

# THINK, TALK, ACT AND ENJOY! ON ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS FOR CHANGE

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## Abstract

The concept of language is manifested in words. Beyond what is said there is nothing. Or is there? I trust the unspoken, yet talking. I mistrust the words, still writing. I focus my listening on all that is beyond words. I live in a society where words are the given, where words legitimize our actions. I simply have to use them. I claim the right to their interpretation. The words of politics could as well be ours.

In the wake of populist challenges to a unified and inclusive Europe, we can identify the rise of fear and discomfort in societies and a change in the understanding of common welfare as a key for access and inclusion. Access to art and our sense of cultural belonging are highly influenced by these factors, as is freedom of speech. The arts spring from their cultural foundations to describe and express the incomprehensible, inviting us to a dialogue. Art nourishes imagined futurities.

We need each other. It is a mutual dependency: art/culture/policy. Together we need to turn some hierarchies upside down, upgrade strategies and activities in relation to today's societal and political needs and focus on the inclusive activities that will leave indelible marks on the European cultural ecosystem by delivering beyond current norms. I believe we, as artists, must take more responsibility for the process and claim our right to take part in decision-making bodies and funding structures. How can we redefine the role of our institutions? Of the arts? We need to take action and present constructive proposals for change. Think, Talk, Act and Enjoy!

## Keywords

Artistic leadership; artists; choreography; cultural policy

*I think: The concept of language is manifested in words. Beyond what is said there is nothing. Or is there? Words are used to manifest power. Words are there to be claimed. The political words could as well be ours. How can we use them?*

## ***I say:***

### ***Culture policies are failing!***

When we want to improve professional skills, when we need new networking opportunities, partnerships and contacts – what do we do? How do we develop innovative models for capac-

ity building, cross-disciplinary exchange and a co-creational approach for artistic production and presentation? How do we get beyond current norms and systems? What does it really mean to work as an artist in Europe today? These are questions I struggle with as an artist and in my work as the Director of Dansehallerne in Copenhagen, a house for production, collegial discourse, residencies, research and public presentations. In my work I carry hope for change, doubts about the current political situation in Europe and hesitation about the passiveness I experience in many situations. In this text I will give you some reflections on the current situation with a specific focus on Europe and raise some urgent questions.

***I think:** I would love to hear what you are not saying, so I focus on listening while carrying on. Maybe I will manage to...*

**I say:**

**What is going on?**

In the wake of populist challenges to a unified and inclusive Europe, we can identify the rise of fear and discomfort in societies and a change in the understanding of common welfare as a key for access and inclusion. Access to art and our sense of cultural belonging are highly influenced by these factors, as is freedom of speech. To whom are we listening?

Cultures develop when people live together. Culture is our common foundation and our societal contract. The arts spring from their cultural foundations to describe and express the incomprehensible, inviting us to a dialogue. We need each other. It is a mutual dependency: art/culture/policy. Or you could say: artists/audiences and the public/politicians. Art nourishes imagined futurities. Therefore, we need to upgrade our strategies and activities in relation to today's societal and political changes. We need to focus on the inclusive activities that will leave indelible marks on the European cultural ecosystem by delivering beyond current norms.

When cultural policies fail, there is much at stake. With this in mind, we need to strengthen the artistic community in the direction of transnationalism and global mobility, audience engagement and cross-disciplinary capacity building. This can only be done by the integration of citizens, a search for common values and a widened dialogue and knowledge transfer within research. All this will promote accessibility, diversity and social inclusion through an inter-disciplinary and co-creational approach, and open up new perspectives for artistic representation. If we succeed, it will generate new knowledge for a sustainable cultural development in Europe.

***I think:** Words, words, words. Are they comprehensible? Some things must be said; said out loud. Some should be swallowed. Is this the way to do it? I would rather speak of love.*

***I say:***

An inclusive approach will allow us to capture the benefits of diversification and integration, engaging a far wider segment of the population in and through artistic processes and projects, thereby strengthening the social role of the arts. Easy to say, but how do we do that? What can nourish our curiosity and creativity? What would give substance to insights and an understanding of life?

When subsidies are retracted, artists are forced to be more creative than ever to make a living. Artists are by desire and necessity experienced entrepreneurs, active in developing new formats for working, sharing and presenting, creating our own working opportunities and thinking outside the box. New models for organisation, production and presentation create new markets. As artists we need knowledge, training to improve our skills, tools and platforms for expression of ideas, dreams and narratives. We need new tools and models also for participation in cross-disciplinary research and dialogues, which will improve cultural values, skills, social and urban competences. This in turn is linked to the type of trailblazing activism that pioneers a disruptive approach, using the creative power of art to explore paths towards norm-critical innovation; artistic activism as activities of challenging and changing power relations, a practice of *change*.

***I think:*** *Can one identify with the concept of entrepreneurship? Of innovation? I know most artists don't want to, but still these are the words we use. Can we claim them to match our needs? We know from research that our work has an effect on societal development in terms of creativity and innovation, so why not?*

***I say:***

***Forget about creative industries!***

The role of the artist and the relevance of art have changed dramatically over the last few years. Art relies on our ability to imagine, on a broad definition of the concepts of language, identity and culture, and it pushes us towards a widening of cultural norms and the formal set of rules employed in our society. Art helps develop both an individual and societal sense of self; it sharpens our senses and demands action, participation and reaction. Art is what feeds our ability to think beyond the given.

During the first decade of this century, the dialogue between arts, humanities and business focused on the development of creative industries. This was stimulated by infrastructural investment. The arts were more or less forced into a utilitarian perspective. Later, the focus shifted, and today it is mostly about how collaborations between art, science and business can trigger innovation, develop creative tools and strengthen cultural identities as a precondition for growth. Art is back in its role as art – if we insist. *The Heart of the Matter* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences,

2013) is a report on the state of the humanities (including the arts) delivered to the American Congress in June 2013. What is really interesting with that report is the ideological discrepancy between politics and the market about the role of humanities and arts. It turns out that CEOs assign a greater value to arts and humanities as success factors than politicians do.

And if you think on the subject of migration, the rapid expansion and diversification of Europe's population is excellent news. Population diversification is directly associated with increased innovation (Nathan, 2015). But the opportunities to be an artist, to reap the benefits of innovation, are not evenly distributed across city populations (Jung and Ejermeo, 2014). Whilst a handful of exceptional individuals succeed, many more struggle or simply do not take part. In several cities around the world, this has led to an increase in social tension. The *knowledge society* delivers extreme wealth to some – and very little to others; some are included, others excluded.

***I think:** Yes, but has not this always been the case? It seems unavoidable in a capitalistic and neoliberal society. I simply cannot see an alternative. Still we must work to change the system. Many artists believe in a social theory of change; that some people can and do generate change. I simply must work to make a difference. Doubts. What to do...*

**I say:**

**So many narratives...**

Europe is made up of diverse cultures, political systems and civil conditions. We must involve stakeholders and communities to achieve inclusive access to art, to artistic action and participatory co-creation processes. Having toured, produced, published and lectured globally, I speak from my own experience. Just look at Europe: to work as an artist in Georgia, Turkey, Croatia or Spain means to work under totally different conditions than in Sweden, Germany, Belgium or France. Public accessibility varies just as much.

Many European art institutions (particularly performing arts institutions) have difficulties attracting audiences. At the same time, many artists turn their back on traditional venues, looking for new markets that allow alternative formats of production and presentation. I believe we must work cross-disciplinarily and involve stakeholders and communities to achieve inclusive access to art; artistic action and participatory co-creation processes. This, in turn, puts new demands on cultural bureaucracies, on institutions, on education and research, on organisations, on audiences, on the public and on the politicians. On us artists. I believe we need institutions as well as the so-called independent sector, but there has to be a societal acceptance on a more equal footing.

To achieve knowledge transfer and policy outreach, we need to implement transnational multi-stakeholder and policy-maker dialogues. But, first and foremost, we must question growing borders in Europe and focus on the concept of public, open, accessible and inclusive cultural

and creative spaces, strongly devoted to the idea of a borderless and open society; a society with plenty of space for the arts. This puts the question of mobility in focus, the kind of mobility that will stimulate curiosity and empathy. Europe must be seen in a global context. Investments in global mobility pay off. A broad involvement of citizens, a connection between urban realities and cultural interdependencies will strengthen ties between citizens and promote European values as well as artistic and cultural exchange. Participatory and socially inclusive arts invite to close encounters. The idea of *the commons* is a key towards inclusion and accessibility.

***I think:*** *But the politicians must be able to talk about culture as our common foundation and about art as a notion in our culture. Just as all of us must master a variety of narratives if we want to pay each other respect.*

***I say:***

Diversity invites to a richer future. Diversity in the population means diversity in the arts. If diversity is not engaged with, it opens itself up to the corrosive forces of segregation (Danlida and Thorslund, 2011; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Stirling, 2010). As artists we challenge the societal processes by engaging in norm-critical interventions. Participation, co-creation and interactive performances in public spaces are central, not only by addressing new audiences, but also by strengthening the perception and social role of art and actions in society. Artistic and societal involvement by citizens establish participatory processes, enabling intercultural and interfaith dialogues. Cultural heritage can be an enriching component – and “*an act of hospitality can only be poetic*”, according to Jacques Derrida.<sup>1</sup>

A lot can be done to improve the situation. We can do it by creating art, by focusing on education and research, by activism or by engaging in politics and in the development of cultural policies. We need strong cultural policies and we need art policies, not just for survival and material wellbeing, but for long-term, sustainable development. We all need faith in the future based on curiosity and respect for who we are or long to be.

Article 27 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*<sup>2</sup> gives everybody the right to participate in culture and enjoy the arts. Therefore, when we talk about the necessity for development and improvement, it is not just about the life of the artists, but about everyone. Together we can move beyond what we are as individuals. We need to come together.

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1 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Derrida>

2 <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

***I think:** I really believe that we together can move beyond what we are as individuals. That is part of the beauty with art, this invitation to share a moment, an event, a thought, an activity. Singularities in common sharing. Space for the subjective experience. Something beyond the rational agendas.*

***I say:***

Dansehallerne<sup>3</sup> is a national platform and a leading institution for contemporary choreographic performative art in Denmark, located in central Copenhagen with a small branch in Aarhus. This is where I work.

Besides the curated programme, we provide meeting places for everyone interested in experiencing choreographic practices, research processes and critical debate. We take a leading position in the development of new formats for public events, interactive and creative activities for all ages, including the very young and children. We conduct high-level professional training, courses and seminars; provide premises for rehearsals, artistic development work, research and residencies as well as administrative support for artistic production through a Project Centre.<sup>4</sup> We are members of several international and national networks. Besides the great number of visiting artists, there are about 200 in-house artists (DH members) using the facilities of Dansehallerne for training, rehearsing, sharing and presenting. We present around 180 performances in Copenhagen and 300 on tour around Denmark on a yearly basis, for an audience of 63,000 people (2017).

Two years ago, I was invited to take charge of Dansehallerne. My undertakings include reorganizing the institution, turning the “old” way of working (facilitating and renting out spaces and venues for performances) into a curated programme, research and development work, and more. This is done in close collaboration with artists and staff with a special focus on empowerment, on activating the artistic community towards more engagement and artist-led activities.

To do what we say we should, we have, in collaboration with national and international artists, researchers, academic institutions and art forums, initiated an artist-driven cross-disciplinary and international programme, *The Artist’s Research Lab and Residency Programme*, to support the progress of contemporary choreographic performative arts. The programme contributes with research platforms, strong networks, collegial exchange and public venues. We have also initiated the *Innovative Leadership Network* as a new cross-disciplinary forum, with the aim of giving artists a chance to develop new, innovative methods for managing residence and research activities. The network is based on the needs expressed within the various art disciplines employing choreography as a method, in collaboration with international artist-driven and institutional

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3 <http://www.dansehallerne.dk/en>

4 <http://www.dansehallerne.dk/en/project-centre/>

networks. Dansehallerne is also a partner in *Centriphery*, a project involving partners in nine European countries, a project that incorporates a wide range of interconnected activities to reach the goals of audience development while incorporating transnational mobility and capacity building. We will do this by the establishment of *curiosity zones*, which include artistic and educational workshops, info-sessions and skill-enhancing workshops for local artists and citizens. The development of the project explicitly addresses governmental, societal, ecological and economic issues.

***I say:***

***Action taken***

When *The Screening Protest*<sup>5</sup> project brings together political science and media studies perspectives to explore problems through comparing mediations of political dissent across time, space and narrative genre; when the *Non Existence Centre*<sup>6</sup> in Sweden acts socially, politically and artistically trying to answer the question, “What is the potential of working with an expanded view of art in ongoing social and political processes?”; when dancer and choreographer Rita Macalo,<sup>7</sup> who immigrated to Britain from Portugal twenty years ago, spends time in The Jungle (refugee camp in Calais) to catch the voices of the refugees; when Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker invites to *A SLOW WALK*<sup>8</sup> through the streets of Brussels; when Beka Economopoulos works with Not An Alternative,<sup>9</sup> an arts collective and non-profit organization in Brooklyn with a mission to affect popular understandings of events, symbols, and history; when Leonidas Martin Saura,<sup>10</sup> artist and professor at Barcelona University, develops collective projects in art and activism; when Elena Agathokleous at the Mitos center in Cyprus takes part in *Songs of My Neighbours*,<sup>11</sup> a project staged in Poland, Italy and Cyprus; when *Galerie*<sup>12</sup> turns into an immaterial art gallery dealing exclusively with immaterial artworks to support and promote *immaterial object-hood*; when top artists provide one-to-one support for creative artists who have fled their homelands in *FLAX – Foreign Local Artistic Xchange*;<sup>13</sup> when Norwegian artist Tormod Carlsen places his project/object *O – The Healing Lump*<sup>14</sup> in various places; when artist Sara Mara Samsara creates the site of Nicosia history of inter-communal strife, violence and war in *Nicosia Metro Map*;<sup>15</sup> when performance artist Erdem Gunduz<sup>16</sup>

5 <http://screeningprotest.com>

6 <http://www.stallbergsgruva.se/english/>

7 <http://www.freedomfestival.co.uk/event/instant-dissidence-presents-dancing-strangers-calais-england/>

8 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUWZ1\\_zmrig](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUWZ1_zmrig)

9 <http://notanalternative.org>

10 <http://leodecerca.net/tag/leonidas-martin-saura/>

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrwUy6xuYU8>

12 <http://www.galerie.international/about/>

13 <http://flax-culture.com>

14 <https://www.tormodcarlsen.com/o>

15 [https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1JNtrUKvnmjM8cLX0Dh05YUrXXlw&hl=en\\_US&ll=35.127131677693995%2C33.35642699999994&z=12](https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1JNtrUKvnmjM8cLX0Dh05YUrXXlw&hl=en_US&ll=35.127131677693995%2C33.35642699999994&z=12)

16 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/18/turkey-standing-man>

(*Standing man*) stands silently for eight hours, facing a portrait of Kemal Atatürk; when *RISK*,<sup>17</sup> an artist collective based in Copenhagen spend the last seven years developing their collective thinking; when Amanda Steggel (Motherboard project)<sup>18</sup> is working with how networking technologies have influenced the way people work, socialize, create and share information; when Koen Vanmechelen,<sup>19</sup> a Belgian artist investigates biocultural diversity through the *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* and creates the Open University of Diversity; when Shinobu Akimoto and Matthew Evans in Canada create a virtual institution: Residency for Artists on Hiatus<sup>20</sup> for artists not making art – it makes a difference! The list could go on forever...

We are artists and theorists engaged in art – we meet, we share and we develop. We create platforms for collegial exchange and collaborations. In the Dansehallerne projects *Dans din Nabo*,<sup>21</sup> *Centriphery*, *The Artists Research Lab and Residency Programme* and *RESA*,<sup>22</sup> in the way we facilitate the work of the artists, the way we curate – this is what we do. Yes, artists challenge the societal processes by engaging in norm-critical interventions. But how do we deal with the question of responsibility? Questioning hierarchies and norms? The given?

The question I put to you is about artistic interventions for change, about the concepts of *artist-driven* and *artist-led*. In my experience, many artists accept the given, accept and adjust to the old-fashioned bureaucratic system and dysfunctional infrastructure. Many artists very easily hand over their responsibilities for reference groups and decision-making bodies to producers, critics, curators and others; thereby handing over the responsibilities for criteria, for defining markets and thus defending conventional thinking based on a lack of relevant insights in contemporary arts. That said, there are of course also producers, critics, curators, researchers and others with the most brilliant minds, with updated knowledge, engaged in activities we cannot do without. How can we as artists work to strengthen our ability to live and work by taking the lead, by taking on this responsibility? How can we strengthen our ability for cross-disciplinary engagement and public dialogues?

***I think:** I trust the unspoken, yet talking. I mistrust the words, still writing. I focus my listening on all that is beyond words. I live in a society where words are the given, where words legitimize our actions. I simply have to use them. I claim the right to their interpretation. The words of politics could as well be ours.*

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17 <http://risk.nu>

18 <http://www.liveart.org/motherboard/>

19 <https://www.koenvanmechelen.be>

20 <https://residencyforartistsonhiatus.org>

21 <https://www.dansehallerne.dk/forestilling/dans-din-nabo/>

22 <http://www.dansehallerne.dk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Artists-Research-Lab-and-Residency-Programme.pdf>

***I say:***

Back to my initial remark – we need each other, we are interdependent. In a democratic society, art/culture/policy, art and theory, the practice of thinking and doing – all of this hangs together. Together we need to turn some hierarchies upside down, upgrade strategies and activities in relation to today's societal and political needs. I believe we, as artists, must take more responsibility for the process and claim our right to take part in decision-making bodies and funding structures. How can we re-define the role of our institutions? Of the arts? We need to take action and present constructive proposals for change. Because culture policies are failing. Think, Talk, Act and Enjoy!

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