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Co-Design: Imagine a festival for dance in Melbourne

Report & Learnings, December 2020

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Introduction

Dancehouse and Arts House, with support from Creative Victoria, appointed four independent arts practitioners — Mariaa Randall, Priya Srinivasan, Luke George and Tam Nguyen — to lead a community co-design, to explore the potential of a dedicated contemporary dance festival in Melbourne. The Co-Design team led a sector consultation between September and November 2020.

Methodology

In order to understand the current state of dance and what the term “contemporary dance” might mean in Melbourne, the Co-Design team used a decolonising methodology to guide an artist-led dialogue with the sector.

What now? What next? What do we all want next?

Our creative process aims to rethink existing structures by employing an intersectional and dialogic framework to address race, gender, age, sexuality, access and class, employing a dialogic framework. Our target was to achieve a wide range of feedback from diverse dancers, choreographers, institutions, presenters, artists, companies, groups, schools and audiences across Melbourne.

Three part research structure for listening:

1. **An online survey**

30 September - 31 October, 2020

Respondents: 311 people

2. **Focus groups**

Intentionally targeted to bring together diverse voices drawn from our lived experience. 9 conversations which included 4 intersectional conversations and 5 conversations for participants who might share commonality in their practice or cultural background. Perspectives invited to take part included: First Nations artists, culturally diverse artists, independent artists, artists with disability, gender diverse artists, teachers, presenters, street and club artists.

Total Participants: 53 people

3. **Individual consultation**

Deep listening of elders and pioneers in dance

Total Participants: 5 people

Acknowledgement

I live, create and dance on the unceded lands of the Eastern Kulin nation. I respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians, the Woi Wurrung Wurundjeri and Bunurong Boon Wurrung people. I acknowledge these living peoples, leaders, cultures and their ancestors, and pay my respects. I was born and grew up in lutruwita (Tasmania). I am of Anglo-Celtic-Syrian ancestry. I identify as cisgender, male and queer.

I write this report in the knowledge that there is much more listening to do, to dig deeper, to allow space and time for the nuance of people's experiences and articulations to unfold further and for our collective imaginations to continue. This process and report is an invitation to begin a conversation that must continue through diverse methods, mechanisms and leadership. Addressing critical urgencies such as; who is dancing, sector inequities, institutional racism and the climate emergency. The conversation should not be a means to an end, rather a constant tending which fertilises and regenerates the landscape in which we dance, inviting more people to be part of the conversation, to speak up, to be seen, to witness each other in our words and our bodies.

The Co-Design has been a process in developing ways of listening through carefully choreographed conversations between people of different dances, backgrounds, experiences and cultures. It is about being in the conversation, together. Our hope is that it may model a way that can guide the core principles, intentions and purpose of the new festival and for best practice in Victoria's dance sector. The festival, and the sector, can continue ways to listen and respond to the conversation, truly embarking on the notion of "Co-Design". The entire process was undertaken online, mid-pandemic during some of the heaviest lockdowns and restrictions of movement experienced globally.

I want to acknowledge the labour that I witness my arts peers and colleagues undertaking in all of this work, all the time, often unpaid, under-recognised and unheard. I want to acknowledge and thank everyone who participated so generously in this process and invitation, it has been a humbling and inspiring conversation to be part of. Thank you to Arts House and Dancehouse for being brave and trusting an artist-led process. Most of all, thank you to my Co-Design team members and friends, Mariaa, Priya and Tam - I've learned so much from you and I'm in awe of your wisdom and grateful for your collaboration on this huge and often daunting undertaking.

Luke George

Key Learnings – People and Place

“Different people saying different things”

The Co-Design consultation process is the first time many of the artists we spoke to have felt invited to join the conversation, to speak and that what they had to say would be listened to. It was clear that everyone would like to see this consultative and collaborative approach continue, with less opacity to arts organisations and programming, more entry points for an ongoing conversation and shaping of the festival and any other programming and opportunities for them to develop and share their practice. Many artists have felt kept in the dark and the last to know, and in many cases, locked out all together - that the space “isn’t for them”.

“Today is the first day I feel like I am part of a dance community, the conversation is a feeling of catharsis and I feel like I belong.

To speak and to be heard, is to belong.”

Through the Co-Design consultation zoom meetings, artists who live and practice in the same city regularly remarked how they were meeting each other for the first time, hearing what each other had to say and share. Many expressed a strong desire to build an awareness, understanding and appreciation for each other's practice, to learn from and through each other. Fostering a field of dance artists who see and advocate for each other's forms and contexts, rather than competing and cutting each other out.

“A dance festival that can vacuum up the fragmentation we are experiencing is exciting. Something that brings us together because if we don't do this the dance community will continue to fragment, and separate and isolate”

Results from the 311 responses to the Co-Design Survey showed that Victorians practice, attend and participate in a broad range of dance forms and styles at various times, regularities and often participating in more than one singular form (Q2 - *What kind of dance do you practice / watch?*). The highest responses were in contemporary dance (248) and experimental practice (213). The majority of respondents to the Survey were dancers (63%), many of whom are audience members (45%) and choreographers (38%). Of the 69% who had previously participated in Dance Massive (Q6, Q7), 72% were audience members. In Q3 - *Who is there at your dance events?* The top 3 responses were: 79% Ticket buyers, 77% Friends, 72% My Community. When asked in Q13: *What can you contribute to make a new dance festival?* 71% responded: Buy tickets, followed by 64% Learn and 63% Perform. Amongst many things, what these results show is that artists and their communities are the core audience for dance in Victoria.

We listened to First Nations artists and artists of colour, learning that what is known as “contemporary dance” here in Victoria happens in a western colonial framework and predominantly from a European/North American canon of lineages of values for aesthetics and practices. Artists who have a long standing professional practice and are highly respected internationally, with a strong audience and student base for their work, have experienced a closed door when it comes to programming and opportunities within the Victorian dance sector, funding and presentation frameworks. Through this, they find their practices are often categorised as “community” or “cultural” dance, suggesting that is best suited to culturally-specific audiences and non-professional presentation contexts. These artists articulated that this perpetuates systemic and institutional racism.

*“Australia is not a white Anglo society anymore,
but with dance – we are.”*

Artists of diverse backgrounds and marginalised experiences expressed that it is uncomfortable for them if they are the only artist of their experience in a program, e.g. the only artist who is queer, trans, gender non-binary, living with a disability or BIPOC. This places them in a token position of representing a particular community. Artists expressed that they do not want to be curated to be in specific categories in a festival, so as to represent a particular group - that they wish to be engaged based on their ideas, practice and work - bringing diverse ideas and practices into relation with each other.

A key part of our learnings in speaking with First Nations artists was that there needs to be a concentrated critical mass of indigenous artists within a festival program, with positive examples given of Yirramboi Festivals, APAM2020 Blak Lab + Blak Spaces, First Nations focus in Dance Massive 2019. We learnt from these artists that First Nations work must be developed and shown through a self-determined model - “by us, for us and for others”, and that curation of First Nations work must be First Nations led. Importantly that protocol, permissions and cultural safety is prioritised. We heard that when we speak about dance in Victoria, we are speaking about the world’s longest continuing culture, and creating the space and platforms for First Nations artists to dance and be seen - the vital importance of lineage and visibility.

“Your mob seeing you on stage”

Recommendations

A dedicated festival for dance in Victoria should be reflective of the people of this particular place and time - the population that lives in Victoria now and the diversities of form, opinions, aesthetics, culture and dances of the people who live here. A framework, a focused moment for critical mass and gathering for a diversity of artists and audiences to see and hear each other, experts leading their practices, learning from and through each other, through the body, speaking to each other around ideas, versus categories or classifications. It values the sharing and development of artistic practice and community through intersectional approaches and opportunities...
inter: cultural + generational + disciplinary.

Following an artist-centred model, events and activities in the festival may be led by artists working in partnership and collaboration with presenting/supporting organisations, in leading and defining what they do, how they do it and what the spaces and context they situate it within. Events may happen in theatres and venues and/or on-location in specific spaces, durations and times (daytime, evening, late), that are appropriate that best serve the artist/audience/community context.

The conversation with First Nations artists must continue:

- Traditional Owners and Local Elders must be involved and consulted from the beginning
- Dedicated First Nations curator/s and programming embedded throughout all participating organisations
- First 4 days of the new dance festival a concentrated critical mass of First Nations programming
- Further and deeper consultation with Traditional Owners, local mob and First Nations artists living in Victoria
- Explore the future possibility of a dedicated First Nations dance festival

Key Learnings – Program

“Exchange versus transaction”

Overwhelmingly, all the people we heard from, articulated the need for meaningful connection and exchange, the nurturing of dance practice and sharing of diverse knowledges. We learned that people want to see an evolution in our arts ecology, systems for support and particularly in festival frameworks that currently follow a market-centred approach. People described how this has embedded and fostered a sense of competition and transaction between people. For many, this focus on festival-as-marketplace has shifted the focus of dance more towards production and away from practice.

“Dance is not just about an aesthetic product, it's about community. The building of community through the arts is something we should be proud of in Victoria.”

We learned of several things about this:

- Due to a lack of opportunities, support or programming here, many Victorian dance artists seek it outside of Australia for their work. In Survey Q9: *Have you participated in other dance festivals?* by far the highest response was 67% for international festivals, above interstate (51%), Victoria (57%) and Narm-Melbourne (45%).
- Platforms such as Dance Massive has provided significant opportunities for international and national programmers to see artists' work
- This has led to some further opportunities (residencies, exchanges, commissions and tours) for some artists, but overall, not a lot
- Many articulated that this focus on market and prioritising the attendance of programmers, influences who the artists and type of work that is programmed, and thus influencing the practice and creation of the work itself. It also placed many pressures and forced artists and audiences to fit the experience of a work/practice to certain formats, timeframes and contexts that weren't necessarily appropriate
- Also that the amount of resources (e.g. from Australia Council) put toward market based activity was out of balance in relation to there being under/unfunded projects in development, programmed and/or not programmed as a result of not successfully securing funding for their work.

People we spoke to see the necessity and benefit of developing national and international interest and engagement for local work. However, they expressed a desire for the festival to firstly prioritise artistic practice and the rich and deep opportunities for encounter and exchange between diverse artists and audiences through a broad range of events and activity that span scale, duration, type, time, location, context and intention. Opportunities

for people to have additional depth around an artist that goes beyond a singular engagement a performance, particularly for artists who are marginalised. In Survey Q12: What would you like the festival to include? The top 3 responses were: 95% Performances, 82% Workshops and 74% Talks.

“A Festival is a tool, a remedy, a nutritional supplement to art and culture.”

Recommendations

A dedicated festival for dance in Victoria should foster what is special about this place and its people - let the market come to us.

A dance festival that runs annually and spans up to a month of activity which is decentralised and traverses between many different presenting venues and off-site specific locations across the city, both CBD and suburban Melbourne.

Alongside performances of works, the festival elevates and equally values a full program of: public and professional workshops, artist-lab, talks, forums, ideas-in-progress, experiments, mixed bills, jams, dedicated and appropriately situated street-forms events (balls, battles and dancehalls) and so on. Events don't compete for programming and audience, and allow for generous time and space for people to meet, connect and exchange in, around and between events.

The festival should value the informal and inclusive spaces where people come together through sharing of food (inexpensive and not extravagant, e.g. food trucks, long tables, daily soup/stew, etc). People imagined these exchanges taking place before, during and after performance and events, including as well as beyond the theatre foyer, where they can linger and meet at either a dedicated festival hub open and/or in the unhurried travel between festival locations, connecting to people and place.

“It completely changed the feel of the festival; it's basic, but communal sharing of food had an influence over the entire experience. Changes the way you see other people's work.”

- Broader range in ticket prices across the program
- Free events
- Discounted artist festival-pass available, whether or not they are programmed in the festival.
- Discounted Mob tickets for First Nations audiences
- Ways for national and international visitors to the festival to offer and share more about their own practices and contexts as part of their visit

In terms of the climate emergency and navigating Covid conditions, the festival should carefully and responsibly consider how it develops mechanisms for national and international reach, exposure and connection. Festivals such as Liveworks (Performance Space, Sydney), TBA Festival (Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, USA) and many other programming models during Covid has shown what “trans-local” international exchange can look like, where artists and audiences from different global locations can connect and share, without needing to travel. In current conditions, it is highly encouraged that these methods and technologies be invested in and engaged for the Festival in the near future.

Key Learnings – Curation

“Time and place can create elitism: the presenting context becomes the prize (e.g. which institution/theatre values me). It doesn’t have to be something that occurs at a standard time/place; it could be in someone’s house; could be at a club. Distributed models create more money to the artists, closer to people’s lived experiences, move more around Melbourne and more Melbournians can participate.”

We learned that artists want to see the advancement of curation for dance in Victoria for a new festival. Many artists reflected on the Co-Design group itself as being a group of people who are from diverse practices, experiences and knowledges and having deep connections and histories with artists of different communities. People reflected on how the appointment of such a group is what allowed for the breadth and depth of intercultural and intersectional dialogues which currently are not happening in the dance in Victoria. People who can bring people into the conversation.

People imagined seeing the curation of the festival evolve over time, seeing different constellations of curators intersecting with each other. This could be through rolling appointments that may last for various durations based on needs, vision and timelines, rather than annual reappointments for annually based outcomes. Changing the process, and what the festival looks, smells, tastes and behaves like. Specific and unique iterations for each festival led by curation and by the artists’ practices and contexts, not the same box each time.

“If you have different diverse programming and thinking, it needs diverse processes and timeframes”

In consultations with presenter and small-medium organisations, we learned that organisations have their own specific models for curating, with practices and relationships that have been nurtured and developed over time and highly specific to their contexts and communities of artists and audiences. For example, The Substation's Curators at Large and Abbotsford Convent's First Nations curation programs. Such organisations would want to maintain and further develop these curatorial practices and relationships.

Organisations also articulated a desire for there to be no hierarchy or competition between venues and organisations in the festival. Suggesting that a model could be; working in cooperation and cohesion with each other around festival planning and scheduling, an organisation working with its artists and communities, would self-determine their curation and type of events they each program. This would also suggest that each organisation is responsible for its own resources which supports the artists and the events.

“The colonial and the patriarchy are embedded in a singular view and will always have a hierarchy, because it is always pointing in one direction - so it's actually about having a prism that would break the light in numerous rays, be a little bit more hybrid, a little bit more dynamic.”

Recommendations

Continuing and building on the model of a consortium, the festival happens through the cohesive cooperative efforts between organisations which are varied in what they do, where they are situated, the spaces they create for the artists and communities that they work with. There should be no hierarchical structure in the consortium, organisations work with their own resources, methods, stakeholder relationships and funding ecologies in the ways that are appropriate to them. Where desired, organisations should be free (and encouraged) to collaborate with each other with the artists and events they support, e.g. through co-creation/production/presentation, etc.

- Development of curatorial models and programs within presenting organisations
- Clear framework and values for the Festival and presenting organisations which priorities the recommendations from the Co-Design consultation and reports
- Ongoing consultation and sector conversation (between and during the festival), which informs the framework, values and priorities
- Development of appropriate curatorial advisement for the festival and presenting organisations

- Appointment of a Festival Curatorship that works in partnership with artists, organisations and communities across the festival to develop and create the program

A next step in the Co-Design consultation process should involve a wider meeting of the broad range of interested presenters and artists, facilitated by the Co-Design team, working from the learnings of the 2020 consultations to begin conversations with presenters on next steps and sharing vision. These could be a series of ongoing conversations that is hosted at each interested presenting organisation's venue.

On Regional Victoria

We learned that the decentralising of the festival should also include regional Victoria. There is a strong desire to develop connections between metro, suburban and regional artists and communities. City based artists wish to engage with people in the regions through residencies, performances, workshops and talks. Regional based artists wish to develop their audiences and artistic connections locally and in the city. This is alongside a pressing need to help people across all of Victoria recover and rehabilitate from the recent bushfires and Covid.

Recommendations / Explorations

- Partnerships with regional communities and organisations for artist residencies, co-production and previews/avant-premieres/tours of new works
- Festival artist lab/camp being situated in a regional community
- Regional engagement and activity in between each festival
- Increased opportunities for artists based in regional Victoria to participate in the festival, develop their practice and audiences
- Education and reach, opportunities for artists to develop their practice in connection with regional communities, developing audiences, meaningful connections and support
- An entire festival, or a part of the festival, being located in a regional town
- A roaming festival model, travelling to a new regional community each year

On Resources

In Survey Q14: *What kind of resources do you need to do your work in the Festival?* the top three responses were: 70% Development funding, 66% Performance fee, 62% Performance venue.

Based on our Co-Design brief from Arts House and Dancehouse, there is at this point, no dedicated funding for this festival and it must be able to take place on existing resources of the organisations' programs and project funding. This prompted further questions: how is it an equitable model when some organisations and artists have access to more resources than others? Does this continue to perpetuate a model and system based on:

- The responsibility and pressure of fundraising and self-producing lands on the individual artists and small groups/companies
- Practice, creation and presentation of work is reliant on funding rhythms, meaning that it can take years of drip-feed support to produce work and lack of consistent continuum of practice?
- Project funding reliance where the focus and criteria of specific funding bodies are defining which artists and organisations are supported and which are not, leading to the continued curation and programming of artists who already sit within funded frameworks?
- Deep systemic problems of bias within the arts and dance sector (a clear message from the sector as articulated earlier) and that work that isn't funded, isn't programmed?
- Centralising and embedded hierarchies around which organisations and spaces have more resources to work with?

It also raised the questions:

- If Dance Massive was working in a similar model of a cohort of organisations working with existing resources, and is no longer sustainable because it was not able to access dedicated funding, how is this new festival different and will be more sustainable?
- If organisations are putting their program resources for dance towards the festival, how will this impact their support for and programming of dance in the rest of their annual programs?
- That the desires, concerns and needs for dance in Victoria as articulated through this sector consultation, could and should be developed throughout all ongoing program development, not only a festival
- Given all of this, the question was asked, is it wise to be putting these existing resources into a festival or would it be better to strengthen and deepen year long programming?

Ideally...

- Artists are supported from start to finish, throughout all stages, to a level that's appropriate for each presenter and appropriate to the needs of the specific mode of artist presentation (showcase, in-progress, experiment, lab, workshop, class, talk, etc), this may mean each presenter can only support a certain amount of artists for each festival, but with more presenting partners it will still mean a large program
- Artists can seek further funding, but their inclusion is not reliant on it - previously, inclusion in Dance Massive was often reliant on artists securing additional project funding, which ultimately means that decisions of funding panels and funding body recourse limits are the decisive factor in programming, continuing the cycle of who gets funded gets programmed.
- The new dance festival secures substantial longer-term ongoing funding from State and Federal Arts funding bodies.
- Festival presenting organisations work with their Local Councils to secure additional funding for their programs and artists.

Personal reflection

This has been a very humbling experience to have the opportunity and privilege to go deeper and hear more from my peers and colleagues, and to meet and hear from artists whom I have not met before. The experience has led me to ask myself, why haven't I met some of these artists until now? That this has been a failing of my own curiosity? My ability to look beyond my own bubble and paradigm for experiencing and thinking about dance and dancing? It's shown me that even as I may perceive myself to be adjacent to a majority (e.g. being queer person of mixed ancestry and having grown up in a pre-internet, regional, island, anglo-centric and homophobic community, which is deeply a part of my experience and continues to influence my artistic practice), I have benefited directly from the funding and programming systems for contemporary art and dance in Australia, which are predominantly a white-colonial framework for art, and having "worked" the system, I have built a practice that benefits from it.

It saddens me to meet Victorian artists in this consultation process who articulated to us that until now, they have never felt invited to be part of the conversation, for their practice to be seen and understood. Coming from artists who have immense experience to share and perspectives to be heard.

It also saddens and frustrates me that for so many artists we spoke with, they have never truly felt listened to. Reinforcing that the arts in Australia is not led by the artists themselves, rather it is a paternalistic top-down system, where artists are asking for support and a platform, effectively, requesting permission and validation, or being told how they must situate and contextualise their work - what box they may fit into and where that box is stacked.

What is clear is that the future of doing art must be in equal partnership and collaboration between artists and the organisations that exist to support and share their work. Consultation cannot be a one-off thing, it must be ongoing and throughout all parts of organising. We must trust in the wisdom and expertise of artists, we must support the artist first and what they do comes from that, not the other way around.

Likewise, it is for the artists to continue to step up and speak up, to imagine and create the context in which we wish to make and share our dance. It is up to us as artists, to not wait for permission or validation in order to dance. It's up to us to initiate and insist on the necessary and difficult dialogues that need to happen. It is our responsibility to step into and own the artistic space we define for ourselves and our communities and to develop our knowledge and understanding of each others', particularly of the artists and communities we don't know yet. If 2020 has shown us anything, it's that we need each other. Institutions need the individual as much as we need them.

What can we do for each other?