Daniel 0:00

Hello, everyone, welcome to Making a Scene. This is an Esplanade podcast about how art gets made. My name is Daniel Kok. I'm an independent choreographer, curator and performance researcher. In this episode, we'll be talking to an old friend of mine, Martin Schick, who is an interdisciplinary performer, choreographer, producer, and activist currently based in Switzerland. Martin, do you identify with this word activist?

Martin 0:35

Hey there, first of all, thank you for having me. Also, as an activist, maybe this creates a kind of fear, which it is supposed to be. I usually write something that I'm not an activist or not an activist yet, but I think an activist attitude is the right one to have, to put in place. So I'm writing this in the CV also as a kind of an orientation for myself, where I want to go and where I shouldn't lose my focus.

Daniel 1:10

I think we will definitely be talking about where we come from and where we're going. And actually, I remember when we were flatmates in Berlin, there was one day I was working on my bio, and I was in the kitchen. And then you sat down, and we ended up having a chat about it. And in my bio, because of that day, I started writing that my earliest influences were Paula Abdul and Dirty Dancing. I was just looking for an honest response to like, how did I start working with dance, and I absolutely loved Paula Abdul at that time. And she called herself a choreographer and I was like, what is that? Whatever that is, that's what I want to be. And then Dirty Dancing, I was watching the dance sequences and just copying them because I'm from a lower middle class, or working class family, and there's no access to dance classes for a boy. So I was just copying all these videos. So in truth, dance history didn't begin with ballet, Chinese dance, or Martha Graham, it was Paula Abdul and Dirty Dancing for me.

So one of the questions we want to ask you in terms of background, maybe you can start by sharing a little bit about where you come from. I know that you came from TV actually, as well as theatre. So what were your artistic influences and how you became an artist.

Martin 2:27

So actually, I am coming from TV, let's say, because that was my cultural education. I grew up in the countryside in a small village that is more oriented on sports and whatever association you find in a village. So the window to the world was via television, and television was limited, because there was only the Swiss channel that we could see, because we were kind of a traditional family. I'm a very late, late bird. And a lot of time I feel very young in the art business, so I'm over 40, I feel like 20 regarding the, let's say, the art education I have in my past.

Because my first contact where maybe with 18, when I've seen the first ballet in life in Prague. When I was sitting in there, in the first three, four seconds, when the curtain opened, I was already crying. Even so there was no, there was no dramatic scene or anything, it was just the fact of being in a theatre, as if I would know that this is something for me or this is where something is going to happen in the future. It's like coming home without knowing that you had this home before.

And that's where this idea of becoming a ballerina grew and was kind of interrupted by our society that decides that a ballet dancer needs to start training when he's five years old. So in this international competition, where a guy that is 18 years old, can hardly, say, speed up to have kind of the same level. This door was closed and later, I was happy that it was closed because then many other beautiful things happened.

Daniel 4:09

Well, I think it's interesting to hear about how the interest in dance and performance also first came from the point of view of the spectator, a consumer even because I am linking to this word consumer because I know that consumption, marketization of the arts, modes of production, if it's not too big a leap, it eventually became a very big part of what you do artistically now. I wonder if you can very quickly describe that evolution from watching ballet at 18, wanting to be a ballerina, to doing the kind of work that you do today.

Martin 4:52

(Laughs) Sounds like a long way. Yeah, of course, you always get aware of the conditions of work, mostly, if the door is closed, you might be also a bit more critical than when it's wide open. And you are dancing through this made up environment. So if you have to install your place yourself, maybe you start with a different attitude.

But then, even doing critical performances in a rather open and independent art scene, I was totally confronted to this place, or this condition of the making of art, which is a very special condition, of course, because talking as a Swiss white guy, this is a totally, totally privileged position. And for many years, that wasn't so clear for all of us, whatever you're doing that it was so much connected on what society actually put in place as a kind of a system where the cultures and the art scene plays its role. We just did our shows, because we felt excited to dance and show something that we can do and to entertain the audience, but also entertain ourselves by being in nice artistic groups and talking about fancy topics. While doing this, you get more and more into this discussion with yourself about what are you actually doing? And what is creating? Who pays for it? And why? And what is it creating in a bigger context by joining this art market machinery?

It wouldn't be the same if someone is talking from another perspective or from another geographical spot. So this is very specific what I'm saying. But I think it's the only position I can take for myself, being in this equal responsibility of the arts as having this kind of pole position or privileged position, to put it into question and actually to dismantle it and maybe create a new system that is more…more fair and more accessible for others who are not in this privileged position.

Daniel 7:02

This has always interested me in your work and in talking to you in a more personal way, because I'm from Singapore, and we are called the Switzerland of Asia. Well, we call ourselves that, or we aspire to be the Switzerland of Asia. So I feel very obliged to be aware of the position of privilege as well in Singapore, and to be aware of, not just critiquing it, but also aware of how I cannot run away from the fact that this is my background and it influences and shapes the way I, I think I have grown up, but continue to operate inadvertently. So how would you describe Switzerland as a context now? How is it important to you, what Switzerland means?

Martin 7:48

What Switzerland means to me, of course, it's different to what it means to others as I am in this identification with this place, without being able to hide it. So I, as you say, before we even lived together in Berlin. And that was a time that was very important for me to get out of this Swiss context. But it was also a time when I learned that I belong to this context, and I'm responsible, I'm co-responsible for this context.

And when I did these demands for support, financial support for the city of Berlin, I felt very stupid, because I could just go back to Switzerland and use the money that is created there, because we have actually much more. Who am I to go to Berlin and steal the money of people that are having much less resources? So that's somehow one of the reflections I had — that I should actually go back, because that's where I can be much more influencing the situation than when I'm abroad. That was a personal decision. I don't say that any Swiss person has to do that.

But having this access, actually, to those headquarters, let's say, money headquarters, is something that puts me into a responsibility. And having the privilege many times in many discussions, we are just in the role of shutting up and stop talking, because we actually have no idea. And this act of listening to others, to give voices to others that are having a totally different approach to the topics is very important. Which, on the other hand, is not so easy if I'm in Switzerland. And that's why I'm trying not to lose this connection to the outside, to the international context.

Daniel 9:31

Well, I'm aware also that aside from this awareness of the relationship with capital, but also one’s awareness of climate crisis, has also resulted in you making a point to, after several years of doing a lot of international touring, decided to re-negotiate the terms of your creation and production so that you do your very best not to travel anymore. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Martin 10:02

Yeah, that was a decision that was personal. But it was also connected to the artistic practice that we're supposed to do. So there is this fact that, again, talking from the Swiss perspective, to be a quite fancy artist and a successful artist, if we travel a lot, even if we do a show for maybe 20 people in Singapore, it sounds great to be in Singapore and post a photo on Facebook saying, “Hello from Singapore. That's where I am right now.” That creates your cultural or artistic capital at home. This is a logic that I wanted to dismantle also for myself, to not perceive myself as more important just because I'm far away, just because I'm travelling, and how could I create this identity as a more local artist and local operator, where I can have much more influence because I'm staying more time and the production I do can be more intense and can be more rooted to the, to the place and also more sustainable in that sense.

It was also a personal decision for my own health, let's say. I found it a very toxic practice, to fly a lot, and to be two weeks in a place, making friends with people and leaving again, so I was longing also for these more durational relationships with people, with topics, with places, and being less in this… airport. It’s an airport life if you're an international artist, doing this practice. And at the same time, it was an interesting topic also to talk about, in what sense the arts are joining this movement, this ecological movement that we're constantly addressing, but actually, we are not practising that topic. And my question was where I could start practising it. And that's where I took some decisions to stay at least three months in a place. And do works that I call radicant works that are rooting totally different. So they are not composed of one project, but they are composed of several projects that are not so easy to communicate, but they create kind of a complex situation that I have to deal with. And it feels to me to be much more honest, in what I'm doing. It's much less selling myself in this consumption logic. It’s like a field I just have to work and to create important situations more than creating a product.

Daniel 12:26

Yeah, I can hear that very clearly about this idea of, well basically, this reconfigures what constitutes a product of artistic work, of artistic labour. And I think that now perhaps more than any other time, this has become a very pertinent question to ask, right, in the context of COVID. So I'm super curious to catch up with you over the idea of what do you at this moment think is the role of the artist? How can dance be a part of social rehabilitation, for example, in a post-COVID environment? Are these things that you think about?

Martin 13:05

Of course I do. Because I think we are, we know a lot. We, as a society, we know a lot, but it's sometimes difficult to access and to react on it. So the more news we read, the more we also get kind of this anomaly [ie, paralysis], we cannot move anymore, we are shocked by what is happening. As we are on a cognitive level, understanding what is going on, and putting it into your body and create an understanding that is different. It's the same as we say, for school kids, it's difficult to learn actually something if it's just a theory. But if you find a practice and a physical sensation that goes with it, it's much easier to go into this new logic.

And that's something where I think that dance is very important. I started to do this space, open up these dance spaces, again, this improv dance with DJs and creating a free space. But I do kind of an introduction that makes clear that it's not about bringing your dance moves to the floor. But it's more a room to learn to be independent and personally involved in their collective space. How do I create my own understanding of the situation through movement in a space that is a collective space?

This is very important for the society to learn, again, to take your own decision, where the music is like the politics, it gives a certain rhythm and move, but you are still free to decide how you are going to act on this or react on this. And there's many things to learn in such a free space.

This goes against this idea of the spectacle, where the spectacle becomes something that you look at, as something that is bigger than you. This kind of a religious thing, that you also see this in the architecture of the theatres. Even now, the modern theatres are created with a huge stairway where you always think, oh, the art is so far away, and how could I ever get there? It's supposed to be bigger than you. That's the monument, the spectacle that doesn't accompany you in your transformation, in your transition. It's bringing something that you don't know yet.

Daniel 15:13

Well, interestingly, when I first heard that this series of podcasts is called Making A Scene, I was excited because I quite like this phrase in relation to what's happening now. And listening to you now, I'm thinking about making a scene in three senses of the phrase. One being, making a spectacle, something to be looked at, like, how do we make a scene for now, like what kind of scenes need to be made now? Then also rethinking the role of the artist — how does the artist take a greater sense of urgency and agency, into becoming some kind of impresario and understanding that we do have the ability through our versatile, flexible, agile ways of moving to possibly make, or remake, a scene.

And then also the sense of just simply causing trouble. Making a scene, looking silly and being a troublemaker. More and more I feel like an independent artist clearly isn't only about making a show, making a spectacle. But also when we think about choreography, we also think about how we bring people together to collaborate and relate to one another differently. So the social relationship being re-choreographed by the independent artist as an expanded practice really interests me a lot.

It's been a while since I heard about blueFACTORY, can you share a little bit about what blueFACTORY is? And what are some updates.

Martin 16:53

This is a kind of practice where I step out of the cultural sector, because blueFACTORY is organised as a public and private place. So it's a property of the state and the city, and there is a company, a company with actioneers [ ie, shareholders] that is money-oriented or profit-oriented, is developing a neighbourhood. And the neighbourhood is mostly for people who are working on technology and ecology.

And newly since I'm here, we also have this interest to create a social innovation place and the social innovation place, the instrument, would be culture. So how can culture contribute to this existence of the *citoyen de futur*, or how we call it this “future citizen” that knows how to live differently in a time, in a close future, or actually even now. By practising ecological principles by taking part in discussions, conferences, in concerts, in institutions, micro-institutions that are created here.

We have a core group that is composed by seven people and they all represent different sectors. So it is the ecology, the finances, the sociocultural sector, the artistic sector, research, digital, and architecture. And together, we are creating subgroups. And one of the subgroups is this TRNSTN radio, which is a web radio with live teaching on electronic music. But at the same time, we are trying to go more and more in this understanding of what sense this radio can be an ecological place.

Daniel 18:37

When you say ecological, do you mean being part of environmental conservation?

Martin 18:44

It’s a very open field, of course, it's mostly taking part in the practice of being ecological. So not practising those toxic ways of making that we are used to. Having a more local orientation or a more sustainable orientation. But it is also by education, by bringing up topics that could be interesting for young people to think about. And making podcasts and having a kind of an appearance that is also bringing this coolness into being ecological.

Daniel 19:18

Is this interest in working and thinking in ecological terms connected to your new and current work, where you are working and dancing with animals? Because when I first heard that, I was pleasantly surprised, because over the last two and a half years, almost three years now, I've been working on a piece with plants, and trying to study Tai Chi and Taoism alongside the practice. So I'm really excited to hear more about what you're working on with animals.

Martin 19:54

Yeah, me too. I would have the same question to you.

The interesting way, what is happening here, in this conversation you have with those non-human entities, I think it's something that is very fashionable right now in the arts. This following kind of a stream that was a philosophical stream, we're very influenced by the literature that was created some years ago with Bruno Latour, that hit us somehow in our brains by opening up to others. And it's something that we are not so much aware of.

And in some years, we will touch our foreheads and say, how could we put animals in cages and there will be a new respect that will be the new normal, and right now we are far away from it. This process of bringing in the others into the arts, again, will be a long process. Of course, we start making shows with those entities and we interview them, we bring it on stage and we kind of make a first contact. And then the next step will be how can we actually be together? Maybe, thanks to the arts we got there. But then it's also the question, how do we live together as an extension of those art pieces.

And I found this place that is called Shanju Lab, which is in Gimel in Switzerland. They also do artistic projects and they are having a circus school. They work with children, and they have a lot of animals. But those animals they are living together in a kind of a cohabitation. It’s like when you have flatmates, they have those flatmates that are quite different. So they, they go to the maximum of diversity within one flat, let's say, or one stable. And there is also kind of a very soft transition to the human space. So they live very closely to those animals. And they work with those animals, but the work is also not so much separated from their living.

And that's a place where we have those dance sessions together with the animals, where we always discuss afterwards what is actually happening, do they really want to dance with us? Or are we forcing them to be in our new logic and this fun thing also to, our motivation actually to open up, but where is their interest and their needs? And how can they have a profit out of the situation? And so maybe that's a good moment for you now, to introduce your work to this conversation.

Daniel 22:37

Well, if what you're describing is motivated by the question of how to involve “the others”, quote unquote, into our lives, I would say that the motivation for me initially was the opposite, whereby I was interested in how do I put myself aside and start to be able to sense what it's like to be an other? Because that question was really bothering me in a couple of earlier works, where I just find it really a big challenge to ask myself or somebody in the audience, to practice seeing things in a different way. To imagine for a while that you are not, you don't have to watch it as yourself, but what it might be like to watch it from a different point of view.

And then I was thinking about how do I watch something as a transgendered person, as a woman, as a black person, as a white person, even. How do I practice watching differently? So I suppose in the end, it came to more or less a similar kind of direction where there is also…I wasn't thinking about Bruno Latour at first. But I think this is definitely somewhere there, where we are aware that if the plants are present, I like that, immediately, people practice a different way of being attentive, that there is a different presence in the space. And we can watch each other through the plants, with the plants and maybe even entertain the question of is it possible to be watched by the plants.

And I think these questions over the last few months certainly became a very big one in the sense that I'm aware, everybody around the world is starting to buy a lot of plants, putting in their apartments, when they have to be on lockdown. And the stillness that we are experiencing, the isolation, when compared and contrasted with plants, start to feel like a different way of being… finding a new, different sense of strength. And also just feeling maybe not so alone. The sense of isolation is less. And so I'm really curious about this.

And also tying it back to the practice of Tai Chi and Taoism, which is a Chinese religion or philosophy, as well as physical practice. It's something that I didn't really know much about, but then working with plants, and thinking about nature, or the lack thereof, when you are looking at a potted plant. I think it has given me an excuse to find out more about Taoist philosophy again. So that really has been something that I think about a lot over the last few months.

Martin 25:31

Nice. We want to be part of that, of course.

Daniel 25:37

Okay, because of that question, I don't know how to bring this conversation to an end.

Martin 25:42

Maybe it's an open end.

Daniel 25:44  
Maybe it's an open end, yeah.

Martin 25:46

But is that one of the things that I find very problematic with the arts that we always try to find an end, actually. So we, we create those situations, like a performance that has a starting point, and then an ending point. And the ending point is the clapping.

Since my first work on stage, actually, I always try to go around this fact of giving an applause or to create a situation, because it's kind of an ending point, where you can go back home and continue doing your stuff. And not clapping or the not ending, the open end, is a huge provocation for people. Because you're not assured that, yeah, you got to this point, and now you can go back to yourself. And I quite liked this idea of not knowing where it goes and not bringing it somewhere but leaving the doors open.

And I think what we say that at the very end about this opening to others, is also this opening to others in ourselves, to be open for kind of a multiplicity of oneself. And not trying to understand all the things but maybe trying to be a different me in a different situation and trying out things.

So this would help us to understand better the others because we inhabit different logics and we're not acting and augmenting out of our own understanding. And it's all about this intuition and access to emotional understanding of what we are working with. And this is something that we are also working on, to reshape network, where we try to create kind of new ways of governing artistic project and situations. This is exactly also where we always say this is unfinished by nature, it’s unfinished by nature is exactly what brings those two things together, that we will never stop growing. There's not an ending point.

Daniel 27:53

That feels like ironically a really good way to end this conversation. I’m going to put on my newscaster voice.

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