

P.A.R.T.S.

- Opening PARTS 20 – Speech by Frank Vandenbroucke – Former minister of education-

Dear Mrs. De Keersmaeker, dear Theo, students and staff,

Let me first of all congratulate you with the 20th anniversary of P.A.R.T.S., which marks a truly great achievement.

Obviously, it is slightly futile to add more praise to the critical acclaim and public recognition which Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker already received – and rightly so – since she established ROSAS in the 1980s and P.A.R.T.S. in the 1990s. However, I should add to all that has been said in this respect, that we owe you a great deal of gratitude for what you and your fellow travelers achieved here in Brussels.

Today many people feel proud about the international dance scene in Brussels and P.A.R.T.S.'s role in it, but it is fair to say that we owe that to a rare combination of relentless creativity and single-mindedness in a small group of people, most prominently Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker. You should not misunderstand me: you were 'single-minded' in your conviction that artistic creativity needs reflection, that it requires thinking, and that both creativity and thinking need freedom, and thus, institutional flexibility. You were stubborn and single-minded in arguing that one must not be single-minded and open to continuous discovery. That, so it seems to me, is in a nutshell the persistent challenge we are confronted with, when pondering the past and the future of P.A.R.T.S.

I shy away from giving you advice with regard to the future of P.A.R.T.S. That is neither my brief, nor my competence. Let me share some thoughts with you about the significance of P.A.R.T.S. in a broader debate on education, from a slightly different vantage point.

One of the problems I struggled with most, in my time of Flemish Minister of Education, was the 'academic turn' – if I may use that expression – proposed to Flemish higher education institutes in the arts.

The basic idea was not just to promote artistic research ("research embedded in artistic practice and primarily guided by artistic objectives") but artistic research with a true *academic* character, as we define that in academia.

It was not an innocent move: master degrees in the arts had to be true academic master degrees. In tackling this challenge, we boxed ourselves in a pretty difficult corner, because of the way the Flemish Community in Belgium understood and implemented the Bologna 'bachelor-master' format, back in 2003. As you know, we make a distinction between professional tracks in higher education and master tracks. Typically, the professional tracks have a three-year structure (even if we do not define them on the basis of a precise number of years, but on the basis of a number of credits). Their format and mission is not suitable to education programmes that take more time and effort, because of the complexity of the knowledge and skills involved and/or because of the degree of reflexivity that is required.

Now, since our only 'alternative' to professional tracks are academic master tracks, the 'alternative' solution for those more demanding education programmes was to embed them in academic education, that is, education intertwined with academic research. The qualifier 'academic' is defined in a whole set of formal and substantive requirements, with which institutions have to comply.

To avoid misunderstanding, I am not arguing that the 'academic turn' was only a choice 'by default', a negative choice because of lack of alternatives: in the arts, a number of people argued positively that the calling for artistic research and for artistic masters is to be academic.

Let me confess that I've never been very happy with this dichotomy between 'the professional track' and 'the academic track', but it was a legacy with which I worked in the years 2004-2009.

The same maybe holds for my successors in the Flemish Department of Education: policy is liable to a path-dependency which it is difficult to escape from. I think that notably artistic research does not fit easily into the academic category, which is not to say that academic artistic research is impossible or undesirable. The qualifier 'academic' is a demanding one, and, I for one think it *must* be demanding, lest it loses its meaning. Moreover, the European education area needs transparency, because of the mobility of students and researchers, and therefore we are doomed to regulate what we consider to be 'professional' and what we consider to be 'academic' – both in teaching and in research – rather strictly. We have to follow-up our institutions with uniform assessment systems and bureaucratic procedures, the archetypal example being the 'bibliometrics' applied to academic research output ('bibliometrics' means: counting the number of academic publications the institutions produce).

I am, against much opposition, all in favour of this, including the controversial 'bibliometrics'. (Contrary to a number of colleagues, I am not terribly unhappy with the 'publish or perish' drive in academia. Contrary to a number of friends, I do not think that this implies an economic, market-oriented downgrading of higher education. Academics must publish, if they want to have an impact on the global academic debate, and it is their impact, so conceived, which we want to assess.)

Simultaneously, I do not think that, for the artist, the notion of 'research' can only be understood in an academic sense. Artistic research is certainly about inquiry, experimentation and discovery – notably the discovery of the self; but it does not necessarily imply an output that must be formally submitted to argument and counterargument as we expect from academic research.

In the same vein, the professional training of the artist is much more than passing on a set of established techniques. It is about developing creativity, but more than that: artistic creativity needs 'thinking'. Thus 'training' is from the outset, a reflexive activity, both for those who organize the teaching and those who are taught.

It can be institutionalized, for sure, but such institutions need sufficient freedom and flexibility to adapt themselves continuously to evolving insights. Needless to say that is a challenge to accommodate all this in our mainstream higher education institutions. I'm not saying that it is impossible – to say so would be disingenuous vis-à-vis existing higher education institutions in the arts that successfully comply with the bachelor-master structure and all the regulations around it; it would be disingenuous vis-à-vis artists who now pursue highly interesting doctoral research – but it is certainly not straightforward.

With the public support for P.A.R.T.S. – which is the only *initial* higher education programme in Flanders to be subsidized on the basis of a management agreement rather than on the basis of the mainstream rules of recognition and subvention – we deliberately entertain an exception to the institutional mainstream, in terms of freedom, flexibility and philosophy. I consider it a necessary antidote to the mainstream. Public policy sometimes has to take this route: not just ‘tolerate’ the exception to the mainstream – tolerate the denial of existing rules – but actively support it. Accepting a pluralism in approaches is often the best answer to inner tensions within policies that are not easy to solve, such as the ones I sketched.

Unsurprisingly, the observation that there are no straightforward solutions to accommodate the demands of artistic education in our existing institutions, also holds for P.A.R.T.S. itself. For instance, the evolution of P.A.R.T.S. over the last 20 years signals a constant search to find an adequate equilibrium and interaction between ‘training’ and ‘research’. The new ‘3+2’ structure that is now adopted underscores the fact that it is necessary to draw a clear line between a trajectory that focusses predominantly on ‘training’ – which should be a valuable attainment for those who do not pursue ‘research’ – and a trajectory that focusses on ‘research’.

The new structure is, qua formal architecture, more congenial to the ‘professional bachelor’ on the one hand and two-year ‘research masters’ on the other hand, in our higher education institutions. This may facilitate processes of mutual inspiration, mutual learning and cooperation between P.A.R.T.S. and higher education institutions elsewhere in Europe and in Flanders – at least, this is what I would hope to see happen.

Mutual inspiration should not be confined to educational institutions. How do you conceive of the relationship between what you do, here and now, and the society at large in which you live or in which you *wish* to live? This question undoubtedly exercises your staff and many of your students; it is an important question indeed. Again, there are no easy answers. Theo Van Rompay teased me to think about this.

There seems to be a paradox, which I can only formulate in very simple and naïve words. Art will not ‘save the world’; it will not, as such, reduce suffering or tackle injustice: therefore you need the mobilization of politics, you need to fight for power – like it or not. But art makes the world a much better place to live: life without art would be terrible. Not just because we would lack beauty, to state the obvious. Without artistic expression confronting us, it would be hard to understand who we are, with our limitations and our aspirations. It would be hard to understand the ‘crooked timber of humanity’ and its capacity to formulate ideals. This is the quintessence of politics, at least as I see it. Politics needs *ideals*, as the philosopher Susan Neiman argues in her contemporary defense of the Enlightenment.

I was reminded of Susan Neiman, when reading the opening essay of the late Marianne Van Kerkhoven in the book published on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of P.A.R.T.S. In commenting upon De Keersmaeker’s motto ‘I cannot teach anyone to dance’, Marianne Van Kerkhoven quoted Rilke, who said “... it is essentially no concern of ours how someone manages to grow: as long as he grows and as long as we keep track of the law of our own growth”. Susan Neiman wrote a little book on education, which title is ‘Why grow up?’. Growing up, she says, requires that we learn the difference between *is* and *ought* without ever giving up on either one: keeping one eye on the way the world ought to be, while never losing sight of the way it is, requires permanent, precarious balance (Susan Neiman, *Why Grow Up?*, p. 121). And then, she says, about her Enlightenment guide, Immanuel Kant: “In radical opposition to every philosopher who

came before him, Kant believed that philosophy was not an exercise for the privileged few, but an activity prescribed by the very nature of reason itself – hence, something natural to all of us. For all philosophy is an attempt to wrestle with three questions that concern us all: what can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? Later Kant wrote that all these questions could be reduced to another: what is the human being?” (SN, p. 196). What is the human being? Maybe more than every other artistic expression, dance confronts us with that question: what is the human being?

The artist is not a political actor, he is an artist and should be an authentic artist. But there is an intimate relationship between politics and his subject matter, which he and we should at least try to understand. What is the human being? Education – making it possible that people ‘grow up’ – is all about this. I wish you much success with this fantastic endeavour.

Frank Vandenbroucke, Brussels, 8.9.2015.