

*ACKNOWLEDGING THE COMMITMENT*

Interview with Lotte van den Berg

By Sodja Zupanc Lotker



In spring 2021 I conducted this online interview with Dutch performance director Lotte van den Berg about the *Building Conversation* project. *Building Conversation* is a platform for dialogical art led besides Lotte van den Berg by Dutch visual artist Daan 't Sas and Belgian performance maker and philosopher Peter Aers but includes many other guides in many countries existing since 2014.

The performance is a dialogue among the audience members based in very specific rules and script. Individual dialogues are inspired by different methods of different people and groups of people – philosophers, scientists, tribes. For instance, the *Parliament of Things* is inspired by the work of French theorist Bruno Latour; *Thinking Together* dialogue/performance is developed based on the work of quantum physicist David Bohm and *Impossible Conversation* is based on Jesuit methods. Each dialogue/performance has a moderator/guide that introduces the rules and sets the timing of the dialogue and its individual parts but the content is fully up to the participants. Important part of the Building Conversation events is the meeting point where all the groups that led dialogue that evening meet to drink and have soup and continue talking together.

This interview can never reproduce the experience of the Building Conversation dialogues. Instead, it aims to uncover some of the thinking and the needs of Lotte van den Berg in making them. I have collaborated with Lotte van den Berg and Building Conversation on multiple projects in the past years, so this became more of a conversation rather than an interview in many places.

S.L.: How did you start with the work on dialogue and dialogical art?

L.VD B.: I started with the spectator or the act of spectating, watching. For me, as a theatre-maker, as a director, it was important to invite the spectator, over time more and more, into the action; and to acknowledge the spectator as part of the action.

Of course, this is backwards narration, but I think that maybe not from the very beginning of my career, but already a few years before the start of the *Building Conversation* project, the spectator somehow was a very important role in my work; important in the way I thought about my work. You could say that for many of the performances I made like *Wasteland* (2004), and *Rumour* (2007), *Agoraphobia* (2012) ... I somehow started designing, developing, creating through the spectator's role. I was designing the place of watching, the seats, the way they were seated or standing. That was always the beginning. For me the position of the spectator is the start of the creative process.

I was researching what does it mean to be present, to watch, to observe, to be at a distance, to recognize yourself in the story of others, to commit yourself to the fact that you're watching, to engage yourself in watching, to look at the act of watching and seeing as an act. And slowly turned into dialogue.

I made the performance *Agoraphobia* in 2012 with one performer. He is outside on a square, and as an audience member, you're invited to go to the square, to have your phone and to dial a number and to listen. You hear a voice, and it talks about the fact that they would like to speak out but don't dare. And then slowly you recognize that you're there listening with many more people. And slowly this group of listeners recognizes each other, and suddenly you're there with your phone on your ear with a hundred people, and you start following this homeless person (the performer). And then after a while there is a moment when we turn off the connection, so you must come closer because otherwise you won't hear, and you must commit to the listening closely. That is a very important moment in the performance. And although it is a monologue, I really perceive it as a dialogue: because it is through the act of listening that this person changes from a homeless, confused person that is nowhere to somebody that stands in the middle of the square with hundreds of people around him listening. This completely changes the way you perceive the person. Before that moment people don't acknowledge them. They would pass the person while doing shopping. And suddenly he or she becomes the king, or the guru, the center.

S.L.: You are acknowledging the commitment of both audience and the artists and the influence on each other, right?

L.VD B.: Yes, and that, of course, immediately also has a lot of political implications. Are we consumers? Are we consuming performances as an audience? Are we consuming what we see? Or are we somehow co-creating? Are we making it? Because if there is no one watching the show, there's no show.

S.L.: It happens also in conventional drama theatre with stage auditorium division too, because just the act of watching and listening influences the performance.

L.VD B.: Yes, of course. But for me it is important to distinctly acknowledge it, to make it visible, to make it tangible, to make it an experience, to make people aware that the watching and the seeing is an act, a political act.

S.L.: They also see themselves seeing? They notice how the way they watch, spatially and culturally, influences what they see?

L.VD B.: In *Rumour* you, the audience, are sitting in a closed box with a big window and outside you see the city happening. First, you, of course, think that it's about the performers in the city. But then the performers disappear among the other people in the city. There's a moment when you think: «Ok now we can go home because the performers disappeared,» and then, after a few minutes, you think: «Oh, but there's a lot to see.» And then, listening to the soundscape you find out that how you see things depends on what you think and what you feel. If you start hearing romantic music, suddenly you see people being romantic or being in love. If you listen to rain, you imagine rain and wind. And you are start noticing your own thinking, your own position.

S.L.: This is the question of framing. The sounds for instance frame/influence the experience. But there are a lot of aspects that frame the experience. Some of it is done on purpose by the artists and some of it comes from the audience themselves. But the craft of the director is here a bit different. You're not directing audience's perception towards different things on stage, but you're facilitating for them also to understand perception itself, in a way, if that makes sense? And creating space for their perception...

L.VD B.: Yes, I'm inviting people to be self-reflective. Not only on the level of perception, but also for instance to question: «What does it mean for me to be part of a group here? Why do I want to watch this?»

In Wasteland, the performance where the audience sits a hundred and two meters away from some people in a deserted space killing each other. What does it mean to sit here and watch? To keep watching? Why do I want to watch this?

S.L.: In working with perception over the course of years I have realized that dramaturgically there need to be two steps. Self-reflection is sometimes extremely far point for audience, and I think there needs to be a step of acknowledging before self-reflection. Often providing the step of acknowledging the position of perception is enough, in a way. And then, they do the self-reflection or not. And, sometimes, if you push for the self-reflection too fast and too early in the performance and the acknowledging does not happen, it is dramaturgically bad and in a way patronizing. You push audience's into a place too fast, they don't get there themselves and, in a way, it is not real. Do you know what I mean? I think it happens often in participatory works.

L.VD B.: Yes, acknowledging your own presence and the importance of your presence, and of course, the smallness of your presence. But this process of perceiving, of watching, of being there, of acknowledging yourself in relation to others also watching to the work itself, for me that process became more and more important.

Of course, I was also busy with the fact that in public space people less and less, somehow, communicated. That there is an individualization happening, that we're very much in our own sphere... the phones were not that present yet. Sitting in trains, and trams, and buses, for me, always has been a very important inspiration. I was reflecting upon what does it mean to be together in this way. Acknowledging each other presence is sometimes more important than having a talk.

S.L.: And acknowledging presence is already a dialogue?

L.VD B.: Yes. I remember this moment once when my nose started bleeding on a train. It was a full train, there were even people standing. And I was trying to pretend as if it wasn't bleeding... and I didn't have anything to stop the bleeding. And nobody responded! I think because I tried to hide it: everybody 'agreed' with my act of hiding. So, they behaved as if they did not see it. And then I decided to say: «My nose is bleeding!» And in that moment, everybody gave me their handkerchiefs.

Seeing the other is admitting your own presence. I was not only behaving as if my nose wasn't bleeding; I was in a way trying to pretend I wasn't there. The moment I dared to be there with all my stumbling and blood: others could also be there.

I would like to say that for me the most important thing is not the notion of dialogue, but the notion of joining or participating. It goes back to being in Kinshasa in Congo in 2010, where we worked for 4 months with a group of different artists. We were working outside, in an open atelier in a suburb of the city. We asked ourselves this question: 'can you watch with the eyes of another'? And there was this idea that we would make ourselves the strangers by going there.

I went there as a director, somebody who is used to watch the stage from a distance. As a director you're not on the stage, you watch things happening, and then you organize it, you control it, you're on the outside. And being there, in this constant chaos, in the public space in Kinshasa, it became clear that I was not able to watch in the same way because I was constantly watched and observed myself! I couldn't be the fly on the wall, I couldn't be the outside observer, I couldn't be the director controlling because there was no inside nor outside.

We made something we called «invisible theatre» with a few Congolese actors; little scenes performed on the street but without saying: «This is a performance.» So, they just came, and they did some fighting, or they started watching the sky... they did simple interventions, and we followed how people responded. And then, we made a small tribune, and while making it our production leader wrote down, «Podium pour les douze chaises.» So, I wanted to make a tribune for 12 chairs. It was a stage for the chairs. I really loved it! It was a little language game, but for me, it was also about turning around the stage itself. The auditorium was on the stage.

It was a simple place about 3 to 4 meters, maybe a bit bigger, and 12 white plastic chairs on it. We moved it to different places. It took a lot of people to move it. We would put it somewhere, and then I would sit there, invite people, and we would watch the ordinary life, sometimes also with the intervention of the spectators. It was a performance we were constantly trying out and experimenting with.

It was very difficult to find people who wanted to sit with me on the stage for the chairs. And, if there were people sitting there, they would immediately leave as soon as something was happening. If there was a scene happening further away, somehow, they would leave and went there, closer, to be in it. Most of the people had no desire to sit and to watch, which for me is an especially important thing to do: to be able to sit and watch. Instead, there was a desire to be part of the scene, to be part of the action, to be close. You can think that from a distance, sitting you have an overview, and you see what is happening. But you can also have the feeling that you have to be in it to know what is happening. Not only to watch with an overview, but you must, actually, immerse, to be part of... you have to smell and to feel, and to breath with the action. It is a totally different way of connecting.

It is an understanding, knowing through bodily experience. I was directly confronted with this white western perspective that still prevails, where we think that you learn, that you understand, that you see if you have overview, if there is «neutral» position, if there is distance.

S.L.: But it is very strange that this position is persistent because in philosophy and different disciplines, we know this is not true for a long, long time. But in the theatre, it somehow stuck. It also includes a myth of separation and a myth of rationality. It's a widespread myth that understanding happens only through thinking verbally or thinking in these rational ways.

But then, of course, there's the other extreme of the participatory theatre, like immersive theatre become pure... it plays so much with just experience that it becomes a funhouse. So, I think there must be a serious very complex balance between experiencing and understanding.

L.VD B.: To have the acknowledgement of you in it and the self-reflection following this acknowledgement.

S.L.: Yes, exactly. And acknowledging yourself and acknowledging all the different types of differences that are happening, acknowledging all the aspects.

L.VD B.: Yes, now we're working on *Rhizome*, a new work where I would like to start with sitting and from there to step up and to step in.

S.L.: I think maybe you should also finish by sitting. There's something about first observing, then understanding how it is to be a part of, and then when you go back to sitting, you will never watch in the same way because you are aware of how it is from inside.

I am thinking how all these participatory things will influence the more traditional ways of theatre. We will never be able to watch the same way again probably. It will change.

L.VD B.: In a way, there is a fluidity of roles. You are not a spectator or an actor anymore, you are both. That you're watching and acting, and this, somehow, it's more like breathing.

S.L.: And the audience needs time, they cannot be too busy, so they can acknowledge or perceive their perception.

L.VD B.: If it is too active there is no time for self-reflection.

After we came back from Kinshasa, I was thinking that I have to acknowledge my white distant director position. And together with Daan¹ I started to do research around participation.

On the island of Terschelling², during the *Oerol Festival*, we asked if we could have a 10-day brainstorming outdoors in 2013. We were creating a simple settlement, every day anew, sometimes with some cover against rain, or sun, or wind, and we had tea and coffee, and we could bake eggs for people. We had this place, and it was on a really very huge field, where there was nothing. People would come by because they were walking by or have seen it from a distance. It was not announced in any program. It was just there, it appeared, and then they would say, «What are you doing?» And we would say, «We're sitting here and we're thinking about a possible project next year, here in this place.» And then we would say, «If you would join, what would we do?» And we had all-day discussions, and somehow the question was so simple that Daan and me could simply cook and do eggs, and they would also start having questions for each other. A lot of possible projects came up: houses, and vegetable gardens, and boats, a lot of things that could be built. We called it - «Temple the Building Place» or «The building place the Temple». There was something around spirituality but also about something very concrete and the building. We really thought at the end of the 10 days that we are going to build something next year, and that it was about the act of building.

But all the things that we together with the people made up ended up with the question: «But, do we really need it?» And that broke it down again. We would find that it was not really needed. And we felt that actually it was super nice that the place was empty. There's not so much empty spaces anymore, so why should we build something? And then, more and more, for us, it became clear that the conversation itself, this talking and watching, and imagining a common future, in this simple way, was what it was about. The conversation itself was the building. Somebody on the last day said, «You're not building with bricks but with words. So, maybe, Building Conversation would be a nice title.» And, well, we stayed loyal to it. I doubted it as a title, but it somehow became the title. And then we said, «Ok, this is what we're going to do for next year, we're going to build conversations. We're going to create different types of conversations and invite people to join.» The idea was that you go into an empty space, you create your dialogue space there, you have the conversation as a work of art, and then you come back, and you reflect.

The year after, we did the first experiments of Building Conversation. It started from this question of participation. What kind of frame should you, as an artist, propose? Should you design for a possibility for others to actually join? And how to actually take responsibility yourself, to take part, to take your part, to acknowledge the fact that you are a part in a bigger whole? From all this the dialogue appeared.

I thought for years that I was busy inviting spectators in as participants, and in this first week of performing *Building Conversation* at *Oerol* I suddenly realized that I was inviting myself in. That I invited myself as a director to join.

I have always, as a director felt I was the first spectator. When sitting, when directing, when making, somehow, I was always perceiving myself as a spectator, making for other spectators or for others to watch with me. And when we were inviting spectators to step in and to join, I was in a way inviting myself to step in and to join. That's where I decided not to stick to the white distant observing position but to try and to step in and be a part of. And inviting myself to switching roles, to acknowledge the fact that I can frame it, I can install, I can create a setting, and I can step in. It is also problematic in a sense.

S.L.: Yes, I think there are some seemingly contradictory things in that because you're creating the space in which you are to be together, you and audience and everyone, but you're still the one that frames it and you're still the one that makes the rules, right? And you're still the one that has the first need and more experience, right? So, how do you deal with that?

L.VD B.: Yes, that is a constant question. But it is the same question connected to leadership, and fellowship. Daan always chooses to really join. But I am also really a director. I really love setting the frame. I'm good at it. That's also a place where I can really be touched. I choose not to give up that space or that role completely, but I choose to, maybe sometimes, step out of it to also join, but I also want to be able to step back. This is becoming more and more clear to me.

S.L.: Again, the most important thing there is acknowledging, acknowledging what you need and acknowledging to the audience that this is where you are. Being transparent about your position: «This is how I operate and these are the rules,» and they can join or not.

L.VD B.: That's, of course, what we try to do with Building Conversation, to be very clear that we did set the frame and we also do try to join with them, although we have another position.

And Daan and me, we talk about curiosity and control a lot. There is a wish to be part, to be curious, to be in and to feel. And there is a wish to control. And, how to combine them? I think Building Conversation really grew from the fact that we, Daan and me, are quite different in that. And even this morning when talking about the new project, the Rhizome, I again decided I'm not going to give up the ways to control, at least to a certain degree.

S.L.: Because taking control is also in a way of taking responsibility for something, right?

L.VD B.: It is responsibility, yes, yes. But this is a constant struggle also, a constant search. How to negotiate these two? The openness and the control. And it is at the core of Building Conversation. But Daan and me sometimes also say, «We should stop! I can't do this anymore!» We are really clashing.

S.L.: Yes, but I think it is also why it works so well. It is because these two polarities are needed for the situation to be dynamic, and the possibility for something third.

L.VD B.: Sometimes it seems that the one controlling is most needed. But it's not true, if Daan wouldn't be there as a counterforce, Building Conversation would never have been what it is. It would not exist in a way.

S.L.: Some of the openness would be lost.

L.VD B.: Yes, and the playfulness, and the not-knowing, and the really trusting the fact that everybody who's there is there, it is what it is. But, for me, I can only look at that if it is framed. I think that the reflection, the self-reflection happens because you can watch it, to watch yourself in it. You need to frame.

S.L.: What is that still now surprises you the most about the conversations and about the dialogue?

L.VD B.: The surprise of people joining. People joining and being surprised how easy it is. As if prior to joining there is maybe a fear of dialogue or a distrust in the possibility of it. Also experience impossibility of dialogue.

And then when the dialogue happens. It provides a sense of relaxation. It surprises the people, and it also provides a sense of trust in others. What surprises me is how easy it is to do it. Or maybe not easy but simple.

S.L.: That's my experience also. It is simple to have open creative dialogue. But dialogues are often too stiff, or judgmental, or formal, or superficial... It says something about our society.

L.VD B.: If I think of myself being a young student, I was constantly discussing and debating, and very harshly. And talking was really about battling, no?

S.L.: Yes, about winning.

L.VD B.: And I loved it, but I also hated it. I was constantly fighting.

S.L.: So, it is about understanding dialogue not as a battle but as sharing.

L.VD B.: Yeah, but then not only the cozy, harmonious sharing. There is a place in between where there is dissent, where there is agonism. And that we can be agonistic that and to endure it.

For the new project, the Rhizome, we want to create a dialogue where it's not only the human voice that sets the tone and speaks. We of course made The Parliament of Things within the Building Conversation where we, together with audience, invite the voices of others or perspectives of others more-than-human. Still in the Parliament they must speak through human words. That is starting to irritate me a bit because you still push these others and these more-than-human entities into a human frame that is so boxed and separated, no? Words work through separation.

S.L.: Yes, our languages are about distinguishing - separating and categorizing. Or at least this is what they were mainly used for, for hundreds of years.

L.VD B.: We are now looking for ways how to install a setting in which maybe words can be part of it but are not the main thing. I was at this outside place where we're now sometimes working, and there's a huge inside area which is totally falling apart with a lot of sounds. There was rain and wind that day, so there's things squeaking, and dropping, and moving. It's all different kind of sounds, so it's wood against wood, it's metal, it's water. And somehow, there was this moment where I thought, «Maybe this is the conversation. And, what would I say if I would join?»

I sat down, I was listening to all these things and perceived it as a dialogue, as a conversation, and it was interesting because I it's so fragile, and you feel that the words could also destroy it. I could only say things like, «What if I eee-ooo-aaaaah.»

I'm busy now with how we could acknowledge our own human voice as one of the sounds. Also, so we don't perceive the place where we are as a landscape, that is our backdrop to our existing, and we don't see the sounds that are there as a soundscape in the back of our talking. How to step in this even broader collective of things and entities, and how to give yourself a place in there.

S.L.: Yeah. I think it's important to understand that the dialogue is already happening on so many levels – just by us existing. We think that we are in charge of instance objects, but it's not true because we have to wash them, and we have to iron them, and now in lockdown, I understand, more and more, that I do a lot of services to objects, you know? L.VD B.: Yeah, it's this whole notion of being-with. Maybe first, it was about joining, like me, as an outsider. I'm an observant joining the other people somehow. Now I think how to join. It's also like to acknowledge that you are together with so many other things and how to do that.

S.L.: And it's not only for the reasons to be politically better, to acknowledge...

L.VD B.: No, no!

S.L.: To acknowledge who you are.

L.VD B.: For your own soul.

S.L.: Exactly! The other day somebody here in Prague said: «The problem with the Czech Republic is that we can never be fully independent.» And I thought: «What does that mean? Does that mean I need to stop breathing? And I need to stop eating? And I need to stop reading books? Which kind of independence are you talking about? Because I am dependent on so many things that it's not even called dependency, it's just called life.

L.VD B.: So, after the moment of listening and trying to include my voice the question was how to stand up? Make a moment, make a decision, choose a moment to stand up, to step in, and look for a place to lay down. It was a beautiful moment! It was just outside, but to be somewhere, and to be somehow thinking like, «Where could I? Should I? Do I want to?» And laying down then suddenly becomes something really connected to being-with.

S.L.: I keep thinking that you have to also go from political back to the aesthetic because, somehow, these compositional things are actually political things, in relation to being-with, where you are in relationship to others, and how the constellations in the sense of composition are made.

Because, sometimes, the aesthetic allows you for a different level of intuitive thinking or intuitively understanding the situation without predetermined it politically.

S.L.: Thinking about dialogue people are afraid of things that are in change because, if things will change anyway, they think they're no worth grasping in the moment. And, if they cannot be grasped, then they don't exist. So, people, somehow, don't like understanding that things are changing minute to minute. So, there's something about stability and instability that is, somehow, a big part of the problem of human thinking. We don't understand that if I grasp something on a micro level or even in a second, that it's still worth it. Acknowledging that this is how it is now and it will change, you know? That I control it or grasp it in the moment but allow that it will be different the next time.

L.VD B.: I think I was like 16-17 or something and I was writing an essay on Buddhism for my religion class. I read this book about Buddhism and it said: «Everything changes constantly. And you shouldn't think of change as a river constantly changing, with you as a piece of wood in the changing river. There's no piece of wood.»

I was aware of the fact that I wasn't able to think myself as change. I constantly came back to myself as this little piece of wood in the changing river floating. And then, there was a moment, I know it was in the house of my mother in a room upstairs with one window, and I looked at the window outside, and I turned, and then I saw the wall with my shadow. And I thought, «Ok now, everything changed!» Only this turning made me realize how... I can't even explain, but there was this moment of insight that I thought, «Now everything is different!»

But it's so difficult not to go back to the feeling of the piece of wood floating in the changing river.

NOTAS

- ¹ Daan 't Sas, Dutch visual artist, one of the leaders of the Building Conversation with Belgian philosopher/performance maker Peter Aers and Lotte van den Berg.
- ² In the Netherlands.