

Kenneth Collins

1.

I am sitting in a bar in Charleston, South Carolina. It is near closing time. I'm a non-drinker; this is, ironically, one of many late nights I will spend at a bar during my three-night stay in South Carolina's oldest city. I'm meeting the choreographer Reggie Wilson for the first time and he's asking me why I have been invited to the Alliance of Artists Communities annual conference. He knows I'm there to respond in some way to The Hatchery Project's residency program for dance, of which he is one of four artists receiving support. But the question remains, why me? And what kind of response?

WILLSON

Are you a choreographer?

COLLINS

No.

WILSON

A dancer?

COLLINS

I don't know the first thing about dance.

WILLSON

Are you a writer? A critic?

COLLINS

No.

WILLSON

Well... then why are you here?

I arrived in Charleston only a few hours prior to this conversation and it wasn't the first time I was asked the same thing. In the coming days, this line of questioning would repeat itself again and again in similar forms. I am still searching for the answer.

2.

The mayor of Charleston has been the mayor of Charleston since the year I was born: 1975. He's warming up the room for Reggie Wilson's keynote speech the morning after our late night conversation about my purpose. The mayor speaks about the importance of art and artists to his city. The real work that is involved behind the scenes. What kind of resources go into the production of culture. And some other things I should probably be taking notes on. But I find I am thinking instead about our desire for consistency in this country... Our desperate need for things to seem stable and dependable... I'm thinking about the comfort

that must be felt by the citizens of Charleston to know Joseph P. Riley, Jr. is still at the helm. To know he's been steering the ship in the same direction, almost 40 years now.

I often hear discussions about how the directors of arts venues in the United States hold onto their positions for infinitely longer than their counterparts in Europe, who tend to regularly move from one institution to the next. I'm often curious about the reasons for this. One could argue there are simply fewer institutions to move between here in the U.S. But I'm more curious about what impact this has on aesthetics. What impact it has on the introduction of new visions and voices. What impact it has on risk taking—in a field that so often espouses the virtues of testing the unknown.

Mayor Riley wants his city to invest in excellence. A member of our group later joked the mayor actually used the term “*great* excellence,” as if to somehow set it apart from ordinary, mediocre excellence. Mayor Riley exudes a certain southern charm and demonstrates the ability to win over a room; however, the question of great excellence was an interesting way to start a day preoccupied with the value of failure.

3.

The rhetoric of failure is creeping up more and more in contemporary performance circles. The language seems everywhere lately, as it attempts to speak to money and power about the importance of funding risk. Various statements on the value of failure are regularly made by artists and curators, presenters and funders. The Hatchery partners evoke this somewhat Beckettian ideal numerous times throughout the conference, as we all debate over how to fail better in a broken system.

Where I think the rhetoric of failure gets it wrong is in inherently implying the possibility of *success* as the alternative, actual and ultimate goal. Statements emphasizing the importance of failure often secretly retain the frame of art as a capitalist enterprise, with artists seen as working in the R&D department of a corporation that will eventually produce a marketable commodity. If one is patient enough with our failures, the argument seems to suggest, there will be a payoff of some kind... some day.

I think we need to reexamine this terminology and its underlying implications.

4.

You, dear reader, may notice I have been writing about my time in Charleston for a page and a half now in the present tense—to be honest, I am trying, not only, to sort through the day, but to find a personal way of “responding” to The Hatchery Project. This is what I've been asked to do: *respond*.

But instead of continuing down this road, let's fast-forward. Let's do what many AAC members seemed tempted to do, based on the beautiful weather in Charleston, and just skip the conference altogether. This means we have left the Southern comfort of South Carolina and we are in New York City now. It is November. There is cold, icy rain hitting the

window of my apartment in Queens. I am typing this sentence next to a space heater, trying to keep warm.

I am thinking again about Reggie Wilson's questions from my first night in Charleston. And I am going to attempt to answer them with a bit more depth this time.

I am not a choreographer. I am not a critic. I guess I would say that I am an interdisciplinary artist, working primarily in performance-based forms. I am the founder and artistic director of Temporary Distortion, an NYC-based, artist-run, non-profit performance company that explores the potential tensions and overlaps found between practices in visual art, theater, cinema and music. I work across and between disciplines to create performances, installations, films, albums and works for the stage. (At least, this is what my website tells me.)

I was invited by The Hatchery Project partners to respond to the convening in Charleston without much of a mandate—and with (I suspect) mixed expectations over what sort of writing I would produce. The offer first came in the form of a phone call from The Hatchery's official documenter/evaluator, Claudia La Rocco. When I myself asked the “why me” question, I think she suggested I might bring a *productive skepticism* (or perhaps it was a *constructive pessimism*?) to the table. Something like that.

5.

Part of the Hatchery experiment involves bringing together four very different institutions, each with their own agenda, to ask what it would mean to work together with the same artists over a multi-year, extended development and residency period. With so many programs falsely claiming the mantle of innovation or experimentation in our field, The Hatchery seems to honestly fit the bill. But innovation and experimentation also bring uncertainty along for the ride. To paraphrase Hatchery artist Beth Gill, “How do you know what you are going to make, before you make it?”

My perceived lack of a clear mandate and suspicion of mixed expectations is a feeling I also heard echoed by each of the artists supported by the project; however, I should say that I don't think this feeling of uncertainty is necessarily a negative thing. It invites reflection and activates an increased sense of engagement. It also throws you off balance. Some of the artists in the Hatchery seemed to view working in such circumstances as purposeful or constructive. Some expressed that it only served as a distraction from getting down to the business of making their work—something difficult enough, even under the best of circumstances. As with the Hatchery partners themselves, opinions differed.

6.

To illustrate some of the differences in focus, needs and expectations between the Hatchery partners, I think we could easily identify two organizations that seem at opposite ends of a spectrum:

On one side we have Vermont Performance Lab. The banner at the top of the organization's website clearly emphasizes the agenda of "community engagement." The website describes a key part of the organization's mission as engaging "VPL's rural community around the creative process." This is clearly an important consideration when making work at VPL, regardless of the particular process of any given artist. The mandate is clear.

On the other end of the spectrum, we can categorize the philosophy of The Chocolate Factory's artistic director Brian Rogers as something along the lines of "just do what you want to do." It is important to mention Rogers is a practicing artist himself, because he brings that experience to all his interactions with the artists he supports. He honestly doesn't care what the artist chooses to do. And I mean that in the best sense possible. I do not want to suggest he's apathetic. There is just no additional agenda. He asks nothing more (or less) of his artists than simply: do what is right for you.

My point is not to suggest the mission of one of these organizations is any better than the next. I simply want to highlight a major difference in agenda—a difference in *needs*—when it comes to what is expected of an artist during a residency at one Hatchery partner's venue versus another's. The other two Hatchery partners seem to fall somewhere between Vermont Performance Lab and The Chocolate Factory on this spectrum of what they want/need to happen as part of an artist's development process. In short, in agreeing to take part in this program, the artists also submitted themselves (and their development processes) to the potential impact of a plethora of sometimes contradictory expectations. In hearing the artists speak at the AAC conference and afterwards, I'm not sure if they each fully appreciated in advance the impact this might have on their development process. And I'm not sure if the Hatchery partners themselves did either.

7.

Discussing his interactions with residency sites in the past, Reggie Wilson raised an interesting point at the AAC conference. When asked to do things like: give a work-in-progress performance, video document the development of his process, or engage with the local community in certain ways, his response to the residency site would often be:

Yes, I *could* do that. But let me ask, who do you imagine it would be for?

This question challenges organizations supporting the development of new works in-progress to take ownership of program expectations that do not actually fit with the needs of the artists they are seeking to support. It not only raised the question, what are the expectations being made of an artist in residence? It asked, *why* should these be the expectations in the first place?

8.

With no true sense of the exact expectations being made of me as I type, I find myself left with one thought instead:

How can I be useful?

It would be easy for me to say I fully endorse the range of services and support The Hatchery Project provides its artists. All agendas aside, it is not hard to see it is an impressive, inventive and admirable project. The Hatchery's presentations at the AAC conference demonstrated the excellent job the partners have done of collectively marshaling resources to provide space, time, funding and additional forms of assistance to these choreographers. But would such a summary be the most useful contribution I could make? Would it tap into the *productive skepticism* that potentially triggered my invitation to write this in the first place?

The truth is: no one needs me to say, good job. The Hatchery partners themselves could better demonstrate the various ways this project has met its goals. The artists can speak for themselves (and did at the conference) to describe the ways they were empowered, supported and guided by the people behind this project.

As an outside "responder" to The Hatchery Project, I believe it is my job to bring an outlier perspective to the table. To ask questions and to challenge assumptions. So, let's go there for at a little bit before we wrap things up. Let's get skeptical.

9.

One primary aim of The Hatchery Project is to "sustain dance-makers from the beginning of the creative process through to a work's premiere." As an outsider, I find myself asking: what choices could have been made to have an even bigger impact on the development process of the artists involved? For me to do this, it is necessary to step beyond the assumptions of the entire project as a whole.

One of the main forms of support the Hatchery provides (since it is a residency program) is space for artists to work without the pressure of a premiere. As an artist, I am really glad to see the Hatchery providing this kind of support. But the notion of *what kind* of space and for *how long* is one that needs further examination and deeper consideration in our field.

10.

Outside of the world of performance, almost all visual artists are conventionally thought of as having a studio-based practice. Long-term, year-round access to a private studio is the sine qua non of the professional visual artist. But this is not true for the professional performance-maker. Hourly rehearsals, shared spaces and short-term residencies are seen as adequate resources for making challenging and innovative new performance. This view needs to change. Performance-makers need to be seen as engaging in a studio-based practice, no different than any other artist whose work is made in three-dimensional space. The Hatchery artists I spoke to agreed with this need. So let's consider the possibilities:

The budget for The Hatchery Project is \$600,000.

Hatchery artist, Beth Gill's last studio (900-1,000 square feet) cost \$1,250/month. A studio of the same size currently costs my company just a tad less.

At this cost, each of the four Hatchery artists could have been supported with private, year-round studios for a full *ten years* before exhausting the total budget of this project. Now... it is very important to point out that providing private, year-round studios was not the mission of the Hatchery; however, it was the goal of the people behind this project to consider new ways to better provide space to support the development process of these artists. And if you are looking to effect radical change in the performing arts, you have to ask, if you give four artists private studios to make work in for ten years: How would it potentially impact their processes? Their bodies of work? The way they view their careers? Their sense of sustainability in a field where burnout is so prevalent? You have to ask: Would it not be a game changer? The artists I spoke to said the impact would be huge.

Obviously, my idea of how you could spend this \$600,000 is absolutely extreme. And I'm sure to some (but most likely not the artists) it will sound totally crazy! In the case of the Hatchery, it takes the program's entire budget and injects it into just one key area of concern and does not remotely address the various local missions of the partners involved in Florida, Pennsylvania or Vermont. Nor does it address the other expenses and administrative costs behind the project. In pointing out what *could* have been done with this money, I am not saying this is how the partners *should* have spent it. Instead, I make this point in order to challenge assumptions concerning how we prioritize the resources we have available in our field—especially, when from the perspective of our artists, these resources are viewed as *incredibly* limited and mostly out of their control.

Prompted by the ambition and activities of The Hatchery Project, I am asking: How can we convince funders to make the kinds of gestures that could have truly fundamental and lasting impacts on the artists working in this field? It isn't about risk. It isn't about *failure*. In fact, maybe Mayor Riley was right when he delivered his introductory remarks that morning in Charleston, and we should talk instead about providing the necessary and crucial elements of infrastructure our small business owners (artists) need in order to produce the cultural events our cities so value. It isn't about giving artists room to fail. It is about giving them the essential resources they need to succeed... be it with *great* excellence or otherwise.

The Hatchery Project has shown us some new ways to make resources available to artists. My response is: now let's up the ante.