

Dancing in a world that matters: artistic citizenship in practice

Dr Fiona Bannon is senior lecturer at the University of Leeds and Chair of DanceHE. This article shares passages from her recent publication *Considering Ethics in Dance, Theatre and Performance* arguing for the inherent value of dance as a route to learning through bodily motion, suggesting it is here that we learn from the centre of our existence in the world



My title underscores ambitions for our practice moving forward with respect to the values inherent in making dance together as communities of artistic citizens. Given the opportunity to revisit inspirations that were shared during Our Dance Democracy, I turned to considerations of my training/learning in inclusive dance practices with Peter Brinson in the first years of the Community Dance Programme at The Laban Centre in the 1980s. In those early days imagining dance practice for community practitioners and the public, we spoke of forging agency in the world; of exploring modes of practice that could help us make sense of the contexts of our lives, and of learning the ways that social assembly could help foster rich and integrated societies.

Then, as now, public funding and resources were failing communities. The branded notion of arts and culture has, at times been oriented towards the production and provision of an elite, in the site of performance and the attending audiences. This drive towards production and display rather than

fostering sustainability and agency has proven to be a dominant feature of our times. Arguably, and hopefully, we are experiencing change within a burgeoning debate that calls for responsible practices that transform and support communities to make art as a response to their own lives, experiences and ideas.

Those of us working in ephemeral, time-based and body-based processes continue to struggle to fit the model of tradable commodities. Our preference to champion embodied value as an impetus for our experience does not always provide immediate evidence for an annual report. In dancing we can explore what goes on when we learn with each other; bringing attention to our bodily selves as the vital site of our relations. I continue to argue for the inherent value of dance as a route to learning through bodily motion, for it is here that we learn of ourselves as and from the centre of our existence in a world that matters.

Through our engagement with dance we echo thoughts shared by Elizabeth Grosz when arguing that, “Art is the most direct intensification of the resonance, and dissonance between bodies and the cosmos, between one milieu or rhythm or another” (1).

We know we live in curious times embroiled in complex crosscurrents of debate that can feel distracting and at times, counter productive. In such circumstances we might gain benefit from fostering conversations that could help to identify the support needed now for the artists, educators and activists of future generations.

- How might we design modes of training and practice to support our futures where, more than ever, we will be dependent on the quality of our interactions?
- How do we secure a place for arts practice to ask dangerous questions of our ways of being in association and ensure they are heard?

In exploring what can be experienced and learned through engagement in cooperative, collaborative art making, Phillipa Rothfield offers us a valuable place to start simply, reminding us that, “...the ethical is already implicated within the domain of dance simply because we dance. It is found in the tactile flow of information, from one body to another (2).”

The support I find is an acknowledgement of the inherent value of learning through bodily motion. Through our time spent dancing we can recognise that for each of us, it is our body that is the centre of our existence in the world. Implicit in this is the value to be gained with respect to our ethic-aesthetic enhancement, where learning experiences attend to the manner of our dialogic relations. >



In dance, we work within and through a broad range of behavioural activities that can have immediate inter-corporeal implications for the ways in which we relate to one another, and to our identity or to the roles we take or to the art we make. We talk of ourselves as responsible practitioners and of the relevance of the work we do. Our work offers opportunities for transforming lives in the communities with which we work, to which we contribute and support. However, without tangible objects to possess, this experiential practice can be difficult to trade in a society where the notion of monetary value significantly reduces notions of value to more tangible products and price than can be easily or immediately identified by the enhancement of life experiences.

I am confident that we all continue to argue for a view of experience in dance that intertwines the social and the civic as features of our relations. These experiences provide opportunity to realise positive changes in ourselves and with those with whom we work. It is here, in such encounters that I recognise the means by which to forge enhanced ethical awareness.

I spoke in Liverpool of a recent writing project taking the title – Considering Ethics in Dance, Theatre and Performance – where I explored the tentative steps we take in learning how to relate with one another and with our own life experiences. The threads intertwined throughout the book have helped me make sense of my journey as a restless community arts practitioner. Whilst aware of my debt to Peter I also want to thank Francois Mataraso. From *Regular Marvels* published by the Community Dance & Mind Foundation – now *People Dancing*, in 1994 to, *A Restless Art* in 2019, he has proven to be a trustworthy guide with respect to the practice of making sense in the communication of significant values and for a sense of accountability interwoven within practice.

I continue to explore the complex intertwining of the ways that we can learn through moving and thereby enrich our experience from the challenge of being-in-relation. It is here that I recognise ethical-artistic practice with respect...

- to social communication
- to responsible and responsive engagement
- to the development of proficiencies or skills or 'well-made-ness' with respect to judgment, purpose, communication
- to the use of creative endeavour in making places of interaction
- to our ways of recognising and of making sense.

These experiences come into existence beyond the boundary of the formal art world, and teach us how the world works and how our lives contribute

to the places we occupy and groups we live amongst.

How can we learn to recognise our co-implication with the places and cultures that we are part of through our multiple ways of relating? Examples can be found in work made by self-conscious practitioners, often working on the fringes of the arts sector, engaged with social, economic or political critique. This is practice that echoes appreciation of art-making as a fundamental facility of our human ways of communicating. Here, artistic responses/experiments and sense-making are made by and for people, regardless of the particular media or practice through which they are realised. They disseminate particular 'messages' and/or meanings and are grounded in the locality and encounters where they are formed. It is through our engagement with such experiences, shaped in communities of art making that we can shape understandings of our lives. This is echoed in the words of Iris Murdoch who succinctly says, "art is for life's sake... or else it is worthless (3)."

The World Health Organisation (1946) identified health as "...a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". The European Charter on Environment and Health (1989), further suggests that "...good health and wellbeing require a clean and harmonious environment in which physical, psychological, social and aesthetic factors are all given their due importance."

Underneath, what are arguably utopian definitions, lies an acknowledgment of the reciprocal impact of our external environment with our internal experience of 'personhood'. Our lives are interconnecting so without sufficient attention to the complex interactional nature of our experiences and means of communication, we will only progress towards a dulling and narrowing of life experience and expectation. To contribute positive change to this lively context,

- What might socially engaged practice offer to a civilising society?
- What might be a role for the arts as an intrinsic feature of a society rather than as an economy?

With the shift to the political 'right' all governments have emphasised the virtues of competition, the market and financial success – over other life and community values. According to the British Social Attitude Survey – there has been a fall in public support for policies that redistribute wealth and opportunity. This is a shift that we see reinforced daily in media hype and twitter feeds that espouse separatism, and a dismantling of social infrastructure. They praise the

achievements of individuals without noting that these achievements are seldom the result of solo endeavour.

There are, of course, various interplays that exist between the creation and experience of performance as part of our culture. The focus promoted here is to think about performance making that strives towards socially engaged art. In valuing our work, we need to be ready to champion the experience of moving and making dance works that are overtly corporeal, perceptual and social. In these ways, we might recognise dance as a border discipline with the body at the centre.

Within and through dance, we are able to traverse different nomadic identities with respect; to the work we each have explored in coming to know ourselves, to the work we do in cooperation and to the work done in partnership with ideas and contexts and others. Experiences of dance can offer a host of informal learning cultures that are shaped as a responsive pedagogy of embodiment/of culture/of communication/of holistic development.

Experiencing dance can offer powerful routes towards positive societal and personal change. In dance education (of all sorts) we create spaces that are conducive to social cohesion in culturally and politically diverse communities. Therefore, let us state the claim; dancing is a form of identity making and of world making. It can shape our own ways of being. Understanding moving and being moved matters in a world that is increasingly struggling to recognise social value in community.

In *Dancing in a World that Matters*, our ethics reveal themselves as the only way to effect and to see positive change. Here, I am intertwining aesthetics, ethics, creativity, collaboration, art-making and education as constituent features in the generation of knowledge, and of our learning by being in-relation. This is a lively, complex place of learning where we need to learn what it means to negotiate. The situation is made all the more intricate when we realise the many entanglements through which we relate on a daily basis and the lively online interfaces that we have to learn to navigate. Attending to ethics as an integrating feature of practice can help us consider inter-relational sensitivities and responsibilities through the ties we share in terms of work, neighbourhood, family relations or dancing communities.

Looking towards practice

In the multitude of events involved in the creation of a dance work, the embodied significance of the transmission of relations resides in the micro-practices between those involved, affect. It is

here that we each can learn to give attention to the small details and nuances that shape our shared identity. Here, embedded within our shared processes we can recognise that,

Ethics is, about all manner of behaviours towards being-in-community with others, and our selves. It clearly concerns co-creation, collaboration, self-expression, self-determination and collectivity, all integrating through a shared reliance and simply stated, ethics tells us to, ‘...do as you would be done by’.

Ethics is present in the metaphors that a performance might evoke as much as it is the embodied vision realised in the form of a work.

Ethics is ultimately the presence of reflective self-consciousness that enables us to share a collective imagination and responsibility for ourselves and for others.

For political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett, the adoption of what might be thought to be codes of behaviour may well be an indispensable part of ethical practice, even when exercised only through enforced obligation. She goes on to propose that we adopt the values to be found in facilitating ‘...ethical generosity’ as a way of being sensitively responsive, somehow in touch with what it means to be aware of our encounters with ideas and with the world (4). As a mode of learning and a manner of practice this could prove to be advantageous with respect to ways that we relate as social beings. The wealth within our practice requires this ethical stance.

Relations through ethics in practice

Through experiences gained working in creative, social contexts, where we generate ideas, there are opportunities to comprehend the values inherent in our interconnectedness. In aligning ethics and aesthetics in the collaborative processes of art/dance making, we can orient our lived experiences towards a fuller appreciation for the animating impact of moving. The quest is to put artistic, social practice to work with respect to our ethical and aesthetic attention and to the felt sense of our being in association with the others with whom we work.

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References

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2. Rothfield 2015
3. Murdoch, 1997, 218
4. Bennett, J. 2001. *The enchantment of modern life*. Princeton, NJ [u.a.]: Princeton Univ. Press