

## THE LIVING EXPERIENCE- Bart van Rosmalen

### WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? ELIA ACADEMY 5-7 July

Standing in the hall looking at Carla Delfos (director Elia) I suddenly remembered it all started for me with an Elia conference in 1998 in Helsinki. Working at that time as a consultant in a very big project aiming for the restructuration of higher arts education in the Netherlands. Carla introduced me to Peter Renshaw from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. 'The two of you have each other something to say'. I still remember the exact line. Still grateful for that moment Carla was the 'postiljon d'amour'.

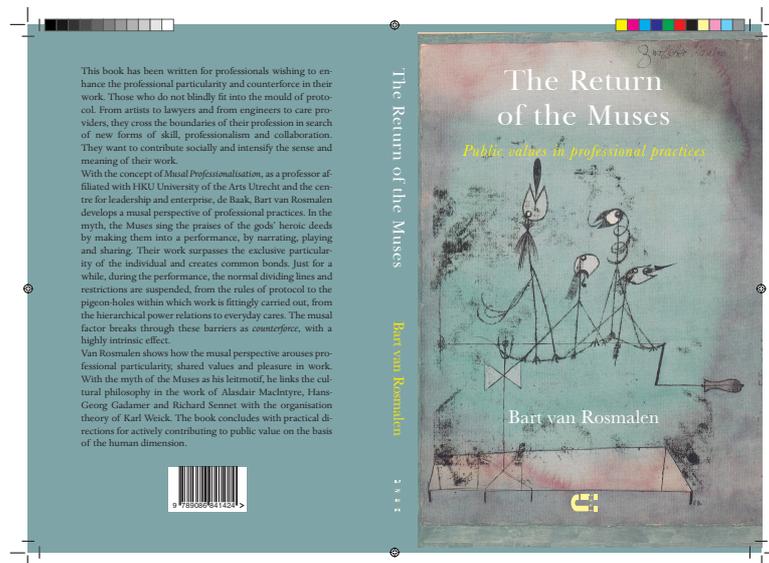
- I meet Peter in a small restaurant. His energy, full of engagement, spreads all over the place. He talks about the concept of Connecting Conversations: opening up our institutions as well inside between teachers and outside stakeholders. Big issues in the outside world need a broader idea of conversation.
- 2004. I meet Peter again and again listen to a fabulous wake up call. That moment triggered me: what a great idea 'connecting conversations' but what is the design? How to do it?
- 2006. Brings an opportunity. I work together with The Dutch National Bank and Pricewaterhouse Coopers to develop the connecting conversations in practice. But the first meeting full of expectations is a disappointment. People are keeping a safe distance and are even a bit afraid for each other... Cross traffic between far away disciplines is not so easy.
- The second time we start to work from sources of inspiration. That's better! Only in the end, after four hours of intense collaboration, we properly introduce one another.
- From these experiences I start to work with all kind of professionals on their professional development: Police officers, Professionals in the care, Business people, Scientists, Teachers. Artists. **And what strikes me is the following:**

Across all disciplines I see a growing desire for GOOD WORK. Good for me, my life, my values, my perspectives. But also good for society in terms of public value. And of course good speaking about excellent quality of the work itself, the product, and the quality in how we work together, the working process. Four dimensions of good work: person, society, work and working outcome.

## Counterforce

And above all I see more and more professionals that just don't want to conform silently with the strict lines of the protocol. There's more than targets, demands, avoiding risks, goals, evaluations,...

There's among professionals in different domains a feeling of 'counterforce' growing. And I contribute to this counterforce using my background in the arts. I catalyse in them what I call **makership**. The attitude/ the experience/ the making process/ the physicality of the body/ the material awareness/ using space and so on. Here starts my research question some 7-8 years ago: *what does this 'making' contribute to professional development?*



I wrote a book about that: the return of the muses. I wanted to avoid the words 'art', 'creativity', 'esthetics' having too much loaded meaning already. Going back to an old story I found the mythical figure of the muse. So I called my book 'the return of the muses'. The subtitle 'public values in professional practices' situates my quest in the larger context of what we call 'social change'.

In this book I elaborate on the importance to narrate like the homo narrans, to play like the homo ludens or to make like the homo faber. The repeating motif behind those questions is the strong and intertwined relation between 'finding one's own voice' and 'taking fully part in the 'we' of group dynamics' at the same time: expressive uniqueness and togetherness at the same time. And the key issue that brings that together is the **performative moment of the living experience**.

Building further on that I am working as a leading professor of a research group of teacher/researchers at HKU (University of the Arts Utrecht).

- We closely collaborate with the Masters Art Education and the Master Crossover Creativity. Students that fancy and fit the perspective join circles of research.

- In my own school supporting the educational and organisational change towards becoming a learning network.
- On a national level we participate in more and more funding proposals together with other schools in and outside the arts
- Internationally I initiated in 2007 together with Helena Gaunt from the same Guildhall as Peter Renshaw, the Innovative Conservatoire, a network of now 28 conservatoires, where most of the ideas and working forms I work with are born and tested.

## **PART 2**

My original idea was to elaborate in this short key-note further on this idea of ‘catalysing makership’ as key-issue in professional development.

But....

Given the remarkable pleasant and also explorative atmosphere of this Elia Academy and of course given the theme ‘stretching elasticity’ I decided to unfold a much more personal perspective. From here I threw away the old preparation and move to the unknown myself.

*starting with telling something about my own quest for elasticity*

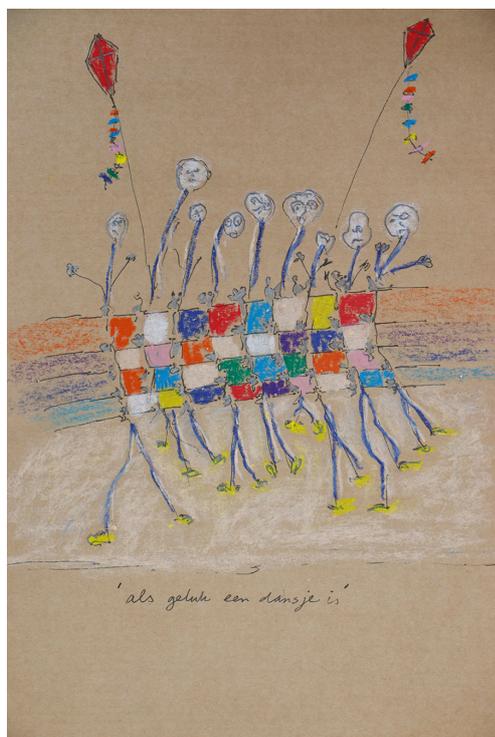
When I finished my Phd I got suddenly a strong desire to draw. This was connected to an idea. I didn’t play much of the cello because of all the writing. I thought ‘when I make a small drawing’ and put it on the stand I might break through my habits of playing late night the tiny bits of music I always play. Maybe this helps finding back my curiosity. So I did. And I started with a new impulse to practice: drawings as a score. I showed one of the drawings to a colleague professor in theatre, Anouk Saleming. To my surprise she send back a poetical text. So I became curious ‘what’s going on here?’ What happens when I send another drawing. Yes.! A text came back. And I was challenged for the following one. And so on. After a year drawing and texting in late evenings after the work was done we made a selection found a publisher and a book came out. And now we are in the middle of putting all these drawing-texts on music and make theatre out of it.



This is the book that came out. This whole process has a strong effect on me. I research all kind of things I have already been writing about but now through the real making, the real **living experience** itself. I come across unknown parts. Let me take you a bit further in this much more vulnerable personal track.

What I will do is making 9 short remarks / reflections, three on each theme of the conference combining them each time with a drawing and some personal observations.

## I- Curiosity



The first drawing is not only a score to improvise. It says something about the Myth of the Muses as well. The Gods were doing their deeds day after day. But there was nobody to see it actively. It all passed unreflected. So they got questions whether this was 'good work' or not. They went to Zeus their chief on a strategic moment. He had won that day a fight with the Titans, the giants of that time. Zeus himself also wanted to be seen for that. So looking for a solution Zeus went to bed with the Goddess of memory: Mnemosyne. Out of this relation 9 muses were born. Their task was sing about the deeds of the Gods. Remarkable moment. Reflection came in the world. We started to understand 'what was going on'. To my students I often say that the muses were researchers *avant la lettre*. And interestingly enough they do it through making, it starts all with making. Thinking comes later.

And the third meaning we can see in the first drawing is the struggle between the system/ the structures/ the protocol at the one side and the desire for free space, liberty, human values, creativity at the other side.

The first drawing is about the birth of counterforce as well: 'What is going on here?'



This drawing I want to combine with the idea that it is a self-portrait. When the question 'what is going on here?' comes up this leads to 'curiosity'. Now we are free from the system we step in the unknown. We are crossing borders. And what I notice with my students in the Master Crossover Creativity for instance (all students have different

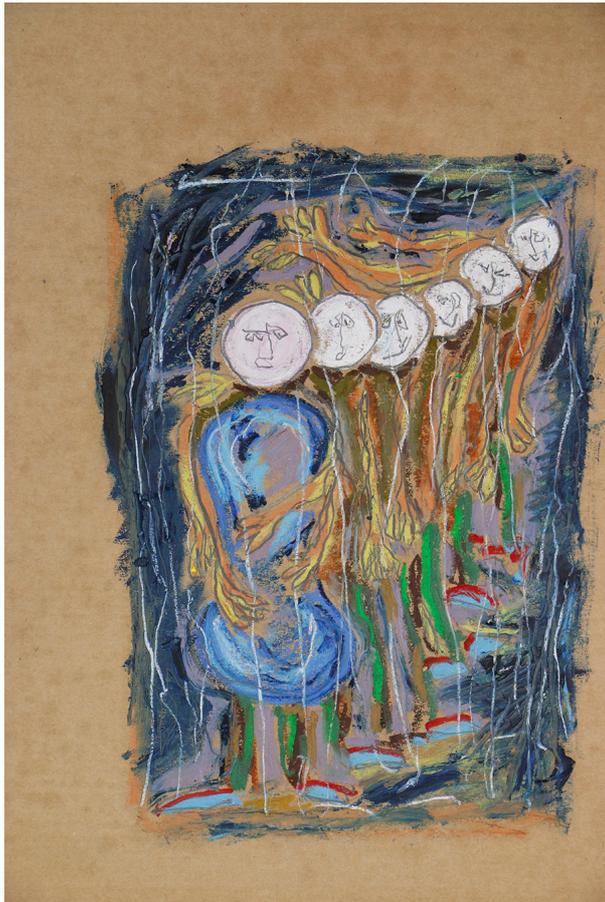
backgrounds) is that being in the open, being in the unknown comes together with questions like 'who am I in this situation' 'what is here expected' 'what is it that I want'. Inevitably the curiosity for the unknown leads to or needs curiosity for **'one self'**.



The third thought that comes up with 'curiosity' is that you need to allow some of the ecstatic. When you start the making in whatever form the desire, the play, the story, the process of making takes over at a certain point. It is also about allowing to be out of control. Letting go. Go with the flow. And I don't know how that is for you but I have all kind of different inner voices that talk to me in such a situation. 'Act normal'. 'Stay with your profession'. 'This is not how you are expected to behave'. These voices tend to say immediately **no to temptation** and kill curiosity right away. So allowing a certain strangeness, over the top, being vulnerable, taken away in Dionysian mode is part of it. **Accept the ecstatic.**

## II- Hybridity

Also in relation to the concept of hybridity I'd like to illuminate three thoughts.



So the idea of hybridity is that we have in our professional lives different roles, live and work in different domains, move ‘in between’ disciplines and so on. The concept is often connected with the idea of rapid changes that ask us to adapt.

In my mind came a poem of Pablo Neruda: ‘we are many’. It’s the idea that there is not such a thing like a fixed self. But what we perceive as our identity in fact is a constant polyphony of voices. (given what I said about all voices in my head this seems indeed the case). So we are as human beings by far suited to deal with hybridity. It is already part of our human condition.

There’s this beautiful exercise based upon the writings of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. He starts to address what he has learned from whom. From my grandfather...From my father...First his family, than his friends, than colleagues, in total 17 people appear.

How important it is to realise where it comes from and that is not about ‘the I, the ego, the individual’ illustrates the following short story. In my book I had this chapter 2 that all was about what I did, I experienced, I invented. My promoter said: ‘for someone that talks so much about the Muses you write surprisingly often the word I’. This hit me off course in a vulnerable point. He said ‘there’s an easy way out’: search and replace the word I through ‘we’ or through the person where you got it from. Very helpful to explore the notion ‘we are many’ this exercise: **From whom did you learn what?**



The second thought is about how we deal with hybridity in our work. I want to add here the word 'diversity' or extend this to 'cultural diversity'. Every situation we live and work in is growing into more and more diversity. Where people come from. How they live.

What their knowledge is, their skills. How to deal with that diversity?

I think back to the opening session with Heather Barnett. How we managed almost in a split of a second to be one organism coming from 21 different countries!! And a similar experience we had in the workshop of Trude Cone. Another spectacular story in this perspective is about the Inuit travelling all the way to their annual meeting. When all are arrived they sit in a circle. But instead of talking there's just silent looking. This could go on for hours and hours. When this is finished the order is restored. In extension of what I said about 'connecting conversations' I think growing hybridity asks directly for a growing repertoire of '**conversation**'. Lets stretch the elasticity of the concept 'conversation' and bring form in, physicality,...Much more is possible.



The last remark about hybridity is about roles. In my school with colleague professors came up the idea to make a form to investigate how much time each of us spend on 'research' 'on teaching' on 'managing' on 'administration like filling in forms' on 'being an 'entrepreneur'. Suddenly I felt upcoming nervousness and anger. And I said: 'I do only one thing and that is research, research, research', because this happens to be the main title of my work. My explanation was: I don't want to cut it all in pieces. It doesn't feel like that. I rather turn it around and see what different aspects there are. Let me do the following experiment: **what is going on here?**

- Is this what I am doing here research? yes its action research doing an intervention in my usual habit of a lecturer
- Is it teaching? Yes I share bit's of knowledge and do suggestions for exercise that are good.
- Am I an artist? I don't know but I play and perform for you.
- An entrepreneur? Yes I hope you buy my book, mention me on twitter when it has something to say to you. Hope you invite me again.
- And so on....

The message here is that hybridity for me is not about cutting the person in pieces but exploring different stories about who I am and what I am doing here. So here it is **'appear as one' and unfold the whole polyphony.**

### **III- Research**

The three last pictures are about the theme of **research**.



The story of the muses helps me to stretch the methodological elasticity of ‘research’. On my schedule for this summer is to clarify what I mean by ‘musal research’. How can I in one or two minutes explore that with you?

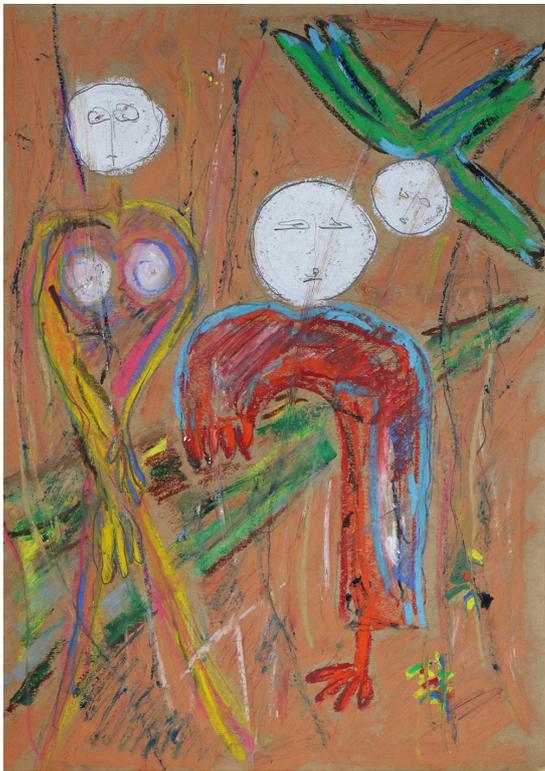
Let’s go back to the old Greek. After having done lots of work on philosophy and politics they moved to the theatre. Often the same persons. To see and experience the world from a different angle. Now what strikes me is that:

- it’s a shared activity
- it is made public through performing
- and there are two ‘results’:
  - 1- people take the outcomes of the insights with them. It stimulates new ideas about working and living. As in an action research mode.
  - 2- There’s also the meaning and impact of the performance itself, **the living experience**. This outcome can’t be taken away. It serves no other purpose than itself.

Two images 8 and 9 illustrate the position two of the importance of the ‘living experience’ itself. The first about ‘what is going on here?’ Without answering that question. It is just the experience itself we share.

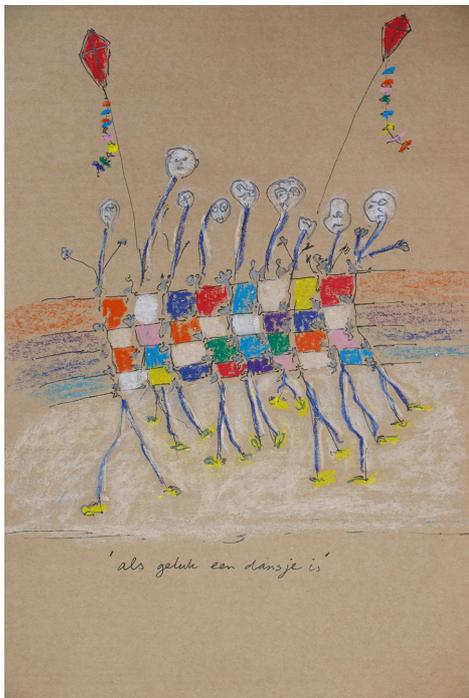


The second one about what it is to be a real observer, an audience and being transformed by the living experience.



Let me compare now this line of thought with the Elia academy we are in. What I experience as vital qualities in how we work here together fits this old idea. I want to state that this conference IS collaborative research! A few experiences underpin this idea:

- Remember we were the slime with Heather. We did this all together and there where two outcomes:
  - o we brought her data for her research on how experiential learning can benefit from biological organisation systems.
  - o But there's also the performance/ experience itself. I expect that each of us that was there will have a long memory on how it was 'as itself'. Experience who I am in that situation. How it felt. Here we ourselves became researchers. Starting with curiosity.
- Second moment to recall is the silent walk. Was that an intermezzo or was it taking musical distance moving back and forth? And was I part of the larger (musical) design of the conference as a research track. I value the last explanation.
- Third moment was the first edition of the diner pensant. It showed a similar thing. Researchers with (dramatic and theatrical ideas) got the floor!! Were we in a conference or in the theatre? We were stretching the elasticity of the concept of a conference. The audience step by step was invited to take part. Afterwards we saw the performer/researchers in a shared performance/ research/ feed-back with the 'audience'.



And this all is about enlarging **'the living experience'**. Why is that important? This is at the heart of the social change we are working on. Free ourselves from the systems that caught us. Imagine our own futures. And live and work stronger with our living experience.

I am grateful to be part of this shared exploration and want to thank Elia academy.

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