

Dear Pieter,

In London I watched your performance *Landscape with Skiproads*, presented during a LIFT event exploring the legacy of the First World War. The show stayed with me so strongly; an extraordinary work.

So far as I can remember though, and this isn't a complaint (!), there were no concrete references to the 'Great War' in the performance, which comprised a long narrative connecting a set of ordinary and at the same time unlikely objects displayed on the stage. Each object had an elaborate history narrated through the show, and as watchers we soon learned to anticipate that even the most banal of them would, through the narration, prove to have a spectacular connection to events and ideas of great significance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The nondescript glove on a plinth, for example, turned out to have once belonged to Adam Smith, the advocate and architect of Free Market economics, who, in 1759, famously coined the concept of the 'invisible hand' of the market – a metaphor for the forces, which he said, allowed capitalism to self-regulate. An ordinary bell meanwhile, displayed elsewhere onstage, was revealed through your narration to be the very bell used by Pavlov in his iconic behaviour and conditioning experiments in St Petersburg at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I wanted to ask you, in this context, about dealing with history in your work. There seems to be no fear on your part, neither in picking up these concrete signs and symbols from the past, nor in inserting them into a narrative framework which runs free with them, whilst at the same time 'making use of' their significance – incorporating them into a schema and argument very much of your own. What's your approach to history in this and other works? What kind or kinds of responsibility are you negotiating when you work with these materials?

And, on a slightly different topic, despite its lack of direct reference to the First World War, do you think that this work has some relevance to the way we might think about it? How might those questions of responsibility change in relation to institutionalised carnage of that kind?

Behind (or through) the detail here I think you see me scratching at some larger questions. What does it mean for a work to take on these matters of historical import? Many works claim to be about particular topics (usually an important one) but in fact they can't get near to what they claim to research or present. I didn't have that same impression of falling short with your work though. I was very interested in the way you seized those alleged artefacts, those signs of big ideas, and then worked them against each other to make something else. It seemed to me you made something 'bigger' than the sum of the materials. So often, when people grab content of significance it's the other way round – the content is big but the work stays small. These aren't precise terms of course! It's Sunday and I've been writing all day. Perhaps I'm trying to think about work that concerns itself with ideas, and not so much with

facts. Recounting facts has its place of course. But watching your work I got the sense that we need more than facts if we are going to make sense of what has happened to us, and where we are going. We need a poetics. What do you think?

All the best,

Tim

Dear Tim,

Thanks a lot for your letter. It is true, *Skiproads* doesn't deal literally with WW1. I could have inserted some concrete references, but that would have been merely anecdotal. While we drown in anecdotes, we have no story. That is the more fundamental issue. It is valuable that we remember what happened in WW1, and I assume we just have to take for granted all the touristic / opportunistic projects that pop up in this process. But a commemoration should be a rethinking and thinking is a forward-looking gesture, a movement. In fact, one thought that drove me while making *Skiproads* was the idea that an overload of history can be very damaging for public health. It's common sense that a shortage of history might lead to recurring stupidity, but at the same time, an excess of history can lead to it crumbling under its own weight; an overload of history threatens to paralyse the present, to crush forward-looking vitality.

Our era already has an inclination towards what has been, rather than towards the potential of being, and when we turn to commemorating WW1, it seems more crucial to address this question of history itself, than it might be to celebrate yet another brave war nurse. Nowadays, Europe is a museum; collecting, protecting and scraping a living from the cultural, moral and financial wealth of what was, cherishing and living off the legacy of our grandfathers. We have been turned into a moribund geriatric posterity preservation scheme. Sloterdijk said: "The 21st century will be the century of the subject" – well, let it come! 'Cause for now it's still mainly the century of the elder, wandering spectator having reached a mood in which the idea of a new beginning is no more than a beautiful, melancholic idea. In order to effectively resist this historical condition, I think we need history to be the power fuel, the shaping power of the contemporary. *Skiproads* tries to contribute to that process and consequently I collected some objects that were present at key historical moments; the moments when we became who we are. In real. Or at least as real as possible. In the facts. Or at least as close to them as possible.

The political calamities that we live today in Europe find their origin in these objects and I wanted to invent a new configuration for them. I use them, with a naked naïveté, to sketch something better with them. For me the performance begins as a sort of a historical mine-clearing operation; a way to make room for a new landscape, that leaves the deadly beaten tracks aside. It's an attempt to rise up from our history. The old landmines that haunt our present-

day human and political conditions are on stage, exposed in the here and now, where all of us can grab, touch and rearrange them. Every night I hope that the performance can remind us that it is possible to have a grip on the things that make our history. Of course I know this is a big ambition, but at least the objects are on stage and hopefully, we, the coming subjects of the 21st century, can get some sense of the graspable, and thus transformable history we live in.

Your question about the kind of responsibility we have in dealing with these materials is a crucial one. You write, “maybe we need more than facts.” I completely agree – we need a poetics. But it should be a poetics that remains true to the facts. After all, one can remain true to reality in the most wild, magic and imaginative stories just as one can tell the most realistic naturalistic stories that are completely escapist entertainment.

I think that’s the decisive factor in the ethics of these aesthetics; having respect for the facts, and a dedicated love for the real. As you certainly know, there are “merchants of doubt”: lobbyists that alter or simply hide scientific facts in order to increase the profit of the companies or politicians they work for. They transform facts through fiction, using much the same method as artists, but doing very dirty tricks with it. For instance, scientific results on climate change are structurally transformed by lobbyists of petroleum companies and by the American Republican Party. If, as citizens, we don’t have access to facts, to correct facts, then we can’t legitimately make our choices or cast our votes, and without that our entire democratic system collapses. Fictionalising facts is a dangerous method we need to be careful with; threatening to undermine the basic trust our democracies need. Maybe the danger of this method – transforming facts with fiction – reveals its power? But what should the parameters of such a poetics be? I’m curious to hear your thoughts on this.

When a performance is good, I believe, it is a smuggling route between fiction and reality. The better it is, the smoother the smuggling goes. It should work well into both directions: remaking reality through fiction, and when it’s really great, enabling people to alter the material relations they’re living in, and when it’s fantastic it might even help people reclaim an existential viability. In this coming and going on the smuggling route between fiction and reality, a mysterious event might take place that some call “beauty” – I don’t even know what it is, but I do know that when it happens it is a simple enigma that endlessly calls out.

I have a strong feeling that one of the key questions in today’s performance and theatre is this relation to the real. I’ve seen so many performances struggling with it – some perversely using the real for just a spectacular emotional effect and others remaking it in a truly transformative way.

Warm greetings,

Pieter

Hi Pieter

I really like this idea of art as a space in which to reclaim history as something with trajectory, movement, thought and change, directed towards the future. There's a spirit in what you write that I like too, just as I felt after the performance, when those familiar objects / ideas were buzzing around in my head in new ways that I couldn't easily put back into words.

I think that precise difficulty – bringing the work back into a descriptive discourse – might be one key to what we're talking about. It's as if my ambition might be for an art that does not repeat or reiterate other kinds of understanding, but rather produces its own sense and discourse.

At the same time, I think you're right about the importance of this question about art's relation to the real. I think we're feeling that in a new way, not in the old artistic staple of 'is it true or is it illusion,' but in the profound sense we have now that fiction and fact are braided around and through each other so very deeply. The understanding that our contact with media, or with fiction, writes deeply into our experiences and perceptions of realities; that our accounts of the truth are always, in a sense, fictions; that 'reality' is not what it used to be – these are almost commonplace positions of popular culture. But knowing that, and living it on a daily basis, we still have to proceed. That's where the poetics comes in, and with it your question about the parameters of our relation to fiction in fact, and fact in fiction.

You point out that not only artists are busy subverting and rewriting stories; all those lobbyists, Transnational Corporations and politicians are very busy with it too. You see something similar in some of the hoopla of the WW1 Centenary. The loosening of the game rules attracts all kinds of players, some far from welcome or desirable. To me, what those guys are doing – in the spreading of misinformation around climate change, immigration, health or poverty for example, is trickery of the worst kind; I'd be keen to see them go to prison for their deceptions. At best, what artists do when they mess with the facts of historical and other realities, is something else. In *Skiproads* you made a constellation of materials that have a tension between them. The tension is connected to the significance of the materials and enhanced by the fictional materials you're threading through those historical fragments. The tension in that constellation is not resolvable or reducible to an argument and that's what confronts us and draws us in, leaving the piece to sit there as a powerful problem. It's also what makes the work, despite its playfulness, still respectful of the truths you're dealing with. Whatever else the work does, it lets those truths be – in their complexity, strangeness, inexplicability and irreconcilability.

I wanted to change the subject a bit though, before signing off. As well as this question of the real and the fictional, I am thinking about the dynamics

between what can be seen and what not. I've been thinking about the streams of violent images generated by conflict that fly around on social media – the bloody corpses of children, weeping mothers and dazed hospitalised fighters from Syria, Gaza and elsewhere, all posted online by people keen, no doubt, to advertise the truth of what was happening. More recently we had the spate of ISIS beheading videos that are all over the internet too. I'm not conflating motives or situations, just pointing at these very different attempts to spread images of hideous violence in public space. There's an urgency to these attempts to have us see what is happening; seeing is meant to cut through the walls we build to divide us from trauma, to shock us into action or understanding. But I am not sure I can really see anything anymore, not in that sense; I'm thinking about what it means to see things, and about the politics of what's made visible and how.

Tx

Dear Tim,

How to see?

We are supposed to see the brutal facts of Syria, Isis and the rest, because we need to know. Democracy, human solidarity asks us to know – we can't close our eyes. At least, that's the line of so many brave, important journalists. But you're right to point out there's something rotten in the land of naked truth. We've reached a level of access to pictures that one simply can't bear it anymore. Where has this discharge of images come from? How did it come so far? Of course I do think I should know and see, but does seeing more of these images prevent terrible things from happening, or even help me to better understand them? I think we put too much false faith in confronting ourselves with real facts and real images, without thinking if our doing so makes any difference.

Now, I can imagine that if I were in a terrible conflict situation, I wouldn't care about the subtleties; I'd just want the world to see what was happening. But this doesn't undermine our question: we're smashed to blindness with these images of hideous violence. Where does this tendency come from and where will it take us? What do these journalists, bloggers and social media users believe, or hope for? Sometimes I think they believe so fervently in the power of "real images" that they imagine the holocaust could not have happened if the internet had existed back then. Just imagine – the villagers of Auschwitz would be sharing images on Facebook, journalists would send pictures of the smoke from the chimneys – all as it happened. There'd be no traumatised Jews thanks to these pictures that would have enlightened the Europeans and "shocked them into action," no Israelis eaten up with fear, no Palestinian occupation...

But I'm afraid that although we now see the most gruesome pictures from Syria and elsewhere, things just go on and on and nothing really happens, just like the genocide in Rwanda went on even as we were looking at it. So I'm

afraid there is a dreamlike naïveté at work in this sharing of pictures of the real; despite the truth of the images, and the hopeful, communicative act of their distribution, they are soon dragged into a true blood-show that strangely disconnects us from the facts.

I think a historical shift has happened. Where once we put our hopes in systems of belief – myths and religions – now we seem to put all our hopes and expectation into this confrontation with naked facts. We expect so much from these images of the real. We have a surreal hunger for them, and for the reality they stand for. And somehow I think that alienates us even more from reality itself.

Now, I don't necessarily want Jesus Christ to get involved in this, let him rest in peace, but his partner in crime, St Thomas, is still haunting our thinking. The apostle Thomas doubted the resurrection of Jesus, and wanted to see real pictures. He wanted to see the wound of Christ: only seeing is believing, only material facts and evidence are convincing. That story gave us much more than some magnificent paintings in which St Thomas is pictured with his finger sticking between Jesus' fleshy ribs. It also gave us the primary force, or perhaps the genesis-myth of journalists and scientists; 'we need to know the bloody facts;' 'Don't fool with me.' But I feel, in many ways, it might well be time to be sceptical about this predominant scepticism as well.

There is no reason to go back to the believing-rather-than-seeing business of Jesus Christ. But the scepticism that says you have to see this, you have to watch this, otherwise you are not informed and you can't be a responsible citizen, is simply getting out of hand. Not only because, as you described, the so-called public space of media is just pseudo-public, but here we are back where we began our conversation: we need a poetics.

Myths, or fictions if you wish, can create a narrative out of a history that can't yet be told. They offer an unfounded, groundless moment, which is perhaps the only ground from which a genuinely great transition towards something else can emerge. The bombs we see exploding on our screens are splintering us more and more every day. I hope that the poetics I'm looking for, using invented narrative alongside the facts that make us who we are, might work like an ark made out of all those splinters. It's a dodgy boat, and it has many, many (wiki)leaks, but it might get us to make a passage, as fleeting as a night in the theatre. We are shaped by fictions as much as by facts, and very often, though we can't change the facts directly, we can change the fiction that makes us. Perhaps that's the only form of freedom we are capable of.

A last thought. In theatres of the former centuries, the performance started with unveiling the stage, pulling up and away the curtain. The gesture of pulling away the curtain, to unveil, to unmask... that's the ultimate gesture of a *bringer of truth*; it is such a complex and beautifully loaded "first act." It says: You couldn't see until now; this is the moment you will see. That's the same promise the Facebookers and bloggers with their shocking images and naked facts make. But in the old theatres, back then, only a fiction started with the raising of the curtain, and now, in our media, the gesture of unveiling leads to

showing the most horrific facts, only the facts. I think we need to create something new out of both of these things, something that dances between them. Perhaps it's time for a "curtain piece."

Many greetings,

Pieter