

T HREE QUESTIONS

Sandra Man / Nicola van Straaten

During the third lockdown we came up with the idea of asking each other 3 questions about art. In an ongoing series we publish one duet each time.

Sandra's Questions

SM: *How did you discover art (or, how did it find you)? Was dance/performance art the first art form in your life? Are there other forms of art that you deal with more intensely?*

NvS: i think all humans arrive with a natural propensity towards art and creativity, whether through making rhythm or pictures or stories. so i can't say i ever "discovered" art, but rather that it was already a built-in feature of my being, just like with everyone else. (i very much agree with Joseph Beuys that everyone is an artist). but formally, the first art form that i invested in was dance. i started ballet lessons at six years old and later on contemporary dance, taking it very seriously

until my mid-twenties. i've also kept a journal since i learnt how to write and although i write everyday, i never really considered writing as one of my crafts until quite recently. it's funny because even though dance has been the art form that i have the most formal training in, it is the art form that features the least in my daily artistic practice. and for some reason, i've always felt a little guilty about this, like i should do or make more dancerly work or something (lol). recently i decided to let go of my identity as "dancer" because it never actually fit so comfortably - and now i just go with "artist" which is a small relief. i really like to work and play with different mediums, but i probably publicly "publish" writings and performances the most. for me, it always comes back to the body, to a certain understanding or experience of embodied-ment. i have not managed to language yet the relationships between my artistic work and embodied-ment, but i suspect this is quite okay. anyway, right now and throughout 2020, the forms of art i'm dealing with the most intensely are probably tarot, ritual and being in love with people.

SM: *How would you describe your affections towards art? Is it love, respect, admiration, adoration, understanding ...? Do your affections differ depending on the kind of art you are engaging with (i.e. being different in relation to watching dance/dancing or writing/reading or looking at an image...)?*

NvS: this is such an interesting question to try answer. i think it requires a little background information about myself. i grew up in a Christian home, the daughter of a pastor and i was always very religious. as a child and as a teenager, my world revolved around my faith and dance classes but they seemed like separate things. when i finished high-school, i traded in Christianity for feminism and atheism. but towards the end of my twenties, i found myself really missing and urgently needing some kind of formalized communion with the Divine

again. in the last year, i have created a spiritual practice that's more aligned with my politics and i've re-invoked a Divine presence into my life (i think 2020 did this for a lot of people, actually). and through this, i'm recognizing or remembering that art and spirituality have always been like two sides of the same coin for me. i experience art as a communion with the Divine, with myself, and with the world around me. more and more, i see creative labour and spiritual labour as essentially the same thing. so actually, when i think of my affections towards art, and the ways in which art is wrapped up with spirituality, i realize that it's possibly the most important thing to me and that i actually take it very fucking seriously! and although my feelings are always changing, i think i can confidently say that i feel art is Very Important, as in - it's Quite Sacred to me.

and then my affections certainly differ with the different kinds of art that i engage with. i see my engagements with art-work as a kind of conversation or encounter or exchange, and sometimes i'm really ready or into a particular conversation (ie. artwork) - sometimes i'm not. so the feelings change and depend, but i think there is a different kind of texture of feeling, that depends on the medium. i find with live performance, my feelings are often very immediate and embodied, perhaps because the performer's body is present in a way that film or images or text does not allow. performance lasts a certain amount of time, i am in a certain place to witness it and so, in general, my feelings are more intense and heightened towards live performance because my body feels more complicit. my affections towards text seem more cerebral, they uncurl slowly because you can spend as much time as you want with text, returning, reflecting, re-reading etc. sometimes what a particular text is expressing takes days, months, even years to understand (for me at least). the experience of reading is often more private, emotions can emerge in their own time. it's like a longer, slower more subtle unfolding of affection when it comes to engaging with text. listening to music feels almost the opposite, it

enables me to stop thinking somehow, it's an experience that constantly draws me into the present. music feels like a holding, like the sound is holding me. and then looking at images also has a different texture of emotion, but i feel like i haven't quite developed the patience or attention to really be present with an image just yet. it's probably the art-form that i struggle with the most to converse with (but maybe i'm just over-thinking now).

SM: *Do you expect art to be political?*

NvS: i don't know if i *expect* art to be political. but i do assume everything, art included, to be political. the word "politics" i think comes from Greek and means "affairs of the city". i feel politics are everyone's affair then, we're all implicated and involved in politics whether we recognize it or not. i don't really think any creation or action (artistic or otherwise) can be apolitical, nothing can be separated from the politics surrounding it. even inaction is political. or saying, 'this artwork is not a political artwork' feels to me, like a political statement. so maybe actually the short answer is yes. i expect and assume art to be political.

Nicola's Questions

NvS: *i'm curious about your writing practice... how do you use words? to what end? do you ever feel words fail or frustrate you? how would you describe the quality or relationship between language and the body?*

SM: I think the relationship between body and language has something to do with a third thing and that is space. A body is in space, experiencing its surrounding, being part of its environment.

Being here on earth, is sensing, connecting inside and outside, feeling what is around you, letting it in, relating to it.

For me this very basic openness is essential for moving and writing alike. In my artistic practice I work with dancers who are trained in opening up their antennas to profoundly engage with what is here, around them, to connect and thus be present. I, myself, when writing, do the same, I enter a state that allows me to be completely in my senses. Just like the dancers move according to what already moves them, I describe what comes to me if and when my senses are open. The longer I write and the deeper I get into it, the more I realise that writing is a state, more than anything else (inventing content, looking for a form, shaping words or sentences – this is all necessary but comes later).

If I am truly „listening“ in this very broad sense of being open I hear the words and I dive into a rhythm, and when I write, I take dictations. If this happens, I don't ever feel frustrated. But I do get nervous and uneasy if for a longer period I cannot enter the state of writing. This is the case when there are too many things around me that force me to be active and busy and finish tasks. Then, there is no space.

NvS: *how would you describe your artistic practice to a child of four years old?*

SM: I am playing with the things around me, arranging them all the time in a new way, building little worlds with them and then inviting guests to come and visit. It is like setting up a space for your toys so that they have their own environment. You build something that your toys would like to be in, and you with them.

And then, I also listen to my invisible friends. I have several of them. When it is very quiet, they come. And they show me new things, they guide me, they make me go into a corner of a room and discover

something there. I stay with them and I depict what they show me, and what I see through them.

NvS: *was there a text/performance/person/event/anything that changed your understanding of art entirely?*

SM: Yes, neither one nor many, I can think of a few. The first art in my life was literature, and reading was taking a drug. When I was 17 I read Ulysses and I can still feel the energy of going beyond understanding, tasting the essence of writing, the stream itself, the drive, the desire. This same feeling of a crystal clear immediacy, a very intense but conscious dissolution (or expansion?) of any „self“, re-appears from time to time when I come across really good art. It happened when I saw the first piece by Nacera Belaza (Sur le fil, 2017 in Tanzquartier Wien), it happened when I re-watched Andrei Tarkovsky's The Mirror some years ago, it happened when I started to read Clarice Lispector and it also was there 15 years ago when suddenly during a Venice Biennial I felt the urge to go to all the Venetian churches to see the Tintoretto paintings.

I think it is always the same thing but every time very different, unexpected and surprising, and it is precisely the moment when you are suddenly reminded that art is not about understanding. Something is strong enough to hit you directly somewhere beyond your emotional or intellectual competence. This transgression evokes a sensation that is not just pleasant, an intensity of excess in which you dissolve (or expand?), you lose yourself, at least for a moment you are being brought to where you are no longer or not yet (or completely?) yourself.