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Keynote Kédja/Stretch, August 20th 2020, digital performance

## **HEY, HEY, WE ARE THE MONKEYS**

Looking around, I see so much cowardice, ugliness, futility. Sore feet, tapping the wrong floors and hands losing their grip. This provides new experiences and they hurt, they hurt, they hurt. But suddenly in the midst of all this, someone smiles back, towards me and with me. My pulse goes up, with lust, with intuition and thinking eggs us on, applies pressure, does good and evil at the same time, without staining our baggage. Those of us who dance know that a soft surface generates huge leaps and a wild flight of body and mind, even if there's stupidity around the corner; with unintelligible noise, scents and tastes in tow.

The relevance of art is in the meeting. Dance. When the unintelligible can be stirred and mixed into something that will be meaningful, provoking or soothingly beautiful. Art can comment on everyday life in other ways than news reports or political decisions and regulations. This is where civil disobedience comes to the fore. The role of the artist – like that of the researcher – is to stretch, pull and break everything that limits us, diminishes our world of thought and field of action – thus giving us linguistic and cultural self-reliance. The role of our audiences is to take part in that meeting.

If you define dance as a physical, spatial art form, this demands a meeting with a participant. A conscious or subconscious meeting with voice at stake. Body meets body. Thought meets thought. We speak, we move and we listen with different cultural, political, maybe religious or otherwise colored voices. Soft or hard. We think and act with different bodies in various spaces. The conditions are set by politics.

We live in strange times, characterized by waves of migration, environmental hazards, a coronavirus pandemic, extreme nationalism and right-wing populism, but also by humanitarian solidarity, care and courage. All in one mix. Those in power create opportunities, but also various restrictions; they tamper with the right to free expression and something we, who live in thriving democracies take for granted – artistic freedom.

Censorship is today the greatest threat to the artistic freedom needed to create relevant and timely artistic works. The arguments for censorship are often political or religious. A rise in nationalism has led to increased intolerance. Particularly in relation to people with an LGBT identity, women, refugees and other immigrants. The most visible examples in Europe are Hungary, Poland, Croatia and Turkey, but also countries we think of as strong proponents of culture and art. Of contemporary art. Of dance. Can you hear me?

2019 Europe accounts for 28 per cent of all artists imprisoned in the world. Fourteen artists were imprisoned in Spain, nine in Turkey, four in Russia, two in the UK, one in France. Specifically, within the realm of dance, there were seven documented cases last year in six different countries of artists taken to court or imprisoned for immoral acts based on religious arguments or sexual behavior. My source is FREEMUSE 2020<sup>1</sup>, the UN report on the Right to Artistic Freedom and Creativity<sup>2</sup>, along with witness reports from artists I have met in the countries I just mentioned. The most surprising thing is that France is pointed out as one of the most problematic countries with examples of censorship and several actions in contradiction with the legal right to freedom of expression.

Censorship creates fear. People in fear are dangerous. Powerful people in fear can make fateful decisions. People in fear under a destructive power, can give up and become passive – or turn into terrorists. A democracy is undermined by fear. Imploding. Art is forced underground and freedom of expression is undermined. People are silenced. We need to be on our toes and view all information with a critical eye. Too many people swallow gross simplifications and half-truths without any factual base, as possible answers to complicated questions. We are swamped in fabricated pieces of information aimed at making us happy and not ask too many questions. Fabricated pieces to overrule our fear.

Some of it is so goddamn-hells-bells dim-witted. It makes me sweat when I think of it. Everything goes black before my eyes. I feel dizzy. My good senses flow away. Where to? When something flows away, it normally makes a noise. Not this. Can't understand where it goes. It leaves an empty, hollow feeling. Weird. That feeling comes back over and over

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<sup>1</sup> <https://freemuse.org/news/the-state-of-artistic-freedom-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CulturalRights/Pages/ArtisticFreedom.aspx>

again. The hollow stirs up a maelstrom that draws everything inward. Like being hungry, starving, without being able to do anything about it. My fading senses are replaced by the sound of rain. And suddenly, everything becomes intelligible and tangible.

Who has most opinions? Who speaks with conviction about things? Who is in power?

Another obstacle is our self-censorship and a sense of impotence. "...that is not for me..."; "...I don't know enough..."; "...I can't handle that...". These arguments are heard mostly among women, while men often express themselves with great self-assuredness, managing us with clear instructions. As a leader in my own right, I have countless experiences of women, who really underestimate their capacity and men who overestimate theirs; but in our patriarchal and capitalistic society, these men stay in charge. Men who listen to other men. Also within dance. Does it make a difference? Yes, if it leads to a priority for male artists, if it offers distinguished posts or grants to other men. In the disguise of qualitative criteria set up by men, interpreted by men from a masculine culture and value system. Otherwise not. Gender is not everything, but we cannot escape the cultural heritage that gives priority to the male voice.

Hey, hey, we are the monkeys. We can choose to ignore these self-assured opinions in favor of a deepened reflection and unfettered thought processes. We dance with a physical voice. We can choose to be generous and listen, think and act without claiming an absolute truth. The cultural voice is speaking. Gender is speaking. Politics is speaking. We can choose to show loving care and compassion, without refraining from criticism and opposition. The disobedient ones live richer but are always vulnerable.

Let us not get lost in populist ideas about art as something applicable, useful to be produced on a conveyor belt. Let us help each other by sharing strategies, methods, networks and life experiences of various kinds. Let us listen to one another and bring forward new voices. Let us be generous. Let us dance. Don't ask for permission. Just do it.

I know that everyone has the ability to feel, think and act, if you just believe in your own ability. We all get wet when it rains, even if some of us are more resistant than others and hunger can always be stilled if you get something to eat. How generous we can afford to be is a question of culture. It is easy to be penny-wise and pound-foolish. Like simplifications. Witlessed.

So, where do we find the positive signs we need to have any faith in the future? How do we nourish trust and courage to feed our processes? I can see a will to change among new generations of choreographers and dancers; I see a challenge to existing power and market structures, a distancing from conventional institutional structures in favor of new dialog formats and an openness for active meetings. With the audience. I see curiosity towards what can be generated by artistic strategies and actions; at the same time an ambition to restore beauty and lust in aesthetic experiences. It is an eternal wave movement. Art can generate the self-confidence and faith needed to give people a voice, the sense and the ability to engage in critical reflection. A voice can be heard as a spoken word, an image, a sign or a body. At times as dance.

*Explorations of Now* is an ongoing collaboration between the Swedish Cullberg Ballet<sup>3</sup>, Cultivator and the Institute for Future Studies<sup>4</sup>. I quote: “*With artistic and scientific processes as an entry point and with existential questions as our foundation, our intention is to create meeting points where we explore how to liberate our collective power of imagination to reach a sustainable future*”, says Stina Dahlström of the Cullberg Ballet. A Danish duo, the Two Women Machine Show<sup>5</sup>, produces critical works that place contemporary choreography in different political and activist contexts, and they say: “*In the making of My Body is a Barrel of Gunpowder we explored different types of warfare strategies and associated them with a conceptual and body-based practice*”. Vala Tomaz Foltyn<sup>6</sup> is a Polish artist, who now works in exile with a transdisciplinary mix of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cullberg.com/explorations-of-now/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.iffs.se/en/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.twowomenmachineshow.com/my-body-is-a-barrel-of-gunpowder/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://sheftergallery.com/artists/vala-t-foltyn/>

choreography, poetry and magic. He/she says the following: *“My magic has become primarily a political strategy and an artistic activity. I stopped differentiating the political from art, my body from the social body, the home from public space, the dance from performance art, the theatre from visual arts. My magic – or, rather, a choreography of magic – is my thinking, my being in the world, my revolution, my celebration and victory”*.

Or as the Swedish choreographer Anna Koch says about her strategy with the weld platform: *“Weld’s focus is on the art of dance, to create situations that deepen and enhance the art form and widen the concept of dance. We do it as an independent platform for experimental processes and knowledge production. We gather impulses, we do matchups, we break down, rethink and try to define ourselves as something not completely tangible. With a critical and free thought process, we want to share a physical, virtual and sensual space, where actors within the arts and sciences can meet and uncover alternative avenues. Weld is a platform in constant flux, an art project in its own right.”*

That’s how life goes on IRL. Dance. I behave and work hard. So do you, I expect. Vala and many others have been forced to leave their home countries because of repression against artists. I enjoy the freedom of living in a country where I can do what I want. I choreograph a movement through time and thick layers of sensual, bodily experiences. I feel, I think, I act. I write, speak on occasion, I draw, I paint and I dance, but not every day. In dance, my body at times expresses more than I can cope with. Nothing is as clear as in dance. I dream my dreams and make everyday life into something more satisfying or more worrying, or more dangerous... As BadCo<sup>7</sup> say about their latest work: *“The Labour of Panic is a happening created in suspended time. A time with a quite certain endpoint and a rather uncertain beginning. However, to allow the everyday to be something else, to allow something to end and something new to begin, the infrastructural space itself must allow the possibility of change. That is the terrain where one outlines the contours and excavates the remains of that which cannot come to be and that which may yet occur”*.

To produce the works that must reach not just the audiences but the public as meaningful, provocative or soothingly beautiful - to produce the works that should also reach those who

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<sup>7</sup> <http://badco.hr/hr/home/>

do not yet know that they want to take part – demands courage and a measure of civil disobedience. It demands that we take responsibility and make a stand for the values we believe in, for the importance of art and a presence, also when it rains. We must live with our senses turned on. We must celebrate each other's progress and offer support when times are tough. We must assume power over the structures and resources needed to give every person a chance to both practice art and take part in what art can offer. We have to do this. No one will do it for us.

Thank you for listening, watching and sharing this moment with me. Thank you for staying critical, always thinking and with your senses on alert. We live and work in different realities. Whatever you think about life – don't say that it is boring. Exhausting, sure – fatally dangerous, absolutely! How else could it be?

By the way: Have you seen *Let us stop this mad rush towards the end*<sup>8</sup> by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargeon?

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<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/showcase/burrowsfargion>