

Introduction by Jeroen Peeters

Are we here yet?

How does a choreographer like Meg Stuart create work? Even for interested audiences the creative process remains mostly inaccessible and the dance studio a foreign space. In interviews one catches a glimpse of an artist's intentions, poetics or world-view, of their life maybe, but artists are seldom addressed as makers. Though one might be familiar with someone's artistic vocabulary or universe as conveyed through performances on stage, this world appears differently when it is still in process – under construction, so to speak. Driven by intuition and a dark object of desire, a creative process will never be fully revealed in words, the resulting work never fully unravelled, yet mystification seems to be out of place. After all, a choreography or a performance is the outcome of a process of making – the making of ideas, material, formal decisions, social interactions, and so on. If such a thing exists at all, does the work perhaps have its own, intrinsic discourse? An exploration and documentation of a creative process might be a good place to start, hoping that the *languages of making* will follow.

Between November 2004 and January 2006, from the audition workshop to the opening night, I immersed myself in the creative process of *Replacement*, spending long stretches of time in the studio to observe the rehearsals and talk to Meg Stuart and her collaborators. It brought up even more questions. Each piece has a specific subject matter and cast, but each also requires the invention of its own process, developed and shared by a group of collaborators in continuous exchange. The studio is a space brimming with language, from tasks to discussions and chatter, all of it charged with the flustered energies of exploration and creation. Yet, can one discern there method and language that exceed project-specific interests? How to address the more encompassing, intuitive and practical set of guidelines that has grown over a career, yielding articulate decisions regarding the composition and dramaturgy of a piece, the social energy of rehearsals, performance strategies, and so on? It concerns Meg Stuart's artistic genealogy and history of collaboration, which is sedimented in embodied poetics – and in her case hardly shared via words, not even in the studio. So how could I bring Stuart's poetics and method, her implicit language of making, onto paper?

Rummaging through the archive of Stuart's company Damaged Goods, I collected existing materials related to her work, such as performance texts, notes written by Stuart for programmes or subsidy applications, videos of lectures – mostly bits and pieces, fragments and anecdotes, betraying a reluctance to use language. It was elsewhere that I discovered a true accumulation of discourse, embedded in the work: in the tasks and fictions that make up the many exercises spoken out loud by Stuart in workshops. These exercises have gained structure and clarity over the years and, due to the pedagogical context, appear unburdened by the haphazardness that characterises a creative process. They highlight the narratives and principles underpinning the work and reveal aspects of its construction. Carefully transcribed and organised into a manual, the exercises of Meg Stuart and Damaged Goods are at the heart of this book.

In the wake of the exercises, the studio dialogue became my main tool for further documentation of Stuart's way of working. Over the course of five years I conducted about fifty hours of interviews with Meg Stuart and (former) Damaged Goods collaborators to discuss issues of the work in relation to processes of research and creation, training and performing, dramaturgy and collaboration. Though Stuart's pieces from *Disfigure Study* (1991) to *Maybe Forever* (2007) were touched upon in an oblique way, these dialogues sought to revisit meaningful moments in Stuart's artistic trajectory, mapping out genealogies and collaborations as a way of drawing different lines through the work. In this book, they have been reworked into a virtual polylogue of singular voices and counter-voices circling around the same moment, concern or theme.

These voices have thereby gained density and focus, but their tone and phrasing remains close to the informal language used in the studio – they appear in quotation marks in order to stress their oral source.

The insistence on an internal perspective upon Stuart's work is a red thread throughout this book, which also embraces essays and visual contributions by several Damaged Goods collaborators, each one first-person accounts addressing aspects of making. It thus extends the overall vision to encompass a variety of perspectives, different approaches to writing and visual impressions. More materials are rubbing up against the juxtaposed views and voices: a selection of documents, performance texts, quotations from other artists that inspired Stuart, as well as photographs from the pieces. All of it adds up to a space that is crammed with substance, a container brimming with memories, projections, reflections and images close to Stuart's choreographic practice, a heterogeneity of materials that have a certain gravity of their own and, hopefully, won't cease to resonate and stir up new questions for future work. The composition of the book happened in close collaboration with Meg Stuart and graphic designer Kim Beirnaert.

Are we here yet? doesn't come with a map or a table of contents, but invites the reader to take a walk through some of Damaged Goods' conceptual landscapes. You can enter anywhere, acknowledge the place you are in by holding onto the materials and giving them time to resonate, then navigate on your own as soon as you feel grounded. You could go to page 129, land in the studio, tune in to its energies and work your way through the rumble and jumble of the creative process. You could read from cover to cover and follow a choreographer discovering her own movement vocabulary, facing wider choreographic concerns, embracing collaboration, meeting foreign languages and going into the world, gathering question upon question. You could empathise with the identity struggle of performers becoming transparent, inverting their suspicion of words, or morphing when challenged by technology. You could slip into the all-embracing fictions of costumes or a cinematic reality on stage, and discover improvisation strategies that aim to outsmart the threats of a suffocating totality. Or you could take this book into a dance studio, go straight to page 154 and work with the exercises, letting the tasks slowly overwhelm your body. Are we here yet?

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