

Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography

Report to the Field of Dance and Performance

**MANCC Hosts Artist / Writer Convening
Sunday, June 5th and Monday, June 6th, 2016**

**Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography
School of Dance, College of Fine Arts, Florida State University**

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Note: MANCC regards the ideas that emerged out of this initial convening as early but important information as we work towards better addressing artists' evolving needs, in this context in relation to writing. With a few exceptions given here as quotes, this narrative report will cover the ideas discussed without attribution. The list of participants and their bios are also included as a separate link. MANCC thanks each of the participants for their invaluable contributions during this Convening.

Why a Dance Writing Convening?

This Convening grew out of several MANCC artists' requests over the past several years to find ways to bring writers into their developmental process. Significantly, two of these artists have been part of multi-year residencies at MANCC that have been supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, one a Returning Choreographic Fellow* and one a Hatchery Project Artist**. Their desires surfaced as a result of being in ongoing dialogue with MANCC staff (and in the case of the Hatchery Project, with all four project partners), and the generosity of time and relationship building that such multi-year residencies can foster. Two pilot residencies embedding writers with these two artists took place in 2015. MANCC solicited evaluations from these artists and embedded writers post-residency, which generated the idea of gathering a small but potent circle of writers and artists to help generate additional ideas around this initiative that could be implemented.

Writing Beyond Critique

On June 5-6, 2016, MANCC gathered nine scholars, artists, and writers to discuss writing for contemporary dance. The Convening was held in response to MANCC artists describing the frustrating lack of informed coverage of their work in media, publications, and scholarship, and a strong desire to re-imagine the conventions of dance writing. Contemporary work is often radically different than forms of the past and artists are asking for equally transformed ways to approach the work. Experimental choreographers are forging new paths as they engage deeply with the concerns of our time and push the boundaries of the form forward. These artists are not presenting answers, but suggesting novel ways of seeing and conceptualizing our shared human experience. The artists expressed a distinct desire, as noted by participant Danielle Goldman, "... to shift from 'choreocentricity' in dance writing, with the focus on performance or finished work, to more coverage of research and development and post-performance explorations." Thus, the desire to engage with writers in a more meaningful and nuanced way can offer an avenue to more properly meet and engage with the ever-evolving forms of dance.

Artists want writers to move away from using an old binary lens in critiquing work, the good versus bad, towards new ways that more fully engage the life of a work before and beyond 'final' product.

As the traditional means of publicized response, reviews have been losing relevance since the arrival of the internet and the ongoing and major changes to the marketplace; the marketplace once required the "package," which included hard copy press kits with reviews around a work to secure and support touring. As the economy continues to change, the field is unlikely to see an active touring system re-emerge, making typically short form, binary reviews less useful and informative not only to artists but to the field itself. Yet, arguably, with post-performance critique continuing to be the most widely read form of dance writing, artists feel pressure to participate in this conventional model that still influences both audiences and funders in order to remain relevant within the marketplace. This acquiescence is a function of having to make a living in spite of the fact that short, binary reviews do not provide the best (or even adequate) coverage and explication of contemporary work.

In their evolving response to the changing economic landscape, artists are pushing to dismantle the critical hierarchy and questioning the tie between writing and marketplace distribution. This includes reconsidering cultural producers and responders who may not be sanctioned by institutions who could be engaged to grow the field. Tara Willis, as part of an emerging generation of artist/writers, added, "Because of the rising credibility of blogs and social media, there is space for more writers and writers who are peers. There is, therefore, space for younger or earlier career artists and more access to and appreciation for writing that isn't in "The Times". Willis also shared that she was given advice, "to get your pull quote," from the legitimized paper, and it seemed an impossible thing to get. But now there seems to be a shift and a range of ways it can happen. Improved dance writing from more sources may be the way to continue to engage in a current system required to attract funding, while also better informing the public on the ways in which to enter into a dialogue with the work.

As they explore the freedom they have to base inquiry around ideas, language is part of that investigation, and engaging writers over time supposes a desire for ongoing discourse, rather than reviews. Moreover, with dancemakers inviting the discourse, the power dynamics that trouble existing critic/artist relationships may open up and allow a more nuanced negotiation. This is critical when colonization, racism, sexism, and other exclusionary practices have significantly informed the dance field in regard to who has traditionally received coverage, and it continues to be a factor in the present. As Cynthia Oliver reminded, "There is a part of me that feels we are acquiescing to the existing power structure. How about a refusal of that and that we go more deeply in the body... In the interest of valuing one thing over the other, what gets memorialized, what has a certain kind of life is that which is written down, versus what gets transferred body to body over time." In other words, "Africanist practice made even more aggressive. Especially in a digitized world where everything is living on the cloud, which isn't an access." Hence, the power of words has created great distrust in artists who rely on the body to tell stories.

Moreover, many experimental choreographers resist the emphasis on a finished product in their work and, as the form has evolved, feel that dance writing as a form has not kept up. luciana achugar adds, "I don't want to subscribe to the writing that is evaluative – it's a model of production. A kind of factory. It's a capitalist model; it's an interruption of the making of the work...slowly I look for methods, for ways that I am resisting that." Artists described the "held" nature of critical writing, often composed after only one viewing of the presented work, that suggests a writer is not interested in the investigation (or is not able to be

interested because of publication constraints), essentially missing the essence of contemporary work. Danielle Goldman, who was echoed by several participants, says she is interested in an embeddedness and experimentation in the writing that is not overly determined by the cult of finished work. She wants to be working against linear development and is more interested in the aftermath, when the critical questions arise through dialogue and can become more complex. Other artists shared that they feel their work requires responsive writing that can be informed by abstraction, the experience of live performance, and analysis that is not tied to being complete. Instead, they desire that the work be allowed to resonate and shift. Ideally, they want writing that creates space for response by the choreographer to generate a dialogue.

Artists and Writers working together

The participants - writers, two scholars, and those writing for a popular audience - echoed the participant artists in their frustration at not being able to do more informed dance writing due to time, declining print space, and/or lack of readership. They acknowledged the subsequent research and writing limitations due to these deficits, including the lack of both markets for publishing and audiences for a more relevant type of writing. Artists and scholars also described a disconnect between the academic world and dance world, both feeling there is a lack of access to scholarship and a limited audience due to substantial dance illiteracy. Writer Jennifer Krasinsky added, "New forms are what is needed on both sides, to exist with and alongside. Then it becomes a very different dialogue - creative friction, challenging one another. That, to me, is the most interesting, to give space for the two or more people to figure each other out."

Because the writers, scholars, and artists seek new styles of writing and push for the conventions around dance writing to be re-imagined, they spent significant time in this Convening discussing how to consider an artist-writer working relationship, where one was not in service to the other. Rather, both sides are interested in developing a critical alliance facilitating mutually generative practices, one in which writing and dance share the space as creative actions and embodied practices. Okwui Okpokwasili asked, "What if there is potential for the choreographic artist and writer to write with each other, what is text for performance, what are we thinking about... So what if we are both in the rehearsal practice and then you both write. And then you both respond to the writing. Is there a way that we can practice with each other on this writing practice? And the convo can be had, what are we doing, what does this process mean." Jen Atkins added, "The physical language and the writing languages are working together to create change in the process rather than only focusing on product/production... it goes like this, the writing is generating new ideas of moving, and vice versa. And in the exchange, it creates a current of understanding, intonation, etc. even if the writer after this goes and writes a review, it will be totally different. Just as the dance itself will also be different." Writing alongside someone's work, responding, improvising, offering a mirror to the process, all can provide a useful framework in considering these relationships. The group liked the idea of considering dance writing as investigative journalism, replacing value judgments with questions about process, experience, and language. Additional discussions involved inviting multiple writers into the process with the option to respond at different times, encouraging longer-term relationships between artists and writers, and challenging a single perspective.

Connecting to Audiences

As participants considered how to shift the conversation from binary critiques of good or bad to investigations of the work, it was suggested that the writer might stand-in as an amplified audience and could be the first step to facilitating a viewer connection to work. Oliver

suggested that the writer provides the “sort of amplification that you want with the audience, where they bring a whole ocean of information to the work, larger than what you could create yourself.” Furthermore, artists described a need for support in cultivating empathy, curiosity, and acceptance of new paradigms in the viewer. Reflecting this type of inquiry, scholar Dr. Alisha Gaines asked, “How is pain being read? How do we open up to empathy and what are the limits to it? What do we do when empathy fails us, when language fails?” As a writer, Gaines’ sentiments prove compelling in the effort to sensitize and condition the audience for exploration instead of judgment. The need for more literacy in dance and the desire to help audiences find and connect to contemporary work was a primary thread in the conversation over the course of the Convening. Artists desire more awareness of the necessity for a wide range of artistic practices, which are fundamental to the creation of a healthy, vibrant, responsive culture. Participants agreed that the work of developing audiences for dance and dance writing needs to be done through both practices. The combined practices of viewing, teaching, and writing are and will continue to be mechanisms for improving dance literacy and strengthening the field overall.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This Convening represents an early effort on the part of MANCC to accommodate several MANCC artists’ requests to find ways to bring writers into their developmental process, to observe and to articulate the artist’s inquiry. With the continuing desire to stay responsive to artists, next steps for MANCC include continuing to experiment with hosting writers-in-residence with interested dancemakers. Taking into account the questions and directions that have come out of this energized one and a half day gathering, MANCC will stay in close dialogue with each of our resident artists on the subject of dance writing. As was true with the two pilot embedded writer residencies in 2015, there will be an evaluative dialogue with the artists and embedded writers after each residency about emergent questions, directions, and ways in which MANCC can stay nimble and responsive. A few early questions to consider have emerged from the Convening including: Could writers and artists be presented in tandem and/or could independent Entrypoints (significant experiences crafted with scholars, experts, and/or audiences by the Research Associate to further ideas and concepts being explored while in residence) support writers’ inquiries? MANCC will work to address these questions, while also identifying artists’ and writers’ resources and avenues to support these ongoing connections.

Additionally, MANCC will continue to support the dialogue around dance writing, as the Convening’s exchanges contribute more consciousness around the relationship between artists and writers. MANCC will initiate these conversations with the participants and national colleagues and work to develop conference collaborations and alliances around this area of inquiry. One early idea to explore is to host a second Artist & Writer Convening as part of a larger Forum, perhaps expanding across disciplines to create opportunities for further connections. MANCC hosted a 2009 Forum, entitled *Choreographic Research and Development / Advancing the National Dialogue*, which was funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. This conference was the first of its kind to focus on the support of choreographic research and development in dance in the United States. The event brought together key stakeholders from across the country to advance the national dialogue on how to make research and development in dance a more vital cornerstone of what we achieve as a field in the arena of creative residencies. A second Forum would facilitate an opportunity to take the measure of where the field has come since MANCC began in 2004, while furthering the inquiry around dance writing.

Along with gathering information from artists on ways to both embed writers in artists' residencies and further the dance writing dialogue, the Convening also informed MANCC's research on how to manage and utilize the Center's substantial residency archives (begun in 2004). MANCC is exploring the idea of collaborating with writers to create contextual packages connected to past residency artists and their creative processes as a method of organizing the archives and preparing them for historical, scholarly, educational, and artistic endeavors. While not a direct intention of the Convening, the discussion provided valuable insight on how MANCC might begin to approach this undertaking.

*Returning Choreographic Fellow project: In 2010 with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, MANCC began making multi-year commitments to help anchor and support new research concepts by returning mid-career MANCC artists.

**The Hatchery Project: With support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, The Hatchery Project launched a three-year pilot project in June 2012 as an experiment in collaboration in supporting choreographers and their development of new work throughout the many stages of the creative process. The four artists included Luciana Achugar, Beth Gill, Annie-B Parson of Big Dance Theater, and Reggie Wilson. The writer Claudia La Rocco was brought on to document and evaluate this endeavor, observing as artists spent creative time in the rural, retreat-like environment of Vermont Performance Lab, the university setting of MANCC, and the rich urban cultures of RED Arts Project (Philadelphia) and the Chocolate Factory (New York City).

The seeds of this multi-site creative residency project grew out of the 2009 FORUM at MANCC, entitled *Choreographic Research and Development / Advancing the National Dialogue*, which was soon followed by the release of a 2011 report from the Alliance of Artists Communities, called *Mind the Gap*, also funded by The Mellon Foundation. These turning points highlighted the need for more research and development support for dance in the United States – drawing particular attention to the fact that organizers, presenters, and audiences were often unaware of the complexities of how live performance projects are constructed, and ultimately realized. The partners came together as four very different practitioners of residency work with a mutual desire to support dance makers, support each other in the effort to deepen R&D potential, and share our experiences more broadly in the hopes that other arts organizers might also learn and begin to work in new, challenging, artist-centered ways. <http://www.artistcommunities.org/sites/default/files/shared/Mind-the-Gap.pdf>

- Report authored by Carla Peterson and Rachel Howell, drawn directly from the conversation that took place amongst the participants during the Artist / Writer, and approved for publication by each of them.