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## WRITTEN REFLECTION

### SUFFERING: ON OUR PERCEPTION OF PAIN

*Suffering* was a physical performance that investigated suffering and the imagery of suffering in our time.

In our era of diagnoses and medications suffering is rarely regarded as a natural part of life. Yet we suffer. Distress and vulnerability permeate our everyday lives, in both a local and a global perspective. Each individual suffering accommodates a larger narrative. At the same time images of human suffering is spread daily. Other people's distress has become commonplace. What happens to us when we look at other people's pain? How can we handle all these images without losing our compassion and humanity? And without consolidating polarized notions of "us and them"?

The project *Suffering* started as a reaction on two tendencies in the society. On the one hand it was the fact that mental suffering was much discussed in the public debate, but often in terms of medication and diagnosis. On the other hand it was the media flow of images of suffering people that poured over us at this time, for example images of fleeing people on overloaded boats in the Mediterranean Sea. How can we handle suffering in our society – our own and other people's?

Early in the working process we came to the conclusion that there is a lack of language for suffering in our society. Where there is suffering there is also silence. Images of suffering are largely taken at a distance and lack the sufferer's own voice, and expressions of suffering are medically answered. In the performance we tried to create a multitude of expressions for the suffering, with the help of movements, actions, words and images. The difficulty of handling suffering was embodied, performed and contextualized.

In the working process many questions dealing with representation and reproduction came up. How can we discuss images of suffering without just reproducing them? How can we manage to go beyond the unambiguous, and instead create complex images and events on stage? We experimented for example with simultaneous actions in individual scenes and conflicting approaches and rhythms in the acting of the performers. We also tried different ways of "holding" and "taking care" of the images we chose to use on stage through projections. Here, both the quality of the acting and the lighting design were important means. This was a way to counteract the tendency to just reproduce the images and instead pointing out an active relation and position towards them. This relation connected to the issue of testimonies, that was significant specifically towards the end of the performance.

For me as a director, the *Suffering* performance was a challenge when it comes to creating a complex weave of meaning, where physical acting, words, sound and visuality together formed patterns leading to an associative dramaturgy. The project explored different

devising methods during creation and directing of the performance, which included both physical improvisational work and text writing. At the level of performing, the project involved a dialogue between three different strands of physical theater, joined by an indirect linkage to Jerzy Grotowski's theater work.

We also experimented with author readings on stage as part of the performance narrative. These readings had neither the function of a play script nor of a regular author reading, but as something third: as an integrated part of the performance and the narrative. This way of incorporating literature – read by the author herself – as part of a performance narrative was in many ways a new approach that needs to be explored further in the future.