that on our own. And quite often theaters do not have time for this either. This is unfortunate, because this could be a way of familiarizing larger audiences with other forms of dance. Apparently, this is quite difficult. We are regularly asked for posters showing dance in movement, so audiences will know that my work is categorized as 'dance'. Does it have to be that way, or is there also another way?

It makes me wonder how far people will determine what an artist can create and present in the future. Will there no longer be a place in theaters for dance that explores new directions? Unfortunately, this is also one of the main themes of the STATE OF ANXIETY.

Which brings us to the next state, the **STATE OF PAIN**: Working in cold studios, or dancing on hard floors – these are only a few small examples. However, these are some of the day-to-day realities we face on a regular basis and these day-to-day realities do make a difference when discussing working conditions. But there are more painful areas other than physical discomfort that we have to deal with. An important point is that in the Netherlands the only aspect that is looked at in art is the end result, while the production itself is not the only valuable aspect – all the other processes involved are too. There ought to be a lot more time for artistic research to go deeper into one's artistic calling and the creative process itself. The focus of the artistic process should be on the content; as a result the artistic side will evolve and improve, and the core of one's artistry can come back to the forefront.

Another painful area is the runaway pragmatism in our field. More often than not, business solutions are used to solve problems. All the regulations and processes that now dominate our field tend to put a damper on passion. The process in the studio is minimalized to such a great extent that you have no other choice but to sacrifice your weekends. How is it possible that in the past the artistic process was given three months? Today we have to create new work within five weeks! But what really counts in the arts is an idea or a movement that you stand for. To overextend yourself time and time again as an artist and as a person – that hurts.

I have noticed in a number of countries where resources for the arts are not as readily available that the commitment of people working in the arts is very different from ours. Art often has a different status abroad. Why is there such a large gap between the arts in the Netherlands and Belgium? And why must the arts in the Netherlands always take the initiative to confirm the status of art?

Yet another state is the **STATE OF POINT ZERO**. I gave this state that name some time ago, because we have reached point zero in this country. Notwithstanding all the positive things in the performing arts I mentioned earlier, many of the people working in front and behind the scenes in the arts unfortunately have to deal with this reality; for instance, many are facing a burnout or have feelings of emptiness. POINT ZERO can be a point where all you experience is emptiness, your feelings shut down and in the end nothing matters anymore – a kind of an autopilot mode. It is a state I often think about.

Artists are deeply invested in their work; in spite of the (massive) budget cuts they keep on working. Dancers being asked to work for little or no pay is a reality. That is not a healthy situation. How long will it take before the autopilot crashes? We have a Fair Practice Code, but who makes it possible for us to live it up to it?

Let's get back to the State of Dance in the Netherlands and the question I asked in the beginning: Does dance actually exist in the Netherlands? Not the way I see it.

After an intensive period of creating and the premiere of *Blueprint on Memory*, which is a part of *The Memory Loss Collection* (a triptych), I would like to elaborate on this.

Because of the aging population more and more people have to deal with dementia, either because they are afflicted with it or they know someone who is. Currently people are looking for news of coping with it from every perspective – medical science, healthcare, social initiatives and the arts. For *The Memory Loss Collection* I pored over all these sources. During my preparations I invited a number of scientists and artists to reflect on my questions on the subject, and I continued to explore the subject with a group of performers, musicians and technicians. I am doing this at several art centers in Europe: London, Paris and Antwerp, as well as in Maastricht and Rotterdam where the new production will have its premieres. Long before it is clear what the performances will be like, the research is shared with audiences, for instance in the public spaces of the Barbican in London. I am telling you this because such a project illustrates how my work method has developed and what this means for my day-to-day activities. This is not about me, but it does serve as an example of how a lot of choreographers are working nowadays.

We travel and work with all sorts of different people, we stay for a limited time in many different places. The one common denominator is the interest in a particular subject and mankind in general.

The dance field knows many influences, origins and backgrounds, and I am one of them. My work is Dutch-Flemish and I create my work in Rotterdam and Antwerp, but increasingly abroad as well. In all the places I have visited and worked I have met people that are fighting for something. The fact that I work in the Netherlands doesn't automatically qualify my work as Dutch. It doesn't work that way. Imagine discovering a cure for something and not making it available to anyone beyond your own borders. And yet, I feel that this awareness is often missing when I am trying to get projects off the ground. Dutch dance policy focuses on the Netherlands, in spite of the fact that our work has a European scope.

But let's go back to the state.

I talked about the pragmatism that rules the dance field and the surrounding organizations. I mention this again, because I believe that this is the state the dance field is in right now. A state in which politics and policies dominate. But, as artists, we would be wise to realize that we do not have to go along with that. Of course we need a good narrative to give the arts its proper place in society, and we also need a structure that we can relate to. A structure based on the... **ESSENCE**.

Nevertheless, the **STATE OF ANXIETY**, the **STATE OF PAIN** and the **STATE OF POINT ZERO** are also part of the current state and we cannot simply settle for that. Being aware of the existence of these states and the pressure they put on the day-to-day artistic process is vital.

Only when we take these different states into account and find out what our common intrinsic motivation really is, only then can we attain an ideal State of Dance that will allow the open and international character of dance as an art form come to full fruition. Because in the ideal state, the **STATE OF EUPHORIA**, the various rhythms create beautiful music together and keep everything moving, leaving no room for stagnation.

Thank you for your attention.

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