

Together We Know More than We Do Alone: Sharing Some of the Thoughts Behind the «keðja encounter Questioning Agendas», Aarhus 2011

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The keðja¹ encounter is the largest platform for dance in the Nordic-Baltic countries. It not only brings together numerous dance professionals but also all the professions within the dance world. While distribution of scholarships to artists and freelancers is one of the many activities of the encounter, the program also encompasses practical work, lectures and talks.

This article will guide you through the process of curating the *keðja encounter Questioning Agendas*, which took place in Aarhus, Denmark, September 2011. This work was a journey into how to both accommodate important issues and have these mirrored in the actual structure of the event – where former keðjas have tended to follow a more traditional conference set up. This article will attempt to give an idea of our reflective working process.

In the framework of keðja, a number of dance professionals from the Nordic-Baltic countries met six times during the years 2008–2010 in vitalizing and inspiring exchanges – the so-called Encounters. There was a one-year time gap between the first period and the new three-year period of keðja activities that began in September 2012 (both supported by the Nordic Baltic Mobility Programme and the Culture programme of The European

Union). This allowed for a chance to create a slightly different keðja encounter in Aarhus, September 2011: A keðja with less economical resources and – unlike the previous encounters – without a theme defined years before the actual implementation. keðja aarhus offered an opportunity to react to the most prevailing topics and needs in the various fields of professional dance, which the former keðja encounters had made evident. In present times we can no longer count on any given, stable truths or all-encompassing stories on how the world is. This circumstance presents numerous challenges to institutions and structures as well as individuals who operate within the art world. While the institutional structures of art may have trouble in adapting to the new demands quickly enough, the more versatile and adaptable role of the artist is definitely undergoing changes and expanding into new spheres. Aside from the problem of finding new audiences and frames for production, we² found that the most recurrent theme addressed in the previous keðja encounters was the overall navigation of artists and cultural workers – in other words the relation between the dance world and its surroundings.

1 keðja means chain in both Old Norse (the North Germanic language used in the Scandinavian and Nordic region during the Viking Age) as well as in modern Icelandic. The here described keðja project is developed by six Nordic and Baltic organizations working with contemporary dance in a professional context.

2 Besides the author of this article, the 'we' refers to the people with whom I collaborated during the programming. In the first part of the preparation process it was primarily the head of Danseværket, the overall coordinator of keðja, and the curator of the festival Moving Agendas, and later in the process the 'we' consisted of my two co-curators and me. Names are listed at the end of this article.

Dance and Society

Our vision was to reinforce dance artists and the dance world more generally through a heightened awareness of the relations and connections between the art of dance and the society around it. By doing this we hoped to foster shifts in the existing approach to agendas and habitual structures. Our scope could be summed up as an attempt in strengthening the relational aspects between the world of dance and the rest of society. We asked ourselves: “Can society be seen not only as a source of possible audiences to dance productions, but also as a sphere in which dance artists can diversify their activities, broaden their practice and share what they do to the benefit of more people?” Or said in a less polite way: “Who do you make your art for and why?”

The inspiration for this approach came from Simon Dove’s article “Start making sense” published in a magazine titled *Animated*.³ Here Dove criticizes the current organizational structures in dance art for focusing too much on the product and specific frames for presenting dance, as opposed to making it possible for artists to work, and work well, in diverse contexts. Dove claims that the infrastructures of the dance of our day have marginalized dance from the rest of society – even though dance has the power to change lives and essentially is a social action. Drawing on statistics arguing that in the European context only six per cent of the population attends dance performances, he opines/claims that: “Clearly current dance practice does not make sense to most people.”⁴

Dove describes how he meets many artists

who have only started to develop a profound sense of purpose in their work years after finishing their education. He is determined that the following question should be the structural core of dance students’ education: “[What is] their role and responsibility as artists in the world today?”⁵ If this problem is not addressed during arts education, the risk is to create what he calls ‘social disengagement’. Dove concludes:

... this is a very powerful way to develop in them a real sense of responsibility for what they do, why they do it, and for whom and with who do they do it. These are key questions for any artist in the 21st century, and students who begin this process of self inquiry whilst still at college are years ahead of those who only begin to engage with these questions when confronted by the realities of professional life.⁶

Parallel to the stimulating questions that Simon Doves’ article raises and the growing focus on the role of the audience and their “say” on things – or at least on their own experience, “we became interested in the Critical Response Process method” developed by the renowned Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.⁷ When it became possible for the US-based Dance Exchange to allow two of their employees to work with us at the keđja encounter in Denmark, we felt lucky. Dance Exchange is a company of dance artists that creates dances by engaging people in art making. When engaging in dance practice in a

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 For info on the company see <http://danceexchange.org>. A few months prior to keđja, Dance Exchange had completed a restructuring in which Liz Lerman, who founded the company in 1976, left in order to pursue independent projects.

3 The article was published in the Autumn 2010 edition of *Animated* magazine. More info: www.communitydance.org.uk/animated.

4 Dove: “Start making sense”, *Animated*, Autumn 2010.

variety of contexts, inside as well as outside of black box theatres and studios, they asks four basic questions: Who gets to dance? Where is the dance happening? What is it about? Why does it matter?

Formats and Methods of Sharing Knowledge

As content and form are two sides of the same coin, the concrete structures of the Aarhus encounter were of vital importance in the curatorial process. We were inspired by the changes in pedagogical approaches, which are getting more and more attention: We started out by agreeing that the social world has changed rapidly during the last decades. This is not only evident in how people want entertainment and art experiences. (There is more involvement, increased interest and activity in creating one's own experience. At one end of this continuum is the experience industry.) A parameter for the discussed change is what research tells us about teaching and acquiring knowledge: The so-called "transmission model" has shown its limits. Here transmission is understood as a transfer of information and knowledge from one (talking) person to other (listening) persons.⁸ Newer, more fertile methods are already increasingly implemented in parts of the business world.⁹ However, in many cases the educational system lags behind in meeting related demands of present and future societies.

8 Animation adapted from talk by Sir Ken Robinson on Changing Education Paradigms can be seen on: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>. More on his work: www.sirkenrobinson.com.

9 In Internet search the keywords 'meeting management' offer 19.232 hits. Links to a report on the Meetings Industry: http://fastfuture.com/?page_id=11.

The challenge, which we diagnosed as most important to address, was how to develop ways for sharing and disseminating knowledge suited to our field – to the benefit of both the dance environment as well as society at large. This viewpoint was crucial for how we structured the encounter: Why do we have to either sit down and listen to someone talking, for instance about creativity and the body, while our own body slowly falls asleep, or sweat a lot in a physical workshop, which may offer minimal reflective stimuli for the brain? We wanted to bridge what could be described as the often experienced but disadvantageous division of "brains over there, and bodies over here".

So we asked: What if dance artists took as their point of departure what is central for their work, i.e. the body and creativity? The body is a very wise entity – it even carries a brain on its top. The more both body and intellect are stimulated and used in a complementary process of learning, the better the learning effect. Inspired by, for instance, Open Space Technology as a format for sharing knowledge, we set out to find suggestions for how we could stimulate this mutual object of interest (body & brain) in order to meet, exchange knowledge and learn. As a given for the curatorial work, we used the idea that knowledge is relationally distributed amongst us. Together we know more, and know more surprising things, than we do alone.

We wanted this relational element to be clearly present in the concrete structuring of all days and all sessions of the encounter. In the first information sent out about Questioning Agendas, we invited participants to join the experiment being playful at heart, keeping in mind that our programming had a high amount of experimentation in it. This being stated, the programming would in no way

defy excellence, professional experience or the value of the traditional roles of giving and receiving. Our wish was to use the unique keõja environment developed by the Nordic-Baltic dance professionals over the previous three years as a fruitful setting for trying out other formats.

The Three Legs of Questioning Agendas

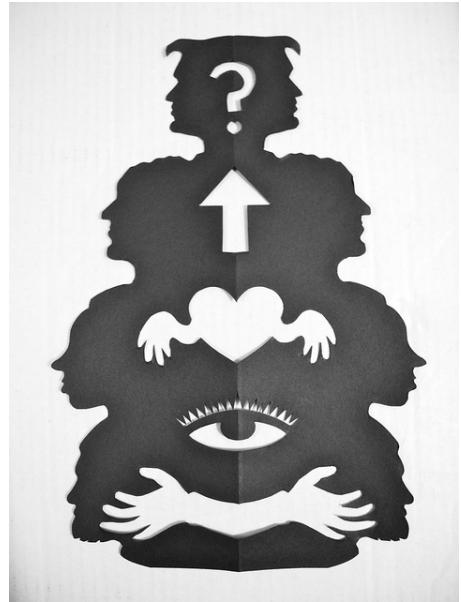
From all this inspiration and useful questions we condensed our inquiries into two questions: Why do you dance? Who do you dance for? On this basis we then defined the three main strands or legs of the programme:

- **Competences & Leadership:** A need for empowering the artist herself and her collaborators, raising the knowledge of own competences and through this the possibility of taking action.
- **Words:** Communication and dissemination, verbal and written (also with a focus on opening up dialogues on dance to non-colleagues)
- **Tools & Strategies:** Approaches to find new ways of finding and communicating with audiences and to acquire funding.

The keõja Programme and Its Concrete Numbers

During Questioning Agendas we offered all in all seven plenary activities and 19 individual sessions, happening in the course of three days. Before the official opening of keõja one whole day was dedicated to various pre-meetings as well as a facilitator's crash course. 140 participants met and spent time together in the framework made possible by the keõja team of seven employees, 15 volunteers and various local collaborators and co-producers.

The two main elements of the leg that was



John Borstel: – Here's my attempt to do conference notation in cut paper, with profiles of participants and icons to represent conference themes.

titled “Words” were: Critical Response Process methods on how to get useful feedback on anything from dance to dessert, and Re/viewing Dance – scrutinizing what perceptual lenses are used when watching dance and how to write about dance. Both activities ran for all three days. For the leg “Tools & Strategies” we offered an Open Space -inspired session taking place over two days, as well as a keynote on the role of art in society. The leg “Competences & Leadership” had a keynote on the competences of the artist, and a variety of hands-on sessions and debates. Amongst the latter was a two-day workshop where professionals and local youngsters involved with modern dance, and hip-hop and juggling met and created material together.

The Choreographers' Meeting came up with lots of concrete results for future actions, and parallel to this also The Producers' Meeting took

place. Both Meetings were developed during the first three years of keđja out of a concrete need amongst the artists and producers themselves. At this keđja encounter we decided to include them as an important part of the programme. For the keynote sessions our initial wish was to have the listeners actively participate in greater degrees than is common to conventional speech events. This desire was only partially fulfilled, but these sessions showed a lot of inspiration for future possibilities.

The day before the keđja encounter was officially opened, Dance Exchange held a crash course for a small group of future facilitators in the Critical Response Process in order for them to function as co-facilitators in the three-day long event. In the following days the process was presented and tried out on work-in-progress material created by some of the keđja participants.

We sought to provide time for a central activity of keđja; namely, Networking. For instance, we applied some new elements to the official opening, and we offered all participants stimuli and revitalization for body and mind via morning-yoga. Similarly, we encouraged the invited participants (who ran sessions) to work with and stimulate both body and mind as well as to try out other dialogue formats than the well-known panel structure. We aimed at, and think that we found, a good balance between involving the local dance community, the Nordic-Baltic participants and inviting professionals from other fields. There were many try-outs and a wealth of varied results. In addition to the mentioned sessions, there was a range of different approaches and takes on the three main legs or issues. The full programme can be accessed via the keđja website.

Formats for Sharing During the Event

Aware that we had created a huge programme and that most participants would want to be in several places at the same time, we set up a system of constructing minutes from all the sessions and made a Response Corner, where participants could write, film or draw comments via a net cam and a Smartboard. The system of minutes is a good idea to be further developed. The Response Corner did not get as much attention as we wished for, first and foremost because the programme was so intense. In another set up the option of recording or drawing your responses, as an alternative to the written word, will surely have its *raison d'être* in a dance environment.

On the final day of the encounter we carried out two further experiments: A Reporting Session and a Rotating Panel. The first functioned well and can be developed into a good method giving all participants a taste of the sessions they did not take part in. A description of The Reporting Session can be found in the list of facts at the end of the article.

The Rotating Panel summarized the three days in three steps. The second step involved a one-word response to the encounter by each participant. This is what the person drafting this minute caught:

Easy to ask for help, participation, question, positiveness, high, beyond, disco, joining of forces, involvement, unity, innovation, Gladstone Gander (Fætter Højben), creativity, connectedness, a lot of things, generosity, inspiration, potential, this place, communication, enjoy, people, energy, thoughts, openness, perspectives, say yes, hello, plans, Pluto, friends, tools, generosity.



Rounding Up Dance. Photo: Benedikte Paaske.

From this Elizabeth Johnson, for the second time during this keõja, conducted Dance Exchange's Build-a-Phrase method by creating movements to important words, sentences or notions; movements which we all danced together. This article features one snapshot from the last dance, and I bet there are still a good bunch of people who can remember all of or parts of the two danced summaries simply because we activated our bodies as part of the summary process, and physically pinned down the meanings of some words and notions.

Our decision to add a so-called graphic recording was a success. On the last day of the encounter two people made a huge drawing of what had happened during that day – drawing and writing the essence of meetings and sessions, illustrating it in pictures and good cites. The two persons, trained in this method, were mainly informed by the participants themselves who either came and reported to the two “recorders”, or were interviewed by them. The question remains for who these various types of documentation are made: Were they made for the participants and if so, how? Or were they made for people who were not present (colleagues, or people from other, perhaps non-related fields) and how was the material imparted to them? Perhaps these are relevant questions for a future keõja session.

In the Slipstream of keõja

It is interesting to note that the positive response to the Re/viewing session has already led to two further events. Similar sessions to the one described above took place at the Dance & Theatre Festival in Gothenburg (Sweden) in May 2012 and at the keõja encounter in Tallinn (Estonia) in September 2012.

Danish choreographers, who tested the

Critical Response Process in Aarhus, have voiced interest in using the method again. As now a few Danish facilitators have been through the crash course and Bush Hartshorn, the artistic director of Dansescenen in Dansehallerne, Copenhagen, has long-time experience with using this method, so I hope to see it implemented more and more.

Attempting a Conclusion

What you have just read includes many threads from which to weave different conclusions.

For me the most important thread is that it is indeed possible – with perhaps a bit more work – to create frameworks that facilitate other, dynamic structures for how to meet and how to exchange knowledge and learn together. With this I do not merely refer to the customary seminar/conference practices we all know by heart, but also to structures that mirror and strengthen the actual content, so that structure and content strengthen each other. These are structures that are flexible and versatile enough to accommodate what needs to be addressed right there and then as well as contain the potential to create positive friction and surprise us. These are structures, which keep us alert so that what we do is continuously questioned, and therefore perhaps will make sense, both to ourselves, to our colleagues and to many other people too.

In my opinion the core challenge of the professional dance world of today is to develop the existing structures and formats as well as adapt new ones for dissemination and knowledge sharing. Also, we should develop both the reason ‘why’ and the way ‘how’ we present and share the actual art work. Why so? Because, referring back to what Simon Dove discussed, the world of passive culture consumerism is



Tools & Strategies, Wednesday: John Borstel og Dorthe Kreutzfeldt. Photo: Linda Birkedal.

a world of yesterday. We have built an endless number of proscenium theatres where audiences are fixed in comfortable and passive seats. These monuments will stay and will still be used. But at the same time it is clear that this no longer is the only environment for artists to meet the numerous and headless beasts we call “the audience” – surely, this development is not a temporary whim. If the ways in which we present art are changing into situations of exchanging and meeting, then the formats we use around our art productions ought to reflect this shift. The way in which you work has a huge effect on the result. The way we structure education, post-education and work will always have effect on the art produced in these very same structures. Questioning the agendas of dance and its role in society can be a scary endeavour, but the tool can be very simple. I will let Simon Dove have the last word with the sentence he uses to describe the shift in focus: “Changing from ‘How you dance’ to ‘Why you dance’”.¹⁰

Facts

The Reporting Session

Amongst participants from each of the sessions in the programme one to two volunteers are found – overlaps are fine as the volunteers can report from more than one session. The volunteers join to form groups of four to six persons. They become reporters, who choose and agree on how to convey the essence/a summary of each session they took part in. This can be via keywords, movements, drawings or other formats. The participants of the whole encounter – depending on their number –

gather in groups around each of these “reporter groups”, so that for instance four “reporter groups” each have 20 persons around them. In 15 minutes, each group presents their report to the listening and watching group. On the sound of a bell, the “mob” of listeners moves on to the next reporter group (which will then, for instance, repeat their summaries up to four times during the whole Reporting Session). The Reporting Session can of course be refined in a number of ways. However, not only did our first try out give all participants a taste of what they had missed (as well as possibly new perspectives on what they indeed had attended), but it also provided information for the Graphic Recording that took place the same day.

The Following Persons Were So-Called Invited Participants at keōja

At conferences the following persons would commonly be called speakers or contributors. Following our own rule, all participants were seen as contributors, and thus the following were called “invited participants”: Anna Katrine Korning, Ulla Gad, Antonia Baehr, Barbara Simonsen, Brian Degn, Bush Hartshorn, Colin Poole, Cher Geurtze, Dorthe Kreutzfeldt, Elizabeth Johnson, Favela Vera Ortiz, Guðmundur Elías Knudsen, Helle Fuglsang, Ine Therese Berg, Isto Turpeinen, John Borstel, Karen Vedel, Katrin Ingvadóttir, Marlie Szlavik Johansen, Mette Ingvartsen, Niller Wischmann, Michael Eis, Palle Granhøj, Pernille Overø, Peter Anderson, Satu Tujunen, Sidsel Pape, Tatiana Chemi, Uta Plate and Valérie Castan.

10 From a live conversation with Simon Dove, Spring 2012, while writing this article. Simon then was the head of the dance education programme of The Herberger Institute at the Arizona State University.

Moving Agendas – An Important Sidekick

Parallel to the encounter Questioning Agendas, Danseværket organized a new dance festival in Aarhus that was curated by Annika B. Lewis. In collaboration with the keđja encounter and with a focus on citizens of Aarhus as the primary audience, the festival aimed to present dance art that consciously addresses its relationship with society.

The keđja Aarhus Team

Christine Fentz: Curator of the encounter keđja Aarhus Questioning Agendas

Peter Anderson: Co-curator and facilitator during keđja

Dorthe Kreutzfeldt: Co-curator and facilitator during keđja

Charlotte Mors: Daily leader of Danseværket, host organization for keđja

Anne Hübertz: Practical coordinator

Michala Melson: Practical coordinator

Kamma Siegumfeldt: Overall coordinator of keđja encounters, Dansehallerne

Annika B. Lewis: Curator of the festival “Moving Agendas” (and **Kira Stochholm, Jesper Bonde Hansen, Anne-Mette Hoffmann-Christensen, Janne Jensen** a.o.)

Links

kedja: www.kedja.net – including link to the video of the graphic recording

Host organisation Danseværket:

www.dansevaerket.dk

The festival Moving Agendas:

www.movingagendas.dk

Overall coordinator Dansens Hus/

now Dansehallerne: www.dansehallerne.dk

Dance Exchange: www.danceexchange.com

For further material, info and links, please contact:

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BIOGRAPHY

Christine Fentz is a director, dramaturge (MA) and artistic director of internationally touring Secret Hotel (Denmark). She works as a dramaturge for choreographers and directors. She likewise is active within artistic research and in the editorial board of Nordic Summer University's next publication on this subject (publ. 2013). Fentz has been on the board of Danseværket, Aarhus, since 1997. She co-founded and chaired the organisation titled Independent Performing Artists between 2005–09 (www.scenekunstnere.dk) and does other cultural political work.

BIOGRAFI

Christine Fentz er instruktør, dramaturg (cand.phil.) og kunstnerisk leder af internationalt turnerende Secret Hotel (.dk). Arbejder som dramaturg for koreografer og instruktører. Aktiv indenfor kunstnerisk forskning og i redaktionen for Nordisk Sommeruniversitets næste publikation om emnet (udgivet 2013). I Danseværkets bestyrelse (Aarhus) siden 1997. Medstifter og ordførende for den kulturpolitiske organisation Uafhængige Scenekunstnere 2005-09 scenekunstnere.dk og aktiv indenfor kulturpolitisk arbejde.