

Conversations on the frontlines of the body

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Abstract

The Australian performing arts collective Remnant Dance has a partnership with a charity organisation that supports an orphaned community in Myanmar (Burma). The creation of a contemporary dance film with this community generated a performance in which young Burmese participants were encouraged to tell their own stories. The film was set in an abandoned glass factory in Myanmar, using glass as a metaphor for a surface that invites reflection as well as open transparency with the young people from the children's centre. The story of making the dance film *Meeting Places* offers a case study for reflection on ideas of interconnection through dance making; and a site for engagement with social justice concerns within diverse communities. The creation of new dance through cross-cultural, multi-arts forms and interdisciplinary contexts enables narratives to emerge through the frontline of dance's unique communication.

Keywords: contemporary dance, social justice, connectivity

Introduction

Remnant Dance is a dance theatre collective based in Perth, Western Australia, established with a vision to create innovative dance work and make space for dancers to connect with diverse audiences, and each other. A guiding principle of the collective is to create works within a collaboratively devised frame that is open to dancers and makers who might not otherwise be active in these roles. Multi-disciplinary artists who are invited to collaborate within the collective have enriched the creative process, generating artistic work through disciplines that include the visual arts, film, fashion, literature and music. As the resident dance maker, I am interested in technically trained dancers and multi-disciplinary artists who bring diversity of experience to the creative process. In particular, I am interested in what older dancers, emerging artists, dancers adjusting to injury or changes in body shape and type can bring to enrich the collective approach to choreography and artistic practice. Dance is often understood as a conversation between artists and/ or with audiences even if that moment of communication is ephemeral. My 'front', which refers to the primary site of communication of and on my body, moves to connect with a series of others; ensuring dance emerges as a dialogue of interconnectedness. I experiment with communication through my ever-changing frontal plane (physically and metaphorically) in relation to both my fellow artists and that of the audience's frontal and dorsal planes of action and being.

Remnant Dance has an existing partnership with the Australian charity organisation Myanmar Kids: Aussies helping the children of Myanmar (MyKids), which supports an impoverished community of orphaned and abandoned youth living at the Andrew Youth Development Centre (AYDC) in Yangon, Myanmar. In early 2014, I facilitated

the making of a short contemporary dance film with this community as part of a developing body of creative work. Physical frontlines were used as motivations to encourage the young Burmese participants to tell their own stories. The film's setting was predominantly situated in the abandoned Nagar Glass Factory in Myanmar, using glass as a metaphor for a front that invites reflection as well as an open transparency (through transparent glass plane) with others.

The dance film *Meeting Places* evolved as a creative response to interconnection through collaborative dance making in a community grappling with poverty and need. The performance outcome from this cross-cultural encounter encouraged communication through a front-facing encounter with other dancers and audiences alike, as well as through back-facing encounters between dancers in compositional processes and performances. These sites were both developed, and shattered, in making the works in Myanmar.

The project began by inviting Remnant Dance artists to explore connectivity through dance making in a collective environment. This provided space to engage in communication along frontlines of the body, both as individuals, and also collectively. The ensuing pursuit of dance as dialogue has led to a larger and deeper examination of cross-cultural connections in multi-art forms, inviting an epistemological excavation of artistic practice as a space for empowerment and agency.



Remnant Dancers Charity Ng, Esther Scott and Katie Chown performing in Yangon, Myanmar
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Social justice arts

It is within the notion of the dance creating space for direct interaction with social justice concerns that the Remnant Dance practice encountered a need for deeper critical enquiry into new knowledge surrounding connectivity, social activism and artistic practice, within the field of dance. The performance response to our cross-

cultural encounters in unexpected meeting places has been such that it has invited a deeper analysis of who is speaking about, or engaging in, social justice concerns and how this can contribute to ongoing discourse about dance making as an agent for peace in the future.

There is a burgeoning body of work on social justice arts. There is also increasing interest in 'artist' approaches within creative processes and practices. In June 2014 for example, UNESCO celebrated International Arts Education Week with a focus on releasing 'arts for peace' research articles. Artistic practice committed to instigating social change may not be a new idea, but in the 'past two decades, there has been a marked increase in education programs aimed to create art for social justice' (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 364). These have complemented a growing trend towards global dialogues for social transformation through the arts and there is a developing body of literature and practice reflecting on, and moving towards, a critical analysis of social justice arts practices.

In some instances, the gatherings of arts advocates for social change have moved from educational contexts and are now flourishing within social or charitable enterprises. An example is the global International Development of the Arts for Reconciliation (INDRA) Congress which grew out of the program, Art: A Resource for Reconciliation Over the World (ARROW) in the United Kingdom in 2011 (Knight, 2014, p. 74). Complementing this development, there has been a notable increase in individuals volunteering to work abroad in what is known as 'voluntourism'. Kerry Stewart reports in a news article entitled 'Is "voluntourism" the new colonialism?' that voluntourism is 'one of the fastest growing areas of the tourism industry. However new evidence suggests that it may be doing more harm than good in developing countries' (2014, p.1). An enthusiasm for instigating social and cultural change for the well-being of others has resulted in practices that are sometimes elusive when it comes to clarity of definition, purpose or outcome.

The scope of artwork that seeks to address injustice or social inequity is broad and thus defined in many ways, including, according to Marit Dewhurst (2011, p.366):

activist art (Felshin, 1995), community-based arts (deNobriga & Schwarzman, 1999), public art (Lacy, 1995), art for social change (O'Brien & Little, 1990), theater of the oppressed (Boal, 1979), art for democracy (Blandy & Congdon, 1987), and community cultural development (Adams & Goldbard, 2001). What all artistic production seems to share is a commitment to engage in creating art that draws attention to, mobilizes action toward, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice.

In contemporary social justice arts endeavours, there is an inherent challenge in balancing expectations of aesthetic rigour with social activism in a complex field fraught with potential ethical dilemmas for both artist and activist.

The experience of working cross-culturally in which the arts become a vehicle for social engagement is also not unique. The Remnant Dance project in Myanmar led to wordless connections through the action of dancing together: Burmese and Australian individuals communicating in a space of (assumed) equity and

acceptance. Accompanying this experience was ideological wrestling with such work as a potential site for activating social justice arts that seeks 'to transform the status quo—the fractured landscape of institutional discrimination, systemic violence, paralyzing poverty, and silenced opposition—into a world where men and women are able to be fully human' (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 366).

There have been other projects that, like my own, have attempted to delicately navigate this area of arts practice and social justice activism. For example, Rebekah L. Chilcote's (2007) paper reports on the effectiveness of a four week art therapy program for 113 school children affected by the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. Her observations of the need to be culturally sensitive, employing an effective translator and working within a local institute, resonate with my recent research experiences.

Fiona M. Collins and Susan Ogier (2013) analyse another action research project in the U.K. that sought to utilize contemporary artists to help children understand changing identities in the European Union, noting that 'a dialogic approach is particularly useful in the creation of artwork because it facilitates explorative dialogues between children and adults with the specific purpose of developing relationships and communities, as well as giving children opportunities of talking together in respectful collaboration' (p. 620).

There are also examples of research by dance artists engaged in cross-cultural dance projects, such as Nicholas Rowe's reflection on his work in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He questions his work, asking:

In my enthusiasm to support dance activities amongst politically marginalized populations, am I unwittingly diminishing local cultural ideals? Is this leading to a process of deculturation (Ortiz 1995), the insidious replacement of one culture by another? If so, what impact is this having on the community's own sense of cultural autonomy and cohesion? These critical questions have stimulated my investigations into whether it is possible (as a cross-cultural interventionist) to teach *how* to dance without teaching *what* to dance" (Rowe, 2008, p. 3).

What seems apparent is that 'meaning-making through performative expression allows for personal transformation through acute awareness of, and reflection on, one's own beliefs, knowledge and values through the process of creating artistic work' (Barton & Ryan, 2014, p. 412). Further and sensitive investigation into how dance making facilitates engagement with social concerns is a necessary and critical path to analyse social justice arts in this burgeoning field of literature.

Background

The aim of the Remnant Dance project was to create a new dance in an established collective and explore what this can mean in cross-cultural (Myanmar and Australia), multi-arts form (visual arts, film and dance) and interdisciplinary (social justice) contexts. Throughout the project, the focus gradually shifted from considering the dance film as a final artistic product, to acknowledging that it is representative of a process which offers a portfolio of exchange in co-creation and cross-cultural negotiation.

The project was initially driven by our practice in the studio. It grew out of my own practice-led research methodology which has allowed for rigorous academic and artistic critique that simultaneously shaped these creative processes. As a reflective practitioner I am aware that '[n]ew knowledge is made meaningful by the ways in which learners establish connections between knowledge learned, previous experiences and the context in which learners find themselves' (Daley, 2001, p. 41). As Donald A. Schon observed, professional practitioners 'reflect on ongoing experience and learn from it' (in Boud, 2001, p. 11). On reflection, I have discovered the Remnant artists have in common a desire to connect.

As a result I have found myself developing work that explores connectivity, often through guided or contact improvisation. The more collaborative the creative process, the greater the trust between the dancers and as a result, the more interdependence there is in the movement. This collaborative approach has led to what I view as an interconnection or an *interdance-dependency*; a dependence on each other. In these moments of connectivity, the need arises to pay attention to the emerging narrative along the front lines of interconnection in the danced work. For it is the conversations along lines of the bodies in motion which provide opportunities for connection with the larger world in which we live, and we have discovered just as it is foolish '[t]o study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches beyond it, it is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined' (Bakhtin cited in Rodriguez, 2000, p.20). Remnant Dance artists have responded eagerly to this kind of connectivity, which in turn has nurtured the language of the body within and between dancers.

The sharing of language when the conversation occurs in dance allow possibilities for extending knowledge about the practice of dance making as well as responding to what new ideas have found expression along this conversational front. This potentially blurs the distinction between boundaries of one dancer and another and permits the other to:

contain the subject in his (sic) gaze, enclose him in space (against his background), frame him in time (against and beyond the moment of his birth and his death), [and] can ultimately-and here, again, we have to reckon with the axiological dimension-collect his moments of meaning and endow them with significance (Bakhtin cited in Erdinast-Vulcan, 1994, p. 256).

The wonder of such dialogical engagement is that the tension of divergent ideas creates space for a conversation between 'speakers' within which are multiple possibilities for interconnection.

This has enabled space for the integration of dance theory and practice, despite inherent challenges. Cheryl Stock has argued that there is an 'ongoing challenge of dissolving the binary oppositions of theory and practice, especially in creative arts practice where theory resides in and emerges from the doing as much as in articulating reflection about the doing' (2009, p. 2). The 'dilemma' concerns 'translating insightful knowledge arising from the embodied process in tandem with the embodied product or 'finished' examinable work', citing Caroline Rye (2003)

whose perspective is that by definition the practice of the dance cannot be recorded as it is 'embedded in the action itself' (Stock, 2009, p. 6).

It appears that there remains the ongoing question of navigating the

incompatible competencies (Candlin, 2000b) of the 'spectating' academic experts with their 'irrepressible drive ... to inscribe, interpret, and hence to practise temporal closure', and practitioner experts who create emergent works of 'residual unfinishedness' (Melrose, 2006) which are not only embodied but ephemeral, as in the case of live performance (Stock, 2009, p. 2).

This need not be disheartening as both the artistic work and the stories about making the artistic work offer fresh opportunities to excavate research findings and share insights in diverse ways.

Furthermore, my experience in the Remnant Dance collective context resonates with the observation that 'demonstration of disciplinary knowledge and skills does not necessarily need to be discursively formed using the symbols of language' (Barton & Ryan, 2014, p. 409). A combination of documenting creative dance practice in choreography, both directed and improvised alongside discursive texts, holds possibilities for communicating learned knowledge in multiple forms to connect with others.

Given that dance making practice is 'an art form in which originality and new knowledge also arise from collaborative creative processes' (Stock, 2009, p. 1), creating within a collective has allowed for multiple outcomes, constantly responsive to the observations and experience of the practice. The Remnant Dance project quite significantly has highlighted possibilities regarding collective practices and partnerships for creative collaborations. As Shirley McKechnie has observed of the creative process within a collective context:

What became evident as we examined the processes taking place was something we now recognise as a complex dynamic system, one in which many levels of thought, action and interaction grow or evolve in time. These interactions sometimes resembled those of informal social exchanges as dancers and choreographer discussed the associations and implications of a particular idea (2002, p. 4).

We have discovered there is scope to examine the roles of collectives, dance companies (and other arts organisations), in relation to charity organisations and that of the work of humanitarian aid organisations. Furthermore, the ongoing question of social engagement invites debate about how community arts workers co-exist with artistic producers. Inquiry-driven exploration engages the artists involved by drawing on the embodied knowledge of the dancers which can then be shared in a performance context with a broader audience.

The Myanmar project has also exposed the struggle between the tradition of exhibiting a completed and polished art work or object, versus the dialogic process of an incomplete conversation. The dance film *Meeting Places* is a genuine representation of both a collaborative process, and of the conversations we as artists

had with Burmese children during creative development. It is my contention that the film is a conversational piece that holds most resonance when screened alongside other dance works and amongst visual art pieces which together communicate the stories of others. New frontlines for kinaesthetic dialogue have invited conversations about dance, as well as conversations that *are* danced, beyond the boundaries of the collective practice.



Remnant dancer Katie Chown performing with *Meeting Places* film projection.
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Case study: *Meeting Places*

Remnant Dance's partnership with the charity organisation MyKids Inc. facilitated direct engagement with cross-cultural concerns through dance making practices. MyKids is registered with Global Development Group in Australia and supports the in-country partner charity Myanmar Vision International (MVI) which raises support for over 100 orphaned and abandoned children and young people at the Andrew Youth Development Centre (AYDC) in Yangon.

In early 2013, Remnant Dance accepted the invitation from MyKids and MVI to creatively engage with the community of young people living at the AYDC. In November 2013 I travelled to Yangon, Myanmar to meet with this Burmese community in preparation for creating a contemporary dance film that might offer an opportunity for the sharing of the children's stories.

From February-March 2014 I returned with dancers, film-makers and a visual artist and together, we facilitated creative workshops with 110 children aged 5–18 to explore what stories they might like to share through artistic expression. In order to safe-guard the children at the AYDC, collective members sought to facilitate movement as a shared language between all participants, rather than directing subjects in a film. The key component of the project became the creative workshops in dance, music, art, photography and costume design which invited the children's perspectives and determined the content for filming. The process involved play-based facilitation in specific genres which encouraged participants to express themselves in a creative language. The activities were designed within an educational framework and supported by occupational therapy practice, so the experience was ethical, educational and edifying. The creative workshops, and later the dance film, generated a unique space for conversations between Australian and Burmese participants in movement languages responsive to the children's engagement with foreigners in their own home.

These creative conversations were in part captured during filming at AYDC and on location in the abandoned Nagar Glass Factory. The site with its criss-crossing pathways and mounds of abandoned glass vessels and in some sections fragmented glass pieces, offered engaging space for the telling of stories, using the glass as a metaphor for the creative fronts along which we were to have our conversations.



Remnant Dancers and AYDC children, on location for the film shoot at the Nagar Glass Factory, Myanmar © Remnant Dance 2015, reprinted with permission. Photo: Amanda Humphries

The film's title in Burmese refers to the concept of both a physical and heart-to-heart meeting place. This theme was explored when filming on location at AYDC, where there was making and communicating in the children's home. At the Nagar Glass Factory, the imagery of glass as a transparent front was utilised and concepts of identity explored in the body as well as textually, as for example, in writing names on broken fragments of glass in both Burmese and English. The soundscape was made by the children, and also included the integration of glass sounds recorded on location at the disused factory. Throughout the film there are threads of conversations, interwoven through movement phrases. The creative work was responsive to both context and to individuals, specifically through the language of dance. Furthermore, this occurred through community arts engagement and artistic performances; both facilitating communication through shared story-telling.

In April, the Remnant Dance artists and collaborators returned to Yangon to premiere the contemporary dance film *Meeting Places* as part of the international performance and visual arts exhibition tour titled *Hpan Myay Hman Myay* [*Land of Glass, Land of Mirrors*].



Flyer for international tour with artwork by Amanda Humphries ©
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The children's response to the film, as contextualised in a developing body of live danced work as well as visual art pieces, was unexpected: a space for empowering young lives had opened up and was held through artistic practice. This was the beginning of a deeper awareness of how dance making that invites conversation through collaborative practices gently allows for an engagement with social issues along frontlines of the body, both individually and in community. The dance film and subsequent premiere at a prestigious public venue and in a renowned art gallery and later shared with a wealthy international school, became an avenue

for empowerment for children and young people whose stories had not been seen or heard in this way before. The dance making had created a safe place and a language in common for conversation.

Collaboration had been at the heart of the process of social engagement in Myanmar, reworking boundary lines along which conversations have been spoken in and between moving bodies. Creative differences on location during the film shoot identified how collaborative processes are impacted by individuals' approaches to interdisciplinary devising. Artistic conflict offered insight into the differing methodologies of artists and makers.

Connectivity with a social justice body facilitated an experience which enhanced dance making practices, through a collective interested in shifting the front with which artists engage with others, and within the sphere of social responsibility and responsiveness. The connection with the MyKids charity has also fostered a deeper interconnection for Remnant Dance artists as they seek to meaningfully engage with the world around them. This has held most resonance for each participant involved in the project in Myanmar from the outset to close of the project. My family's own interest led to my children initiating a fundraising drive in Perth to collect soccer boots and socks to take to Myanmar in the Easter school holidays—as a gift for children who don't own shoes.

The tension between artistic practice and social engagement in a cross-cultural creative context is one that I wrestled with during the Remnant Dance project in Myanmar. My intention was to generate a creative space and invite conversations with a Burmese community through the language of dance making, and to then reflect that experience in the creation of an artistic product: a dance on film. In actuality, dialogic movement entered into social engagement and I realised that 'identities are produced through complex processes through which we identify with another in which, as it were, people put themselves into someone else's story, and, in the process and through processes of reworking, make it their own story' (Collins & Ogier, 2013, p. 630). I was changed by the experience of stepping into the stories of the young Burmese people and how we affected their perceptions of a broader world and the people within it.

Conclusion

Collaborative dance making in the collective context has led to an engagement with social concerns arising from an artistic project with diverse participants and audiences. In making meeting places in and on the body we discovered that 'when working on an artistic production, a creative community is established whereby pupils develop a shared meaning through dialogue which in turn becomes an inherent part of the understanding of their own creative output' (Collins & Ogier, 2013, p. 617). What has become clear through this project is that interconnection through collaborative dance making has opened a portal to social justice arts praxis; a site that continues to beckon further and promote deeper engagement through conversations on the frontlines of the body.

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This article has not been published, submitted, or accepted for publication elsewhere.

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Biography

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and community contexts. Coleman's most recent creative works have been performed throughout Australia and in Vietnam, China and Myanmar.