

Introduction

Guy Cools
Pascal Gielen

The Ethics of Art takes as its starting point the paradigm shifts that have occurred in the first decade of the 21st century and that seem to have raised a new and growing ethical consciousness within the artistic community, both in the way it relates to the larger social, political and economic challenges and in the way it reflects on its own production and distribution mechanisms.

This book is an attempt to describe this ethical turn within the arts. It doesn't wish to install a new politically correct agenda of right behavior but rather to show how the artistic community as a whole as well as individual artists engage in a creative dialogue with society and how, as a result of this dialogue, they make personal ethical choices.

As with the other books published by Arts in Society, we neither intend nor pretend to create a conclusive theoretical overview answering all the questions raised in the debate on the ethics of art. Rather, we prefer to gently orchestrate a polyphonic conversation in which the singular voices of individual artists, discussing their own creative practices, are equally important as the more scholarly contributions.

The book focuses on the European contemporary dance scene, but it embeds this in the larger context and history of eco-art practices, while also providing some striking examples of best practices from the USA and Canada, where there is a much longer and more established tradition of discourse on ethical issues.

After two introductory chapters, written by us, the editors, ourselves, the book is divided into two main sections. The first section, *The Ethics of Art: Ecosophy*, focuses on eco-art practices and how the ethical turn in the arts implies, again, a greater receptivity for the environment we live in. The second section focuses more on dance and the renewed interest in 'caring for the body' instead of transgressing it, both on the level of the individual and on that of the larger 'body politic' of cooperation and collaboration. However, the attentive reader will notice there is a lot of crossover between both sections, since the increased receptivity for one's environment always occurs through the sentient body.

In his introductory essay, *Situational Ethics: An Artistic Ecology*, Pascal Gielen offers a sharp analysis of some of the pathologies of contemporary society that are caused by the 'state of exception' we live in and the 'campanisation' of social models (Agamben). The situational ethics of art offers an alternative to

these pathologies by the way in which artistic imagination can produce new situations, based on the potentials and the limits of the individual 'body' to replace the habits installed by the homogenization process of global capitalism.

The ethical turn in the arts seems to imply and also depend on a revalorization of the receptive mode of the creation process. In his contribution, *The Art of Listening*, Guy Cools describes how in his own practice as a dance dramaturge his focus has shifted from the articulation to the perception pole of the creative process. In a similar way, contemporary philosophers and sociologists such as Richard Shusterman, Richard Sennett or David Abram underline the importance of practicing our dialogical skills and in particular the art of listening. The professional performing arts, dance in particular, seem to be an excellent laboratory to do so.

The first section, *The Ethics of Art: Ecosophy*, on eco-art practices, starts with an historical overview by Karolien Byttebier and Christel Stalpaert. In *Ecology and Art: Scenes of a Tumultuous Affair*, they situate the phenomenon of eco-theatre and eco-performance in the 21st century within a larger evolution that also comprises land art, environmental art and eco-art, devoting specific attention to a shifting interpretation of the terms 'ecology' and 'ethics.' Using the Belgian theatre maker and visual artist, Benjamin Verdonck, as their main example, they describe the activism of the contemporary ecologically engaged artist as that of a performer-diplomat.

Where Byttebier and Stalpaert place the contemporary eco-art practices in a historical perspective, Jeroen Peeters, in *Imagination, Experience and Meaning as Quality of Life*, uses the same context of a number of recent initiatives around sustainable development in the performing arts, but opens it up to a broader philosophical discourse on new modes of production and policy making. Artistic imagination is the guiding principle in all of these new initiatives.

After the scholars and critics who outline the debate, the floor is given to the artists themselves. In *On the Manifesto for the Active Participation of the Performing Arts Sector in the Transition towards a Fair Durability*, which foregrounds the tension between artistic freedom and ecological limits, Sébastien Hendrickx and Benjamin Verdonck give an overview of the critical response that their manifesto has generated.

In *The Eco Art Incubator and the Ethics of Belonging*, Denise Kenney gives an overview of the eco-art practices she initiated within the interdisciplinary performance art program of the University of British Columbia/Campus Okanagan and how these practices situate themselves 'at the intersection of the human activity (the sensory body) and the environment within which that activity takes place.'

In her essay *A Long Duration Art Ensemble: Theatre of All Possibilities, Research Vessel Heraclitus, and Biosphere 2*, Kathelin Gray describes the projects that were realized worldwide over a period of 40 years combining ecology, performing arts and new models of social and political organization. By doing so she offers a unique insight into both the difficulties and the power of collaboration within a long duration art ensemble.

During the course of one year, spanning the four seasons, the Dutch performance collective 'united sorry,' consisting of Robert Steijn and Frans Poelstra, created performances out of conversations with the trees in Vienna. In *Green Conversations*, they describe in a poetic narrative the intentions behind and the insights they gained from 'their embedded journalism,' talking to trees.

The contribution by the Canadian-American scholar Naomi M. Jackson links the second section, which zooms in on the body and contemporary dance practices, to the first one, on eco-art. In *Ecology, Dance Presenting, and Social Justice*, she reflects on how a discourse of ecology adapted by the performing arts presenting world in the USA relates to concerns central to promoters of social justice. She does so discussing, among others, as a case study the viral Youtube video, *Where the Hell is Matt?*

In *Why Dance? Aesthetico-Political Notes on Pedro Almodóvar's 'Talk to Her'*, Arne De Boever describes and analyzes the story of the comatose Alicia in *Hable con ella (Talk to Her)* by Pedro Almodóvar and situates it within the contemporary discourse of the 'state of exception' (Agamben) we live in, in which biopolitics (Foucault) control people's lives and bodies. He further continues to argue for 'an ecology of care and an ecology of dance without nature' as a countercurrent to the above.

In their dialogue *On Collaboration and Navigating between Dance Cultures: an Ethics of Reconciliation*, choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and dance scholar Lise Uytterhoeven focus on

the necessity of a dialogical practice in and around the work of art. A dialogue which reaches out to the ‘other’ while recognizing the uniqueness of each voice involved in it.

American choreographer and dancer Sara Wookey was at the core of a polemic that went viral between Yvonne Rainer and Marina Abramović on how dancers should be treated. In *Disappearing and Resurfacing Movements: And Other Concerns of (a) Dance Artist(s)*, Wookey looks back at that experience and discusses different qualities and working conditions of her work as a dance artist both in the Netherlands and in the USA and how the dancer’s ability to make something from nothing is acutely useful and necessary in a time of economic uncertainty.

In *Ethics in Dreamwork: Notes from EDEN*, modul-dance choreographer Mala Kline describes her journey to find a new approach and ‘invent an artistic practice that enables her to explore the possibilities towards an alternative paradigm based on different ways of seeing, which by returning to the image reaffirms it as a medium of our connectivity, communication and exchange.’ This new approach is based on the School of Images, a kabbalah-based school of working with dream imagination.

In his contribution, Indian choreographer Navtej Johar discusses the interconnectedness of his practice as yoga teacher, a choreographer and an urban activist in Madras, India. The common denominator in all these practices is the taking care and ‘giving sincere and continuously attention’ to both one’s body and one’s (urban) environment. He illustrates this with the project he developed, *The Power of Seeing*, in which school children are guided to observe and document one element of their urban environment in order to eventually reorganize and change that environment.

Through the diversity of these individual approaches and situational ethical attitudes a common ground appears, which is best summarized by the following quote from David Abram’s influential book in contemporary American ecological philosophy, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996):

It may be that the new ‘environmental ethic’ toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire – an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature – will come into existence not primarily

through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative structures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.¹

We hope that you will enjoy both the diversity and the uniqueness of all the individual voices in this book and that the polyphonic dialogue they engage in, by being presented next to each other, may also stimulate you to join the debate on *The Ethics of Art*.

The Ethics of Art is the follow-up to the Third modul-dance Conference, 'Ethics in Aesthetics? For an Ecology of the Arts of both Environment and Body,' organized in October 2012 by the modul-dance Project of the European Dance Network, Danshuis Station Zuid and the institute Arts in Society of the Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts in Tilburg. Some of the texts of this conference have been re-worked for this publication, but most of the essays were written especially for this book. We are grateful to the organizers of the conference and especially to the modul-dance project, which also invested in the realization of this publication.

Notes

- 1 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.
New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 69.