

Speech Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

On the occasion of the ceremony of the Helena Vaz da Silva European Award

8 november 2021

Dear board members of Europa Nostra, of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Centro Nacional de Cultura and the Clube Português de Imprensa,

Dear members of the jury,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first express how honoured and grateful I am to be standing here tonight and receiving the renowned Helena Vaz da Silva European Award for Raising Public Awareness of Cultural Heritage. I also wish to congratulate Antonia Arslan for the special recognition given by the Jury for her role in defending Europe's cultural heritage through literature and through defending human and cultural rights, especially those of female writers. I would very much have liked to know the inspiring Helena Vaz da Silva, who – from what I read – moreover was a friend of the admirable Marguerite Yourcenar, born in my city, in Brussels. I feel very well surrounded tonight, standing in the footsteps of these strong women.

At some point on their path, any artist will come to question what it is that they do and what their medium means to them. The examples are endless. Constantin Brancusi said: "There are some fools who define my work as abstract, yet what they qualify as abstract is that which is the most realistic; it is not the appearance that is real but rather the idea, which is the very essence of things". Trisha Brown said that "Dancing on the edge is the only place to be". Steve Reich said, "I discovered that the most interesting music of all was made by simply lining the loops in unison, and letting them slowly shift out of phase with each other." Patti Smith asked herself "Why can't I write something that would awake the

dead? That pursuit is what burns most deeply.” And Fernando Pessoa wrote “I don't know what I feel or what I want to feel. I don't know what to think or what I am.”

It's often in moments like these, addressing an audience, that one has to articulate what they do and why they do it. However, I realize this questioning is just as necessary for my everyday work in the studio. It is a constant companion. Throughout my career the attempt to express what choreography means to me, and how I'm in partnership with it, has always been moving, shifting, changing. It dances along with me. At different stages, different definitions of choreography have taken central focus, directly impacting the work I create. First, there was the idea that **choreographing is embodying an abstraction**. This involved an obsession with the numerical, the geometric, and formalism. Next, there was the idea that **choreographing is the organization of time and space**. This involved a return to the human body, to the basics of how humans move—walking, breathing, standing, falling, lying. There has also been the definition of **choreography as a means to defy gravity**, as something that is about Isaac Newton and **spinning and jumping like a child**, and more recently, there is the idea that **choreographing can be a form of healing**. Even though each of these ways of relating to my craft has taken priority at a certain time, the previous definitions never disappear—we carry the knowledge we have gained with us in work just as in life.

And here in front of you today, I am still asking myself these questions. Due to the crisis we find ourselves in, they have become even more crucial than before. When COVID-19 began, everything we thought we knew was destabilized and how we choose to live was destabilized with it. These unsettling times raised questions to many people working in many different fields, and also to the basis of how we go about our daily lives. Speaking as a choreographer, an artist in the field of live performance, and most importantly, a dancer, the questions became of unavoidable importance... When will we do it again? Where will we do it again? Why dance?

When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

When the hurly-burly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

That will be ere the set of sun.

Where the place?

Upon the heath.

There to meet with Macbeth.

On this search for a possible definition of choreography, one strategy I have used before is to look at the root of the word. Choreography is a fusion of two Greek concepts: 'chore', meaning choir or troupe, and 'grafein', meaning to write. In this sense, the etymology of choreography is a matter of writing the people, which can also be seen as writing the space *between* the people. Therefore, **choreography is a question of how to organize a group of people—a multitude.** With this in mind, I think about how COVID-19 has pulled choreography from the studio into a more public sphere. What we see during this pandemic is a peculiar kind of choreography. We are the multitude, carefully executing a performance of sanitary procedures. In this choreography, we have seen distance and mistrust between bodies, a lack of touch, rituals of entering and exiting, screening. This choreography is specified even down to the costumes we wear—our COVID masks.

Given the reality we experience daily, COVID-19 easily becomes the #1 problem to solve, but this is short-sighted thinking. There are underlying issues that cannot be ignored. Climate change, ecology, education, migration, health care, the growing wealth gap... These are issues that are truly at the top of the list and must be treated with more urgency than they currently are. As I'm speaking, the second week of the UN Climate Change Conference is underway in Glasgow. We are facing huge challenges as humanity and we can only overcome them if we stand together. One of the major challenges is the extreme loss of animal and plant species, more than a million species are on the brink of extinction (and in the end we might be one of them). Connected to the problems of pollution, climate change

and the abusive character of our economy on our planet we are in a dangerous place. We destroy our environment, we destroy ourselves. It has never been more important for world leaders to come together as a team, acknowledge the full weight of this crisis, and put wise plans in action to do something about it.

To quote Shakespeare again, this time in the voice of Titania the fairy queen...

The human mortals want their winter cheer:

No night is now with hymn or carol blest.

Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,

Pale in her anger, washes all the air,

That rheumatic diseases do abound:

And through this distemperature we see

The seasons alter...

With my ongoing quest to articulate what it is that I do, there is, inevitably, always the question of “why?” Why choreography, why dance? The question of “why” weighs more and more as a mode of ‘doom’ thinking increases. Why am I dancing and choreographing with all of this happening around me? What can my work do to help? Can it help? Should it help?

It makes me think of that scene from the Titanic when the violinists keep playing as the ship is sinking. Doom is inevitable for them, but their music-making is a way to enjoy a last burst of beauty, to soothe themselves and the others around them who face the same fate. But honestly, I’d rather not think this way... firstly, because this is not the Titanic, we *do* have a future ahead of us and we cannot say as the say in French “Après nous le deluge” because I believe that choreography has the potential to offer more than just soothing. I think we can learn from it too.

In the current climate, it can feel as if everything to do with sharing is under threat, and that the speed of this is accelerating as difficulties of the world pile up. How do we relate to

each other as individuals or a collective, as a continent or a globe? The number of people living in cities is steadily increasing, meaning the planet is becoming one big city, this “polis”, the greek word which leads to the word “political”. The space between people is changing. We are getting closer and closer to each other, yet at the same time, we are becoming more and more individualistic, “screened of” by technology and not to mention afraid of the other’s body.

In my dance, I often think about the vertical and horizontal axes. The vertical axis is what connects us between heaven and earth, keeping us grounded with gravity, but simultaneously uplifting us. In dance, we can try to defy gravity, to fly, which according to the late American choreographer, Trisha Brown, is the most beautiful movement. The horizontal axis is the realm of the social. It’s where we reach out to our neighbors, providing support when necessary. This happens in dance but also in daily life. Unfortunately, the way we use the horizontal axis is becoming increasingly complex. There is the necessity to distance ourselves from each other, but less room to do so. I believe the matter of how to organize the people needs re-evaluation and re-imagination. How are we going to live together with so many people? How are we going to re-organize the people?

What we need now is a reset — to make radical shifts in order to stabilize the planet and its people. Calls for a ‘reset’ of our society have become remarkably widespread across the political spectrum, along with our increasing incapacity to imagine collective solutions to collective problems. Dance lovers and choreographers probably hear their own references here: ‘Set and Reset’ is one of Trisha Brown’s most important pieces, itself set to the music of Laurie Anderson, who provided the score ‘Long Time No See.’ Brown’s piece, which premiered in 1983, is a beautiful metaphor for the ways in which human beings both order and reorder their world. It is one of the greatest works of post-modern dance, full of complex movement and intricate composition, there is plenty for us to learn from. It exemplifies the power of imaginative thinking, improvising and inventing. The world needs to rewrite itself, not to rewind but to reset for a better future.

As with any art-making, from choreography, we can learn about decision-making. The work of a choreographer implies making many choices. Sometimes these are large decisions that have a huge impact on where the piece will go. For example, what music to work with? Choosing to work with “Drumming” by Steve Reich as I did in 1998, as opposed to Bach’s “Goldberg Variations” as I have recently done, lead to entirely different works. Other decisions are so small and precise that you, in the audience, may barely have noticed the alternative. For example, shall the gaze reach up or down? It seems like an insignificant detail, but I assure you, it is not. Just as each word in language means something specific, body language is the same and the way the gaze can sculpt the space is extremely powerful.

Decision-making is everywhere in our daily life. We are constantly making choices that affect our own lives, but also those around us, on both micro and macro levels. We know all too well how big decisions made by people in power can impact our lives, but the smallest decisions can also have a large impact, just like I experience when I choose to hold my fingers this way or that way in my dance.

A figure that has been with me since my earliest works is the spiral. Spirals are figures of life and of change - in every spiral, the closing is also the opening. I’m very interested in circles too. I like the idea that a circle is the most democratic figure because when standing in a circle everyone is of equal distance to the center. It’s no coincidence that dancing often happens in a circle and it has been like that in cultures around the world for as long as we know. But the image I really want to share with you today is that of concentric circles - multiple circles widening around one shared center. This central point (the eye of the storm) is both the ultimate movement and the ultimate stillness, while the circles around grow bigger and bigger. Think of a circle as something closed off or internal like a bubble is easy to do, but what I like about concentric circles is the expansion outward, all while sharing a common center. A natural example of concentric circles would be dropping a stone in water and seeing the ripples spread outward.

Just like a small stone, small-scale choice-making will inevitably lead to concentric circles. Sometimes it's easy to fall into a pattern of thinking that nothing you do has an impact, but I've found that rather than letting oneself be demotivated like this, it's better to think on a different scale. If we zoom in, we see that even the smallest action or choice can have the largest effect, reaching far as it ripples outward. Each of us, as individuals, has a part to play in the wider community, no matter how small our actions may seem. And to say it with Greta Thunberg: No one is too small to make a difference.

In preparation of this speech, I was looking into the work and history of Europa Nostra. I learned how the risk of flooding in Venice and the potential destruction of the city's heritage, due to climate change, was at the origin of this organization. This got me thinking about the heritage of dance and choreography, and how *that* should be protected. It's a difficult one to dissect because as a Live Art and live act, dance isn't made up of objects that can be destroyed by time or the changing climate. Dance itself can't be washed away in a flood; it can't be burnt to ash in a fire. Choreographies (written dances), have, just like stories or songs, been passed on from body to body, generation to generation, for centuries. The only difference is that choreographed dance isn't recorded in writing as easily as a story or song. A video recording is one thing, and the internet too, but these are recent inventions in relation to the ages humans have been dancing.

As has been made evident to me, even though dance may not be made of erodible materials, its heritage needs to be protected too. How do you protect the heritage of dance? I think this is a matter of transmitting knowledge in order to keep that heritage alive, meaning that this is a good time to talk about education.

In 1994, Bernard Focroulle, Theo Van Rompay, Kees Eijrond and I came together to found the school P.A.R.T.S. It opened in Brussels in 1995 and has since then seen 556 students pass through its doors from 66 countries around the world. P.A.R.T.S. was built in response to what has been called the Flemish wave of the 1980s, and to fill the gap that was felt due to the disappearance of Mudra, the school of Maurice Bejart. We wanted to create a school

that would be a place to bring people together and build a future. Brussels is a kind of no-mans-land that's betwixt and between, a pocket of urban space that bridges the north and south, east and west. In Brussels, as demonstrated by the surrealists, there is a taste for things outside the box, the uncategorizable, and the absurd. All this made it the perfect place to make this school happen. It felt as if anything was possible with no conservative history to uphold. We started this school with youthful ambition, and at the same time we were driven by a belief in the importance of education. We wanted to accompany and support young artists, make a possible way for them. After all, the word education stems from the Latin word 'educare' which means 'to lead out', just like those concentric circles I spoke of.

Throughout these years of P.A.R.T.S. I have seen constant change. I've learned that change tends to happen in a cyclical pattern, always coming back to a similar place in a different way. When dealing with change, one constantly asks the question—what remains? Are there things that we should hold on to? Or are there things we should let go of to assist change? That's a difficult thing to learn, not only as an educator but also for the students who come from different backgrounds across the world. Arriving at the school with different social, physical and mental realities, their education is just as much about human growth as it is about dance. Ultimately, dance acts as a common ground.

All this being said, protecting the heritage of dance is a matter of caring for its transmission, from generation to generation, and nurturing its development and growth. We learn from the past and work with it in the present to reset for the future. What is essential for this to happen is the idea of leading students out into the world with all the tools they may need, both as dancers and human beings.

But in order to protect the heritage of dance, I think that there's something even more vital than this topic of education, and that is the body. Dance primarily exists in the body, and it goes without saying (especially in the eyes of the pandemic) that the body needs to be protected too. Protecting the heritage of dance is first and foremost a matter of protecting the people.

During this past year, we have been suddenly confronted with mistrust of the body - the bodies of others and even our own, which are the 'houses' in which we live. We don't know what's happening inside ourselves, so depend on the knowledge of doctors, scientists, politicians. We worry about proximity to others, we worry about touch, we worry about being surrounded by a community, we worry about sharing breath. Unfortunately, these very things - proximity, touch, community, and breath - are all essential to the DNA of dance. Therefore, this crisis has hit not only the work of a professional dancer or choreographer, but who we are on a human level.

This is a good moment to share with you a story of something I witnessed earlier this year. In March, Rosas was invited to the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland, to create and perform a project I've been developing called *Dark Red*. Not the 'dark red' zone of COVID, but a project about choreographic encounters with the architecture of museum spaces and exhibitions, taking the form of live, choreographic installations. This particular one was based on the sculptures of Auguste Rodin and Hans Arp, exhibited in Fondation Beyeler at the time.

After taking our final bows at the end of the last day, we gave an *encore* by performing a song we had been working with in this project: "Kiss" by Prince. "Kiss", of course, was chosen simply because of the famous "Kiss" by Rodin. As we finished and ran backstage, the buzz left in the room was quite deafening. The people were highly energized, eager for more. So, I intuitively and instantly asked the technician if he could play Prince's song through the sound system. Without exaggerating, the *second* the song was playing the people surged into the space and started to dance. You'll know from parties you've been at, there can often be that awkward moment when the dance floor isn't warm yet and people are too self-conscious to get in there and move. It's a bit like sheep—if one starts, and another follows, soon everyone will join, but it tends to take time. However, as the music started the room immediately broke into full-on dancing. Self-consciousness had given way to that sensation of celebrating in a crowd that we were missing so much. Old people, small

children, the staff of the gallery, the guards, and us dancers who came back out to join them, all dancing together, sharing a moment of uninhibited joy, moving our bodies together in collectivity. I should add that there was still social distancing and face masks (so don't worry), but even with those safety measures, this exemplifies one of the vital elements of dance and what dancing is all about—community. Sharing an experience as a community, and celebrating that community.

It may sound like something that goes without saying, but at the end of the day, **choreography is a celebration of humanity. Choreography is a means to dance together, collectively.** Even when dancing a solo, you are never truly alone. That is the definition I present to you today.

There are many things to learn from dance that can help us in these times: how to deal with our surroundings, our time and space, in a way that is not full of doom, destruction and selfishness, but celebration. We can learn how to relate to the body of the other, to listen to our body, protect and work with it rather than against it. We can learn how to share the same rhythm instead of being individualistic, and how to celebrate our humanity again.

Dancing is something we all know. A child can dance before it can walk or speak. Without a doubt, every single person in this room is familiar with it, just like the people at Fondation Beyeler. Although dancing in solitude is one thing (we can dance even in quarantine or self-isolation), it is fundamentally a social act— bodies moving side by side with negotiation, often to a common beat, the space between breathing.

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,*

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

T.S. Eliot, excerpt from Burnt Norton, n°1 of 'Four quartets'.

Thank you.