

DANCE AFTER LOCKDOWN

Living with Paradox

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Abstract

This writing explores the experiences of people in the UK's contemporary dance sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ It draws on qualitative data from a small research project—*Dance after Lockdown*—to examine how that sector understands their work, and how the language and ideology of the creative industries have shaped the lives and experiences of contemporary dance artists and institutions in the UK. The paper offers a range of diverse voices as one of the goals of the research was to examine the breadth of experiences, which we hope makes a case for the need to have a dance sector that is flexible and responsive to the needs of many freelance dance artists.

Keywords

COVID-19, contemporary dance, economics, eco-system, freelance, pandemic, universal basic income (UBI), precarity

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CONTEMPORARY DANCE AND THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic has exposed the system, be it dance or the world. There are a lot of injustices that already existed before the pandemic, but we never really addressed them.

– Mei, freelance artist and academic, 9 March 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on dance and the arts in the UK. The Office for National Statistics reported a 69 percent decline in the creative, arts and entertainment industries from pre-pandemic levels (ONS 2021). In the first months of the pandemic, live encounters between dancers and audiences were suspended, theatres were closed, studio spaces lay empty, and dancing alone, if you were dancing at all, became the new normal.

We are three dance artist-scholars and in this writing we dip our feet into a long-standing conversation about the ways in which concepts and experiences of precarity and value infect the experiences of contemporary dance specifically, and the arts more broadly. This article uses a small qualitative research project called *Dance after Lockdown*² to attempt to understand the experiences of people in the UK's contemporary dance sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is divided into four parts:

Part 1: *Keeping dance-artists poor* describes the precarious experiences of dance artists before and during the pandemic.

Part 2: *Creative Industries, market-economics and the value of value* takes a broad view on the ways in which contemporary dance has absorbed neoliberal values.

Part 3: *Talking of the future: Universal Basic Income* introduces how the research participants expressed a need for some form of basic income to counter their precarity and to be able to continue their work.

Part 4: *Coping with paradox: contemporary dance as eco-system* briefly describes the contradictions of the neoliberal dancer and wonder about the value of describing contemporary dance as an eco-system.

This writing therefore ambitiously zooms in and out between the local concerns of a group of people involved in contemporary dance in the UK, and the broader socio-economic context in which they work and live.

Dance after Lockdown was a small qualitative research project that ran from January to April 2021. It aimed to describe the impacts of the pandemic on the contemporary dance sector in the UK, and to explore policy-based strategies to rebuild the sector post-pandemic. *Dance after Lockdown* was limited in time and scale, but we sought to use the project's concomitant agility to collect primary data while the participants were still attempting to come to grips with how the pandemic was affecting their professional lives.

We approached small- and large-scale contemporary dance organizations in the UK to help identify and select participants. The group of participants was diverse by gender, age, location, nationality, race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and education. We interviewed sixteen people in the UK contemporary concert dance sector. They included dancers, choreographers, teachers, facilitators, producers, academics, and dance institution directors. In conversations with salaried representatives of organizations, they were offered a nominal fee for their time but many declined to accept compensation. While unsalaried participants were paid for their time. Each interview lasted sixty to ninety minutes and was a semi-structured conversation around the project aim that was facilitated by a member of the team. The interviews were professionally transcribed and the transcriptions were thematically analyzed by the research team to reveal the issues of greatest concern to the participants.

The participants not only spoke about their personal experiences during lockdown, but also about the professional contemporary dance sector and its institutions as an entity or *system*. At times they described the failings of the contemporary dance sector. For the most part, these failings existed before the pandemic. This is an important and persistent idea in our research, and also, a limitation: that the system in which contemporary dance performance is made, performed, and toured was a type of *pre-existing condition* exacerbated by the pandemic.

In this paper we integrate the participants' own words to share the experiences and working conditions of contemporary dance in the UK. We acknowledge that in a simple qualitative design, it is not possible to know the extent to which a group of participants is representative of a larger group or sector. Nevertheless, two key themes emerged from the conversations. First, the participants discussed in detail their experiences of fiscal precarity that had been worsened by the pandemic. Second, they spoke passionately about the need for some form of basic income to counter their fiscal precarity. For many participants, the pandemic offered time to reflect on the practices, methods, and institutions in the sector. They expressed understandable anxiety for the future, but also a clear resolve that the

contemporary dance working condition in the UK, as it was before the pandemic, is not sustainable.

KEEPING DANCE-ARTISTS POOR

I want to see really radical change. I think that's the only way we can do this. I think we can't tinker around the edges of these things. It's too broken. Like, we can't just have slightly better commissions—the commissions go from £500 to £1,000—because £1,000 still keeps artists poor, so we need to stop. Just don't do that.

– Valerie, freelance artist and academic, 24 Feb. 2021

Arts Council England states that in dance “the workforce is highly educated but poorly paid” (Burns and Harrison 170). As mentioned by the freelance artist and academic, change is needed that faces the problem in a direct way. The dance sector in the UK is comprised of people who mostly hold multiple and various jobs, and, as such, it is a difficult workforce to quantify. In 2016 Arts Council England reported that approximately 40,000 people work in dance in the UK, with teachers being the largest group within that workforce (149). In 2018, an Office for National Statistics Labour Force Survey³ estimated that there were 21,000 people who identified as dancers or choreographers, and 17,000 of those (81%), were working on a freelance basis.

Freelance dance artists are the most economically compromised. In the financial year ending March 2020, just prior to the pandemic, the median household income in the UK was £29,990 (census 2021). In 2021, the Real Living Wage for a full-time employee is £18,525, and £21,157 for someone earning the London Living Wage (Living Wage Foundation). Fulltime freelance dance artists earned on average just £11,669.74. During the pandemic, the situation for dance artists and organizations worsened. The UK's dance sector support organization, One Dance UK, conducted a COVID-19 impact survey⁴ on members, and reported that in April 2020, over half expected their income to decrease by at least 50 percent. Considering this bleak reality, living in London and the demands of financially surviving and experiencing salary satisfaction, was difficult.

We live in London and it's not fiscally... It's not an easy place to be, money-wise. Everything is expensive here. So it felt really scary. Your life can change. People's lives have changed in this moment in one month, going from having something to having nothing. I don't know, so it was scary.

– Michael, freelance artist, 3 March 2021

While low rates of pay and lack of compensation for the irregularity of employment are common to the exploitation of workers throughout the gig

economy, this is more rare in fields—like dance—which depending on the context of the work, requires people to have many years of training.

[The problems] we are talking about [occur in] freelancing in general, but depending on the career you're freelancing, the income is much higher. So you can afford to freelance ... even with photography ... the fee of a shoot is much higher than a day as a dancer. So, I mean, it's specific to dance, the income, the wages that we get paid [as dancers] are ridiculous, basically.

– Sophie, freelance dancer and photographer, 16 Feb. 2021

Monica, a contemporary dance artist with a career of over thirty years, spoke of the need for dance artists to find other ways to sustain themselves because it was rarely possible to survive financially if dance was one's sole form of employment:

I think my whole life most of the work I've done has been unpaid. In various phases of Arts Council and public policy, arts policy speak, the phrase "portfolio career" came in to being as a very polite way to describe, or an almost idealised way to describe, what people who weren't employed by a ballet company did in their lives. I think that that sort of portfolio career in reality means that you do your practice, your dance practice, whatever that is, and then you have very different other strands to making money, and some of those might be in the arts but probably a lot of them aren't.

– Monica, freelance artist, 23 Feb. 2021

Freelance artists lean on their partners, family, and friends for financial support to survive. This was particularly true during the pandemic when artists' precarity was pushed to breaking point.

I was lucky enough my partner was able to pay more of the rent, because I mean I've had sleepless nights because we have a one-bedroom flat, £1,600 [per month] in London that I only just was able to pay half of it in normal, you know, and then realising that I had three months left of that contract ... that was going to come to an end soon. There was a job in August scheduled, and then I knew there was a grant coming but I didn't know when that was coming, how much that was going to be, so there were lots of sleepless nights.

– Mateu, freelance artist, 1 March 2021

Financial precarity is a problem for the sector not only because it causes real hardship and is traumatic for the individuals exploited, but also because it perpetuates inequality. If dance work is financially unsustainable, then only those with familial or spousal support can feasibly embark upon or sustain a career. This affects the diversity in the sector, excluding those from less privileged backgrounds. What kind of art might be created if artists were only paid a living

wage? Whose ideas become realized, voices heard, and bodies seen? Who would be represented on our stages and in our institutions? If dance cannot adequately pay its workers, then societal privileges and forces of exclusion are replicated. Such forces disproportionately affect those who are already marginalized in society, particularly black, brown, and indigenous people of the global majority and those with disabilities.

If it is really only for people that have that well-paying husband to do the work, then we will never get out of the privilege in the sector either, will we?

– Maria, dance agency director, 15 Feb. 2021

The combination of precarious working conditions, a highly competitive job market, and poor wages that often need to be supplemented with support from families tessellates with other well-documented problems in contemporary dance: exploitation exacerbated by poverty, issues with injury and health, and an inability to plan for the future including having a family. Our participants echoed these problems in their testimonies, and how persistent inequalities and significant hardships have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The dance sector is also diminished when artists, exhausted from their insecure and challenging conditions, leave the profession. More generally, the sector is impoverished because it inadvertently restricts or denies entry to those without an outside support network. Such impoverishment is not unique or peculiar to the dance sector. That is, any cultural field like dance that perpetuates conditions of poverty inevitably mirrors the inequalities already present in society.

None of these experiences described by our contemporary dance participants are surprising. Indeed, all have been detailed elsewhere—as cited above—well before the pandemic struck in 2020. Dance studies scholar Annelies Van Assche's work (see Van Assche 2018, Van Assche 2019) on precarity in contemporary dance has been pivotal in the field; she suggests that socio-economic precarity also produces psychological precarity. Meanwhile, our research brings to light various concerns about the dance sector such as the overwhelming cause of harm described by participants related to the financial precarity of freelance dance artists.

The cultural theorist Angela McRobbie outlines this key paradox at the heart of the so-called creative economy. She asks,

Why has the figure of the artist, who, as a worker, quickly morphs into a kind of busy creative multi-tasker, and then perhaps even a well-paid executive, come to occupy a prominent place in debates about the potential of the creative industries, when the typical artist is historically associated with sporadic or minimal earnings, with a

poverty-line existence, and with unpredictable ‘human resources’ upon which he or she must draw? (70)

McRobbie suggests that freelance artists have become a type of laborer: a crash-test dummy for the future of work “without the benefits, protection and social security, which have been associated with employment” (McRobbie, 70). These are artists who must be responsible for themselves. They are prototypical individualists fired up by the promises and apparent fiscal liquidity of the creative industries.

CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, MARKET-ECONOMICS, AND THE VALUE OF VALUE

All the money ... comes from government. Then we give it to big institutions. Those big institutions give it out to smaller companies, and then the smaller companies give it out to the others.

– Valerie, freelance artist and academic, 24 Feb. 2021

If I hear that Arts Council England don’t feel they can influence anything at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ... if I hear from people really high up, that they just feel like they are being yelled at and being told what to do with very little, yes, then I just wonder, “What is the point?”

– Maria, dance agency director, 15 Feb. 2021

In 1997, Tony Blair’s recently elected Labour government established a Creative Industries Task Force as a key component of its new Department for Culture, Media and Sport⁶ (formerly the Department for National Heritage). The Task Force commissioned a document that birthed the language and ideology of the economic value of the arts, and more specifically *creativity*. It was called the 1998 Creative Industries Mapping Document and it is considered the first “comprehensive analysis of the economic contribution of creative activities to the overall economic health of the country” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 1998).

The document, and its follow-up in 2001, defined the creative industries as cultural activities based on “individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 2001). In the UK these industries are advertising and marketing, architecture, arts and culture, crafts, design, fashion, IT, software and computer services (including games), music, publishing, film, and TV.

The contemporary everyday use of the word *industries* in the arts is telling. In the eyes of government, the public, private and third sectors, the general public, and in the arts and their institutions themselves, the arts have become synonymous with the creative industries, and thereby default to being “manufacturing and production carried out on a commercial basis [...] and requiring the investment of capital” (OED 2021). The fiscal value to the UK of *creative* sectors—meaning their capacity to produce and sell intellectual property—has become the de facto justification for the UK Government’s subsidization of the arts. In 2013—deep into the austerity measures implemented due to the 2008 global financial crisis—the UK’s then Culture Secretary, Maria Miller, said that we must “hammer home the value of culture to our economy”, and that “when times are tough and money is tight, our focus must be on culture’s economic impact” (“Maria Miller”).

The rationalization of decisions, ideas, and progress based solely on market-led thinking is a core principle of neoliberalism: a widespread shift towards the uninhibited private market as the primary source of human advancement. Neoliberalism is dependent on a liberal (unregulated) Western market-based economy, the central tenet of which is that, given an existing distribution of income, competitive markets optimally satisfy customer preferences. However, one market-led situation that justifies government intervention or subsidization are inefficiencies or imperfections. Such inefficiencies are described as market failures and they disrupt the allocation of resources that an intervention is then designed to correct.

In arts and culture, market inefficiency or failure is thought to be created by positive externalities—or benefits to the public good—which, by definition, are not mediated through the market. To *correct* such a market failure, a government would pay a subsidy that is more or less equal to the (very difficult to measure) value of that externality. The nature of these positive externalities are wrestled with constantly; indeed as Heilbrun and Gray (2001) note that “no aspect of the economics of art has been debated at greater length, which in itself suggests that the answer is not unambiguous” (226). These public benefits inform old and new conversations about why the arts should be subsidized, but the three most common reasons are: i) the arts make us better people (social improvement); ii) the arts foster creativity, innovation, and experimentation; and iii) the arts nurture and preserve an idea of tradition to future generations.

Unsurprisingly, governments commission economists to attempt to discover the price of public good externalities in the arts, which means determining the amount of money the public is willing to pay for state-led subsidies. Depending on one’s politics, such data are either a way of deferring leadership and responsibility or listening carefully to the will of the people. Either way, the result is audit culture

logic (another principle of neoliberalism), and where one stands in relation to auditing depends on whether you believe in the capacity to assess or measure value and values.

In 2013, 47 percent of the English public thought that public spending on the arts was “about the right amount” (Statista 2014). In the 2018–19 financial year, Arts Council England granted £164.63 million (ACE 2019) and of these funds, 66 percent were what is known as *Grant-in-Aid funding* directly from the UK Government. According to One Dance UK, the remaining 34 percent came from National Lottery funding—a state-franchised gambling system that “has made a lot of poor people slightly poorer while equipping Arts Councils to enrich an arts sector that disproportionately serves the better-off” (One Dance UK 2021). Based on the population of England in 2019 as 56 million (ONS 2019), the total amount was divided in the following way. The £164.63 million arts and culture budget represented 0.7 percent of Government spending, compared with £178 billion on health, £116 billion on education, and £55 billion on defense. That year the total amount of arts funding in the UK was approximately £2.92 per capita, compared with, for example, £1,703 in education.

The statistic cited above is a critical idea and problem that our participants felt deeply because it, in effect, kept them precarious. There is little public demand on the government to increase state funding of the arts, and some of our participants expressed a self-aware concern that public funding and the concomitant fiscal precarity in contemporary dance reflects British culture’s ambivalence towards dance and the arts.

I just feel like in other places there’s just more resources for dancers to be and do what they do because people think that it has value. I don’t know in the UK if we really think that dance has a critical social and mental health value. I don’t know. I’m not convinced that we have that here:

– Michael, freelance artist, 3 March 2021

The abstract concept of “creative industries” was constructed to make sense of—and indeed simplify—the (arts) world through a particular fiscal lens, and in turn becomes concretized through institutional use and repetition. The values that are oriented towards economic benefit and the exploitation and accumulation of intellectual property through market-based rationalizations thereby infect how the lives and work of artists are felt, seen, and understood. Michael’s adoption of the word *value* above is telling—he recognizes the lack of value attributed to dance, but describes those values in terms of social and mental health, both neoliberal positive externalities (or instances of market failure) that rationalize why the arts ought to be valued and funded (“Interview” 3 March 2021). The editors of *Against Value in*

the Arts and Education, Sam Ladkin, Robert McKay and Emile Bojesen, describe this situation as “the neoliberal’s dream accounting of value [whereby] artists’ work is deemed to have value as an agent in the reproduction of civil society” (15). Instead, Ladkin et al.’s position is to critique the nature of value itself—including audit culture—in which they understand value to be more than a description, and closer to a “challenge or implicit threat” (15). They also describe how value is transferrable, or able to be exchanged, while instead the word *significance* avoids these traps: “Significance can be described, but it cannot be transferred without changing (for better or worse) its context of signification and therefore also its significance” (20). Ladkin, McKay and Bojesen also warn that the audit culture embedded in the concept of *value* creates a vicious cycle or form or recursion—in which the thing measured is reified by the machinery of its measurement, all while giving the illusion of neutrality: the “self-serving logic of instrumentality” (18). In other words, *how* value is measured by audit culture determines *what* is valuable.

Given the status accorded the policy-driven union between creativity and industry in a market-led economy, it is hardly surprising the UK’s small dance sector (relative to most other creative industries) deploys the term industry, as in One Dance UK’s “industry standards” (One Dance UK 2020). This is despite ongoing debate as to “whether the creative industries are an ‘industry’ at all” (Featherstone 2021). Nevertheless, contemporary dance remains curiously positioned in a market economy. After all, dancers and choreographers are unequivocally creatives but it is difficult to see them as being part of what urban studies theoretician Richard Florida calls the creative class (2012). The creative class is a group of people described by David Brooks—a self-described moderate—as having “converted cultural attainment into economic privilege and vice versa”, and by controlling the “epistemic regime” (Brooks), they get to determine what is true. In other words, contemporary dancers, like so many artists, get to be creatives, and this guarantees a certain quantity of cultural significance, but without the means for subsistence, let alone the accumulation of wealth. In *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Angela McRobbie describes how artists absorb entrepreneurial spirit and passion along with a type of “knowing self-exploitation” all while their imaginations and creativity are marketized (79).

Although contemporary dance is carried out more or less on a commercial basis—a choreographic product is made and sold to the public by artists—it is not commercially sustainable without subsidization. Contemporary dance finds itself in a market that *neutrally* reflects on “the value consumers place on the goods and services sellers have to offer” (Sandel 87); that is, what people are prepared to pay to experience it. Therefore, contemporary dance has no choice but to collude with—or embrace—the marketing and ideology of the neoliberal economic framing of

how the arts provide public benefits, while barely surviving as a statistical outlier in those industries.

The political philosopher Michael Sandel writes how “the common good is defined by GDP, and that the value of people’s contributions consists in the market value of the goods or services they sell” (25). GDP and its cousin GVA (gross value added), are commonly used to measure the economic contribution of individual sectors like the creative industries. They crudely tell us how much money was spent, but little about *how*:

Collecting data on production, consumption and investment is a great idea, but determining the success of a country by reference to GDP is like judging the success of your kid’s birthday party by measuring how much you spent on the catering.

-Damien, dance agency director, 5 March 2021

In all this focus on the (economic) common good of the arts, contemporary dance’s various economic dependencies don’t hide the fact that it also depends on exploiting its workers in order to barely survive:

The organisation—such a small organisation, such a small turnover, opens so much with such a small team—does rely on exploitation, whether that’s the unpaid hours of its salaried team, the unpaid hours of the artists that are doing things either intentionally unpaid or for just not quite enough money, ultimately.

– Damien, dance agency director, 5 March 2021

Perhaps contemporary dance in the UK is better described as a collection of not-for-profit institutions that adopt industry-inspired postures—the accumulation and exchange of social benefits and values—as a survival strategy. Such posturing occurs even though market-based neoliberal thinking tends to be orthogonal to the implicit cultural values of contemporary dance artists. To make commercial work is to sell out or to work counter to those cultural values; that is, to be commercial—an aesthetic more than an economic ingredient—is, by and large, to mark one’s self as an outsider in the small UK contemporary dance tribe.

The pandemic has brought into sharp relief that contemporary dance in the UK is not financially sustainable based on current funding, and perhaps it never has been. What then is its future? Our participants spoke passionately about their hope for—and the necessity to have—some kind of ongoing income that would alleviate the precarity of the freelancers in the sector.

TALKING OF THE FUTURE: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

Before it was really hard. But now my heart goes out to these young dance-artists. What are they going to do? At least I've had a career. I am thinking of ending it a bit sooner than I wanted but they've not had any. Their dreams, what are they going to do?

– Mateu, freelance artist, 1 March 2021

There is rage. There is real, real rage. People wouldn't feel that rage if they were able to live okay, but it's not my fault that they can't live.

– Maria, dance agency director, 15 Feb. 2021

There have been few, if any, surprises in this writing. We already knew that contemporary dance-artists live precarious lives, and the institutions that are designed to support them are themselves surviving hand to mouth by adopting the tropes of neoliberal thinking. The pandemic has predictably exacerbated the pre-existing living conditions for a dance-artist in the UK. While the pandemic also gave many dance artists some space to reflect, and often even adapt their practices to their current situation, the conversations in *Dance after Lockdown* made it clear that our participants are desperate for change in the dance sector. The sector, that was (dys)functioning before the pandemic, works on an unsustainable model. Given these circumstances, it is also not surprising that the dance people we talked with supported the call for a Universal Basic Income (UBI).

In the UK, 16 March 2021 marked a year since the COVID-19 pandemic placed a nationwide ban on all non-essential social contact, including the closure of all live performance venues. In commemoration of the anniversary, the performing arts' union Equity put out a call for the UK government to introduce a basic income guaranteed for creative workers. Equity argued that the pandemic exposed the inability of the UK's national welfare system and governmental support schemes to support the needs of creative, freelance and intermittent workers.

Support for UBI has grown in recent years with advocates suggesting that current programs of social security are rendered unfit for purpose due to ongoing socioeconomic transformations like recent labor market changes, improvements in digital technologies, and the resultant rise of the gig economy.

UBI is a must ... I'm really into UBI ... I think that would solve a lot of our problems and then we wouldn't have to have the rest of this conversation, because people would be empowered to say, "No" to crap work. [...] It would change everything. Other people would be artists than who can currently be artists.

– Valerie, freelance artist and academic, 24 Feb. 2021

UBI is a disarmingly simple idea, that is defined as a non-means-tested regular cash payment, paid periodically to everyone within a defined political community, on an individual basis, without behavioral (labor market/employment) conditions attached and without reference to prior contribution or behavior (payment into a system/work history). Van Der Veen and Van Parijs state that a generous unconditional payment would strengthen the position of the poorly paid in society, and help improve the conditions of work and pay by affording a better work-life balance and higher rates of engagement in intrinsically fulfilling activities. It would provide income security to all as a matter of right, absent of intrusive and onerous entitlement conditions.

The potential benefits of UBI on the precarious working conditions in contemporary dance are simple to describe. These benefits are more or less equivalent across other precarious work sectors, and particularly what has become known as the gig economy. Freelancers in gig-based sectors endure irregular, insecure, and poorly paid positions, and would likely benefit from a regular, unconditional basic income. Unlike means-tested schemes, UBI claimants are not disincentivized from working by risk of benefit withdrawal or income disruption.

UBI would provide a safety net for freelance dancers. It would enable the lowest paid workers in dance to be in a position to save for the future and mitigate against harm caused by unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A reasonable and dependable income would also radically shift negotiations between employers and workers. Dance artists would no longer have to accept exploitative or opportunities and be more inclined to negotiate improved conditions. There are nuances here though. A basic income needs to be high enough to “enable people to refuse ‘bad’ jobs” (Gray) else low pay would be more acceptable and there would be an increase in low wage positions that are easily filled by employers.

UBI would also provide freelance dance artists the means to treat their bodies with greater care, and potentially lengthen their careers. It would create opportunities for professional development where currently “there is zero progression” according to a freelance artist such as Mateu (“Interview” 1 March 2021).

Participants in our research also highlighted the difficulties of combining parenthood with freelance dance work, and recognized that the large majority of freelance dance artists are women. UBI would better allow individuals to balance work and family commitments, and would impact gender relations not because [UBI] favors women but because the existing system favors men. Sociologist Barbara Hobson (1990) has noted that existing provision which grants social security at the household level can trap people into dependent situations and may lead to financial abuse and power imbalances between partners. An individualized UBI payment

provides women with greater economic independence and would also help address gendered differences in contribution histories and pension entitlements. It would also lead to the recognition of the societal importance of uncompensated caring responsibilities predominantly performed by women.

Perhaps a UBI might enable different kinds of artworks to be created by different kinds of people, most importantly in dance. Contemporary dance artists would no longer require familial support and contemporary concert dance might free itself of its relentless middleclass-ness. We would see different bodies, experience different perspectives, and understand more diverse stories. The Dutch historian Rutger Bregman has described UBI as “venture capital for people,” (“Poverty isn’t lack of character”) and as such these newly visible artists would potentially have the safety and economic security required to innovate, experiment, and collaborate. They would be given the dignity that they need to do their work.

COPING WITH PARADOX: CONTEMPORARY DANCE AS ECO-SYSTEM

Surely we can’t put it all back how it was. That’s what scares me the most. It worries me in my heart.

– Valerie, freelance artist and academic, 24 Feb. 2021

It really feels down to the individual. It’s hard for me because I didn’t grow up in the UK. I have a vantage point on what the UK is, from a very particular perspective, but I get the feeling that there’s something also just societal about this. Countries where there is a desire for things to be individualistic rather than collectivised somehow.

– Michael, freelance artist, 3 March 2021

It is now more than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK there is still tremendous uncertainty about the future even as most people seem to be engaging in a performance of life-that-is-once-again-normal. When this article was first drafted, New Zealand—a country that pursued a zero-COVID-19 policy—had its first community transmission of the virus in more than eight months. In one way or another, we are learning just how interconnected we are as we learn to live with SARS-CoV-2.

At the heart of this article—and the small qualitative research project that underpins it—is a set of contradictions that exists in the thinking-body of the freelance contemporary dance artist. They are contradictions that the UK’s

contemporary dance sector has worn heavily both before and during the pandemic. How is the highly trained freelance contemporary dancer able to manage—or even live with—the troubling contradictions of economic precarity, perceived and real lack of cultural value, dependence on private support or state-sponsored funding to which we are all entitled, and the need and desire as a community for some form of UBI? At the same time, these artists recognize the vital importance of not having profit and self-profit as the only goal for life and its arts. They are artists described by their institutions as independent, yet who are acutely aware of just how dependent they are. This naming contradiction is surprisingly insidious. *Independence* acts as a moral proxy for neoliberal faith in individualism and self-sufficiency; that each of us earns or does not earn our just desserts, and yet the more “we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility. And without these sentiments, it is hard to care for the common good” (Sandel 16).

Although we have described contemporary dance in the UK as a fringe sector in the creative industries, the contradictions that contemporary dancers embody in relation to the institutions that support them, extend well beyond those creative industries and into society in general. These are artists trapped in the “broader belief that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving the public good” (Sandel 19). Yet, contemporary dance is also a microcosm that reflects far deeper societal problems to do with inequality, value. In *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* Michael Sandel (2020) unpicks Western democracies’ faith in meritocracy as a cornerstone of neoliberal and global consumer capitalism. He describes how the meritocratic ethic is corrosive of commonality in how it celebrates the morality of freedom and autonomy through markets that give people what they deserve. Meritocracy is not a solution to inequality but a way to justify it.

Through working with the experiences of the project participants and the surrounding scholarly materials, we have come to understand that it matters how the people that comprise the contemporary dance community in the UK describe themselves. In Jonathan Gross’s oral history of the 1998 DCMS Mapping Document, the arts administrator Dick Penny says that arts and cultural activity “now needs to be understood as an ‘eco-system’ (Gross 18). This word carries tremendous potential in helping the freelance dance community make sense of their paradoxical (neoliberal) experiences described above: an ecosystem is delicate, sensitive, fragile, connected, inter-dependent, adaptive, and affords stewardship, compassion, and solidarity; it nourishes and is nourished. Ecosystems are built on shared dependencies and implicit to their structure is how small local communities interrelate, all while infecting global thinking and practices, and then back again.

Perhaps the danger in attempting to understand and describe the experiences of people in the contemporary dance community is that we have fallen into the trap of auditing their words through the language of market economies. In many respects this trap is akin to the air we all breathe, yet it also distracts us from questions that any human ecosystem—large or small—must wrestle with, and that lie at the heart of the freelance contemporary dancer working in the midst of a pandemic: What makes for the dignity of work? What do we owe one another as citizens? Talk of inequality and ecosystems—perhaps born out of idealism or faith in a common good not derived from neoliberal ideology—seems worlds away from, on the one hand, the metaphor of dance as a creative industry, and on the other, the small-scale practices of the freelance contemporary dancer.

I hope there's a return to the civic. It's not about making different work but about involving ourselves civically, seeing ourselves part of society rather than, "We're this esteemed fancy thing and you'll all come when we tell you to."

– Valerie, freelance artist and academic, 24 Feb. 2021

Notes

1. The authors acknowledge and thank the participants' pivotal role in this research. We also express our thanks to the Dance Chronicle reviewers and editors. This work was supported by Coventry University's QR Strategic Priorities Funding, 2020-2021. Ethical Approval was given to the research through Coventry University's Ethical Approval process on 25 January 2021 (Reference number P117132). All project participants were paid a participation fee for their time.
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