

'The Pain of Others' is an impressive exercise in empathy

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The Pain of Others © RV/Michiel Devijver

Can you share pain? Is it possible to literally feel someone else's suffering? In the conversational performance *The Pain of Others* artist Peter Aers asks us to at least give it a go.

It all starts with an author who excels at translating existential questions into simple fables: Toon Tellegen. To kick off *The Pain of Others*, Aers reads one of Tellegen's animal stories. In the tale every inhabitant of the forest talks about his specific pain - the slug feels it in his horns, the wasp in her waist. Until it's the ant's turn to speak: 'I don't feel pain. Pain is nonsense'. The animals start doubting: is their pain real, or does it exist solely in their heads? How can they render their suffering credible, if every animal only feels his own pain?

This is the central question of *The Pain of Others*, part four in the cycle *Everything Depends on How a Thing is Thought*: a series in which theatre maker Peter Aers brings together a small group of participants for an investigation into thorny philosophical questions. *The Pain of Others* takes place in a psychiatric hospital in Bruges, not only because it was staged at the onsite festival *Un/settled/in public space* organised by art centre KAAP, but above all because of the nature of the 'conversation': we will talk with both

words and bodies. Such a conversation requires a space outside of the familiar theatre. That is why, on a mild afternoon in late summer, twelve strangers are lingering uneasily within a wooden box, set up in the gym of the hospital.



The Pain of Others © RV/Michiel Devijver

The Pain of Others is called a conversational performance, but turns out to be a rather physical experience. The mainspring of the occurrence is an audio-interview in which a refugee who has been raped, is being interrogated by a functionary of the department of migration. Some participants say they feel the forceful words in their bodies, others present themselves as the ant and pose critical questions. The next step is a more intuitive attempt to deal with the story. We are invited to 'map' the characters - not to impersonate them, but to position them in space.

What is the distance between the refugee and her son? Which role does the functionary play? How long is the line between the pain of this 'other' and society, which is watching? Astonishingly, this exercise produces a dance, a choreography of shifting bodies that seem unable to stay on the same spot - in line with our thoughts, that constantly change direction. Every time an element is added to the story we look for a new place, obeying a feeling about what is 'right' in these relations. This is a place where a philosophical problem is not imagined, but collectively 'spatialised', something that requires a wordless negotiation between the twelve of us. How close do we allow the pain of that other to get?

The story of the refugee is the onset, but what makes *The Pain of Others* so incredible, is the dignity with which our group tackles the task. Personal pain, filling the room just as well, is left unspoken, but reverberates subcutaneously. Somebody states: "Some pain cuts so deep, you never return to who you were before." Somebody else says: "I feel fireworks inside". Sometimes slightly trembling hands or a hesitating voice give away that speaking about the pain of others also surfaces one's own suffering. However, nobody has the urge to hijack the performance with his own anecdote.

It would be easy to joke about this setup and methodology, in which adults shuffle about in a room trying to represent something - chuckle chuckle. But there's nothing to giggle about. On the contrary: it is moving to see how seriously everybody goes about the challenge, with how much dedication people speak up and how that brings eleven total strangers very close to each other, if even for a moment. *The Pain of Others* isn't only *about* attempting to understand each other; the performance forces you to put the attempt into practice, here and now.

The result is that by the end of the afternoon, the way in which we handle the pain of others has changed, evidenced by the final alignment. That is important, because there is more at stake than creating a successful performance. If twelve strangers are prepared to talk, listen, nuance and change opinion, then maybe there is still hope for the survival of that precious notion called 'empathy'. This is no matter of course in a world predominantly ruled by ants.