

DANCE CONSULTATION:

REPORT OF CO-DESIGN FOR A NEW DANCE FESTIVAL IN MELBOURNE

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The goal was to create a consultation to co-design a new festival for dance in Melbourne given that Dance Massive as a festival would not be going ahead.

METHOD:

In order to understand the current state of dance and what the term “contemporary dance” might mean in Melbourne, we as a quartet from diverse cultural, social and gendered location, used a decolonising, ethnographic methodological framework to structure the research process. Our target was to achieve a wide range of feedback from diverse dancers, institutions, presenters, artists, groups, schools and audiences across Melbourne. To rethink existing structures and to magnify the impact of this co-design the research was conducted with an intersectional framework to address race, gender, age, sexuality, access and class employing a dialogic framework.

RESEARCH STRUCTURE:

1. **In order to achieve the widest reach we co-designed a survey** with 21 questions with multiple choice, yes/no and sentence answers. We had 311 responses on the online survey from a diverse group of people.
2. **In order to achieve breadth and depth conducted 8 focus group consults** online. The questions and discussions emerging from the surveys conducted beforehand were used to structure the sessions. We outlined key groups that represent a diverse range of perspectives of dance in Melbourne and chosen key representatives from different categories and understandings of what constitutes contemporary dance. Sample of categories of people in focus groups:
 - First Nations
 - Culturally Diverse

- Independent Artists
- Teachers
- Producers
- Presenters
- Street/Clubs

The groups had between 2-4 consultants with 8 participants as the maximum number in the online discussion which included in total 58 artists, producers and presenters who attended. The online discussions were on zoom due to covid. The sessions were recorded with permission from participants. The focus groups were assembled using the insider knowledge of the quartet of consultants to address the following goals:

- To decolonise process and outcomes
- For participants to feel culturally safe in the groups they are in
- Effective time management
- What is going to create the most for each particular focus group
- What will be created when we establish rules for listening
- What will be created when speaking with an awareness of power

Constraints:

- Zoom/ online engagement not ideal for this discourse
- 1 hour time limit not enough time
- People who are unfamiliar with one another
- People not sharing common practice
- Diminished ability to advocate as a group
- Cultural safety could be compromised in an online environment and without critical training beforehand

KEY ISSUES IN METHOD:

We were aware of the constraints and possibilities of this method process. We were aware that such mechanisms have the capacity to fail online but have endeavoured to do our best to avoid these issues by making sure that culturally appropriate consultants are available in mixed focus group consults. However, this did not always happen in all consults and sometimes resulted in some difficulties in the process. Discomfort was expressed by some panellists in private after the panels were over. Some panellists were appalled at the lack of respect provided by the typical dominant voices. Some panellists did not feel comfortable speaking when they were not in the majority.

We were also aware that methodology can vary depending on mode used. Survey data collection reveals certain information vs. intimate individual oral storytelling/audio/ video recording vs. focus group dialogues that allows different voices to be heard. The purpose of each part of the method was to reveal something different even if questions are the same and depending on background/ age / experience of who is being put in conversation under what constraints. How somebody might behave in an anonymous survey, differs from their behaviour in a group which differs in what knowledge can be gained in a private personal context. Therefore, we endeavoured to do our best to incorporate multi pronged strategy that allows us to get breadth and depth.

One major area that needs much more care and work is the prioritizing of First Nations voices. We did not have as much input from key voices as we would have liked and missed artists who needed to be part of this process. There are also several other artistic sectors we could not tap into since none of us had expertise in these areas. Much more work needs to be done for cultural equity and social justice issues to create a critical balance in future.

KEY FINDINGS OF PANELS AND ONLINE SURVEY

We had artists from very different practices such as western classical, non western classical, Indian classical, folk, street, club, popular, contemporary, experimental, hip hop, belly dance, Butoh, ballroom, indigenous, Latin American, Jamaican dance hall, Kandyan and more responding to the call for co-consultation.

1. All panellists expressed the excitement and joy with being in a room, albeit a “zoom room” with diverse artists of varied backgrounds.
2. They all unequivocally said such conversations were much needed.
3. Every panel requested more time for these discussions
4. Many panellists felt that a festival that reflected the diversity of the dance sector in Victoria was a much needed corrective
5. The term “community” needs to be rethought to include all communities, whether its contemporary, classical, folk, popular
6. The term “contemporary” was a contested term and had multiple varying reflections which can be found both in the online survey and in our discussions. Here are a selected few responses below.

When asked to define the term “contemporary” we received many different responses but there were some through lines about how the term excludes many artists:

I really believe contemporary dance is all types of dance which is practiced by dancers who are living today! These can be forms of dance with a lot of structure, or not much at all.. dance with a millennia-long history or impromptu forms of movement. I think what makes a dance contemporary are the dancers themselves, not the dance form. The dance form is just a medium.. the same way pen and paper convey the message of contemporary people. In some ways, seeing a classical, traditional art form performed by a modern person is very interesting to see how bits of time tessellate together into a single experience for the dancer and audience.

Exclusive terminology that serves as a means of exclusion and marginalisation of the “other” and potentially alienating of diverse and mainstream audiences alike. I question the practical value of this term to do much more than signify internal meaning that is irrelevant to most and highly problematic for some outside of the small contemporary dance sector.

When I hear the phrase Contemporary Dance in discussions and in forums I get the sense that what is being referred to are usually dancers who are trained in Western post modern dance forms. However to me, contemporary dance are works and artforms that are present in our current times

from any genre that encompasses the broader range from non-Western perspectives and countries such as Java in Indonesia or a Butoh performance in Melbourne. Contemporary dance also refers to the body that is dancing the work. It is from here and now whether or not the performer is trained in a classical or traditional style of dance. The reinterpretation of works are in itself relevant to the time it is created and performed for us today.

Sadly, 'Contemporary' is quite often used to 'isolate' quality productions by Policy makers of Funding bodies at the State, Federal and Local Govt levels for the past few decades. We do not need a token Multicultural Arts Funding. The word "Contemporary" has to be redefined in the context of Classical dance (including Indian Classical Dance and NOT just Western Ballet) which has several innovative components which integrate music compositions and works of contemporary composers. Dance means all forms of dance and not ballet

Contemporary is a slippery notion for me. As a descriptor of 'dance', it means new, experimental with connotations from the mainstream perspective as perhaps inaccessible to lay audiences and firmly established within a Western-centric framework. As a genre, it means in response to classical or modern dance and again, with an unspoken framing in Western canons. In any sense, the notion of contemporary feels Western, even when describing 'flamenco' or 'Afro' which is problematic to my mind. The term 'dance', at once a noun and a verb, means movement and moving, relating to others and the world, making ideas bodily, touching others' minds, bodies, souls, hearts and expressing, creating, teaching, training, discovering, translating and interpreting languages of lines, shapes, colours, textures, places, things and animals, including people. It means thinking, responding and learning in poetic terms that remain open to change. It is an ideal of an ethics and aesthetics of care.

Dancers from diverse backgrounds, choreography inspired by new stories and diverse influences, perhaps performed outside the established institutions or in unexpected ways and locations

I guess contemporary means of the now. The art of the present, about the current issues and ideas. And dance is any movement of the body, but also non-bodied things can dance, and also stillness can be dance so I'm not really sure

In terms of participating in Dance Massive some key responses included:

I have felt that Dance Massive needs to do more outreach to engage dancers from First Nations, people of colour, gender diverse etc. It's not enough to put a 'call out', but instead there should be more relationship - building with people from these communities. There needs to be more flexible opportunities through future dance festivals, many of which I believe start with relationship - building.

I have never been invited nor given the opportunity to be a part of this festival .The definition of contemporary is essentially white ,and Anglo Saxon going by what the standards are .Any professional engaging in dance styles that are south Asian or seen as a classical performer is automatically understood to be part of community arts and put in to a narrow box and directed towards that side of the dance genre .The definition of contemporary is painfully narrow and still given to a very colonial construct of what can or cannot be included . Despite being one of the most prominent, professional with a formidable pedagogy and performance history of my style I have always been left not only with no space to even conduct my practice when the festival happens ,but also no invite has been extended to us . With no grants that favour my dance style not any dance space that is provided to me to develop anything of my art form I am left white on my one to survive in a very difficult and competitive environment where there is no equity built to help me climb this very inequitable social ladder

My dance form has never been invited.

My art form was not considered to be suitable for the festival.

I have applied to present as a choreographer in Dance Massive through Arts House and Dancehouse, but my inquiries were not met with a response. The only barrier to me was the curatorial taste of the directors.

I believe the barriers are several and complex to identity in this limited space. The obvious one is the elitist 'white' dominant platform that it existed in meant that an artist like myself, even though my practice is heavily invested in experimental dance, but because of my cultural heritage(s) and non-linear trajectory in career as a dance maker, meant implicitly, I had no place to occupy at Dance Massive. From an outsider's perspective, the few CALD & POC artists in D.M appeared as tokenism, since the artists in the festival as a whole did not reflect the cultural diversity of dance artists working in Australia.

SPOTLIGHT

Many questions arose about what is the term contemporary. In the South Asian panel with both older and younger artists what emerged is that this term is contested. That the traditional/ classical is contemporary and there is a need to decolonize Eurocentric claims of the term. The multiple voices served to highlight the range that postcolonial South Asian dance practice is at once contemporary and has classical dance elements to varying degrees in each work. Ultimately what was discussed is that representational control needs to move away from the current dominant aesthetics in funded Melbourne dance practices to enable a rethinking of what cultural equity might look like if we actually reflected the diverse population and dance practices that are Melbourne. One particular voice rose up and was reflected by several others in both the public context of panels, but also in the individual and duet consults.

But truth be said we all are trapped in this goldfish bowl that our collective history has placed us into. Decolonizing our artistic playing field will require us to look within ourselves. The progeny of the colonial masters, and the progeny of the oppressed masses, be it in South Asia, or Australia are still continuing a narrative that is coloured by that historical burden. The benefactors of that history are still continuing a narrative in their respective fields, reaping spaces, and platforms of privilege and ease that are neither open nor available to those who have been historically unseen or unheard.

To say that we are now in a democratic set up and that it's an open playing field, with open spaces for each of us to make a mark based upon our talent and hard work. Or to say that it's not fair to single out people of today who have no direct hand in what happened in the past is essentially what white washing history is all about.

Equality as an idea and notion is all quite great to wave as a placard but the talk here is about Equity. A systemic problem, a systemic structural violence of historical narratives, a systemic gaslighting of people who begin to question the orgies of power on display at festivals where even the brown skinned participants /performers are essentially using the art vocabulary of the white world to gain entry, just a toe hold, just a tick in the box of the complete festival circuit of privilege that is up to its gills festooned with a white continuing narrative of privilege. Equity will require a complete scrapping away of all that was in the past, done as it was in the past, going back to the drawing board and starting from ground zero.

POSSIBLE FUTURES:

What was clear from this process is that there is a real need for dialogue between dancers in Victoria whatever their background, funding capacities, artistic value or “bill-ability.” For this to happen critical and meaningful structural changes need to be put in place. Festival organizers, venues, and key organizations need to take responsibility to turn themselves inside out, conduct internal surveys and checks to see how the diversity that is present in the Victorian population is reflected at every level of the organization. The adage “There can be no art about us without us” must be adhered to whether it is with First Nations artists or artists of colour, LGBTQIA+ artists or artists with disability featured in festivals or whether festivals that reflect these communities are truly being represented and empowered. If the organization does not have the required know-how then it is the duty of the organization to employ consultants who are culturally relevant and have the knowledge and capabilities to help lead the sector. Just as this quartet of consultants come from diverse backgrounds and experience and were thoughtfully selected by Artshouse and Dancehouse to deliver this consultation, so too must organizations endeavour to bring such expertise to deliver future models that reflect the change in aesthetics, design, and outcomes required for actual cultural equity to exist. In addition, it is also recommended that organizations undertake diversity training programs in order to deliver diverse festival outcomes with cultural safety in mind.

Many of the people in the panels and also those in online surveys recommended that an equitable festival was not only necessary but also much needed in order to reflect the diversity that is Victorian dance today. The call to action has demanded it. Creative Victoria, Dancehouse and Artshouse have listened and set up this consultation process. Covid has enabled us to clear the past and move towards an equitable future. Especially when the Black Lives Movement has galvanized many worldwide, here in Victoria, it also seems to be the will of the panelists we spoke to. Let us take it and do so quickly to become world leaders modelling equity, plurality and multiplicity with a critical social justice lens in place.