

A LETTER TO THE SPECTATORS THAT WE ARE

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*this letter is presented as one collective text. It is based on individual contributions modified through response of the collective. As the letter ensues from a common thinking space we developed in the workshop "Theory Studio", held in November-December 2010, we sign it collectively. You can respond to bboys.theory@gmail.com

Dear (emancipated) spectator

Lately we (a group of artists) have been discussing tools to make difficult work more accessible. In this letter we would like to share with you some thoughts and tools. This is an open proposal and it is meant to generate discussion. Among yourself and yourself and others. We will write from our own experience as spectators and as artists (who sometimes produces difficult work).

There is this simple thought about attending work that is more difficult: the more a performance demands, the more you will have to work. But one can ask him or herself: why do the effort? Why still go to see difficult work? Why going to theatre? Why still be concerned about art?

Till far in the 19th century art was legitimized because it was about beauty. It gave the spectator a pleasant feeling, a time and space to flee from the hard and repetitive life outside the theatre. The avant-garde relieved the art from the duty to be beautiful. The art of the avant-garde brought the everyday life within art.

But where are we today? In what context does one have to place an artwork in order to understand it better? And should that actually be a premise? Should one know a bit of art history in order to understand the "difficult" art works today? Should we all know who Marcel Duchamp is?

Or should the premise of art be that it's purely there to entertain us?

Maybe we don't have to expect so much from art and that can be its premise. That it is every spectator on his/her own that does the work and makes from the work as much as what they relate or contemplate or receive from the work. Usually there is a one way thinking that a performance has to give and that the spectator only has to receive. But isn't it reasonable to think that the more a performance requires (attention, thinking,...) the more you will have to work and therefore also the more that you will receive from a "difficult" work? And what you receive is different from person to person and cannot be predicted by the maker of the art work. This is where you, we, we all together, become an emancipated spectator, meaning a spectator which has the full responsibility to think for himself/herself, where this is not done by the maker herself/himself. Because it is precisely this fact that one can think for him or herself that differentiates the theatre

from for example tv, where the makers/producers think for their audience.

Pure thinking for oneself is maybe something which rarely exists, but nonetheless, it is something you can experience in a theatre. Maybe because it is one of the last domains where a certain freedom is allowed (unlike politics, mass media; where others think for you).

I don't know how you feel about this. It is somehow a pity that this letter travels only one way and that there can appear very little invitation to answer it, because of the distance.

I often wonder why, what the different reasons, discourses are of people to go to see art. What is your discourse? Why do you go to a theatre?

Maybe the question: "why do the effort", appears too negative. As if one has to do an effort to come to the theatre... Maybe it is we, as artists and the producers who have to do a bigger effort to contextualize more what we do. Of course you are willing to do an effort, you already do it, but this should be answered by before talks and after talks, to give a better view on what the piece is aiming at. What there is at stake...

Side-remarks:

(The modern condition of art, as Adorno said, is that it has become self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the whole, not even its right to exist.)

Consequence: the performance is not enough... Why should we take it for granted that there should be art? Some artists continue working because they are artists (superfluity).

"Blame the spectator"

As we started this theory workshop we played a card game. The rule was quite simple: we wrote five matters of concern on five pieces of paper and then we tried to see how we could make links, groups and eventually draw a map with everybody's concerns. It was quite amusing to see that among all these personal matters, each participant had at least one related to the audience. The scary aspect of it is that before having been confronted to a real audience we, as students, are also perverted by this new trend. This seems to be the symptom of a strange relationship between makers and spectators. Artists owe to spectators as much as spectators owe to artists, yet there must be a balance issue if, as we can witness, more and more makers are busy with activating the audience or talk about the audience itself. It is as if the audience was a little child who needed to be reassured and explained all the time that he/she is as important as adults. Audience behaves like a spoilt kid and somehow works for its own stultification. To make it very simple, maybe too simple, let us start from this very common place saying that when, in the relationship between makers and audience, a problem of communication arises, the fault is always attributed to the artist. We always talk about difficult works or bad works but what if we would consider the problem the other way around like this Norwegian proverb does: "There is no bad weather, there are only bad outfits." It is a big detour to say that maybe we should consider the option of blaming the spectator a bit more. Maybe there are difficult audiences and even bad audiences.

Being a spectator myself I can witness the impatience and the exigency of an audience. These two things go together in the fact that a spectator expects to get a lot for a minimum of time. The performance format starts to take on the aspect of a TV series in which the viewer can be fed in forty-five minutes. It's commonly admitted that, nowadays, a dance piece reaching over one hour and a half is considered long and therefore, *a priori*, a difficult work. It is problematic to think that in order to bring more people to one's show, one would have to take into consideration the duration of the performance and this concern would be completely disconnected from the content of the work. If a work is seen as difficult from the mere fact of its long duration I guess it is fine to qualify this way of reasoning as pure laziness. We are facing here a first problem which is the capacity of concentration of an audience. This is what I meant by the image of the spoilt kid, the performance has to be good, short and not asking too much effort. In other terms, spectators ask for efficiency which is quite dangerous on the both sides of the orchestra pit. Demand for efficiency adds more pressure on the artist's shoulder who begins to care more about the demands of the spectator than he should, plus it implies that the spectator is considered as stupid if he/she has to be taken by the hand or at least not challenged excessively.

It might sound as a cliché to say that spectators are consuming performances and art in general as any other products but it is obvious that a big race in which people aim for the largest acquisition of a bit of everything is happening right now. This everything includes books, cinema, fine arts, music etc. Lovers of art, as they call themselves, see a lot of things but at the end cannot talk about any because they are always jumping from one thing to another. This means that when you ask those people why are you going to music concerts or dance performances (as an ex student of the sociologist Rudy Laermans did for his research) you get the typical answer: "Because it moves me, it makes me think." These same moved persons will then judge the work and somehow influence the artist's way of creating and what is worrying about it is that these persons have nothing to say. A lot of them simply follow a sort of art fashion dictating which book has to be read, who is the philosopher of the moment etc. It means that for a lot of spectators the reason why they go to a show is never disinterested. By disinterested I do not mean that they should go to theater without giving a care but instead they should develop disinterested curiosity. It happens very often that the viewing of a performance only stands for the confirmation of a prejudice. If a spectator goes to a show thinking beforehand that it will be bad he/she will actually be more happy if it is indeed bad rather than the opposite. I am talking about personal experience here.

This brings me to another point which is the ego of the spectator. When people go to theater to see works which require thinking a bit more than usually, let's say, the reaction of the audience is really based on their susceptibility. If one tries to challenge the spectator too much, the spectator will feel that he/she is taken for stupid when it is rather the opposite. Again the lambda spectator wants to be pleased, go out of the theater and be able to say: "I got everything". I can talk about a personal story here. My comrades and I went to see the last performance of Antonia Baehr, For Faces. For this piece we did not receive the usual more or less obscure program. The performance happens, I enjoy it, it is over, we leave the space and, surprise-surprise, three people are waiting at the doors to give a paper in relation with the piece. First I have to say that this piece was mostly based on the perception of each spectator. Anyway, I read the paper and find there quite a clear description of the states I have been through during the performance as the thoughts I had about it. I must admit that at first this was really gratifying, it is like following a general correction in high school and realizing that all your answers are correct. It appeared afterwards that it was not such a good idea because it prevented any possibilities of wondering about the performance. But let us not go there, the goal is to find a way to share responsibility between

makers and audience.

Going to a performance implies a clear answer to our expectations about it – a very common feeling I share as well. It feeds our ego to think that we have been able to understand what the maker wanted to share, we are able to think, we are not stupid. The problems proposed by the maker might be more or less complex, the audience wants to play the game of finding the problem, seek its interest and works out a way to solve it. Then come the so-called “difficult works”. It happens more than often that an audience go out of the theater annoyed because they couldn't figure out what happened. From this comes a mood mixing vexation and hatred for the choreographer or the film maker. Nevertheless I would say that the vexation is stronger and this for a simple reason that the spectator believes he or she is inferior to the artist. If I try to make up a sentence inspired by *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Jacques Rancière) and that would apply to the audience it would be that what stultifies the most an audience is not a lack of education but their belief in the inferiority of their intelligence. An artist's work is nothing more than a proposition. The term proposition does not induce anything holy or considered as one and only truth but a potentiality for action. Both proposer and receiver are equal in front of it. One could of course argue that the proposition is always placed in a certain context defined by the maker but this is not an insurmountable obstacle. Most of the time, informations about the artist and his work are easily and maybe too easily available to the the largest audience. The performance/film might have been a real failure, who knows, yet we should also wonder if the audience was well equipped for it, meaning whether they did take the effort to read a bit about the artist, what his or her concerns are and try to find all this information somewhere else than in the theater brochure. We come back to a possible laziness from the audience. One does not turn into a spectator at the late moment that he/she takes his/her seat in the theater. One is already a spectator in becoming when one decides to see a certain performance. From that argument the spectator has signed a virtual contract and one of the clauses is that he/she will come to the show as fully armed as possible to take part. In French we say that someone assists a performance which is interesting if we look to its meanings. It implies that when one comes to a show it is as a participant and support. I have said that the work of the spectator begins before the performance started and I would even prolong it to the after show. This work can be applied in various way. First of all the logical continuation would be that spectators exchange between themselves, what would be the purpose of gathering people together otherwise? Then, the option of looking up to the artist's website presents the advantages of being unsullied by the misleading words of curators plus the possibility to find an overview of the previous projects. In any case the best is still to talk to the maker him/herself. Paradoxically it seems that it is easier to approach the proposer if his work has been perceived as difficult. Indeed he or she will be abandoned by embarrassed colleagues and therefore eager to hear and discuss with anyone. Of course this would not be possible for a large number but what about a group aftertalk. It is stupid to think that these dialogues should be organized and proposed by the theaters. Isn't it something that audience should request? Instead of leaving the black box in the most sterile and aggressive way one should ask for a discussion. This is not an act of weakness but rather one of courage to create a situation in which you can react in a constructive way. Audience has a lot of power but each members of this whole is too busy with his own person.

Art is a matter of public concern.

An invitation that concerns us

Did you ever consider the reasons behind your choices to see performances?

If you are a professional maker, your reasons span from artistic interest, collegial support or solidarity to curiosity about a work you don't know, but probably have heard about, so you go there to "check it out". We admit that we follow in the first place recommendations, the word of mouth. When did you notice you became careful about the time and money you can give? Which performance or artist dissuaded you? Or was it circumstance that changed your theater-going habits (family, being generally too busy, shifting interests to other arts and culture)?

If you are not a professional theater person, your reasons of going to theater are entirely different. Disinterested curiosity plays a role, marketing impact, recommendations, again, the very social event that the theater performance promises, to name a few. Statistics show that choices are repeated and consolidated into taste. You go to see the work of the artist you liked. Can you recall choosing a performance by the specificity of the topic it addressed and you felt it was something not to be missed because of what it could contribute to an urgent issue of debate? How often does this happen to you, when it comes to theater, and is it different with visual arts?

Your invitation is missing. You are missing an invitation. I don't mean we need more, even more marketing, tailored to suit what a public discourse deems as diversity of individual interests. Perhaps it's an entirely different kind of address that you, as an ordinary clueless spectator, are looking for.

I'm trying to find examples, but I'm worried about the didactic function they would get. When did I go to see a work of theater or dance on the basis of a specific description, statement, a piece of reasoning?

What would "genuinely interest" me? To begin with, it would be something that doesn't try to sell itself. Less adjectives and more verbs, please, and nouns, of course. Perhaps longer sentences, with quotation marks if necessary, a few internet links, books mentioned. A whole paragraph, two pages, an interview, an essay. Is our need as simple as to getting more space for publishing and reading about the work, or it is certainly about less curatorial publicity and another kind of discourse? Of course, it's not only about grammar, although changing grammar and economy of this text is part of the rules of discourse.

Does the text now announce what this work is about? What it is concerned with? If this topic is a matter of a wider discussion? Describing how the performance was made in the words of the maker won't do. It might satisfy my interest only partly, inasmuch something that refers only to itself is interesting. To what extent, if any, do your choices depend on what specifically concerned you in the textual presentation of the work? Apart from the marketing idiom, which conflates descriptions, characterizations with words of persuasion and sale, why this performance should interest YOU? Does it imply that you should work a little before you come to theater, share a few thoughts with yourself, seek a position, or prepare yourself to develop one during the performance?

On understanding: from information to knowledge

I'm sitting, watching, listening. I'm not passive – I'm there, present and ready to receive.

Ready to discover something, that is, to learn something new or just something more.

In a context of a performance I could have informed myself before about the content of the piece. But here, unless I know what the work is talking about, precisely, in details, because I studied it, it's only grasping or taking superficial elements, in order to figure out if I could be interested by the work or not. We cannot consider problematic the way that programmes or articles inform people about a work, the information serves as a kind of preview or publicity to invite and seduce.

But what is really problematic is the after, if one leaves the theatre with a mass of information, and only rough information, there is no construction. The best example is television or any other medium that keeps you in a relatively passive state : first, we look at, second, we receive, but that's the only thing we do. There is no third operation.

A few questions about "third operation":

Is there something spectators can do with our performances?

Are we interpellating them to become creative users?

Do we think that understanding elicits a prolonged expression, a reaction turned into action?

Should we (and the theaters) develop a space, or tools to enable the third operation?

Is the third operation an activity, or will it suffice that the performance forces you to construct a position? (A position isn't just the perspective which frames your perception, but a stance)

But we would need this third operation if we would like to know. And by knowing I mean being able to explain to ourselves or to others. Explaining supposes that understanding precedes it. Then the question that comes out there is, how do we understand information ?

How we treat the information received is one of the answer to this question.

Separating, confronting, relating, associating information might be a starting point for an understanding.

Understanding implies two things: first, a sense of critic, and second, an interest.

Once the information is treated, memory is one of the parameters that we need in order to built a knowledge, the faculties to refer and explain are also necessary.

The seer, and by extension the receiver has already an important responsibility (that he or she can choose to take or not) when he or she comes to theatre. By this effort of understanding that she has to produce, her activation is already made.

Considering as well that some theatre maker only offers his/her work, without challenging, or giving any place for reflexion, I admit that the spectator might not be tried to go further in a research of understanding, it's however the necessity in order to talk about knowledge later on.

So the author, or the maker is also partly responsible for triggering the curiosity of the spectator.

On attention

How many times did you hear the phrase: "Yes... I really liked, but, I didn't understand anything". Probably, we have to accept that in a considerable amount of performances, the choreographer doesn't totally understand either whar he/she has made, but, let's take that as an extraordinary case, and suppose that everyone does... In this case we are taking as a starting

point something totally wrong. What does it mean I didn't understand? In several number of cases it just means, they didn't give me a "narrative" I could follow. But obviously, this is not a constitutive part of the medium, and cinema does it much better than us.

The performance codes belong to another kind. It is not a language that you already master (not us either), or anything you can compare with your own experience. The performance "understanding" requires from the spectator a certain engagement with the object, an effort. It is true that certain kind of performance ask a previous historical knowledge (in the case or re-enactments) but this is nothing you cannot solve with a little bit of time and your will to know, as many people do in theatre, for example, when reading the play before seeing Shakespeare. With "engagement with the object" actually I mean something as simple as giving a minimum of attention, and attention is something else that look at it, it is to watch in a critical way.

What is attention?

Focused attention: The ability to respond discretely to specific visual, auditory or tactile stimuli.

Sustained attention (vigilance): The ability to maintain a consistent behavioral response during continuous and repetitive activity.

Selective attention: The ability to maintain a behavioral or cognitive set in the face of distracting or competing stimuli. Therefore it incorporates the notion of "freedom from distractibility."

Alternating attention: The ability of mental flexibility that allows individuals to shift their focus of attention and move between tasks having different cognitive requirements.

Divided attention: This is the highest level of attention and it refers to the ability to respond simultaneously to multiple tasks or multiple task demands.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention>

In daily life we accept everything we see as a reality, every effect has its own cause, and certainly all of us have the capacity of reasoning and formulating judgments through the information we gather. In performance we should accept that the choreographer keeps this relation of causality as well, and ask ourselves WHY. In the end we don't ask more than that, more than engaging your basic cognitive capacities as attention, perception, memory, thinking... In order to put the information together and interpret something, as we do in daily life by looking, listening and figuring out meanings, comparing this with previous knowledge. Something we all share. The capacity which makes anybody equal to everybody.

As Rancière does in *The ignorant schoolmaster*, we proclaim the equality of intelligences. So, from this point on, we need to necessarily get rid of the false self-judgment "I don't have enough tools for understanding" as the Nietzsche's camel gets rid from the burden and becomes lion and child, we also should become critics and co-authors. There is not performance without spectators. We need at least one, one witness for closing the communication circle. The interpretation of the audience is necessary for the realization of the performance, and because it is evident that is not possible to reach an equal and undistorted transmission, the spectator takes an active role in it, a

sort of author-interpreter.

I would like to do an important observation at this point. And it is that, when Rancière proclaims the equality of intelligences, and the treatment of the audience as subjects capable of understanding, it is not an excuse (and this is an excuse for certain choreographers) for not taking our responsibility as a creators leaving all the work for the free interpretation of our audience. Because we cannot ask our audience to solve a problem when there is no problem established.

About the responsibility of the artist

In the last years some choreographers are experimenting with the attention their work elicits from the audience. More makers are trying to produce the work that can be more challenging for the spectators or at least dealing with how to make a choreographic problem a matter of public concern.

Anyway, this is not something totally new, already Brecht and Artaud, each of them in his own way, were busy with breaking the traditional passive position of the spectator, who is relegated to being captured by images, motionless on his seat, without any possibility of intervention. Brecht and Artaud wanted to create a space where they will learn something and become active participants in a collective performance.

I heard that this increasing interest in the audience has been described as a new trend, and I think this is a dangerous position, and I said dangerous because nowadays in the capitalistic society, all the mass media, marketing enterprises and so on, are working with the same idea that the old theatre, keeping us as a passive receivers of information, being not able to interact with all this overwhelming images. Maybe all this new wave of Brechts and Artauds is the answer of the contemporary eternal question of *why do the effort of going to the theatre?* So, this trend is selling to the fashion market one of the last spaces where the audience can be equal to each other.

Now I would say that I can understand as well the denomination “trend” of the phenomena, because like everywhere, there are certain people that are not conscious of what activating the audience means, and responsibilities that are attached to it. To take your audience to move around a bit, to exchange the performative space with them without proper reflexion on the medium can end up being awkward, absurd, and the audience will feel treated as an idiot. The same story if you open up to much your dramaturgy, or you are posing problems that you already know the answer, the audience will deal with an easy puzzle of two pieces.

The line is thin. We don't want to make inaccessible and hermetic performances that treat themes that only concern the ego of the artist, that for the only fact to consider him/herself an artist thinks that the audience should takes whatever he/she thinks or likes. Or the artist counts that the sheer action of sharing the room with the others and witnessing the performance the audience will change their way of living in the society. This means not only that you keep your audience motionless, but you literally close the door on their faces. On the contrary, we cannot fulfil the gap between the audience and the performance building a bridge for them, and not even helping them to jump. Since we want to take the spectator as an equal, we should challenge them to cross the forest for themselves, But still we have to build an enigma that makes the audience cross in search for an answer, instead of remaining comfortable in the darkness.

And now we get to the hot spot... How to challenge your audience? I think the answer is clear, we should challenge ourselves, we should make a problem that we want to solve but we don't

know how, we have to start being an ignorant that involves himself/herself in a learning process. Go into a research that will bring you beyond the structures you already master, ideology or aesthetics. Then... we will be equal with the spectator. And this implies the commitment with the object, and the will to solve the problem, sacrificing your artistic ego and your darlings for the sake of something greater. We have to speculate and maybe lose. As the scientist who works persistently for proving the hypothesis.

What specifically happens in the theater that does not happen elsewhere

- what is the effect of one making an effort of buying the ticket and coming to the theater (and maybe even doing some kind of research on the performance)
- why is it different to sit surrounded with people you don't know – do they respect each other's spaces
- do they share similar interests because they chose to come to see the same show
- does the fact that people on stage are as alive as any other person in the auditorium have an effect on your watching / considering the seen
- what about time in this situation
- does a beer before or after influence ones going to the theater
- what about the liveliness of the performing arts? – each performance is singular when performed, even when the material is set
- does the fact that performers onstage are amateurs' changes spectators' relationship towards what he sees?

I am thinking of people faced with people. All people are in need of other people, so we gather and support each other in the roles that we are playing out – spectator, performer. As said before, artists owe to spectators as much as spectators owe to artists. It's as simple as that. (This can also be in public space, football, doesn't makes the theatre a specific place...)

And as far as I can see at this point, theater is the space that was originally constructed to support this precise encounter.

In the same time I am thinking about two specific feelings that happen: one on each "side".

The first being stage fright and second being a silent excitement that you (or me) feel while sitting in the dark, surrounded by people you most likely don't know, watching and waiting attentively.

Stage fright can come about in many forms, this is true. Nevertheless, there is a specific kind of stage fright that only happens when one is faced with a group of people who are attentive towards whatever she/he is doing. When younger, stage fright can be experienced as an unpleasant feeling of discomfort that comes from taking a stand in front of a group of people (who might be judging your every move, as far as you know). When accustomed to being in front of people, stage fright can present itself as a positive, exciting feeling that actually works as support in your stepping out and sharing what you want to share. It is also true that some artists claim not to feel stage fright and I would like to point out that even though the name carries the word "fright" (and I use this term for a lack of a better one but also for its recognizeability) one does not necessarily experience

stage fright as fear, especially when professional experience is implied, but rather as, what I would call in this context, a “boost to one’s artistry”.

This precise feeling only happens when performing before a group of people, and why? – because the stakes are high. Why are the stakes high? – because you place yourself in a vulnerable position in which you are making a statement and producing an immediate reaction in an, assumingly, attentive reader.

And this can actually apply to a politician defending his left or right as well as the artist claiming an abstract movement on stage.

At the same time, what happens on the other side?

I am already in the theatre, so I take for granted that I chose this particular performance as the content of my evening over an alternative, went through the trouble of reading the biography of the collective, bought my ticket, read the program note and found my seat.

All these actions lead to (in most cases) me having an expectation of what I could possibly experience in the next hour or so – the expectation that I project on the curtain in the form of excitement, curiosity and interest. The moment the curtain opens (taking into account a different dispositif) my expectation can transform into opinions.

I agree and/or disagree with the performance, with the performer(s). Disagreement can make me give up right away. An agreement, on the other side, can make me start trusting (even believing in) people on stage, even over my better judgement.

To bring the two sides together into a potential meeting of a *proposition* (made by a performer under influence of adrenalin) and *trust* (of the attentive spectator excited by hers/his expectation) that happen between “two” *people*. Is theater then the only dispositif that welcomes fictional space (magic?) penetrating reality between two conscious parties? This being different than circus by the possibility of magic *not* being realized (when in circus we take it for granted that it will be realized?).

Because - what kind of a contract is signed between 500 spectators who sit at the edges of their Kaai theater seats and breathing in time with 4 dancers performing the first movement of de Keersmaeker’s *Rosas danst Rosas*?

I could as easily imagine that the fact that performers are as alive as spectators introduces the possibility of performers’ failing in their virtuosity. Which makes both parties (secretly) hope for the best – thus both get involved in solving the problem. And this has a stronger effect on the spectator because of his physical passivity (inability to help the one in need).

This notion gets easily graspable when compared to the cinema. When faced with the big screen, spectator’s passivity is not in the way because the performers are not in a direct danger of failure for they have been filmed (most of the time more the year before the particular screening) – which implies preparations, screenings, shooting, editing, postproduction. So by the time our spectator in question meets the actor on screen, the actual actor is safe and sound half way across the world.

What makes the theatre different from other places?

Is it a place constructed to support encounters? Maybe, but this isn't a function that the theatre distinguishes from other places like concert halls, or congress halls. I would even claim that it is the public space was originally the space for encounters...The definition appears as too general. We should be more precise...

But what is it that makes the theatre specific? And can we still find a definition that makes the theatre unique?

We are living and working in a time where a lot of functions that used to make the theatre specific are spread among other terrains. For example: the experience of space: isn't this precisely where 3D films are focused on. Can you speak in a theatre of a real encounter between the audience and performers? Or isn't this a function which is explored better in public space.

What is it then that makes the theatre specific?

A space to contemplate, to work actively in order to understand the given thing? But don't you do this also in while reading a newspaper or going to debate?

Maybe it is more complex? Maybe we cannot say it in one sentence but is it everything I pointed at here above that makes the theatre a theatre place...

One thing you can consider nowadays is that maybe the theatre is one of the last places where there is a certain degree of freedom to act and to speak. I do not mean that this is only connected to the building but to the social context that art creates.