

BUILDING CONVERSATION LOTTE VAN DEN BERG, OMSK

THEATRE

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Van den Berg Recreates the Political

by [Evelyne Coussens](#) seen 18th June 2014

It is difficult to say anything about the work of Lotte van den Berg without reverting to clichés. What does it still mean today when theatre is called 'a meeting'? A 'space for conversation'? A 'political free space'? Marketing talk: it places a flimsy layer of audience participation over a performance that often still has a classical form, with a clearcut distinction between those who say something and those who listen.

What is annoying about these hollow phrases is that they insufficiently indicate the power of those performances that do break through this arrangement, and do this very radically sometimes, like *Building Conversation* by Lotte van den Berg. *Building Conversation* peels off the metaphors of 'like' and 'as if'; it avoids as much as possible the outflanking movement theatre makes to arrive at its own communication, because what is communicated is not more than what the word itself conveys: that what is common, shared, a conversation. In order to bring about this sharing, both the person of the theatre maker and the theatricality of the context is reduced to an almost zero point. Is *Building Conversation* still theatre?

Whoever follows Van den Berg's work for a while notices in the course of the years, apart from the consistency and coherence of the oeuvre, a few shifts. The consistency and coherence lie in the premise that Van den Berg's work is about looking, not just in the obvious sense that a spectator is someone who watches but in the sense that looking itself is thematised. Not infrequently the productions are a call for attention for that which is often looked at but seldom seen. In pieces like *Het blauwe uur* (2003) or *Gerucht* (2007), both site-specific works, attention is focused on looking at daily life. Van den Berg adds minimal theatrical interventions to the ordinary, but only to enhance the wonderful nature of the ordinary. Paradoxically, this same premise got her into trouble exactly there where attention should be obvious: in the black box. Van den Berg's first piece for a large audience, *Winterverblijf* (2007), performed in the Antwerp Bourlaschouwborg, consisted of an ultra slow evocation of (mental) emptiness. Those who didn't want to look, didn't see anything. The narrow-minded Bourla audience fled from the theatre *en masse*.

The shifts concern Van den Berg's increasing desire to shuffle the hierarchical codes of the theatre play and to turn the spectator into a participant, the logical result being a growing importance of 'authentic' material, no predetermined meaning but meaning that arises from the gathering of the participants at the moment itself. While in the above-mentioned pieces Van den Berg always provided theatrical content, *Building Conversation* only consists of user-generated content, to use a trendy word. So *Building Conversation* is a framework, an open space, which is not filled beforehand by a moral or a communication from the theatre maker. This 'messagelessness' of Van den Berg reminds one of the work of the Flemish theatre maker and philosopher Pieter De Buysser. He too tries to create in his performances a space that is without judgment and therefore truly political, because everything can arise in it.

Of course, in the context of the theatre the pursuit of 'authenticity' always results in a paradox, because the only way to achieve authenticity seems to be a complete dismantling of the 'inauthentic' theatrical system of concept, direction and dramaturgy. Van den Berg is consistent: she even let the basic idea for *Building Conversation* grow from meetings with participants. A good place to start with that is the site-specific theatre festival Oerol, with its broad and diverse audience. In 2013 Van den Berg organised a public brainstorm on Terschelling about the question what should be built on the island. The answer of the Oerol visitors was: a space for conversation. Van den Berg took up this answer. Not that she was going to make a performance as a conversation – on the contrary, the aim was to make the metaphor, the 'as if'-construction, disappear. *Building Conversation* is a conversation. That is how it came about that I was called before the event by the production manager, who requested me not to

bring a notebook. Whoever stays in the role of a spectator, like journalists often tend to do, may as well stay away. 'Just to bring yourself will be enough.'

In *Building Conversation* a small group of participants leaves on a trip together for a five-hour enterprise. Every participant has chosen a specific conversation technique: the conversation without words, the Socratic conversation or the 'Bohm'-method, based on concepts from quantum physics. Every group leaves for a different spot on the island. There are no introductions made, whoever is curious about the names and professions of his colleagues, has to make inquiries himself. With about seven strangers and Van den Berg I march into the woods for 'the experimental conversation'. Today this will proceed according to the Dissensus theory of the Walloon political scientist Chantal Mouffe. Van den Berg will look for the biggest possible contrast within the group, because, says Mouffe, it is important to be 'agonists', to realise and recognise that there are differences, without becoming 'antagonists' – enemies. After a walk of about half an hour we reach an open space with a wooden house on which only a roof is placed. First job: build the house together by sliding the panels into the sides, pulling up stools, placing blankets. Someone spontaneously troubles himself with the fire, wood is gathered.

The conversation is started by the search for a contradiction, a dividing line within the group. We arrive at a position about 'me' and 'the other' – who puts himself first in life, who is mainly focused on his fellow human beings? There's meat on this bone: a whole cluster of concepts is attached to it, like freedom and responsibility, care and independence, community and individual. Then Van den Berg asks the groups to stand opposite each other and name the differences aloud. This starts quietly and politely, in nuanced and shrouded words – this is how we postmodern people were raised, in the cultural relativist conviction that every opinion is worth any other. We have grown away from difference to such an extent that even only naming it causes us difficulty. But Van den Berg doesn't allow this cautious finicking for long.

By intervening in the phrasing of our words or by giving the example herself – she too has taken a position – she opposes the groups more sharply to each other, resists subtle modifications, forces one to choose a position. The differences of opinion harden and the groups polarise. On both sides a slight agitation arises that glows into indignation and finally inflames in rage. Distasteful egotism is snappishly opposed to sticky neighbourly love, reckless self confidence to cowardly fear. The stabs are sharp: whoever is angry, dares to show himself. 'I don't want any dying Syrians in my back garden', and older woman says firmly. 'Borders closed.' We become agitated because we don't understand the others and because we can't convert them. Van den Berg lets us get on with it until we arrive at the crucial border where opponents become enemies. Then she stops the discussion. Whoever feels like it, can go over to an opponent and touch him or her in a way that seems appropriate.

What is remarkable is that I interpret her question as a request for reconciliation, while this is not the case. I pick my most fierce opponent and walk over to him, a strange embrace follows: uncomfortable, unwanted. I feel that I'm reverting to my socially accepted role, the role that prescribes that I shouldn't judge anyone, that other opinions are fine, that differences can be smoothed over and smothered by nuanced thinking – and that doesn't feel right because I'm angry. I really don't feel like embracing my opponent. I let myself, so I feel, be taken in by the nuance urge, the consensus compulsion, which is so typical of my generation. He does to. The essence of our *Building Conversation* is exactly that no solution is sought for the opposition during the conversation. The session ends with a moment of reflection, during which both groups are lying on their backs, mixed. Then we take down the house, walk back to the starting point and have a meal together there. Because even if you stood diametrically opposed to each other a moment ago, you still have to continue with each other, on this globe.

Two things remain: the moving dedication with which everyone throws himself into this adventure – people let others look into their souls, I let others look into my soul. That is an intense experience. A second conclusion, or rather an insight, is the fact that a true meeting does not always happen between like-minded people, but can just as well take place between opponents. This is exactly the definition of the political, Chantal Mouffe says. What *Building Conversation* does is simply recreating the political (not politics). The passive spectator / citizen becomes an active participant / citizen. In the political arena – which according to Mouffe should be empty and which Van den Berg thus leaves empty, by not placing any of her own communications in it – he speaks out about a subject that concerns the whole community. And just like the 'real' political process needs a form (of theatricality) to exist, with rules of

play and a coded context, so Van den Berg keeps in *Building Conversation* that structured context. So, yes, *Building Conversation* is theatre, but minimally so: theatre that doesn't do more than provide preconditions. Modest theatre. But big in impact.

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