

The Pain of Others – annex

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Dear reader,

In this contribution I would like to share a few words with you about the performance *The Pain of Others*. After a project week with Peter Aers and fellow students from the Arts Department, I attended the performance at the Vooruit, on the 16th of May 2019. I also had an interview with Peter Aers to discuss his work in more detail. I would like to talk to you about the many questions this performance puts forward and provokes. Does this performance leave something "behind", like "traces" that stay with us or that resonate? In my case it did. In this letter I position myself as a theatre scientist in the making, but I'm also watching as a participant in the performance. As such, you know a little bit what to expect, but also what my perspective is when writing. In my writing, I don't want to solely reflect or write "about" the work. Rather, I want to write reflectively "through" his work. Because I am convinced that the mentioned reflections are actually already included in the performance.

Inspired by Susan Sontag's essay 'Regarding the Pain of Others', Peter Aers invites you, as a participant, to create a space in which thinking, talking and feeling pain together are at stake. Constellator Erika Sprey joins the artistic team, consisting of dramaturge Bart Capelle and scenographer Melissa Mabesoone, specifically for this performance.

A number of questions are central to *The Pain of Others*: How can we share an individual experience of pain with a wider community? How can you empathise with the pain of the other without having known, seen, heard or felt him or her? Does talking about pain change our experience of pain? How do we deal with the pain that comes into our midst, the pain of someone who is absent? This co-creative performance offers the proposal to join as a participant co-performer, at the intersection of performance, participation and reflection. Let's try to put the reflection into words.

Participation and relationality as form or also as content?

A 'conversational performance', I read in the programme booklet and on the website of Vooruit. This is how Peter Aers' work is described. A conversational performance is very similar to what Grant Kester calls 'conversation pieces'. He is concerned with meaningful practices which are the result of a process of performatively created interaction. The emphasis is not on the creation of an art object, but on a performative process that acts as a catalyst for communicative exchange and interaction. This seems to apply well to the work of Peter Aers.

Participation and relationality determine the work to a large extent. We won't situate participation as such in a binary scheme between active and passive. Participation refers to the co-creation and designing of the work. The conversation provides the binding force to create relationality. Starting from a conversation without words, an a(nta)gonistic discussion about guilt and punishment, a parliament of things, *The Pain of Others* forms the provisional conclusion of an artistic investigation into searching ways, along with the audience, to enable relationality with the other in a temporary performative space.

Participation as a concept is omnipresent in the (performing) arts. It is becoming more and more of a 'buzzword', imposed on many artistic practices. This approach to participation, however, is mainly motivated by the democratisation of culture, interpreted as cultural marketing and as a way to attract the widest possible audience. It is not so much aimed at the cultural democracy, or at questioning the cultural offer itself, including the existing hierarchies in the cultural landscape. This points to a broader discussion in which the increasing attention to participation in the arts resonates an economic logic that is sneaking into the arts (cf. the experience economy), which according to Claire Bishop implies a form of instrumentalisation of the arts in function of policy and economic agendas in which the 'use value' of the artistic work becomes more important than its intrinsic value. A question we can ask here is whether participation and relativity only affect the form of the performance, or possibly also have an impact on the content and aesthetics of the work.

Are participation and relationality really a novelty in theatre and performance art, or do we find traces of this in theatre history? The first, affirmative position explains the death of contemporary theatre, as it does not sufficiently concern itself with the relationship with the audience and the wider society, as participants and/or co-creators of the performance. Another position states that theatre has revolved around the co-presence of performers and audience right from the start. Erika Fischer-Lichte, for example, states that the co-presence of human bodies is the essence of theatre and performance art. Theatre may not need to be demolished in order to make space and inter-relationality between people possible. Participation and relationality take theatre back to its essence. Reconsider the theatre innovators of the twentieth century, and we see this discussion reappearing again and again.

With his 'Epic theatre', Bertolt Brecht chose the strategy of 'Verfremdung' to actively involve the audience (by ruthlessly appealing to our conscience). Antonin Artaud wanted to grab the audience 'viscerally' and affectively with his 'Theatre of Cruelty'. Augusto Boal turned 'spectators' into 'spect-actors' who help to determine the course of the performance in his 'Theatre of the oppressed'. Konstantin Stanislavski stated that theatre is rooted in 'the living experience of human beings'. This is also reflected in Peter Brook's 'The Deadly Theatre' and Jerzy Grotowski's 'Naturalistic Theatre'.

Each time the point is to reconsider the cultural hierarchies and to strengthen the link between theatre and society, resulting in the reconsideration of the relationship between the performance and the audience. The same happens in *The Pain of Others*, in which you co-create the performance as a participant by shaping a constellation, but also a living story. It is not so much a performance in the form of a theatrical representation, but rather an artistic proposal that makes the audience think about whether or not to join. But what makes the work an artistic performance, as Grant Kester describes? The ritual character is the determining link in this process.

Is it a performative ritual or a ritual performance?

"When do we see something as a performance and when as a conversation? It's about creating a different setting, preparing a ritual to enter into, and a clear demarcation of a beginning and an end. It is in this context that we are going to work. And that's why I thought it was important that I'd call this a performance. Of course this differs from the visual arts. But it does meet a number of factors [...]."

As such, Peter Aers mentions a number of constitutive characteristics to describe the work as an artistic performance. The creation of a performative setting, the construction of a ritual and a clear demarcation

in terms of beginning and end are essential. A script is provided which allows the participants, as well as the performers, to be able to start the performance. This framework is essential in order to speak of a performance. Inevitably, it goes back to the origins of Western theatre, namely ancient Greek theatre (inspired by African ritual practices) with its theatrical sacrifice rituals for the god of wine and theatre, Dionysos. Do we also sacrifice something in a ritual manner in *The Pain of Others*?

Arnold van Gennep described three ritual phases in his 'Rites de Passage', which have been further elaborated by Victor Turner. In *The Pain of Others*, the ritual phases are marked by different spaces that are entered and passed through. To this end, we distinguish the meeting space, the liminal or performative space, and the space for reflection or debriefing.

The first phase concerns the initiation phase, or the introduction to the performance, when entering the (theatre) auditorium. As a participant you will take a seat on one of the three benches, with the sides facing the performative or scenic space. Even though the U-shape is aimed at the scenic space, at that moment you are mainly aimed at each other. The shoes go off, and Peter explains what you can expect as a participant. The codes of the performance, as Peter Aers calls them, are discussed at this stage. As these are new to most and can cause reticence among the participants, they will be covered one by one.

"Like you have the codes of theatre: lights out, curtains drawn, audience silent... Actually, these are the codes we install. Usually we announce everything, because the codes are not known. As such we create safety, which does not mean that everything is safe and clean, but that you won't feel insecure, that you won't think: what am I going to look like? So that you can throw yourself into the work."

"Are you ready?" A prelude to the so-called liminal phase of the performance, i.e. entering the actual performative space. This is a theatrical installation as a scenic construction in the middle of the (theatre) hall.

Once you have entered the installation, the performance starts. Peter Aers reads fragments from one of Toon Tellegen's animal stories. It's about the pain experienced by those who live in the forest, each with his or her own specific pain. The walrus experiences a dull pain in the moustache; the turtle experiences shield pain; the snail experiences pain in her tentacles; the camel experiences unpleasant tingles from time to time; the hippopotamus experiences pain in the mouth. Or no pain at all, because pain is nonsense, as the ant testifies. This causes doubt: is pain a universal emotion, or is it very private nonetheless? Is it something purely physical-affective, or rather something that takes place in your head? Is it even possible to imagine the pain of another person?

How do you imagine and feel someone else's pain?

The relational dramaturgy, which to a large extent determines the relationship between the participants, is inspired by 'constellation work'. A therapeutic method developed by Bert Hellinger. A family member or a member of an organisation is hereby asked to position 'representatives' (often strangers) of his family or organisation in the space. The representatives are supposed to move through the space according to the way they feel and to the story that the (family) member shares about his or her environment. In this way, the participant gains insight into the fabric of which he or she is a part, which he or she depicts and the static versus dynamic relationships between people are exposed.

In this conversational performance, however, this systemic layer is not used to provide a therapeutic insight, but to reflect on a philosophical, and perhaps also existential and ethical, issue. The makers dismantled the constellation work in order to create a new form. They invite the participants to think and speak in a different, embodied way, in which it remains unclear to what extent 'released feelings' stem from a 'self' or the issues and/or systems of which they are a part. The difficulty of being able to make a clear distinction here is relevant to the central question of the performance: how do we deal with the pain that comes into our midst, the pain of someone who is absent himself?

Whereas Susan Sontag's essay deals with confronting photographs that appeal to our sensory-affective, and above all empathic capacities, in this performance we don't work with photographs, but on the basis of a transcribed interview with a refugee. Although the issue of refugees is a matter of great concern to the media, insight in interviews with the Immigration Department is of a completely different order. It brings you very close to the human aspect of people on the run. From a postcolonial perspective, we can ask ourselves whether it is possible to relate to this very intense experience, being a privileged, white, wealthy Westerner. Can we even afford to write a piece about the 'Subaltern', in this case a woman fleeing with a child, coming from a white, privileged position? To me, this doesn't seem impossible and we should not simply reduce this to appropriation. For the fact that stories are told and shared is pertinent, certainly when it comes to such complex but all the more urgent social issues. It can connect cultures and thus provoke empathy. At the same time, these performative stories can have a poetic power and thus give the performance a special meaning.

In *The Pain of Others* the intention is not to literally depict or represent the situation described in the interview, but rather to explore and sense the relationships between the direct and indirect parties involved. The fact that, as the constellation is formed, all those involved gradually come into contact with each other gives the situation symbolic strength. As participants, but also as representatives in the constellation, we seem to be interdependent of one another. Sometimes the opposite seems to be the case, since the relationships have been cut off or communication becomes distorted. As seems clear in our constellation between the mother and her children. But even there interdependence with the other is at stake, since each relationship is always tuned to the other.

After having formed the performative constellation, you, as a participant, step out of the performative space and take a seat on the benches in front of the installation again. The U-shaped benches are now placed towards the installation, and the curtains are opened. This way, the installation forms a diorama. We become, as it were, spectators of our own performance. Everyone has left a circular rubber dot in the scenic space, with a different colour depending on the role in the constellation. We reflect and give meaning to the performance as a group. Afterwards, we move our dots. As such, we relate ourselves to the pain that has been experienced so centrally and so overwhelmingly. Peter partly overlaps his dot with mine, as support and care. I experience warmth and support. The performance engages you in an affective way, because of the engagement it requires of you as a participant.

Co-presence of interacting bodies, as also advocated by Erika Fischer-Lichte, is central, and takes the form of a dialogical and relational aesthetic. A dialogue with and without words, and an encounter of bodies that form a whole in the constellation, but at the same time retain their subjectivity.

Individual and collective meaning-making

A performance that is supported by relationality creates a specific form of giving meaning. There's no one-way-traffic between the maker and the audience, but a relational and collective process of giving meaning. After all, intersubjectivity determines which meanings can be derived.

In this work several meanings develop in a co-creative process by means of mediating intersubjectivity between the performers and the spectators. What's at stake is the interaction in words as well as on a psycho-physical level. In this way, theatre and performance art are no longer a linear process of the maker(s) in the direction of passive receivers-spectators, but bear witness to 'multiplicity'. A relational aesthetic experience takes the form of a multi-layered and ethically-charged "encounter in wonder," with room for different perspectives and contradictions (free after Christel Stalpaert). After all, there is always space in the performance to intervene in shaping the work, and thus also to give and deduce one's own interpretations and meanings. Relationality here is mainly inter-relationality, with 'inter' emphasising the importance of not necessarily agreeing with each other and of leaving space for dissent.

When, as a participant, you take a position in the scenic space during the formation of the constellation, you are asked to express your feelings in words and to share them with the rest of the group. The following is repeated several times: *"If you want to move, feel free to move."* Although the physical movements resemble a slow motion and often contain freeze moments, over time a subtle choreography unfolds, which is felt physically. Sometimes we come very close to each other, and sometimes everyone is far apart, looking at each other or looking away, moving or standing still. You feel the presence of the other person, and the way in which the other person interacts, determines your attitude and position.

An embodied experience marks the constellation that is created with almost all participants. Whether you are part of the performative constellation by being in the central field of the installation or you're on one of the seats, everyone seems to be involved in the formed constellation. Characteristic of Peter Aers' work is that he does not always rely on words in order to create interaction. Even more so than with words, most of the exchanges and interactions in the performance take place by means of subtle physical expressions, in order to expose the layered complexity in human relationships.

The pain of the Other in relation to the self

Peter Aers asks us, after reading the transcribed interview, if we consider it easier to empathise with someone who looks like you. Uncomfortable silence, which results in a stuttering yes. This question highlights an ethical and socio-psychological issue: how do you empathise with the pain of someone you don't know personally and who may also be very different from your living conditions?

With regard to this performance, a well-considered choice was made for a small group of participants, in a small space, which nonetheless does not feel too small or oppressive, in order to incorporate enough safety. After all, a larger group of participants would provoke a completely different experience and meaning, and would also have an impact on the dramaturgical effectiveness. The artistic proposal has already been formulated in advance, but is only brought to life in a constellation that we form together, based on the elements from the story of the woman in the text.

In *The Pain of Others*, a temporary common ground is created among people who did not know each other before, but who are temporarily surrendered to the mercy of each other and interact with each other in a setting that is slowly becoming familiar. With and without words, a stirring and at times intriguing dialogue develops, that moves you psycho-physically. The sight of the Other, with whom you engage in a dialogue, whether near or a little further away, touches you affectively and empathically. There is no way to escape.

After the performance, you leave as if you were another person. The performance encourages you to think about otherness, empathy and intervening or not intervening, supporting or not supporting.

To me, it seems to be an ethically particularly relevant performance that presses on 'shield pain', or the pain we have caused in the current 'culture of specta(c)torship', so characteristic of the mediatisation of unsettling images of refugees, who risk their lives in order to try to lead a more humane life. The performance appeals to the pain that is not seen or recognised as shared pain, but rather as private pain. Pain of the Other, which is far away from us, or is consciously positioned far from us, in the living constellation that is our Western society. However, the performative constellation exposes the insurmountable interdependence between people, regardless of each other's origins, living conditions or environment. The words of the wasp in Toon Tellegen's story continue to resonate: "[...] *pain in my waist I have [...]. Don't you?*"