



The virtuosity of imperfection

Inclusive dance practice at the the dance department of the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp
Kris De Visscher, Demos, Brussels (B)



**1 –
Demos**

**2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire**

**3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende***

**4 –
Lessons
learned**

**5 –
Future
perspectives**

7 –



**1 –
Demos**

**2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire**

**3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende***

**4 –
Lessons
learned**

**5 –
Future
perspectives**

1 – Demos

Dēmos, a non-partisan, public research and advocacy organization. Dēmos focusses on stimulating and deepening the participation of disadvantaged groups in culture, youth work and sports. With our programme *podium*ops* we map and support the development of inclusive performing arts.

Recent publication:
Voor het voetlicht (In the spotlight)

We also collaborated in a recent brochure on inclusive dance practice *Veerkracht (Resilience)* together with The Royal Conservatoire and Danspunt The Flemish Umbrella Organisation for Community Dance.



1 – Demos

Problem of defining and labeling

Definition?

Any dance practice where disabled and non-disabled dancers are involved in a process of learning and/or creation as equal partners and where the process starts from the unique mix of abilities present.

Labeling?

“a bit like a road sign warning the unwary theatre-goer of possible encounters with wheelchairs - it tells us that we can expect to see a disabled person on stage, which can only leave us asking, ‘Is that really necessary? Who is it that needs to be warned?’ (Adam Benjamin, 2010)

Multiple elements of identity – being disabled can be an important element of the identity of an artist– or it may not. So ideally, we label ‘together’ and in dialogue...

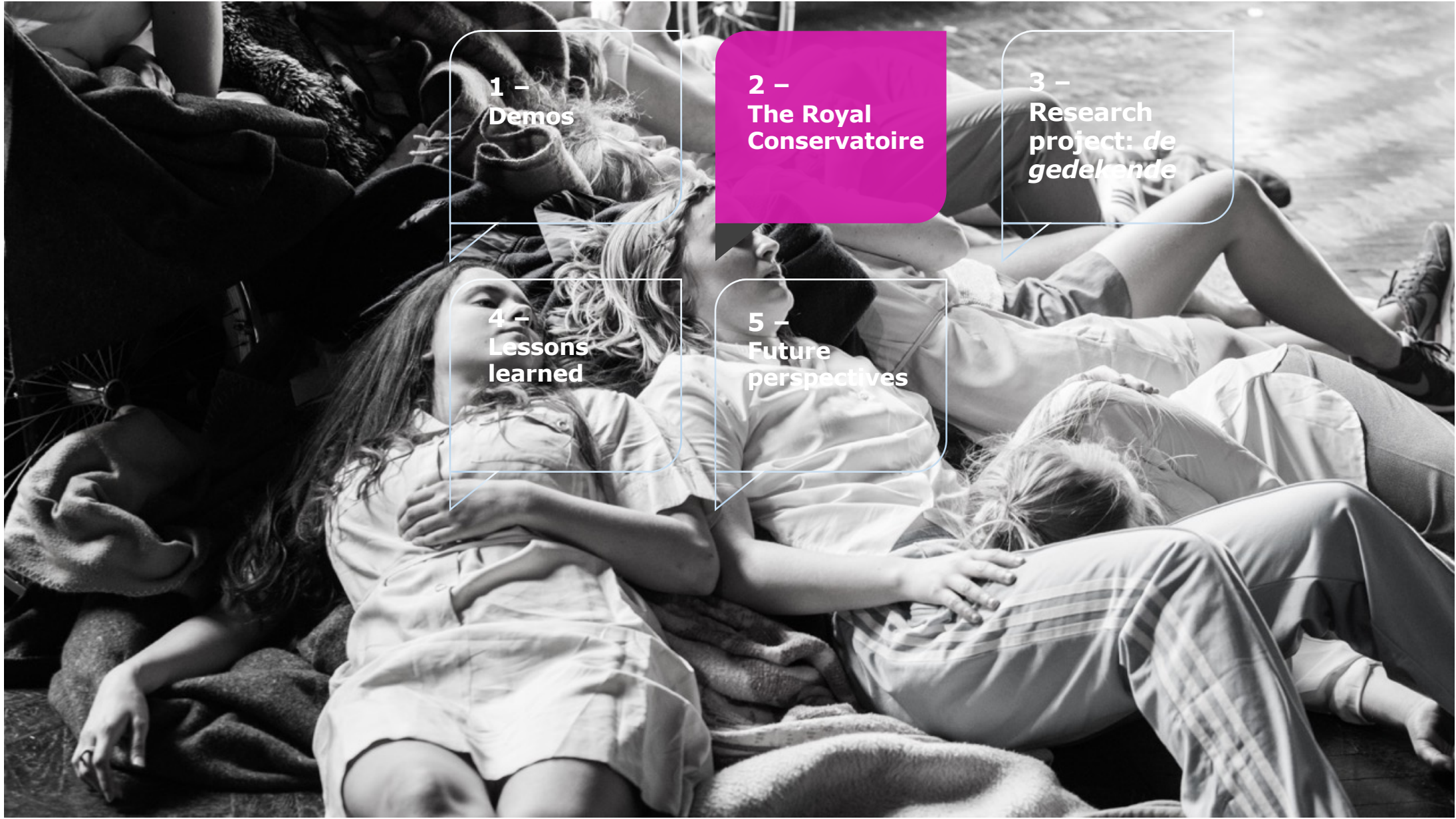
Demos Voor het voetlicht

In *Voor het voetlicht/In the spotlight* we highlight four evolutions in the Flemish performing arts practice of disabled artists:

- From 'arts as means' to 'arts for art's sake'
- From separate provisions to more inclusive opportunities
- From a 'teacher-pupil' relation to an equal partnership
- From a limited audience of family and friends to a wider audience

And we describe in detail for challenges for the future:

- More and more equal opportunities to explore art from a young age
- More and more diverse ways of developing talents
- More (co-)ownership and more disability led arts practice
- An aesthetic model that allows more human variety on stage



1 –
Demos

2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

4 –
Lessons
learned

5 –
Future
perspectives

2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire

The Dance department of the Royal Conservatoire

- BA programme, focus on contemporary dance
- Part of the AP University College
- Inclusive dance practice was initiated by Iris Bouche – artistic director of the dance department and is rooted in a strong personal interest and experience in inclusive dance practice
- Module of 10 hours in the third year of the curriculum
- This module takes the form of yearly three day symposium, containing workshops, lectures, debate, performance,... These workshops immerse students in groups with mixed abilities. Teachers and performers come from - amongst others - Candoco dance company, Stop Gap Dance Company, Adam Benjamin and teachers and performers from the Flemish and Dutch network.
- Need for more *in depth artistic research* and more 'academic' foundation within the context of the University College leads to specific research projects.



1 –
Demos

2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

4 –
Lessons
learned

5 –
Future
perspectives

To put the research in context...

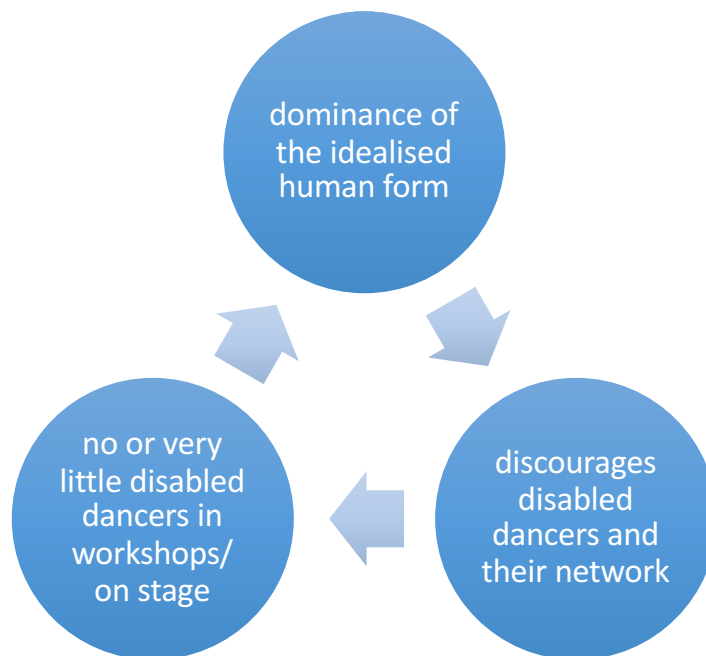
A lot of the research deals with the barriers disabled dancers face to get into Higher Education and to make a career as a professional dancer. A lot of these barriers are rooted in dominant views on dance and dancers.

“The very way we define dance affects the access of disabled people to the professional dance world. In the current UK dance scene it seems that a preoccupation with the idealised human form, rooted in history and classical dance, continues to privilege the image of the slim, non-disabled dancer, at the expense of any body, disabled or nondisabled, that deviates from this norm. Whilst many contemporary dance pioneers have sought to move away from the exclusivity and homogeneity synonymous with ballet, there remains to a great extent a fixed and ‘able-ist’ understanding of what meets the contemporary dance aesthetic. Almost inadvertently, then, disabled dancers are excluded from the field of professional dance within its currently defined parameters.” (Eluned Charnley, dance artist, 2011)

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

To put the research in context...

A lot of the research deals with the barriers disabled dancers face to get into Higher Education and to make a career as a professional dancer. A lot of these barriers are rooted in dominant views on dance and dancers.



To put the research in context...

To break this vicious circle: *ethics and aesthetics perspective*
Both go hand in hand but this research focusses on the *aesthetic Perspective*

“Yes, I am an artist with a disability, but my interest isn’t in disability, my interest is in dance...” to quote Katie Marsh, one of the six disabled dancers portrayed in the documentary *Physically Being Me*.

Main research questions:

- How do disabled and non-disabled dancers influence each other?
- What do they bring to the interaction, what do they get out of it for themselves?
- What context/setting improves the interaction between both?

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

The research

Artistic research

Students of the BA programme at the Royal Conservatoire and pupils of *De leerexpert Dullingen* - a school for special education - created a performance together, based on the work of the Flemish visual artist *Berlinde De Bruyckere* who works on the subject of 'vulnerability'. De Bruyckere works a lot with 'blankets' therefore the performance: *De Gedekende: 'the one covered in blankets'*



3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

The research

Artistic research

- *Two preparatory workshops, one in each school*
- *Study visit together to the exposition of Berlinde De Bruyckere*
- *One working week together in a arts education centre*
- *One week of rehearsal*
- *Performances during one weekend*
- *A documentary of the whole proces*

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

The research

Academic research

In-depth interviews

- *Pupils of De leerexpert*
- *Students of the Royal Conservatoire*
- *The choreographers Iris Bouche and Karel Tuytschaever*
- *The teachers and staff of De leerexpert*

Focusgroup discussing the results and widen the perspective

Steering group

What did we learn?

- Back to basics/back to the essence?
 - Starting again from scratch, redefining dance
 - Dance as a way of communicating, creativity as problem-solving
 - Not about 'working' or 'performing' but about 'being'
 - More about the group than about ego's
 - The virtuosity of imperfection
 - Adapt and transform
- Pitfalls?
 - Supporting vs creating together
 - Verbal communication
- Context?
 - Safety, security, trust vs freedom to improvise
 - Connection



1 –
Demos

2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

4 –
Lessons
learned

5 –
Future
perspectives

4 –
Lessons
learned

Conclusions

- Disabled and non-disabled dancers may need some convincing at first - we need more believers within the network of contemporary dance and within the network of disabled (young) people
- We need to create more and more diverse opportunities that build bridges between both networks
- Inclusive dance practice requires time and continuity to fully focus on the artistic research
- We need to create learning opportunities, to share experience and to create a network of experienced practitioners
- Artistic and academic research can reinforce each other, but the artistic work is the most powerful way to get the message across



1 –
Demos

2 –
The Royal
Conservatoire

3 –
Research
project: *de
gedekende*

4 –
Lessons
learned

5 –
Future
perspectives

New research project Inclusive dance lab

- Weekly sessions
- Two groups with mixed abilities (less experienced/more experienced)
- Fundamental research into the artistic potential of inclusive arts practice + participants reflect/hold on to their experience
- No performance at the end, maybe small presentations along the way
- Run at the conservatoire (accessible venue, presence of highly motivated dance students)
- Bring together a network/a team of experienced teachers and choreographers
- Create learning opportunities for other teachers and choreographers
- Making inclusive dance practice more visible, less special
- Clearing the way for disabled students to apply for the BA programme