

Staging Process Victoria Marks

On October 20, 2014 The Hatchery Project convened a daylong inquiry into the state of dance residencies as part of the Alliance of Artists Communities annual conference, in Charleston, South Carolina. The morning closed session was an introduction to the Hatchery itself, a residency partnership forged between four distinctly different artist-supporting spaces: The Chocolate Factory in Long Island City, New York; the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography at Florida State University in Tallahassee; RED Arts Project in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Vermont Performance Lab in the town of Guilford. The afternoon session, "The Art of Supporting Dance-Making: Building Visibility and Value," brought a larger group of choreographers and residency directors of all stripes together to examine the state of the field with regard to support for artist processes.

The morning session has partners from the four Hatchery sites and three of the four Hatchery choreographers, luciana achugar, Beth Gill and Reggie Wilson, sitting at a dais (the fourth choreographer, Annie-B Parson, was unable to attend). The rest of us are assembled at tables in rolling chairs, ready. The carefully choreographed presentation shifts speakers fluidly. For those of us jumping in for the first time, we are told that the Hatchery convening is in part a response to the Alliance's 2010 report on Artist Residencies and Dance, "Mind the Gap." Upon later review of the "Mind the Gap" report, it seems that the very inception of the Hatchery arose out of a response to the report's recommendations furthering support for dance makers. The three points of action in the 2010 report that appear to explicitly give purpose to the Hatchery are:

Build greater connectivity between the field of dance and the field of residencies for increased understanding, information-sharing and outreach; provide models to residency programs on partnerships for presenting and sharing facilities and resources; advocate to funders, policy-makers, about the need for greater support for dance-makers and their creative development.

Though I don't know all of the Hatchery directors personally, it is evident that Sara, Jennifer, Brian and Craig are progressive thinkers and change-makers interested in developing practices that support dance makers in innovative ways. I also have a small role in this process. I am amongst three other "undercover" participants who will write about the day's convening.

The Hatchery has made a commitment to four different choreographers at very different stages of their careers and with very different kinds of projects. The different sizes of the organizations involved, their locations, and the role they play in their communities offer these four artists different resources, and when pooled together address each artist's different needs. The multi-year commitment of the Hatchery to each of the artists signals an expanded understanding of the limitations

of resources and the need to provide for coherent and sequential creative development. The Hatchery partners shy away from the idea of their collective as a new residency model. Yet, how does a new form as mobile and adaptive as this not become just that? In any case, innovators are not responsible for creating a model; they do what they do, and others will identify it as a model or not.

At one point during the day, Dana Whitco, the director of the Tisch Initiative for Creative Research at New York University, suggests losing the concept of a “model” for artist residencies, and instead looking at “behaviors.” She asks, “What roles do we play together?” Adding, “some are resource aggregators and some are resource stewards.” The Hatchery is indeed reaching out across the dance field, identifying shared interests and differentiated resources and putting these together to better serve artists, who then shepherd and manage the resources to suit their needs. Dana’s shift of language away from “models” to “behaviors” is something I’d like to learn more about. At the surface, this is exciting because the emphasis on “resources” rather than “product” challenges the notion that process is preparation. Instead process might be understood as a series of arrivals. And performances might be considered part of process. A “product,” such as a piece of choreography, emphasizes the thingness of the dance. However a dance is still a resource and still an action of process.

Intrinsically, the Hatchery is designed to build productive relationships between presenting organizations and choreographers. It is clear that the partners seek to construct an environment where each choreographer can self-advocate to meet the unique needs of their processes. Indeed, at the convening, each of the artists clearly expresses different subjectivities and different needs. Yet, it is also clear today that it is the partners who are pro-active, and the artists who are responsive.

Responsive? Reggie Wilson reminds us that he is always wearing 20 hats simultaneously, booking tours, organizing expenses, applying for grants, arranging rehearsal spaces, etc. The work of a choreographer is to be pro-active and to address need across multiple platforms. As Reggie would say: Artists are entrepreneurs who do all sorts of invisible work.

OK. The artists are not responsive. They are pro-active too. But this is not their show. It is nothing short of magic, that Reggie, Beth, luciana (and Annie-B) have time to create, given all the other things they are doing.

The Hatchery Project is porous and flexible. Sara, Brian, Craig and Jennifer are sensitive to language and prepared to shape-shift as needed in order to best serve the unknowns of each artist’s creative practice. Clearly, the Hatchery is interested in artist-centered creative production, opening possibility for not only what happens inside the box, but the shape of the “box” itself. The convening echoes the Hatchery’s artist-centered sensibility, with Craig telling us at the start that there are no planned conclusions for today’s gathering. No neatly wrapped up endings and no answers. Like the choreographers with whom they work, the Hatchery is about

process, and we, seated in rolling chairs, are prepared to mobilize and see what comes up.

In the afternoon an impressive group of artists, program directors and presenters, many who, like Reggie and the other artists, wear multiple hats, join the Hatchery group. They are invited to share their diverse experiences to build shared knowledge for the field. There is great wisdom in the room. Here are some examples.

- “A residency is a temporary community; a third space. Deep listening is required.”
- “You over-prepare in the beginning; then you step back and a light and flexible touch is necessary.”
- “I ask an artist, ‘How can we create the kind of community you want to be a part of?’”
- “My job is to have the conversations that help an artist figure out what they want to do next.”
- “Working with an artist is like being on a moving train. I need to help people realize that dance has stuff to bring to all critical conversations.”
- “Project management tends to be linear. Residency work is not linear. I am providing a place where the ‘craziness’ can happen. It’s a step outside of ordinary... a place that allows artist to explore.”
- “There is no ideal residency... We each do things differently and well.”
- “Universities have much to offer artists. Students are captive for four years. They need to understand creative practice. I am a diagnostician of need on my campus.”
- “It takes great generosity from the artist to do the work. And it is challenging to extricate oneself from an artist who is not going to make the situation work. We have to trust our instincts and be open to the conversations we need to have.”
- “There needs to be a clear sense of ethics surrounding the involvement of my local community within an artist’s work. What do these folks get from participating?”
- “There is no funding model for artist residencies where they don’t have to justify their work through some sort of public showing.” (A complaint.)
- “Universities need to understand that artists are involved in ‘knowledge production.’”
- “Let’s replace the establishment language with language from inside artistic practice. Let’s speak alongside the process of the artists.”

It could also be said that in a not nearly Post-Cartesian world, choreographers bear the brunt of centuries of anxiety about the body, and its long (supposed) anatomical distance from the mind. On more than one occasion, fragments of paternalistic thinking ghost the room. While it is cool to say to a friend, you need to get out of your own way, it is more complicated when those words come from a presenter, or a director of a residency space. The folks at the Hatchery are here to say artists

need to be supported to GET IN THEIR OWN WAY. The convening does much to set a new register for dance-maker/institution partnerships.

The Hatchery presents the field with a new set of behaviors and a new interwoven choreography across distance and time that makes more-of-less for a chosen few. In fact the behavior of the Hatchery itself in combination with its artists is not unlike a choreographic project in which multiple objectives and mutual aspirations are met through collaborative processes.

But surely there are frictions.

Choreographer: I'm worried about language. The pressure to articulate ideas (for grants, and to producers) is damaging to the work. Work solidifies around words.

Choreographer: I am a fake. An imposter. Everybody thinks I know something, but I don't. I need to hide my real process from others.

Choreographer: I need to speak in two languages, one in which I make my questions clear, my strategies concrete. My conversations with presenters and my grant applications need to make my work sound compelling. My other language stems from an acceptance that we begin with nothing, and embrace not-knowing.

Choreographer: Only gradually, does something appear. When we present it, those who have been close to the process speak about what has occurred as "magic." It is not magic. There is not a language for what I do.

These four snapshots gleaned from conversation at the Hatchery meeting point to ways in which dance-makers struggle to communicate their practices alongside organizations who seek to support these very practices, but who must also gather resources that have recognizable value in the marketplace.

This is not an "us and them" – "artists vs. producers" scenario.

Yet, will there also, always, be a fundamental challenge regarding institution/artist collaborations, because creative production must live within real world values? I'm not talking about money itself, but rather about the value systems associated with market-based thinking. Concepts like "success, failure, product and process, value, models, and best-practice, are clues to exchanges of value. Artists must be bilingual developing their own languages, as they also navigate real-world resources. For artists, something does come from nothing and that process of "growing things" often lives in a domain or multiple domains beyond words. What is called "not-knowing" is actually another way of "knowing" and it is hard to describe.

Reggie, speaking to the seemingly cross-purpose of "market value" and "creativity" says: Words! Resource exchange! An artist has "value" and brings that to an

institution... We can make our own practices transparent. Failure. We need a place where failure can happen. Failure gets us closer to success.

Much was said throughout the day about “language” and “value.” Dana Whitco summarized our small group discussion by asking: How can we ascribe value to creative process? What role does language play in that effort?

Choreographers/Artists take responsibility by finding their own agency in colliding and overlapping systems. These same artists must line up their experience against other existing languages without compromise.

Sara concludes thoughts on ways The Hatchery Project builds on more conventional residency models: Longer commitments to artists; larger circles of connection for the artist; deeper understanding of the artist’s work and needs. There is a commitment on the part of the Hatchery to a vision, and to the fragility and affective needs of art making as well as to practical concerns associated with that vision.

What is the point of a convening like this? Has “choreographic magic” happened? No...but lots of heavy lifting has gone down. There have been many well-positioned performances of passion and commitment.

Has a new set of ideas been seeded in the community? I think so.

Could a meeting like this lead to policy change? If so, could funding bodies focus on process rather than product, provide resources in non-programmatic ways? Would it be possible to arrange for multi-year funding?

Somewhere near the end, Craig Peterson reminds: “Artists are in a very vulnerable state.”

Indeed. But I wonder how the convening would have worked if the Hatchery artists had planned it themselves. Or if each group had led half the day. One thing is clear: the problem is also the possibility.

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