

Thoughts On The Electrifying Chaos of Collaboration
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I begin these thoughts with a confession.

I arrived at the Alliance of Artists Communities conference with a certain dispiritedness regarding artists and the larger cultural narratives that whirl around art making and the necessity for support. My mood was, I think, due in part to conversations I'd been having with other writers about the death of cultural criticism as an art form, and the ways in which artists and the systems that support them have been complicit in the treatment of writers as publicists rather than as kindred creative thinkers. In the weeks preceding the AAC conference, I'd had a "last straw" moment: a friend spent seven years writing a monograph on a long-forgotten artist, producing a thrillingly experimental piece of scholarship that translated her visual ideas into a text that was equal parts tone poem, manifesto and ticking time bomb, seeding as the book did a sharp rejection of history as a tidy, knowable narrative. I'd learned that the artist herself wasn't happy with the book, dismissing my friend's achievements outright. I was heartbroken. It seems the artist hadn't read his work for what it was: a text that performed radical thinking about her art inside prose that performed as an extension of her aesthetic.

I was further gloomed by a group email I'd received the week before the conference from playwright/director Richard Maxwell. He was looking for a producer, "again" he'd noted in the job description, which read more like a warning:

This job is tough and particular. The tough part is working for low pay, some long hours, for a mercurial artist with occasional bursts of inspiration. The fun part is...there really isn't a fun part. The job requires negotiating, fundraising, writing and touring. For starters...It's a lot of work and there's no reward that I can offer. EXCEPT: maybe some perverse sense of purpose in feeling like by partnering with my work, you venture into the unknown and inch toward helping find and share something singular that sheds light on a peculiar and perhaps heretofore unseen aspect of our fragile human condition.

My work, he wrote, though clearly the work also necessitated the labor of someone else. ("Think: art work vs. art labor," I wrote in my notebook.) Minutes later, I sent the email to a sharp young producer to see what her thoughts were. Almost immediately, she replied:

I find this posting, along with [Faye Driscoll's new posting](#) to be so DARK. The money, the way they're talking about the job—and how it's really a whole department squeezed into one person that they want—it's totally brutal. But that's a whole other conversation I guess.

Maxwell and Driscoll's postings are disheartening not only because they articulate the terrible challenges to keep afloat with extremely modest means, but because each seems callous—perhaps complacent—about what they are asking of someone in the positions of producer and managing director. Their words echo a strange and terrible kind of entitlement—or *something*. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was a palpable lack of balance somewhere in their business structure. I became confused about how to think through the idea of arts support when it didn't seem that artists themselves were thinking rigorously or as imaginatively about how to support their supporters.

I began to wonder if, in the attempt to preserve the live arts during a time when there is still too little arts funding (and when the arts is still a favorite political target of politicians who've run out of enemies both real and imagined), we had for too long suspended certain conversations, certain inquiries, as to how to think about and name the realities of art production. Had the notion of a single "auteur" formed a protective wall around the maker—independent, outside—or had it undone a potentially more powerful vision of art production? Is there a different origin story to be told for a performance, one that might better structure and fuel and name the dynamics that entwine us—all of us together—fellow *art workers*?

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This overly-long preamble is really just to explain that within the many rich questions, subjects and stories that were presented as part of The Hatchery Project's "The Art of Supporting Dance-Making," my head was already cocked toward a desire to understand the nuances of the ever-evolving collaboration between the choreographers and the supporting/presenting bodies. In her second-year report, the project's documenter/evaluator Claudia La Rocco wrote, "The work of being an artist—an artist who needs other people, other systems, and so is inherently collaborative—what is the best system in which this work should take place?" I was curious to know if there had been shifts (subtle or otherwise) in both practice and position, between the definitions of "artist's needs" and "administrative demands," which a long-term, interconnected partnership seemed like it should organically bring about.

I spent the better part of the first presentations grasping the scope of the Hatchery, its intentions and its challenges. What initially struck me was the fact that all the collaborators seemed to have developed/adopted a common language with which to talk about their experiences thus far; they also seemed at this point in the process to agree on the priorities of the residency. *Flexibility* and *creativity*, which Vermont Performance Lab founder and director Sara Coffey addressed directly that day, seemed to be the unanimously agreed upon virtues, which had enabled artists to receive support and, in turn, give support to the communities in which they were working. luciana achugar expressed the desire for the residency to work against the pressures of the market, and to release artists from working within the typical hierarchies of an institution. (Reggie Wilson and Beth Gill did too, in their turn). As achugar funnily described: "They're like a hippopotamus and I'm like a little bird." She explained that she wanted a residency to

grant her not only greater time and resources, but also greater agency (conceptually, financially, etc.). One of the great strengths of the Hatchery seemed to be the collaboration regarding the definition of the residency—that artists and presenters worked together to clarify at the outset the needs and expectations as they pursued their goals together. (This of course didn't eradicate all uncertainties and obstacles, but clarity of communication seemed to lay a strong foundation for the partnerships.)

Another of the Hatchery's great strengths seemed to be the group's ability to network—both between the participants and with outside resources—particularly at critical junctures in the development of a project. Sara mentioned that isolation in the field is common, and can be crippling; it seemed that there was great power to be found by bringing a group artists and organizations together (I was particularly interested to hear how she was able to shore up last-minute support for Beth at Mass MoCA). Later that day, Beth acknowledged that one of the great lessons in all of this was the mentorship that the Hatchery provided for her, a younger artist who felt she'd been working in “crisis mode” for too long. To me, Beth's comment pointed to an area of deeper interest and potential potency: how to support artists in a way that enables them to understand how to support themselves. Whether knowing when to ask for help, or learning how to work with an institution to maximize its resources, or where additional support may be available—I wanted to know more about how the Hatchery imagined itself as an educating force for artists, and how that in turn would impact the evolving relationships between makers and presenters.

It was more of a challenge to appreciate the impact of the Hatchery's support of more established artists like Reggie Wilson and Annie-B Parson, artists who are already self-possessed and who seem to have their agendas and mechanics firmly in place; I was uncertain how the exchange between artist and presenter had shifted for them. (Annie-B's absence, due to a work-related conflict, was a shame; it would have been interesting to hear how the Hatchery had served her work in a way that differed from other residencies.) The role of the institution in these cases seemed to be one purely of service rather than partnership, providing for the artists rather than working with them. This of course is fair enough, as established artists have vastly different needs from emerging artists, but it seemed the least compelling use of the Hatchery's resources—or, rather, the point of least resistance to “business as usual.”

As a fellow art writer, I couldn't help but be impressed and intrigued that the Hatchery had included Claudia in the process of creating, observing, thinking about, documenting and connecting the ideas and experiences of those involved in the project. For obvious reasons, this is a point on which I believe the Hatchery has been terrifically forward thinking about the potential for the collaborations between writers, artists and institutions. As Claudia said during her panel, “documentation is an art form,” and it's one that should be embraced by all of us as we reimagine our relationship to performance, production, and its records. Whereas writers are most often brought into the process solely as reviewers, there are other points of engagement during a piece's development that could help spark new ways of recording and thinking about the particular beauty—the un-documentable aliveness—of dance.

I thought a great deal about this as I listened to some of the participants address the frictions between language and dance. There were the problematic terms, such as “the field,” the mention of which inevitably made participants throw up their quote fingers. The artists bristled when the word “excellence” was used to describe standards of production. Michèle Steinwald of the Cowles Center for Dance + the Performing Arts commented that presenters tend to “talk around dance,” and Beth added that it is potentially damaging to a work to talk about it, as it threatens to shape the experience of it in a particular way. Luciana mentioned that one of the frustrations of being a choreographer is being asked to name and describe a piece before it’s been created. I can’t help but understand that some of this struggle is because writing and writers are not typically a part of the conversation; writing is seen as a tool rather than a craft. There is more to think about regarding dance prose: how a text might translate and engage with a choreographer’s ideas, rhythms, and relationship to the body; how it can carve out a space between writer/audience and artist; how it might find a language and grammar to articulate something of dance without purporting to replace or explain its experience.

Thoughts and reflections sometimes come to mind in the form of questions rather than statements. Here are some of mine that remain after attending the AAC conference. My questions are both questions of form (of system) and of language (of narrative). Some of them have probably already been addressed by the participants in some way or other; others may be irrelevant to the ongoing experiment. Consider these the fallout of a piqued curiosity:

- What did each partner feel she or he “received” in the transactions between artist and residency? Artist and audience? In other words, how does an organization feel best “supported” by the artists-in-residence?
- How did the support of these four artists over the three years reshape a typical working relationship? Did the duration of this residency make communication and production easier? Did it ever exhaust itself? What were the limits of the working relationship? What were the unexplored possibilities?
- How might other art workers—writers, curators, scholars, students, publicists—be engaged more creatively and productively? At what points should they intersect or be kept away from the process?
- Are there opportunities to re-imagine the intersections between artist and writer that could help dance writing evolve? At what point is the public relations critical model working against an understanding of dance, of the creative process, and of the necessity for an audience’s presence?
- What are the typical narratives around art workers? (The Producer, The Artist, etc.). How are these narratives productive and where are they destructive? At what point are we aware that the “roles” we play are, in part, imposed upon us? Where might we reimagine the articulation of these roles?

--How is the idea of the “auteur”—the single—productive, imperative to art making? In what ways is this concept no longer viable? The same question can be asked of the idea of the “producer,” the “critic,” etc.

-- How has the language of the market infected our ideas of ourselves as art workers? For example, how to define and distinguish identity from brand? Do we rely too heavily on “brand thinking” with regard to artists?

A last thought as The Hatchery Project enters its third year: what was made terrifically clear to me as I listened to the presentations at the conference was that whether or not the Hatchery seeks to become a model for the field, there is every potential for it to do so in generous, insightful and expansive ways. The simple act of reflection—of conducting a live (life!) experiment to see what revising a model of work looks like and how it can and can't be done—possesses a profound resonance for the shape of the artist/presenter relationships, and the questions the project poses ruffles other modes of art work as well. There will never be a perfect way of working, or any one way to imagine and shape a collaboration, but the opportunity to embrace its particular chaos, the electrifying confusion of creation, is sometimes foundation enough.