

Lecture by Sara Wookey

for *Re-designing spaces: Transferable skills of the dance artist*

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Van Abbemuseum in conjunction with Fontys and the Erasmus project

Welcome and thank you for being here (both in this room and on the live feed) today. Thank you to Anne-Marije van den Bersselaar & Dirk Dumon for the invitation to be here. To Fontys and its staff that made this possible (Kim Lokkers, Annemarie Pijnappel, and Femme van den Berg) and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (especially Chris Berndes, Loes Janssen and Astrid Cats) for your continued collaborative efforts to bring my practice into the space of this excellent museum.

When I was first approached by Anne-Marije and Dirk to speak as part of this programme, I was very excited by its title. There was something tickling about seeing the line of up of words such as “transferable” next to “skills” next to “dance”. As a certified transmitter (or teacher) of Yvonne Rainer’s seminal dance work *Trio A* I believe in the power of body-to-body transfer of knowledge in dance, learning by being in the space together, and what gets transferred in that space of togetherness. I am a believer in the knowledge of the dancer in the way she thinks *through* space and in relation to and with others in that space. One might call it a “socio-spatial sensibility?”. When that sensibility is engaged there is the potential for change (physically, architecturally, structurally, politically)?

In the time we have together here I will speak to the proposed title: *Re-designing spaces* through my work with cultural spaces, architects and civic and cultural spaces in North America and Europe. I will focus on three particular projects: Two commissioned works for two different

museums and a book project that proposes certain discourses from curators and dance artists about the return of dance to the museum and what that might mean for dance and the museum of the future.

The transferrable skills of the dance artist will, hopefully, be rendered visible in these projects and the ways they advocate for both the intrinsic and instrumental values of dance in its return to the museum, a space where we might re-think what being in a shared, designed space might mean and how dance might prompt old and new ways of being together.

I would like to reflect back on the experiences that led up to my being - as a dance artist - commissioned to create work for visual arts institutions such as the Hammer Museum and, for the sake of today's lecture the wonderful vanAbbe Museum.

It seems relevant to note the landmarks in communication within a professional relationship, especially when tracking the collaborative potential of dance and the visual arts. In this case, to consider the "transferable skills" within dance and where they might meet the interests of artistic endeavors outside of itself. In this way we might begin to take note of the shifting landscape(s), values and needs within individual fields and, as well, where two - in what might appear to be distinct - art forms (dance and visual arts) might well be moving closer together, inhabiting similar spaces and aiming for, potentially, compatible experiences.

At one point in 2010 in Amsterdam (where I was living at the time) it was suggested to me by Maaïke Bleeker (a scholar in theatre, performance and dance at the University of Utrecht) to reach out to Vivian van Saaze, who was studying at Maastricht University looking at modes of archiving in performance through the lens of art history. Maaïke suggested Vivian as someone

who may have overlapping interests in my *reDANCE* project, a platform for performances, workshops and public conversations on generational transmission in dance (passing dance on body-to-body in the studio from one generation to the next) in relation to the work I was doing with Yvonne Rainer to teach, lecture and perform her seminal works, namely *Trio A* (1966). I was interested to look at the trend of re-performance happening and the fascination galleries and museums were having with the dance artists from Judson Dance Theatre and dance, in general.

In Spring 2012 and after some lively discussions by Skype I was invited by Vivian to speak to a research group composed of curators and educators from Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Van Abbemuseum and others. The event was called *Collecting the Performative: A Research Network Examining Emerging Practice for Collecting and Conserving Performance-based Art* and it was an intimate gathering at Tate Modern where I spoke about my work with Yvonne and my methodologies for transmitting the dance to others through an intricate series of notes on 100 index cards I had created that included capturing Yvonne's language, my own personal notes for remembering movements, spatial orientations and details about gaze and pacing.

The web-page for the event states:

“By bringing together Dutch and British academic scholars and museum professionals, this two-year project aims to provide greater insight into the conceptual and practical challenges related to collecting and conserving artists' performance.” (<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/collecting-performative>)

At that meeting I met Christiane Berndes, Curator and Head of Collections at Van Abbemuseum. Christiane and I met again while I was consulting for the Creative Services Department at the Los Angeles Transportation Agency programming performative tours of public art on Metro led by dancers and theater artists. As part of my role to look at best practices of performance in public spaces I looked to van Abbe Museum as an example of successful programming of interactive art projects, tours and engagement between staff (namely “hosts”) and museum visitors. To clarify, the museum, in this case Van Abbemuseum, was a model for a city, such as Los Angeles, to look at how to invite publics in to creative, socially engaged experiences. From another perspective one could consider the museum is - in a time when truly “public” spaces are being designed out of cities in the push for development, commercialization, gentrification and privatization - one of the last bastions of public space. Dance artists, such as myself, are drawn to these spaces because of their publicness and the invitation to create something for and with a public and a public that can get close to, play within and be a part of the art.

I remember the choreographer Boris Charmatz, when speaking to an audience at Tate Modern before the launch of his *Musée de la danse*, sharing that when he first walked into the Turbine Hall when Tate Modern opened he felt compelled by its publicness, the openness (like a public park) of the space and noticed how those in the space were lounging around, laying on the floor, milling about and creating their own intimate places within the vast space of the hall. As a resident of London I often notice moms bringing their children to the space on rainy days to run around as they relax on the periphery of the space. It is, worth noting, free to enter. I wonder, what happens to that publicness when dance comes in? When, for example, Tino Seghal situates his durational work there? Perhaps, these kinds of spaces may be attractive to dance

artists while what those artists are putting into those spaces might be affected by and affecting the innate experience of its inhabitants in ways worth noting.

But back to the tracing of my connection with Van Abbemuseum....

On following up with Christiane on the case studies project I produced for Metro in LA and wanting to thank her she asked if I would be interested in creating a commissioned work for the museum as part of *Storylines* a project initiative that encourages artists to tell their own story of the museum through interactive projects and as part of the five-year long exhibition *Once Upon A Time... The Collection Now*, a chronological journey across the history of art and its relation to society in the 20th and 21st Century. She will speak more on this after the lunch today and give us an introduction to the project at large.

The thought of creating something, as a dance artist, that would be available to a public for the three year duration of the installation was both exciting and daunting, a reminder of how time-based dance is and how the museum often takes the long term view when considering exhibitions and programming. What excited me most was to engage with the space of the museum (which was going through a re-design process in which architect Abel Cahen worked to open up the spaces, offer new views through the galleries and a more porous feel) and of the people in those spaces. I also wanted to make a work for the museum's inhabitants (staff and visitors alike) in a way that could be sustainable through a user-friendly approach, offer subtle provocations and suggest playfulness while hinting at new agencies within the museum. It was important for me to make something that did not require my presence but would be put in the hands of the user and, from there, continue to evolve over the course of three years. The plan is to convene an event at the end of the project to address what it means to have such a project in

this space and what it does to the rethinking of the museum experience and to the evolution of the field of dance.

Punt.Point was the project title and it was in collaboration with Christiane, landscape architect Rennie Tang and designer Gabriela Baka. As Rennie and my practices emerge from dance and architecture, *Point.Punt* is a project that reflects our awareness of the way individual and collective bodies inhabit, move through, organize and choreograph public space. The project emerged during our residency at the Van Abbemuseum in August 2013. For one week we had permission (by wearing an artist tag) to be in the museum and to try out different physical gestures, positions and actions. We were given a kind of passport or “go ahead” to be another kind of visitor. We tested the allowances of the museum. The guards did not question us, the hosts did not intervene and it was like being in one’s own home, just a lot bigger and whiter.

I began to consider the museum as a domestic space. I became fascinated by the idea of a pass or permission and, as well, the ways that my behavior (sitting, laying down, dancing, doing headstands, placing yellow points in the space, moving, etcetera) affected, or not, others in the space. For example, people began discussing their experiences of dancing, of doing a headstand with me while in the space together. There were encounters with guards about walking on ones hands, and stories of childhood. There were smiles and laughter and people playing with the idea of behaving differently in the otherwise restricted space.

As a dancer I am sensitive to the ways that my body and the bodies of others inhabit, move through, organize and co-create place within a space. I am aware of the ways in which people choose or are guided to position themselves in a space. I am also aware of the ways that many,

seemingly, public spaces are controlled and how my body movements are restricted by social codes, rules and invisible laws of a space.

When in a museum I feel the limitations of movements and the strict rules of behavior enforced in a museum. I am also acutely aware of the presence of a guard in the space who is looking at me looking at art. Yet neither of us should look nor talk to each other. I wonder, how my position in a museum might shift and dialogue with the expected modes of being and of being with others.

In trying to answer these questions I am interested in playing along the borders of socio-spatial codes. I have developed *Punt.Point* with Rennie and incorporated her expertise and sensitivities to materials as a mediation between the body and the space. We wanted to encourage strangers in a shared space to engage based on a common, shared experience of wearing a light, soft and very bright yellow bag and to explore sets of relationships between bodies, objects and art in the newly designed spaces of the Van Abbe.

I will read from a letter to the user of *Punt.Point* from Rennie and me. As we were not present we felt it was important to share our conceptual thinking and extend an invitation to the users of the tool to engage with the project. It reads:

As our practices emerge from dance and architecture, Point.Punt is a project that reflects our awareness of the way individual and collective bodies inhabit, move through, organize and choreograph public space. As resident artists in the museum we observed the way in which people position themselves (influenced by William Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*) while viewing art and how their body movements may be affected by social codes,

rules and invisible laws of a space. Our work plays along the borders of those codes by prompting ways of positioning or re-positioning the body that might liberate it from these limitations. We began to wonder: How might one position oneself in the space, and in relations to the artwork and each other, shift and dialogue with the museum and with each other?

For one week we had special permission, by wearing “guest artist” badges, in the museum to test out various ideas, like being given a kind of passport where anything was possible. The guards and the hosts did not restrict our work but instead asked questions and at times even assisted us. We tried out every day positions such as sitting, lying down and leaning throughout the museum, engaging with the art and architecture in new ways. We questioned how the body could further push the boundaries of space and subvert expectations through more challenging positions such as a full 180 degree re-positioning of the body - a headstand. Finally we felt the space loosening up. Whether watching, imagining or actually doing a headstand in the museum, the idea clearly had a contagious effect. Guards began discussing their experiences of doing a headstand and walking on their hands; there were smiles and laughter as they played with the idea of behaving differently in the otherwise restricted space.

Re-positioning is a provocation for awareness, interaction and place-making in public space through observation, imagination and action. We wish to extend this experience to you as a museum visitor. We are not interested in telling you what to feel, experience or what this project means; that is for you to determine as a co-creator on this project. The point of our project is to prompt, suggest and to invite you to try out a new way of inhabiting your museum. The rest is up to you.

Enjoy...

To zoom out from this project and to consider a broader perspective -and one that encompasses a variety of approaches to the body, human movement and of dance in the museum - I track back, again to my experiences as a dancer...

As a dancer and choreographer working in North American and European contexts, I have increasingly found myself performing in and making work for gallery and museum spaces. This shift from the theatre to the gallery and museum began, for me, in the late 1990's as a student at The Ohio State University Department of Dance seeking more intimate and economical places to show my work, and continued through my Master's studies at The University of California, Los Angeles where I presented my work in museum spaces such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego whose white walls, open spaces and large audience membership suited my somewhat larger-scale performance works that included video projection, live sound and public events. Since 2010 I have worked in and with museums as a transmitter of Yvonne Rainer's repertoire work and in 2014 I had the pleasure of premiering my solo work, *(Dis)Appearing Acts & (Re)Surfacing Subjects: Concerns of (a) Dance Artist(s)* and an installation on *reDANCE* and my Trio A notecards at the New Museum in NYC as part of their program *Performance Archiving Performance*.

I appreciate when live performance work is accompanied by an installation and public conversations about the work and to issues related to showing dance performance in the museum. Issues such as authorship, participation, archiving, working conditions, economical structures of support for labour (such as paying for the creation of a work and its subsequent rehearsals and warm up time for dancers) and documentation.

I could take this opportunity to speak to my long time interests in several of these areas that stem from the root of dance in the gallery and museum, in particular, the issues around money. As museums are not in the business of paying for artistic labour, dance enters and asks for certain conditions, not just physically of the space itself (appropriate floors, temperatures of the space to keep the body warm, easy to access drinking water, warm up spaces, showers and changing rooms, etcetera) but of support for (sometimes) the making of the work but, mostly, for the upkeep of it and of the dancers who perform. All of this points back to the title of this week: *Re-Designing Spaces* and the question of what will the museum of the future look like? And how will it be designed as it continues to house dance and performance works and engage its visitors in socially inclusive ways?

The interest in the social experience of its visitors is a nice segue into the next project I want to share with you. WHO CARES? Dance In the Gallery & Museum a book published in June 2015 by Siobhan Davies Dance. It consists of 15 interviews I conducted with curators who choose to present dance in their spaces and the dance artists who choose to work with them in those spaces.

Prompting thinking about the notion of “care” in this moment for dance in the museum and its possible fleeting nature. It asks for the way that the museum space might care for the human body, artworks, and objects in a common space and who, in those spaces, might serve those needs. The publication invites strategies for best practice for a sustainable future of this renewed meeting of dance practices and visual art institutions.

In initiating this project I was interested in speaking with curators and dance artists because I felt, through my own experiences and hearing those of others, that the dialogue between those

trained to work with objects as visual arts curators and dance artists trained, primarily, to work with the body and, more often in the theatre, may create some misunderstandings. At the same time, I believed-again from my own experience and speaking with others that there was a lot of common ground and willingness on the part of both parties to re-enter somewhat uncharted terrains at this time in our common cultural context and a want for the sustainability of - on the part of curators, the art space; and - on the part of dancers, the field of dance. I was interested how we might work together.

I think of a quote by anthropologist Tim Ingold in Gabriela Gianacci's article *Environmental Presence*. He points out that, "environment is a 'relative' term and that just as one cannot conceive of an organism without an environment, one should not conceive of an environment without an organism". Perhaps this can suggest that curators (and museums) need dancers and dance needs the museum.

Sitting down with those on opposite, yet maybe not so distant, sides of the spectrum allowed me the chance to orient the conversations side by side in a publication and offer the reader a space to make links, see mis-steps, sense overlaps and better understand what is happening at this moment in dance and in cultural art spaces (primarily in the UK-as the majority of the interviewees, except Yvonne Rainer, are UK-based) by rendering thinking more visible.

More simply put: I wanted to know *why* curators programme dance and *why* the dance artists want to be in the museum (using museum generally here, galleries included). I wanted to ask curators what artists often get asked: Why did you do this? What does it mean for you? And ask dance artists what curators often get asked: What is the significance for your field in presenting *your* work in these visual arts-focused cultural spaces?

In other words, there was a prompt on my part to ask the curators to speak personally about their choice and for dance artists to think outside of themselves towards the field at large. The project is a prompt for more dialogue and I would encourage a next publication that includes the voices of theatre programmers (as suggested to me by Alistair Spalding at Sadler's Wells), the dancers (not choreographers in the work), museum visitors and the staff of museums (in particular, the guards) for these voices are relevant and ask to be heard.

Entering into the project I felt somewhat discouraged by the slippage or possible lack of communication between curators and dancers in terms of what they wanted, expected, came away with, etcetera when dance was presented in museums but I came away from this project feeling very hopeful and delighted that, in general, there is a lot of shared interest, values and, more than anything, willingness on both parties to work together to keep this moment going. That dance in the museum is not a passing trend but a potentiality for both opening up what the museum can and will be in terms of moving bodies (both dancers, those working for the museum, visitors, etcetera) and how the practice of dance can be served by being in the museum in terms of critical discourse, self-reflection, preservation and dissemination.

As I consider this book authored by those interviewed, I want to read for you some excerpts from some of the conversations:

I begin by speaking with Catherine Wood, Curator of contemporary art/performance at Tate Modern,

SW: In the arts there is a lot of focus on being relevant and of the times. To be new every time. No gallery wants to show an exhibition that another gallery has just shown. And in considering that, I am interested in the current fascination for looking back. In particular to Yvonne's work. Why are we looking back? There is an interest in the archive, this interest to do dance in the museum again. In a way, we are reliving something that was started, maybe forgotten about and then returned to. It is an interesting place to be in terms of thinking that this moment for dance is new or not new. It feels new at the same time a reinvention of the past. Yvonne suggested that in the 70's the museum did not have the kind of elite status for dancers as it does now.

Catherine responds: "I think in the 70s, it was really after hours, the way dance was in the museum. Well, here (Tate Modern), the performance things they did were through the education department and not the main programme. It was more like, "Well you can use the space". I know Merce Cunningham did a lot in museums. But it was never presented as a show, an exhibition. As far as I understand. Here in the history of Tate, the first performance happened in 1968. It wasn't dance but it was for private patrons of the Tate, an after hours thing in the evening with drinks. And then there were a few things in the 70s that came in through education. It was only ever through education- associated programming, and only in the past three years, have they stopped calling what I do "Additional Programming". I'm talking about being referred to in the organizational economy. Nick Serota [Director of Tate] doesn't call it that. When Stuart Comer was starting the film programme here and I was starting the performance, we both said it should be part of the curatorial department. It shouldn't be "in service" to the main art programme as a second tier."

SW: Do you think dance has found that place in the museum? As a significant artwork among other artworks?

CW: It think we are getting there. This project we're doing now will make that proposition really clearly. The head of exhibitions here has told all the other departments, "This (Musea de la Dans) is the Matisse of the performance programme, so deal with it." We are getting there with the Tanks. What is great about the Tanks reopening is that everybody in the curatorial department stands and agrees that it's not about creating a space that's a kind of segregated theatre space. It will be a space where collection works and performances are shown. And equally performance collection works will still be shown upstairs and in the Turbine Hall. The flow between the spaces is really important. As much as it's great to have a dedicated space that we can use and has acoustic treatment and has a lighting rig, at the same time we're working on sculpture shows in there that will work in tandem in showing dance. "

Andrew Bonacina (Chief Curator at Hepworth Wakefield Museum) was another interviewee. Andrew says, "It becomes increasingly complex as you layer the codes of dance into a space that has its own frameworks of viewing and engagement, spaces that are even more coded in terms of the relationship between objects and bodies. There's a long history of dance and the visual arts coming together, of dance moving into the gallery space, and early on it was a very organic conversation born out of a natural exchange of ideas between visual artists, dancers, musicians, performers, etcetra. Very much Alan Kaprow's era. I'm more interested in facilitating these kinds of platforms or situations for exchange, but I often wonder whether the recent vogue for bringing dance into galleries isn't also somewhat instrumentalised by those needing to satisfy engagement agendas. This idea that it's no longer enough to present a viewer with an object, but that the museum needs to activate it in other ways, digitally, physically...

In all my conversations with those working with me on the project, but especially with the dance artists, one thing that we always wanted to be aware of was to try, as far as possible, to avoid creating any sense of hierarchy between performer and viewer. The thing Kaprow wanted more than anything with a work such as *YARD*, was to create a completely free space that allowed visitors to engage however they wished. Of course, it is still an artwork with an author, and so avoiding all hierarchy is of course...”

I jump in asking “Wishful thinking?”

Andrew responds: “Exactly. Anyone who steps into the space is immediately aware of becoming part of someone’s work. You are immediately on display. But Kaprow was interested in physical and intellectual dynamics at play, and *YARD* becomes a perfect setting for exploring those dynamics. It became a really rich platform for the dance artists to engage with, especially as they were already thinking about how to negotiate the gallery space as a performative space.

From one perspective of the dance artist, I ask Yvonne Rainer (choreographer and filmmaker), “Do you think the museum had the same kind of status for the dance artist as it does now?”

She explains, “ My generation were more integrated with the art world. Our ideas came out of art world ideas such as Minimalism and Pop Art. We were conscious of coming out of a more embraced and cohesive avant-garde. The visual artists were dancing and performing with the dancers. The artists who were a part of Judson, with the exception of [Robert] Rauschenberg, were not that well known or successful yet. All that seemed to change in the 80’s and 90’s. Now these worlds seem much more separate and autonomous than they were back then. And since

then, economically, the art world has exploded. So, I guess, unless you make demands now you feel like a step-child.”

As Yvonne suggests that dance artists make demands on the institution and, as some have suggested on the rethinking of the space and how it might take care of dance, I would like to prompt us to consider where the practice of dance is affected by and/or affecting the museums spaces. And where we negotiate the space between dance as an intrinsically valuable art form and one that is being pressured to have instrumental value, especially when it comes to audiences in cultural institutions.

I wish to continue here on that prompt with a quote from Claire Bishop in her book Artificial Hells. She writes, “In the UK, New Labour (1997-2010) deployed a rhetoric almost identical to that of the practitioners of socially engaged art in order to justify public spending on the arts. Anxious for accountability, the question it asked on entering office in 1997 was: what can the arts do for society? The answers included increasing employability, minimizing crime, fostering aspiration - anything but artistic experimentation and research as values in and of themselves.”

“The key phrase deployed by New Labour was ‘social exclusion’: if people become disconnected from schooling and education, and subsequently the labour market, they are more likely to post problems for welfare systems and society as a whole. New Labour therefore encouraged the arts to be *socially inclusive*. Despite the benign ring to this agenda, it has been subject to critiques from the left, primarily because it seeks to conceal social inequality, rendering it cosmetic, rather than structural.”

“It represents the primary division in society as one between an *included majority* and an *excluded minority* (formerly known as the ‘working class’). The solution implied by the discourse of social exclusion is simply the goal of tradition across the boundary from excluded to included, to allow people to access the holy grail of self-sufficient consumerism and be independent of any need for welfare.”

I will leave this political discussion with a quote or a question by Nicolas Bourriaud (in his book: *Relational Aesthetics*) (that I think covers a lot of points I have raised in my talk today and speaks to the title of this week “Re-designing spaces”_which I would argue could be the actual architectural and designed spaces of our cultural and educational institutions and the less tangible, but no less important, spaces of the social and political). Nicolas writes, “How is art focused on the production of forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?”

To move from that and towards a concluding of my presentation I wish to infuse positivity into the somewhat more critical view. From my discussions with Emily Pringle, Head of Learning at Tate I have learned that one of the values of Tate Learning is love. It suggests that in this moment, this fever for participation and engagement, that “love” can be put forth as something else, something, perhaps, more sustainable and invested that goes beyond the superficial, short term “solutions” that may obscure a need for the arts and, for dance specifically, to be supported on its own terms and for its intrinsic value and for tacit knowledge.

I will leave us here with a quote by bell hooks that might encourage us, as artists, educators, curators, and viewers of art to consider where we might communicate in a collective wish for

longevity of the arts and of inter-personal connection through the arts. She says, “The heartbeat of true love is the willingness to reflect on one’s actions, and to process and communicate this reflection with the loved one....Two beings who have a soul connection want to engage in a full, free-ranging dialogue and commune with each other as deeply as possible.”

Thank you.