

Dancing their unhappy freedoms

Confabulation

This writing is a confabulation. It is made from our experiences, observations, assumptions and imaginations as dance-artists. It should and should not be taken seriously. Rather than analysis, it is more akin to rhetoric: an attempt to summon and draw attention to the paradoxes and contradictions in the thinking-working-desiring-body of a freelance contemporary dance artist. We wonder what it must be like to inhabit that body and how that body in motion relates to the institutions, communities and understandings on which it depends.

We are not sure we have the necessary warrant to make these claims. We are sure that we have neither the right nor ability to speak on behalf of such a multifarious group. Yet the contemporary dance community is a group; it is a group that has things in common, or at the very least one thing in common: the various practices, patterns and conventions that loosely comprise contemporary dance. Could we all agree on those patterns and conventions? Probably not. Could we agree on how contemporary dance distinguishes itself from the overlapping disciplines of hip-hop, ballet, flamenco, somatics; let alone visual arts, theatre, socially-engaged practice, activism and academic research? Definitely not.

We hope this text might be a supportive *and* provocative attempt to articulate some of the experiences felt and lived by this group. We would not expect anyone in this group to see all of themselves in these words. But if they were to generously glance at the text, we hope they might feel moments of recognition, identification or even solidarity. We also hope for readers not immersed in contemporary dance that this text elucidates some of the paradoxes and tensions experienced by contemporary dance artists. Be warned that the text is slightly difficult or pessimistic in tone, even though we don't necessarily feel that pessimism. Perhaps in that difficulty there is hope to be found?

The confabulated dance-artist at the heart of this text is referred to as *they*. This is not to distance ourselves as authors from them, but rather to choreograph—to write movement into—how each of us might or might not recognise and implicate ourselves in the *they*:

Identity is nothing else but a result simultaneously stable and provisional, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structured, of diverse processes of socialization which at the same time construct the individuals and define the institutions.

— Claude Dubar¹

About them

This contemporary dance-artist in the UK is probably middle-class and young: between 20 and 40 years old. Their politics will likely align with the left: care, responsibility, equity and justice. They voted Labour or Green in the most recent UK elections, but likely did not play an active role in their local constituency. They happily wore their mask during the pandemic but were less certain about the possibility of vaccine mandates. They strongly support the social welfare system including the National Health Service. They marched for Black Lives Matter in the northern summer of 2020, but would hesitate to publicly express an opinion on the occupation of Palestine. They worry about the climate emergency and talk of climate justice, while continuing to fly and consume more stuff than they really need.

They create and perform in art works that are presented at theatres, museums, universities, festivals, screens and galleries. They might have attended auditions to be dancers in projects, but more likely will have been invited to do artistic work by friends and peers. “It’s not what you know, but who” is a vital part of their economy, but it is not clear if more so than in other trades or professions.

Most of these dance-artists will not expect to make a living from their work, but they would like to. Many of them will have portfolio careers. They might work in fitness, education, and health and well-being. Some will understand these activities to be a holistic part of their dancing practice: a way to encourage the public to notice their bodies outside the frame of art. Others will understand these activities are merely to make ends meet. Some them might work part- or full-time in arts organisations in non-artistic roles as administrators, receptionists, producers, technicians, ushers or bar staff. Many will sustain their artistic practices by teaching: training new generations of practitioners despite (and perhaps contributing to) the lack of work.

They will have worked for no pay and or been exploited at some stage of their career. Very few will achieve economic stability exclusively through their practices, and many will be dependent on private support from family and friends. Despite how these financial circumstances significantly influence the kinds of art works each individual might make, these details will remain, for the most part, outside of public discussion of their practices.

Funding

Except in the rarest of circumstances, their work is not economically viable. It takes substantially more money to develop, rehearse and present choreography than will be raised by selling tickets to their performances. It is particularly expensive to pay for the labour of performers, designers and technicians, as well as to maintain their own practice. They attempt to meet this financial shortfall—to subsidise their artistic work—by applying for public funding.

They will have experienced first-hand that the funding structure for dance and the arts in the UK is dysfunctional and unsustainable. Nevertheless, to acquire funding they will form a constellation of commitments such as residencies, seed funding, production support and performance dates. They will use these commitments to legitimise the value and potential of their work. To play the funding game they will repeatedly make predictive claims about the form and meanings of their proposed work, in direct conflict with their belief in the open-ended and explorative nature of artistic practice. They will need to make claims about how the work will reach audiences, and the positive social, civic and emotional effects this work will have on the public. They will promise that funding will enable them to access new markets and develop new streams of income, and thereby help their artistic practice to become financially sustainable and self-sufficient. As such, they promise that the support they are asking for is temporary or one-off; that they will not need to rely on similar grants in the future. It will never be clearly articulated what claims are enough to satisfy demands of funders, and often they wonder if even the funders know.

In the face of limited resources funding bodies will repeatedly put artists in competition with one another. While the artist might quietly acquiesce to competitive logic in their proposal writing they will publicly reject the logic of competition by arguing that more funds should be made available to all.² They will be reluctant to claim that their work deserves funding over others, but will also harbour private conversations about the relative merits of the work of some of their peers. Competition is insidious and breeds division.

They will be accustomed to rejection, often with the feedback that their application was *very strong* but missed out due to the sheer number of applicants. Or they will just as often simply receive no response. They will project many things into this silence including reminders of their own powerlessness.

Despite no guarantees of funding, they will continue to make their work.³ They will collaborate with peers to develop contexts in which they can develop and share their practice. While this activity might profess to exist outside of, or even in opposition to, established organisations, the majority of these artists will happily move their practices into institutional spaces if and when institutional agents decide to grant them entry.⁴

Institutions and value

They will continually make approaches towards different institutions: writing applications, and trying to start conversations through attending industry events and inviting programmers to presentations of their work. Most of these efforts will not result in tangible support. Some will enter situations of more regular support with particular institutions who will express a commitment to their work. However, the artist will find themselves repeatedly wondering about the expiry date of this conditional welcome: that one day—when their work no longer corresponds to the organisation’s agenda, when their interests or processes are no longer in vogue—this support will no longer be there.

In seeking institutional support for their work, they will be asked to articulate themselves in language that is outside their expertise,⁵ and that their work likely seeks to challenge or unsettle.⁶ They will be asked to justify their work by calling on values that instrumentalise the arts and that they likely explicitly reject. At each institutional check-point they will decide whether or not they are willing to bear these compromises in order to access institutional resources. Their feelings of dignity and agency will be strangled by their financial and cultural dependence⁷ on these institutions as well as their limited capacity to refuse to *play the game*.

They will perceive and object to various kinds of exclusion embedded in the institutions they work alongside. These exclusions exist along difficult to render lines of race, gender, ability and class. They might feel frustrated by the crude handling of these categories in how they situate their work or try to gather support, and without necessarily knowing if other better alternatives even exist. They might feel shame around the ways they are majoritarian, and attempt to *make space* for those in the margins by holding themselves back from this or that resource, even if they are already insufficiently supported within this economy.

They believe the rich should be taxed more highly or should be less able to avoid paying tax. They believe “in the vital importance of not having profit and self-profit as the only goal for life and its arts”⁸ that the arts have cultural value⁹ to society above and beyond economic value. But they find it difficult to express or agree on precisely what those values are. They will feel deeply the paradox that dance is explicitly and implicitly not valued (in any sense of the word), yet will be familiar with the rhetoric and logic of the economic value of the creative industries.

Collectivity, change and social media

They will be accustomed to adapting and making ends meet. They will rapidly and expertly collaborate with one another on various projects and share resources with peers where possible. They will rely on each other for practical and emotional support, to make work and to maintain a sense of meaning and confidence in what they do. They will regard one another’s values, commitments, compromises and successes with feelings of anger, disappointment, jealousy, envy, joy and desire.

They will position themselves, and be positioned by others, as a *we*: a unified class, and type of worker, with shared interests and ways of thinking. They will frequently gather with their peers to discuss the brokenness of their field, and advocate for collective action that might enact systemic change. They will speak about unionisation, systemic discrimination and the need for organisations to restructure themselves to enable this change. But in the specificities of how this change might be enacted, and what kinds of change they might want to see, they will notice their *we* begin to break down. The histories, tropes and training of artistic practice will encourage them to continually insist on finding nuance within the implausibly broad brushstroke of the plural, first-person pronoun. As such, they will trouble this *we* by compulsively articulating their uniqueness and individuality as an author-artist.¹⁰ They will feel uneasy about their solidarity¹¹ and unsure of how easily their work as artists can be allied with other kinds of labour. Their conversations will inevitably reveal the social allegiances and resentments that have emerged after years of indirect and direct competition for scarce resources.

They are adept users of social media as a way to connect with and advertise themselves to other members of the dance community. Perhaps they also are aware that “technology was, is, and always will be an expression of the economic objectives that direct it into action.”¹² They ignore surveillance capitalism, and seem to extract and collect deeply personal experiences as the means to advertisers’ ends. They do not want it in mind that by using social media they have inadvertently signed up to the terrifying banality of neoliberalism: the commodification of behaviour and thought. The benefits of being connected and being seen are worth the costs.

Freedom, independence and dependence

Their experience of freedom while dancing was likely formative in the desire to be a dancer and kick-started their understanding of the human body in motion. This is not a body in any abstract sense, it is *their* body, and it is their body in motion that speaks to the heart of their personal values, identity and sense of self. This is their body in motion that underpins their politics and world-building, and it is difficult for them to untether their dancing from the need for tangible and intangible institutional resources. It will be hard for them to describe and discuss this tangle of bodies and systems with people who are not dancers.

They understand neoliberalism to be vague and difficult to explain, *and* a key part of the precarity they feel. They will blame many things on neoliberalism, while being aware of how they are implicated in its values of personal freedom, individualism, commodification and consumption, and its emphasis on empty correlations between money and happiness. They know that they participate in an art form that sees itself as resisting neoliberalism while operating fully within it. They will do this all while making dance works that require subsidisation in order to exist. They will deeply feel this paradox of freedom and dependence, and in particular how neoliberalism demands the exploitation of freedom to “maximize productivity and efficiency.”¹³

They will likely be dependent on family and friends to sustain their artistic careers. They live with the fact that most of their funding—when they receive it—comes from the UK’s National Lottery even though the Lottery is effectively a tax on the poor that subsidises their mostly middle-class art. Their dependence exists in direct opposition to how institutions tend to describe them as an independent artist. Their work may also attempt to critique the systems under which it is produced, all while continuing to seek support from these systems. Such ambivalence is the air they breathe.

Some have heard of Universal Basic Income and others have not. Those that have hope that it might diminish their ambivalence, even if they insist that it should not replace state funding of the arts. Rather than merely serving the privileged figure of the dance artist, they laud it as a vital step for societal equality. Others worry that while UBI would afford them a degree of economic and artistic freedom, it would continue to tie them directly to the state, of which they are wholly skeptical. They suspect that even the economic and cultural logic of UBI would not resist neoliberalism’s market-driven exploitation via the promise of freedom.

They have felt that “the culture of the market is exceptionally good at inculcating a sense of helplessness.”¹⁴ Some will resist seeing themselves as trading in goods and services, or identifying their work as a commodity. They do not want to be the passive recipients of economic forces. They will resist the notion of *Homo Economicus*¹⁵ with every fibre in their being. The dance and performance scholar André Lepecki will describe them as part of a group “who create the non-recognizable and do not care about being recognized.”¹⁶ He will also suggest that dance and choreography are “critical to address and counter the kinetic impetus in neoliberalism.”¹⁷ His words may inspire them and bolster their sense of belonging to the world.

They are a freelancer. They value the currency of their body even as it is steeped in the language, postures and gestures of consumer capitalist economics. How could it not be? Their work, when it is presented, will play to small audiences, and will represent a tiny fraction of all cultural activity in the UK. They live without the agency afforded by having a product that people want to buy. Theirs is the “freedom from exchange” that Theodor Adorno describes as coming from having “for sale something unique that no-one wants to buy.”¹⁸ Each of them learns how to live with the limits and humiliations of this unhappy *freedom*. They adapt in order to survive.

Ambition and shame

They are ambitious. They want to be an artist. But it is worth asking what they imagine this figure of *the artist* to be.

They wanted to choreograph for Beyoncé. Or they wanted to be the new Pina Bausch, William Forsythe or Michael Clark: to have their own company and show their work on main stages. They wanted to work every day in the studio with dancers; to accrue visibility, desirability, a buzz; to collaborate with fashion designers, pop-stars; to appear in magazines.

Or not.

They began to recognize that this is unlikely. They realise they are too unwilling to compromise on their critique of spectacle or traditions of dance technique; or they are unlikely to secure the necessary funding, or are simply not as well connected, or not lucky enough. They started to realise that none of this is a meritocracy. They revised their ambition: they want to be the next Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer or Deborah Hay. Their work will never receive major funding, but will be deeply influential and revered by peers and future generations of practitioners.

Or not.

They realise that they cannot afford to commit themselves to practice in such a way, that their work lacks originality and depth, that there are too many artists to ever *stand out*, or that they are indifferent about standing out from their peers. They revise their ambitions again: they wish to sustain a practice, yet find a way of living and working in which they might one day be able to retire without having to rent property. They want to make a new work every handful of years that will be admired by a close circle of peers. They want their peers to be happy and in work. They want the few institutions that they feel invested in—that are still committed to supporting their work—to stay afloat, despite increasingly perilous economic circumstances.

They withstand these shifts of ambition and promise and possibility and feasibility and success and failure. The feel shame arising from the mismatch between who they wish themselves to be and who they really might be or become. They slowly realise that certain things are unlikely, and that certain doors will never open for them or their work. They recalibrate their practice to more realistic and certain futures. They tell themselves that they wouldn’t want to work there anyway. They make a virtue out of necessity. They pivot.

Or they don’t.

They resign from this field, this identity of the dance artist, this mode of production. But their absence will hardly be felt, and will be quickly filled by many others.

Exit

We set out to write about the ‘the contemporary dance artist.’ We wanted to describe, as directly as possible, the many invisible contradictions and tensions we see surrounding their (our) work.

Yet as this text grew, we began to feel its weight. At the start we noted our concern for the writing’s pessimistic tone. It describes a miserable situation, scarce in dignity or pleasure, even for those few who achieve some degree of *success*. But this is not how we actually feel. We still get out of bed in the morning, and we still feel delight in much of the work that surrounds us. How do we reconcile this difference?

When we reflect on those things that nourish and excite us they feel less and less to do with this elusive and unsustainable figure of the *dance artist*. We see people divesting from this identity (and the ambitions and legitimations with which it coheres) yet finding unlikely moments of encounter, attention, pleasure, movement, beauty, thought and care. Rather than focusing on this contemporary dance artist—this fantastical *they* to which few individuals ever feel like they belong—we see and acknowledge these figures operating beyond this confabulation, this anecdotal composite. We see them inhabiting, engaging with and creating worlds far beyond the words we have written.

It is impossible to ignore how the untetherings described in this writing might have been catalysed by a romanticising that “has interrupted the ‘normal’ functioning of the everyday.”¹⁹ But we are wary of romanticising such a catalyst; of normalising how much hardship and pain has been experienced. We also wonder how much this conclusion is motivated by our inability to sit with what we have written, and the conclusions it might suggest. Is this note of optimism simply another way that the unsustainable gets sustained?

But we see these figures. We see many figures. They are wise, prudent, pragmatic, sanguine and committed. They get of bed. They nourish and are nourished. They elevate the ways in which the human body is held, seen and felt in our culture. And we express our gratitude to them all.

— Paul Paschal and Simon Ellis, February 2022

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3. Harry Josephine Giles (2020) ‘I Woke Up And the Arts Was Gone,’ harryjosephine.com/2020/03/20/i-woke-up-and-the-arts-was-gone/.↪
4. David Batchelor (Under The Canary) *Frieze*, Issue 5, June-August 1992: “found spaces are being used as a springboard from which to jump back into the gallery.”↪
5. While Arts Council England professes itself to be committed to democratic participation, its funding structures demand familiarity and use of highly specialised language that elude even seasoned industry professionals. E.g. Jo Crowley, Executive producer of 1927 on Twitter: twitter.com/crowleyjo/status/1456275716799037449.↪
6. For example, see ‘The Grant You Wish You Could Write’ by USA-based dance artist Miguel Gutierrez: dancersgroup.org/2022/01/absolute-you-wish-you-could-write/.↪
7. Quentin Crisp: “I believe in the brutally nothing you can’t afford to, because I may have to change at any moment. [...] The strong can say they believe, but the weak must accept everything. I must change my opinions every week, if necessary.” makinggayhistory.com/podcast/quentin-crisp/.↪
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