

Like the Space In-Between Beats: A Dialogue on Dialogues

-- Lotte van den Berg

-- Marije Nie

This article transmits a dialogue between two theater practitioners: theater-maker Lotte van den Berg, co-founder of Building Conversation, and performer/creator Marije Nie, co-founder of the Parliament of Practices and the Cross Pollination collective. The dialogue is not an argument or a debate, it is an encounter in the space in-between, in-between our practices, experiences, professional ethos and praxis as theater-makers. It is an exercise in inviting the swirls and eddies of thoughts and impulses and following them, with care. The text follows the meandering path of the dialogue, both an exchange and a search for a state of being together that allows thoughts to emerge and take flight while staying connected to our centers, like in a physical theater training.

Keywords: dialogue, theater, practice, building conversation, parliament of practices, praxis, space in-between, cross pollination

This is a dialogue between two theater practitioners: theater maker Lotte van den Berg,¹ co-founder of Building Conversation,² and performer/creator Marije Nie,³ co-founder of the Parliament of Practices and the Cross Pollination collective.⁴ Both have professional practices within the field of theatrical performance.

The dialogue that follows is not an argument or a debate, it is an encounter in the space in-between, in-between our practices, experiences, professional ethos and praxis as theater-makers. It is an exercise in inviting the swirls and eddies of thoughts and impulses and following them, with care. There is no defending of points or building of arguments, instead there are responses and thinking-with.

Figure 1. Interior of the barn where the dialogue took place.
The barn is owned by van den Berg's family, © Lotte van den Berg



There is space for searching, silence, walking, eating, laughing. We also make occasional reflections on how the dialogue is developing, allowing ourselves to shift and rustle, moving towards a place of balance, of being-with that hold presence and action in equal measures. I (Marije Nie) have transcribed the dialogue from a recording and lightly edited it for length and readability.

In 2020 I was invited to make a short video piece on the question: What do you really know? It was part of the Holland Festival online art piece of choreographer Bill T. Jones titled *I Know ... a Digital ritual*. I started confidently but most of what I approached evaporated until finally I was left with the following: "I know that the space in between beats is infinite even when it is very small, because it holds an infinite amount of potential change." I know this through my experience of 25 years of tap dancing, where you are always negotiating this in-between. It is where syncopation lives, but also it is that point where you can shift your physical body to change direction. Likewise in this dialogue we were lightly and playfully filling, seeding and fertilising the space in between us. This lightness allowed us to follow our impulses and curiosity, trusting that in time concrete results will appear.

The text follows our meandering path, both an exchange and a search for a state of being together that allows thoughts to emerge and take flight while staying connected to our centers, like in a physical theater training.

MARIJE NIE: What is dialogue for you in your work?

LOTTE VAN DEN BERG: Dialogue was not my interest at all, at first ... it was more about participation for me. Daan⁶ signaled that many people in the audience felt the need to participate. He suggested the question: what is participation? The kind of participation where you bear responsibility for how the content develops. So it started with curiosity about participation, doing together.

MN: It is such a radical letting go of the result ... Were you already working on that?

LvdB: I was – and am – busy with my position in the work...what is the hierarchy you create in the space of making? And in the more traditional setting, in which you as a director decide when it is finished and then you will show it ... There was also a desire in me to join in. Then I realized during the Oerol festival⁷ in 2014 that, for me, it is not only about audience participation, but also that I want to participate myself ...

With Building Conversation we – Daan, me and a lot of other artist – actually created a performance setting where we were participating and vulnerable too ... searching, not knowing yet ... A part of it.

Conversation appeared to be a very fitting possible form in which to investigate this doing-together, because the conversation is something you actually do together, so if we look at that conversation and see what's happening, who's responding to whom and why and how, we can maybe understand something about what that is. To listen, to respond, to predominate, to gently put something in the middle ... How you are together. What composition, what hierarchy, what kind of body you become together. So it didn't start from a fascination with conversation, but the conversation became a kind of way to investigate.

LvdB: Are you specifically engaged in dialogue?

MN: Yes actually ... It started with Radio Kootwijk Live,⁸ another group I was founding member of, with Bart van Rosmalen.⁹ It was really about meetings inside work. [*the word 'meeting' in Dutch is constructed as 'un-obliged'*.] In those meetings, dialogue was a necessity to find some kind of shared space. I felt a power in that way of exchanging that creates new spaces. And also the techniques that are effective in creating that new space, without determining the desired outcome or problem solving. A technology of deepening the questions instead of answering them. Often, the goal of a meeting is to be productive. For me, this points to what we miss in how we treat each other.

LvdB: The uncertainty.

MN: Yes ... very few processes are aimed at investigating what the

question actually is in itself, how deep it is, how it connects to other questions, and how the combination of questions can open up new spaces. Often it is about making the question as defined, concise and effective as possible as quickly as possible, cutting away what doesn't seem to be productive as if this will lead to the best result...

LvdB: I am in an in-between space right now, a peculiar vacuum. After ten years I decided to stop working for Building Conversation. Now I'm on some kind of sabbatical. A space in which things can arise, in which one can react to others, in which there is openness. Open pores where things can come in. Where one is able to grow, in which things can be experienced. I am more interested in words like that than in dialogue in itself. The opportunity to participate and contribute, to be part, to become.. That is related to positions, hierarchies and whether or not the roles are fixed... an audience can start participating, there isn't the fixation on one person sitting still and another doing the action. That there is greater reciprocity actually.

But at the moment I also really feel like fewer words. I have made works without words for a long time. Movement, on presence and relationships between bodies, space and things. Very visual. People asked why isn't there text being spoken? I replied, "You wouldn't ask a photographer why they don't use speech bubbles, would you?" It is not necessary at all. It is full of itself, and does not need to be interpreted. As a theater-maker, I don't like rehearsed text. I don't want to rehearse with an actor until it no longer sounds rehearsed. It just doesn't interest me.

In Building Conversation all text is generated live, it is a jam session, I could do that. I found that very exciting. Also because I felt that I was learning a lot all the time. About being in conversation, being in contact ... I'm not looking for dialogue ... I look for responsiveness.

MN: Responsibility – response-ability... The ability to answer.

LvdB: And reciprocity. In the dialogical artwork I have done the past years I have come to understand role-fluidity, reciprocity, listening, participation, actualization ... When you feel like you are there or not. When the conversation becomes an action. Experienceable. That you are not only talking *ABOUT* something, but that you are also experiencing it. The topic actualizes within your own experience.

MN: When will that happen?

LvdB: That requires some kind of zooming in and out. You have to be in the conversation, but also watch it. That you have a reflection on the moment you are in yourself. You can talk about contact, but you can also make contact. You can make contact while talking about contact. You can also talk about contact while I don't feel any contact with you at all, while we've been chatting here for an hour and a half.. Can I touch you?

MN: And then it's really going to happen...

LvdB: That pulls the entire conversation to a deeper level and the conversation itself actually becomes the case, the research area. This happens very often in *Thinking Together* (a performative conversation developed by Building Conversations). We often talk about white privilege, but what does it really mean that you've been talking all this time and she hasn't said anything yet. It's about openly and collectively seeing that what you discuss is also going on in how you discuss it. That it's already happening. Then you can use it as a shared case study to explore what that is.

MN: I like that too. Often when we are in conversation we are talking about things outside of the conversation, a book or an experience and you can never fully explain or bring that in, I can't quite pass it on to you in all its complexity. In *Cross Pollination*, with artists from all kinds of different disciplines we start with doing things together, responding to each other. For example, through exercises: I start with a tapping exercise. I have to shape it as I offer it, in a way that it's accessible to everyone, that it connects to what we're already doing and that it brings a new perspective to it. Someone then responds to that with a physical theater exercise, then someone brings in a song that can add something or create contrast. After two hours we are together in a kind of complexity, but everyone has experienced it from a completely different experience and position of knowledge. The conversation that happens after the work is intertwined in such a deep way with what we all just experienced and built together... And at the same time the differences between us are almost magnified.

LvdB: Then the verbatim conversation follows a complex physical exchange in which the body is present. I have also applied this in my last two performances, in which the conversation still is important, but also moves out of the center. The embodied experience without interpretation, experienced, comes first anyway. But to be honest I'm also really looking forward to making things that don't have words at all. Which are mystery, signless and unnamed.

MN: For me the image of the oracle is very central. Where in fact you are always on the verge of the unknown, which can't be named, but you can respond to it. That's so fascinating. You can make a powerful exchange without ever feeling the need to ask "what do you mean?" And that's explosive. In a gentle way.

LvdB: To feel that you can respond to each other without hurting each other, to understand that you can be together without understanding or interpreting anything, that is amazing.

MN: Yes ... And fertile. It's actually quite addictive. What I find very fascinating is the difference with the argumentative nature in academic writing, with its demand for logic and rigour. That your argument is well thought out, your references are watertight. With writing that is more open, mysterious, inspired, speculative and emergent, the question is, in fact, where is the rigour ...

LvdB: I am reminded of a performance for young people that I made a long time ago, I would like to give myself away but I don't know to whom. It was about religion, for me. About the need to follow a guru, but not to do it. That's also about the mystery. It was made for young people and I made it at Huis aan de Amstel,¹⁰ which often makes quite didactic performances for young people. I didn't feel like it at all and thought I'm going to make something that really for me is about the desire to surrender and the fear of doing it. Four men who are always making noise and who were very busy, and now and then they came to sit with an old woman. A very mysterious work, but well thought through.

And then the youngsters came, 15-16 years old ... and one of them said, "I really didn't understand what this is about at all, but I found it very fascinating ..." and then I thought: yes, that! I want that! That

combination! That you feel that. That you can find something very fascinating, precisely because you don't understand it.

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MN: And I think that's where the rigour for our kind of work lies ... in that awakening that fascination ... That's actually the only thing that matters. Much more than that everyone 'gets it', or like with the musical *Billy Elliott*¹¹ that everyone sits on the same roller coaster. Because there is a technology of mysteries and of making oracles. There's something that works.

LvdB: Which makes it share-able.

MN: Yes ... also make-able ... In the work with Cross Pollination there are moments that work and some that don't. It works, when everyone's input is brought in with integrity, not with the aim of trying to score or win.

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LvdB: But that's what I'm wondering now, with regard to that question of actualisation... Why are we talking now? Do we talk because we are curious about each other, or because we have nothing else to do, or because we have an article to write? Is the article the goal or is it an alibi for a meeting that has wanted to happen for some time? Why are we here now?

MN: The last for me ...
(laughter)

LvdB: Yes, just because we are curious about each other. Then we don't have to talk about dialogue at all. We don't actually have a set mission.

MN: No. Also because this talk doesn't have to be about something particular.

LvdB: It doesn't have to be about anything. It's so funny that we notice 'we're here now', because the dictaphone is on and then we just keep on talking, so you're also talking because you started talking. Because I also think, could we get into [communicating through] movement now?

MN: Yes I have thought about it too.

MN: The dictaphone asks us ...

LvdB: ... For word.

MN: There's that whole architecture of the situation again which determines what happens ... but you don't have to surrender to that ...

LvdB: No!

MN: I would be curious how we can make an oracle ... Now ... in half an hour..

LvdB: Ok ... what is an oracle?

A divine message? It's not a message, is it? A statement, a trigger, a slap in the face or something.

MN: A zen clap with one hand... Phlats!! Enlightenment!!

The Greek word oracle was something like 'speaking the truth'. In any case, to me it's something that's open, that needs interpretation... Not a concrete prediction of the future, like "you're going to wreck your car tomorrow." Have you ever consulted an oracle?

LvdB: No.

MN: Could your performance be an oracle?

LvdB: *Dying Together*¹² maybe ... Not for telling the truth, but for looking at something from a different angle.

MN: Perhaps inviting?

LvdB: To turn yourself around?

MN: But maybe also for that boy, who said: “It was fascinating but I don’t know what it means.”

LvdB: This I recognise, when something is set in motion or when something new is tapped into.

MN: For me the point is really in those two things: “It’s fascinating but I don’t know what it means.” The fascination means that you stay with it despite not knowing why.

LvdB: You also learn that you don’t know everything

MN: Yes! Exactly ... which can be unbearable and exciting at the same time ...

LvdB: I made *Braakland*,¹³ based on the works of Coetzee.¹⁴ Circling around the question what happens if you accept death. The performance takes place on a huge wasteland at the outskirts of a city. Performers appear and disappear in the distance. As an audience, you feel left alone by them. You see people who kill and bury each other. With no reason. It is a kind of nature documentary in which you see people being violent towards each other, without any resistance. It just happens.

MN: There is no moralising either.

LvdB: It’s like the zebra who is caught by the lion while a bird flies overhead. Everything is taking place kind of just behind a bush or just out of sight ... I think it’s the most beautiful piece I’ve ever made, very early on in my career. I was asking, what happens if we accept death and don’t resist? You long for acceptance, but if you don’t resist at all then life will also become worthless ... Then there was a man who became really angry, who said: “These people are not dying, they are slaughtered ...” and then I asked “huh, is there a difference? Aren’t you dying if you’re slaughtered?” That was very interesting to me. He wanted to moralize it ...

I don’t know how it has to do with what we were just talking about.

MN: It doesn’t have to.

L I think it says something about what words do, when we categorise things differently. A person has killed a person, and then it is not dying ... Dying is natural, we cannot help it; it happens when we fall from a mountain or a rampart. If we kill each other, it's something else. But we are part of that very big happening ... So finally it is also just dying.

MN: I do feel there is something active in dying. If you die, you're the subject. If you are killed then you are the object.

LvdB: But eventually you die.

MN: Maybe dying and being killed meet in the reality of death.

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LvdB: I think it's about allowing things to be what they are, and then there can also be a certain interpretation. So we come back to the idea of action. When is something an action?

In the same performance (*Braakland*) we worked with the performers in the field for three days to prepare it for the performance. That's how we got to know that piece of land. Because sometimes it was in the sand in Belgrade, in the drought in Brazil but also in the rain in the Netherlands or in Ireland. All different surfaces that you walk on differently. It was really about walking, that performance ... A new actor was trained and I asked her to walk towards me, the audience. After watching her doing that walk of a few hundred meters I said to her: "You shouldn't perform that you're walking. Just walk."

MN: Eugenio Barba¹⁴ would have said the same.

LvdB: It was an amazing moment for her and for me when we realized: oh yes it really is a very big difference. When she did it again, she walked ... Actions can go to the bare bones of what they are. And then to me being killed is the same as dying.

MN: Then it all comes together in one fell swoop.

LvdB: And at that moment, it doesn't matter for a while if it's dying or being killed. It's about conciseness. It is interesting when on the one hand you try to capture things in a kind of essence, the nakedness of the action, and at the same time it is enigmatic, undefined. Those two are really intriguing together.

MN: I like this nakedness, it shows the organism alive and intact, it has no clothes on but the whole unknowable miracle is still there.

LvdB: Maybe that's also with dialogue that you move away from the opinion, the assumed, the expected ... The bare bones of dialogue, where are they?

MN: I think this lies in a way of speaking where you can hold your thought carefully in cupped hands, so that it is still alive and able to move. Being concise does not mean that there should be no space left inside the words. 'Getting to the core' of something implies going for the singularity of the thing, to the smallest and most dense point of definition. But you realize that it actually disappeared and there is nothing left alive.

LvdB: It's about being present.

MN: Yes, undefined presence is powerful. Sometimes dialogues can get a little tiresome, when anything that happens is dissected and dissected and that presence seems to disappear, like with the 'getting to the core'.

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LvdB: You can't always control it. We're very often unable to let something be. There are magical moments, in dialogue, when that happens, but you can't have it all the time.

MN: As a dancer, I have often been to the improvisation sessions in Amsterdam with musicians and dancers, where it happens too that everything is just moving in presence all the time.

LvdB: That can be unbearable, for the public, because you are not inside it yourself.

MN: Maybe... but when it works well then it's also fascinating to witness! Sometimes it allows me to escape my need to always be critical – this is good, this isn't, now it's happening, now it isn't.

LvdB: You are able to also witness as an improviser

MN: Yes you escape the cleverness and the critic... And that also has a lot to do with being allowed to be present as an audience.

LvdB: It reminds me of a teacher of mine, Dragan Klaić.¹⁶ He used to sleep during performances.

MN: Oh, nice! What did he say about that?

LvdB: You can be with each other, and then sleep and wake up again.

MN: Yes wonderful... and the most beautiful moment actually, waking up inside a performance! With music we have much more permission for 'letting go'. With Radio Kootwijk Live we once made a concert where we aimed to put people to sleep.., The first snoring sounds were really a victory ... It has something very intimate.

LvdB: That would be nice too, if we could fall asleep here together ...

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LvdB: I'm brooding on something ... Being With. I think it's a response to a lot of the dialogical work that I have done. I see an image of a woman and a chair. They're both being present, before the solving, understanding and changing begins. This shared presence might be a dialogue too.

You could also say that we are talking now because we find it very too intense to just sit opposite each other. But in the end it's two of us in this room.

MN: Yes ... And ... being doesn't necessarily imply inaction. Being present without wanting to 'solve it' doesn't mean one should be passive. To me it means that you are following simple and direct impulses. I've been juggling a lot lately with the words complexity and complicated.

Complexity grows through simple straightforward actions. Complication is clever: a plan to control and solve the whole thing at once, in one complicated move. Like that great definition you've worked on for a long time and then you have described that one thing.. Like an encyclopaedia. Complexity is made of all the very simple things that work and shift together and are flexible to grow and change. Like a tarot deck.

LvdB: Complexity *IS* and complication *WANTS TO BE*.

MN: Yes, it wants to control everything. The desire to understand and grasp it all.

LvdB: Then you come back to 'not wanting to walk, but walking.'

MN: I think Being-With is very much connected to that, to this simplicity, this nakedness. I just watched Donna Haraway's¹⁵ documentary¹⁶ with the jellyfish that keeps swimming by. Complexity through simple actions.

LvdB: And it is also about the frame that is imposed by the arts. That you ask someone to walk in a performance.

MN: Yes, there is a paradox in that.

LvdB: You're eating now, but if I put a camera on it.

MN: Then I won't be eating anymore.

LvdB: It's already a bit different because of that dictaphone ... I'm also worried about the sound of the cheese slicer. Again the presence of the viewer, listener, future audience. Being concerned with the future audience, that you're going to share it. I've been wanting to escape from that all my life.

MN: It is a paradoxical question to ask someone to walk on the stage. If you don't walk functionally like you do in daily life to go to the toilet or the kitchen, is it still walking? Now you walk for another purpose, which belongs on a poetic level. A parallel thing happens in mime when you push against an invisible wall. You move the action of pushing from the hands to the back of the heel, redirecting the energy down into the ground. With the walking, you also transform the reality of the action and it becomes an equivalent force, redirected but with the same energy.

If the Woman and the Chair are just being present on stage, they might transform into an Oracle. The action of 'being present' could invite the same kind of shift as happens with the walking or the pushing. The action transforms from the functional to the theatrical and oracular... or from the personal and intentional to the bare bones, enigmatic action. If I just see you sitting here, I don't have a question. But if it's in a work of art or on the stage, then you become a question mark. That woman and that chair. Strangers. Maybe also to themselves.

LvdB: It is about being-with. I once saw a chair by a window in the sun. Snow outside. I looked at that chair, I was also in that room. It looked so peaceful. That chair was really there for me. I thought about dying. When you die you become part of the world in a different way. So you're not leaving, I guess. I could just suddenly very well imagine being present in the way that chair was present. So when I think about that woman and that chair, they're really two entities. The body of that woman and the body of that chair were there together. How can you visualise that, in dialogue? In a kind of reciprocal, equal way?

MN: Do you have the same feeling sometimes about a human? That peaceful being-there.

LvdB: The images that come to my mind are of homeless people, whom the city passes by. You?

MN: The image that comes to mind is a kind of horror. That was my mother's body when I first saw it. When she passed away very suddenly. It's strange because it's actually a not-being. And present in the worst way.

LvdB: Why do we say that? That it is not-being?

MN: It hit me like a hammer blow, the absence of life, of movement. And of course that is very much about scale as well. About where you are looking.

LvdB: Yes, that is bizarre, right? The absence of movement, of breathing. I saw a frozen sea once. I couldn't really look at that either. You think that there is something wrong with your perception because it is impossible.

MN: Yes, that's the horror. Or a frozen waterfall. And there, too, when you look at a different level, there is plenty of movement. I'm also thinking about knitting. I've noticed that I can knit really big things if I just think. "Ah, nice to be knitting." And as soon as I think of the result it's really impossible to continue and I have to stop immediately. That could also be a kind of being, which is quite active and focused, in a flow. I often knit patterns with beautiful colours and I feel the pattern growing while I'm actually only busy with that one stitch at a time.

I know it also from when I'm completely absorbed in music, when I'm dancing. I don't think about what I'm giving to people or how long do I have to go or oh my god, is this good enough? That's all gone. And you are present with the simplest next step, just like with complexity. But then it is the total situation, I'm either completely here or there. And at the same time I feel the richness of the complexity around me. The music is completely present in all its incomprehensibility, while I'm swimming in it. One step at a time, one stitch at a time.

And then I sense all the possibilities because there is a moment in between the steps, no matter how long or small that is, with an infinite potential for change. But only in between the beats, because as soon as you are actually committed to the next beat, the moment of infinite possibility has already closed, because then your whole body is committed to moving towards that one point. It's like the stillness of the trapeze, at the end of the swing, where the energy is free and can be used for a somersault or trick. And that is also there in that very simple moment of taking the next step. There is also the infinite potential for an action.

LvdB: And again and again, right? Again and again. And always different. And at the same time ... I'm also thinking now that it's nice that we started talking about dialogue and now we talk about this. And about being present. And in essence you need that presence to enter into a dialogue. When we began our conversation, we were very much searching for the other. We were much less present with ourselves and our own centers, with our own stories and feelings. So that you use all your tentacles in that interaction. What happens quickly in dialogue is that you move out of your own center. So you become a bit of a painter on top of a staircase painting a wall that is just out of reach. You're just out of your center of gravity. That might also be the case with the walking... Gravity goes down with every step. And you are there with your attention, not with what the other person might be thinking. You are with your own body and from there you are in relation to the other.

MN: I was with a Mensendieck¹⁹ therapist the other day for my knees. She said that I always stand like this: (*Marije stands up and leans forward slightly*). This is actually the basic tap dance position, weight forward, on the balls of the feet and ready to go... But then she said it causes my weight to put pressure on my joints. So I have to find my center...

LvdB: But that's funny, because now that you're center-ing, it looks like you're falling backwards.

MN: Yes! Does it look like that?

LvdB: Yes, you have that feeling, don't you?

MN: Yes, but I didn't know you could actually see it.

LvdB: I see you are afraid to fall backwards.

MN: Yes, that's exactly the feeling that overwhelms me. I can't do it very well either. I'm so used to always be in that forward mode.

LvdB: Ready to go.

MN: But also always ready to change direction and accommodate ...

LvdB: Yes, and in the beginning, we were both very ready to accommodate so we were moving towards the other immediately. But then you're both kind of in a vague middle, right, trying very hard to make something of it.

MN: There has to be a lot of trust when you're just being there together.

LvdB: You're leaning backwards now, aren't you? It's not actually backwards, but it feels backwards when you sit straight up. Because we are leaning towards each other all the time, it feels like backwards.

But we are already enough.

MN: Yes and that is the trust ... Men often sit like this (hangs back in the chair with legs stretched forward). It's a whole different position. "I'm there, but I'm not there. Yes, you go ahead and I'll see if I can come along."

LvdB: Yes, if it's nice enough. Convince me.

MN: Yes. I once read a nice observation about men and women: The tendency to set up secret societies and cults is often a male affair. And initiations, things like that. Women already have built-in rites of passage in their bodies, that you're going to menstruate and then when you have a child, and then the menopause. You can't actually get around it.

LvdB: Women have anchored that in their bodies, men have to create it. I have made a work on the Senses in Germany and there was a reviewer, Renate Klett²⁰, a feminist, who said: "Finally I understand what female art is." And then she added, and I thought that was a big compliment: "Men are either on earth or in heaven, but women have the ability to combine them." So that you're in the shit and at the same time in the clouds, bringing those two forces or those two forms of being together with your body, in your body, literally. And that they don't have to compete.

MN: Yes, you don't have to make the choice. From dialogue to being-with, that could be a nice title. The question is, of course, is anything going to happen in between that chair and that woman?

LvdB: Ha! Should something be done?

MN: Does something have to happen in a performance? Nothing ever needs to happen in a painting. Painters have found a clever take on that ...

LvdB: Not much needs to happen here for me. I once made a performance with prisoners in Antwerp with the Toneelhuis.²¹ We had a small podium on the third floor of the prison and there they had all taped the floor plans of their own cells on the floor. We had worked with maps for a long time. Maps of where they were now, those prison cells, but also maps of the places or houses where they had once felt very comfortable. Which were often the grandparents' homes, remarkably enough. Then I asked, where do you sit all day? How are you here? They answered, I lie there, or I sit there, with my cigar. Then I asked, so where is your chair? There's a window there, how are you there then? Completely honing in on that "being there". And then he sat there. I still remember those rehearsals, it was so wonderful. It was really Jan's expertise to sit in his way. And then I would say: "Ok guys, let's look at this for five minutes now." Then we all sat there looking at Jan for five minutes. And at the end I would say, "Jesus, Jan, how beautiful that was." And it was just sitting there, like he's been doing in that damn cell for years. It became some kind of delayed photography, that you make a 'photograph' by looking at it together... that's what I like about theater, that you actually create value with the gaze and the attention. Together you literally capture something.

MN: Catch something that is uncatchable.

LvdB: Yes, and not so much in the theater lights as through your shared attention. So the one who wants to show herself and the one who wants to watch it, that is also dialogical, you really do that together. Or at least if dialogic is something that you need each other for.

MN: Yes, and I imagine, in that situation it's not about some kind of perverse way of seeing and being seen, that it becomes the exhibitionist and the voyeur. It feels like he's sitting there. Not to impress anyone or to say, hey I'm great at sitting, but just to share actually. Yes, this is how I am. And with the certainty of really knowing that sitting. And the audience doesn't come to be wowed by spectacle or emotions but for shared attention. That might be hard with the

woman and the chair. With Jan, the whole context is very important, this is a prisoner and he always sits there like this.

LvdB: The question is how to give the context. How empty can it be? I haven't solved that yet either.

MN: No. But the painter doesn't have to solve it.

LvdB: I have that too sometimes with the montage of a work. Then it became such a narrative. There were several scenes and six people of different ages. And then it became like a little family. I got really annoyed. I said to the dramaturge: "But I want it to be an exhibition. A white wall, seven paintings. Not some kind of drama, a different kind of montage."

MN: Yes, that's what Odin Theater²² is very good at, breaking narrative impulses.

LvdB: You can use it, just for a moment.

MN: Narrative can be there, in small chunks, but it's never worked out or pushed to its end... to convince or anything like that. A narrative, a story with a beginning, a middle and an end is also kind of an easy solution, to be able to say something

LvdB: Yes, it can also distract from the core. Like "We are talking about so many things, but it's really about nothing. Where are you?" I've felt that way with other works as well. That the narrative, which may also be the opinion or the subject of the conversation, distracts from the conversation itself. Or that the narrative actually distracts from what the performance is really about.

MN: Yes. And in an almost irresistible way.

LvdB: Yes, you are so drawn into it.

MN: Yes, that is perhaps also where poetry and the poetic come in again. The poetic is not bound to a narrative.

(Marije, standing.) Oh, I'm swaying back and forth with my weight now. I'm continuously asking "where is my center now?" Or "where am I?"

Going forwards or backwards or am I about to fall?" Searching for the point where your toes just touch the ground, but don't push against it.

LvdB: If I think about it then I would like it if you, as a spectator, could also sit in your center. And you know that if you want you can respond. That to me is the greatest value of the work I've been doing over the last ten years with Building Conversation. The reciprocity of the relationship between those who show and those who are willing to watch. And that those roles don't have to be fixed. That it is possible to say, "Oh but now I want to show you something, now I will tell you something and then you can watch." It's important that everyone is present and participates.

MN: Juggling roles.

LvdB: Yes, not sitting backwards with your legs stretched across each other. But also not all the way forward either where it's not about me but about you guys doing fun stuff. It is also always the question "Where am I?" And that is also sincere, it is also about me. I can also stand and say "Stop, I don't like this," or, I don't know ... I think the 'being' of the audience is also really important.

MN: With Cross Pollination, this basic horizontality with fluid roles is really the starting point in the work, so to speak. But we are with peers, equals.

LvdB: Yes, then it's different.

MN: Yes, and it is also very easy and very natural.

LvdB: But don't you really want that kind of gathering with the audience?

MN: I think it can be done with dialogue because it's the whole point that everyone present is part of the oracle. If someone withholds their input, the oracle no longer works. And also there is no judgement inside a dialogue about good or bad, or about the quality of your input.

Performance is a different situation, in which you also have an exchange of time, to a certain extent. So the time we put into making and becoming able to perform, we give this to the audience in a very

concentrated form, just like in a poem really. It's almost like putting pressure on time. And you release that concentrated time in the performance, that is really a gift, the surplus, the potential. While in a dialogue we all exist in the same compression, in the same air pressure.

MN: If you go to the concert, you don't want to hear a bad piece of music. But if it's your niece that plays, then it's fine, then it doesn't matter.

LvdB: The piece of music is determined by the way it is listened to. You really create the moment of sharing with each other.

MN: You mean in any situation where something is shared, you accept it if it aligns well with your intention.

I was in Denmark for a meeting about art in rural areas. A rural area asks us to work differently. We learn to take more time, to integrate what we want to do into the community, to make the moment together, to make sure that it is really carried by people. It's not that all roles have to be equal, but in a rural area the artistic project has to be really accepted by the people before it is meaningful.

And I just had to think about it, because that's often what makes art difficult in our time, that in the cities there's often no integration of the why of this performance with the people sitting there in the room.

LvdB: You can consume anything in the city and it is exchangeable. And something is lost. Then you have to work very hard inside the theater to be present in that way because if you are there firstly as a consumer, it is really much more difficult to become more actively present with everyone. In an emergency, if someone passes out or something, we're all here.

MN: Our village projects with Cross Pollination are a sort of co-creation together with the community. And at a certain point we found the idea of a half-mask, where we are between representation and reality. We were in costume and character, but not completely. We played all kinds of 'half-games' with the people. Not rehearsed but playing with interactions. Because we were half in character, we could lift up the moment. But there was not this feeling of a performance. I found it fascinating. Again, to be on that border between what can happen and not, that the roles were never clear or distilled.

LvdB: So everyone stays awake?

MN: Yes, everyone was awake. There was a real buzz.

LvdB: Being awake is so important. I think that's what matters to me too.

MN: Yes, and that has to do with that boy at your performance, that you are fascinated but you don't know what it is. So you also remain curious. If a kind of poetry can then arise, then I think it is a state in which you can be for a very long time. With each other. Without anything actually happening. Like some kind of party.

LvdB: Reminds me of what you just said about music ... I also experienced it once. That moment when you make the performance together ... There was a wedding of a friend of mine and there was a rumour that the bride's sister was going to dance. There were quite a lot of people, and we created a kind of space in the middle for her. She arrived and we all sat around her. You want it to succeed. It's the bride's sister! I could see that she also found it exciting. And then the music started. It was the wrong piece of music, a false start. And we all thought, "We can do this. We can just hold this moment. It'll be fine." And then the right music comes in and you really feel that you carry it together. Because if you don't, it's gone. Because in the end it's nothing ... It's so beautiful when it is actually nothing! It's so beautiful because it is so fragile. And what you describe from your experience with Joop van den Ende's²³ musical, that's so complete, you can't do anything there!¹⁵

MN: There is no space for you as co-creator.

LvdB: It's a steamroller ... I think it's beautiful when it's fragile and when we all have to be on the tip of our toes in order to let it happen. Because then it's everything. Because then you make it together.

MN: Just like that space between the beats. It really has an infinite possibility.

like the space in-between beats





Figure 2. Exterior of the barn where the dialogue took place, © Lotte van den Berg

Notes

- 1 Lotte van den Berg uses the theatrical form to make relationships between people visible, not only within the walls of the theater, but also beyond. She works in the public space of cities all over the world to make visible what is already there. Images, movements and scenes are reduced to the essence with attention to detail. Van den Berg moves between the worlds of dance, theater, performance and film, creating an open, very individual style that invites the audience to different perspectives and perspectives. She works with professionals and non-professionals, on location and in theaters and chooses to be inspired by what goes on around us, in everyday life. For more information on her work visit her website.
- 2 From 2013 to 2022, Lotte van den Berg, together with Daan 't Sas, Peter Aers and many others, worked on Building Conversation, a long-running Dialogical Art project. Inspired by conversational techniques and rituals from all over the world, Building Conversation has gathered a repertoire of conversations/performances with participants from all over Europe. At the end of 2022, Lotte van den Berg stopped her work for Building Conversation. The collaboration was concluded and celebrated with a book: *Building Conversation – The Scripts*. For current information and the book visit their website.
- 3 Marije Nie is a tap dancer, performer, researcher, facilitator and educator. She is co-founder of the Parliament of Practices and the Cross Pollination collective. She has worked with many styles and genres of music, film, theater, interdisciplinary art and community arts in The Netherlands and internationally. For more information on Marije Nie visit her website.
- 4 Cross Pollination collective was founded in 2017 by Adriana La Selva and Marije Nie, to bring practitioners from all disciplines of the performing arts together in a nomadic theater laboratory to engage in the dialogue in-between practices. For more information on the Cross Pollination Collective visit their website.
- 5 *I Know... Digital Ritual* was created by Bill T. Jones for the Holland Festival in June 2020. Bill T. Jones is an American choreographer, director, author and dancer. He is the co-founder of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and artistic Director of New York Live Arts in Manhattan.
- 6 Visual artist Daan 't Sas is Lotte's partner, both in life and in art. Together they founded Building Conversation, which he currently runs as a platform for dialogical art.
- 7 Oerol Festival is an annual ten-day cultural festival held in June on the Dutch island of Terschelling. This festival was founded in 1981 by Joop Mulder, owner of café De Stoep in Midsland at the time. The first edition took place on June 18, 1982 and it is still running to this day.
- 8 Radio Kootwijk Live was a network of musicians and artists who created new forms of concerts that existed from 2009 till 2015. They organised interdisciplinary labs, bringing together classical musicians with makers from other performative and artistic disciplines, writers and scenic designers and light designers. Besides the artistic research and creation they also worked on forms for exchange and reflection through dialogue, often bringing in professionals from outside the arts who were both participant, dialogue partner and audience.
- 9 Dr. Bart van Rosmalen was originally a cellist and theater director, and has been Lecturer in Arts and Professionalization with HKU University of the Arts Utrecht since 2014.
- 10 Huis aan de Amstel was a theater company that existed from 1990-2009 in Amsterdam. The company made performances for children, young people and adults, with a particular interest in the way in which changes in the world affect people's lives and their immediate environment.
- 11 In 2014 and 2015, Nie was involved as a tap dance coach for the Dutch version of the musical Billy Elliott, produced by Joop van den Ende Theaterproducties.

- 12 *Dying Together* by Lotte van den Berg premiered on October 12, 2018 at the Rotterdamse Schouwburg in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Performed by both performers and spectators, the audience is invited to participate in a physically executed thought exercise in which contemporary situations and images are experienced from the inside. The theme of dying together is central and sheds new light on the way in which we relate to each other.
- 13 *Braakland* by Lotte van den Berg / Compagnie Dakar premiered July 2004 at festival De Karavaan in Alkmaar. *Braakland* tells a sober, visual story about nine figures who roam on forgotten earth. They surrender to the laws of life and death without protecting or defending themselves.
- 14 John Maxwell Coetzee is an Australian writer and literary translator of South-African origin. On 10 December 2003 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.
- 15 Eugenio Barba (1936) is an Italian author and theater director based in Denmark. He is the founder of the Odin Theater and the International School of Theater Anthropology, both located in Holstebro, Denmark.
- 16 Dragan Klaić (1950-2011) studied drama in Belgrade and majored in theater at Yale. From 1978 to 1991 he taught dramaturgy in Belgrade. He moved to the Netherlands where he was a lecturer at the Amsterdam-Maastricht Summer University, director of the Theater Institute of the Netherlands and permanent fellow at Felix Meritis, professor at the Central European University in Budapest and the Academy of Arts of the University of Leiden.
- 17 Donna J. Haraway (1944) is an American Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness Department and Feminist Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a prominent scholar in the field of science and technology studies. She has also contributed to the intersection of information technology and feminist theory, and is a leading scholar in contemporary ecofeminism. Her work criticizes anthropocentrism, emphasizes the self-organising powers of nonhuman processes, and explores dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practices, rethinking sources of ethics.
- 18 *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly* (2016) is a documentary by Fabrizio Terranova and features Haraway in a playful and engaging exploration of her life, influences and ideas. Best-known for her groundbreaking work on gender, cyborgs, animals and post-colonialism.
- 19 Mensendieck therapy aims to improve posture and exercise based on conscious observation, awareness by the patient, analysis and systematic practice of daily movements and postures. It was founded by Bess Mensendieck in the early 20th century.
- 20 Renate Klett (1946) is a writer, theater- and dance- critic, lives in Berlin. She has worked as a dramaturg (Frankfurt, Tübingen, Cologne, Stuttgart, Hamburg) and as program director/artistic director for the Theater der Welt festival (Cologne, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Munich).
- 21 Toneelhuis is a theater company in Antwerp that was founded in 1998 from the merger of the Royal Dutch Theater and the Blue Monday Compagnie. Lotte van den Berg was connected to Het Toneelhuis as part of the artistic team between 2005 and 2009.
- 22 Odin Teatret is an avant-garde theater group based in Holstebro, Denmark. It was founded by Italian theater director and investigator Eugenio Barba in 1964. Until 2022, Odin Teatret was part of the NTL, Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, founded in 2002. In 2023, Odin Teatret is an independent group.
- 23 Joop van den Ende is a former producer for television, film and theater. Joop van den Ende Theater Productions merged in 2015 with Albert Verlinde's musical production company to form Stage Entertainment.