

Fourth Year Arts Award: Outcome Report
Exploring Socially-Engaged Dancemaking
Elyssa Fonicello

With the generous support of an Arts Award, I had the opportunity to explore a number of different dance communities and dancemaking practices over the past year. Through these experiences, I have expanded my understanding of dancemaking practices and honed my technical capabilities.

July 2016 - Dance Exchange Summer Institute, Takoma Park, MD

This past summer, I attended Dance Exchange's Summer Institute in Takoma Park, Maryland. Dance Exchange (DX) is a multi-generational dance company with a mission to "ignite inquiry, inspire change, and connect people of all ages more deeply to the questions at the heart of our lives through dancemaking and creative practices". 2016 marked Dance Exchange's 40th Anniversary, making it a special time to engage with the company. Liz Lerman, Dance Exchange founder and pioneer in socially-engaged practices, was present at the Institute and led sessions on the Critical Response Process, which she developed. Four questions central to Dance Exchange practices were explored: Who gets to dance? Where does the dance happen? What is the dance about? Why does it matter? The institute was organized around these questions to trace how the principles, values, and tools have evolved over the past 40 years.

Every morning of the institute began with a movement class led by Associate Artistic Director Matthew Cumbie in conjunction with other DX artists. These classes were open to anyone from the Takoma Park and D.C. communities. Each class was an engaging opportunity to move with people of all ages and foster a community in that space. Beginning the day with movement was important for bringing awareness to myself and those around me before delving into additional explorations.

“Origins” sessions explored DX history and the processes behind the creation of Dance Exchange core practices. Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process was also a main focus. Artists who have been involved with DX throughout its 40 years, such as Elizabeth Johnson, discussed their individual trajectories and critical contributions to the company. These sessions helped develop a comprehensive picture of Dance Exchange’s many projects and engagements over the years.

“Evolving Practices” sessions focused on dancemaking for a number of topics - such as health care, human rights, and science education. Artists travelled to Dance Exchange from around the country to share their processes with us. From Texas, Allison Orr and Krissie Marty of Forklift Danceworks discussed their process of creating dances with all kinds of people - including sanitation workers, baseball players, and electricians. We also ideated methods of approaching a new project or community. Amie Dowling and Reggie Daniels (*Well Contested Sites*) travelled from San Francisco to discuss art and activism in the age of incarceration. The work that Dowling and Daniels are doing is incredibly important as it transforms an oppressive space into one of creativity. A final “Evolving Practices” session of note involved a group tour of the U.S. Botanical Gardens for a Moving Field Guide that helped foster a more embodied understanding of our natural environment.

“Generator” sessions involved creating movement as a group using tools from the Dance Exchange “Toolbox”. These tools have been extensively workshopped and honed by Liz Lerman and other DX artists over the past 40 years. I appreciated how well-articulated each tool was. In these sessions, facilitators gave us multiple prompts to guide our movement generation. We wrote, walked, talked, and ranted to explore these dancemaking practices central to Dance Exchange’s work.

The Institute culminated with a 40th Anniversary Gala celebrating Dance Exchange. It was exciting to interact with so many people connected to the organization. I felt like most of the D.C. area dance community was in attendance, and it was wonderful to be a part of the vibrant

energy surrounding Dance Exchange. The experience overall was incredibly transformative. I am still reflecting on all that I learned and the questions that surfaced. I have tried to continue asking these questions of myself and the communities of which I identify as a member. One Dance Exchange motto that strongly resonates with me is the idea of “turning discomfort into inquiry.”. I have tried to approach uncertainty from this viewpoint in multiple situations beyond the context of dance since the summer.

Fall 2016 Semester - Choreography of *volition*

After my transformative experience at Dance Exchange, I was excited to return to UVA and begin choreographing for the 2016 Fall Dance Concert. I was interested in using Dance Exchange tools to explore the generation of movement based on personal narratives. A phrase from Dance Exchange, “you are in charge of your own body”, inspired me to question what it meant for female-presenting and identifying people to have actual autonomy within our patriarchal society.

To begin the choreographic process, I used multiple tools I learned while at Dance Exchange to generate movement in collaboration with my five dancers. I started with prompts such as “I come from...” and “It mattered when” to foster the exploration of personal narrative. I prefaced this entire process by stating that each person should only share what they felt truly comfortable sharing, and that no one would be pressured into divulging sensitive personal information. With these prompts, among others, we worked through different Dance Exchange tools. After spending time writing by “stream of conscious”, we used the tool of “Walk and Talk” to narrow down stories into a short phrase. From there, we used the tool called “Equivalents” to create a gesture for each word of the phrase. After a few iterations of this process, each person had three gesture phrases - one for each prompt. These phrases became the movement language of the piece.

After this initial movement generation phase, we began to abstract these gesture phrases into larger movement. In some instances, I asked dancers to combine their phrases into a longer series of movement. This abstracting phase also generated a great deal of material that became part of the piece. Only a few sections consisted of movement that I had created on my own body and shared with the dancers.

The piece's trajectory is a reflection of this choreographic process, in a way. It begins with the "original" and individual versions of the gesture phrases. As the piece develops, the dancers join one another in moments of unison with the abstracted movement phrases. There is a shift in the piece during which the dancers move through their own abstracted phrases while referencing the beginning gestures. The piece ultimately culminates in a dynamic, large-kinsphere abstraction of the gestures.

I greatly appreciated this opportunity to create a piece using tools I had learned from the Dance Exchange Institute. Exploring these dancemaking practices on my own was challenging, but I tried to embrace the idea of "turning discomfort into inquiry". The process also fostered a personal exploration of myself as a mover and choreographer. It did not answer my questions regarding autonomy in the way I had originally hoped. Additional questions emerged from this process, which I have learned to welcome. I hope to have the opportunity to explore these questions through movement in the future.

Please use the following link to view a full video of *volition*: <https://youtu.be/VY5BTI-2LYw>

Winter Break - American Dance Festival Winter Intensive and Gibney/Bates Connect

With the remaining funds from my Arts Award, I travelled to New York City to attend two different dance workshops from December 28 to January 14. I was fortunate to stay with two UVA Dance Minor alumni over the course of these weeks.

The American Dance Festival (ADF) Intensive was nine days of classes that ranged from modern technique to improvisation and choreography. Students from schools all around the country came to Brooklyn for the intensive. Multiple artists connected with ADF taught classes throughout the week. Abby Zbikowski (University of Illinois) taught a challenging repertory from her most recent work, *Destabilizer*. Other artists included Christian von Howard (VCU), Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Gerri Houlihan (FSU).

The ADF Intensive was very challenging technically. By taking classes with multiple teachers, I was able to learn more about my own movement style and comfort level with different types of technique. I discovered strengths as well as areas for improvement.

After the ADF Intensive, I had a few days of rest before beginning the Gibney/Bates Connect Workshop. Gibney Dance is at the center of support for the performing arts and dance in New York. For Gibney/Bates Connect, artists involved with the Bates Dance Festival came to Gibney studios to teach classes. Kendra Portier, currently a performer with David Dorfman Dance, led innovative modern technique classes each day. Amy Miller, the Associate Artistic Director of the Gibney Dance Company, taught repertory from a recent Gibney work. Dante Brown, the Director of Dante Brown | Warehouse Dance, also taught a class during one day of the intensive. I worked with Mr. Brown the previous summer at the Now Next Dance Institute, which was supported by my third-year arts award. It was great to reconnect with Mr. Brown through Gibney dance. He has been a source of encouragement at different moments in my dance career that I have greatly appreciated.

These weeks in New York City were an incredibly exciting, challenging, and formative time. In addition to expanding my technical capabilities and awareness, I became more confident in my ability to thrive in a city after graduating college this year. These two intensive experiences also reinforced my desire to continue dancing in some capacity after graduating. I am grateful for the opportunity to spend time explore the New York City dance community in depth. I feel that I

have established connections with dance practitioners doing important work that. I hope to eventually contribute to this work in some way.

Closing Thoughts:

I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities I have had this year through the support of the Miller Arts Scholars Program. I have been able to explore dance communities in the Washington, D.C. and New York City areas while connecting with a variety of dance artists. Through these experiences, I have expanded my dancemaking practices and honed my technical capabilities. I am very excited to continue developing these skills in the future as I continue to engage with dance in different capacities.

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