

Sustainable dance making: Dancers and choreographers in collaboration

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In this paper I explore the notion of sustainability, drawing from environmental policy and activism, and apply this notion to the process of dance making. I begin by defining sustainability, and move to exploring both the professional and community contexts of dance making and the practices of collaboration. In many ways, the motivation for this paper comes from a deeply felt concern I have regarding the practices of dance making in the professional dance 'industry', particularly as I have observed in New Zealand; practices which I regard as not only unsustainable but sometimes even harmful to dancers and choreographers. I begin by sharing a brief story about my experiences as a dancer as background to my argument.

My own dance journey was significantly influenced by my participation as a child in a community dance workshops offered in small rural halls, and by attending a professional performance by Limbs Dance Company in a local community arts centre. So I was exposed at a young age to both community dance practice and to professional dance performance, and my involvement in both has continued. When I began teaching community dance classes in the early 1990s, I soon recognized the enormous potential for participation in contemporary dance to enhance empowerment, interrogate body image and develop self-confidence in young women. However, my choice to pursue professional training as a contemporary dancer shifted my focus away from these empowering agendas and into the more competitive and potentially isolating world of professional dance performance.

Upon graduating from professional training I was eager for a professional dance career. Facing limited employment opportunities, I founded Curve Dance Collective in 1997, aiming to provide space and opportunity for women in dance beyond the few opportunities available with established companies. I attempted to create a feminist collective working process and had a personal vision for women's empowerment through performance. However, I struggled to communicate my feminist agendas and the dominant hierarchical working processes typical in professional dance were counter to the collective processes I imagined. Each project seemed to require scraping the depths of my energy as I wrote funding applications, undertook production work, managed budgets, created dance and performed, often not in a very satisfying or collaborative way at all. I watched my peers who obtained places in established dance companies struggle with demanding choreographers who used and abused their enthusiasm for dance and requested of them actions they may have felt unable to refuse. Survival was hard financially, but I found it most difficult to safeguard my own well being, and my dream of empowerment for myself and others through dance seemed elusive.

I left the professional dance industry for education and research as a dance lecturer. But within all of my subsequent experiences in dance, the question of how to make dance in this social, cultural and political context remained. Recently I asked myself: how might dance making become sustainable? I began to research this question, turning to environmental policy and activism to understand the notion of sustainability more clearly.

Sustainability is a popular notion in Aotearoa New Zealand, being applied in education, environmental action and policy, as well as being appropriated into a wide variety of industry contexts such as forestry.¹ Sustainability can be defined as 'the ability of a process or human activity to meet present needs but to maintain natural resources and leave the environment in good order for future generations'.² To undertake sustainable practices is generally understood to mean to act so as not to deplete or damage and to act in ways that nurture, now and in the future, enabling people to provide for their social, economic and cultural wellbeing, and health and safety.³

The New Zealand Conservation Authority provides a detailed discussion of the fundamental principles of sustainability, highlighting that 'sustainability can only be addressed in practice, at site- and species-specific levels', and that 'sustainability must also take into account the fact that natural species, ecosystems and processes are always in a state of flux'.⁴ In a dynamic fluctuating system, sustainability is about maintaining balance over time.⁵ Sustainability is reflected in Maori understandings of wellbeing and balance with nature, and traditional practices of conservation.⁶ According to the aims and principles of both the Earth Charter Aotearoa and of UNESCO⁷, sustainability is integral to developing respect and care, protection and restoration of diverse communities of life, and to social and economic justice, tolerance and peace.

Given these broad and varied sources, an understanding of sustainability emerged for me in relation to both environmental action and social action, as the appreciation of balance and need for respect related to both communities of people and to wider ecological communities. In response to these understandings of sustainability, the question I have been exploring in my practice has been: how might these political, social, environmental and educational understandings of sustainability be applied to the creative process of dance making? This is the focus of this paper. However, before discussing sustainability in dance making I need first to clarify what I mean by dance making, and the contexts in which dance making occurs.

'Dance making' is a broad way of describing creative processes and practices engaged in by people in dance. I use the term to refer to the plurality of practices that may be utilized in creating and performing contemporary dance.⁸ In this sense, dance making reflects more than just choreography – 'the tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance'.⁹ Dance making encompasses the whole creative process,¹⁰ including the initial stages of conceptualisation or crystallization of an idea, image or experience, movement improvisation and exploration, and the use of standard choreographic practices to develop movement material, involving what Susan Foster described as 'sorting through, rejecting and constructing physical images'.¹¹ Dance making can involve

interaction and collaboration with other artists in integrating music, theatrical elements, multi-media, acrobatics, text, story telling and other elements with the dance. In addition, exploring specific performance techniques as well as recording and reflecting on experiences can be part of dance making.¹²

Dance making in this broad sense occurs in many contexts. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on two contexts; professional dance performances and community dance, although my comments may apply also to educational and other contexts. These two dance-making contexts can be defined and distinguished in a number of ways (where, arguably a focus on the broad creative processes of dance making, rather than only dance ‘product’, have been a focus¹³). Professional dance performance can be understood as dance that is engaged in ‘everything for performance’ (focused on training, creation and touring).¹⁴ More often than not, professional contemporary dance performance in New Zealand is focused on virtuoso dancing in theatres in the context of a broader New Zealand contemporary dance aesthetic, and the specific aesthetics and personal interests of recognised choreographers.¹⁵ Within the professional dance ‘industry’ there is a common and somewhat romantic image of the artist or choreographer/director as the ‘solitary figure, rebelling against social rules and pushing the boundaries’.¹⁶ The professional choreographer is often perceived as completely responsible for developing an end performance product and didactically directing the dancers towards this performance.¹⁷ However, this image and expectation of the choreographer’s role does not acknowledge that artists such as choreographers, do not typically live or create in a vacuum. Dialogues and exchanges (even those of rebellion) occur between artists and their communities as artistic works are created.

In contrast, an explicit recognition of dialogue and exchange is encompassed in community dance practice. The Foundation for Community Dance outlines community dance as engaged in ‘everything and performance’ (including activities that do not always lead to performance and including performances that do not necessarily involve professional dancers).¹⁸ Petra Kuppers commented that she understood ‘community dance to be movement work that facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self expression and political change. Community dances are communally created’.¹⁹ Kuppers also made the further important statement that ‘community dance’s power rests in process rather than product: in the act of working and moving together, allowing different voices, bodies and experiences to emerge’.²⁰ While the creative process of dance making has been acknowledged and discussed to some extent by professional choreographers,²¹ such considerations of process do not necessarily include or acknowledge all those involved in the process. However, community dance practice foregrounds process.

Further, the practice of community collaborative dance making can be distinguished from the typically directed or authored dance making by a company choreographer. Jo Butterworth²² suggested that there is a shift from the didactic processes often employed in the process of creating a professional dance performance, to the democratic processes developed within a community dance framework. However, it is not only the role of the choreographer that shifts. The role of dancers and other participants can also shift from dancer as instrument or interpreter or contributor, to dancer as creator and co-owner.²³

A pertinent suggestion offered by Gay Hawkins is that community dance practice can be 'a method for aligning the skills of artist with unrepresented groups in the struggle for cultural self-determination'.²⁴ What this might mean for dance professionals working in the community has been of great interest to me. I see that not only is there another opportunity for a future in dance making for professional artists through work in the community, but that this is also an opportunity for rethinking the processes and practices typical in the professional dance world to create more sustainable and positive dance experiences that foster community, empowerment and respect.

To return to my initial question, 'how can understandings of sustainability be applied to the process of dance making?' it seemed to me that developing sustainable dance making would entail consideration of the creative and rehearsal processes so as to meet the needs of all involved, as well as working to nurture and enable all for the future, within the specific contexts of dance making. Integral to the process is respect and acknowledgement for all involved, something I am sad to say is often missing from professional dance 'industry' practices. Additionally, burn out is common, almost expected for choreographers,²⁵ and the didactic or overtly tyrannical practices of some choreographers has had a devastating impact on the wellbeing of many dancers. It has made me turn away from the professional dance industry, both as a dancer and an audience member many times. In searching for other dance-making processes that do nurture and sustain, I have been exploring collaboration.²⁶

Processes of collaboration align easily with community dance practice as I have defined them.²⁷ Collaboration is generally understood to be the acts and processes of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing. Nikos Papastergiadis commented that collaboration 'presupposes mutual understanding, shared languages, common goals and the ability to negotiate across differences'.²⁸ The practice of collaboration makes dialogues and exchanges explicit, both in the processes of creating and in the products of collaboration. In this sense, 'collaboration carries with it an implicit ethical orientation in relationship to difference. It can, potentially, work against the grain of the image of the heroic artist struggling to assert his or her mastery over a recalcitrant nature, and evoke instead a form of art practice defined by openness, listening and intersubjective vulnerability'.²⁹ Collaborative processes can assist a shift in the roles of individuals within a group to facilitate greater communication, acknowledgement of different contributions, and potentially shared ownership of both process and products.³⁰ Working in collaboration challenges some assumptions about dance making however, as the focus may shift from being entirely based around creation of a product, driven by a choreographer, to an appreciation of the quality of relationships within the group and consideration of individual group members' needs alongside any needs of the product or dance. 'It is often the case that collaborative artists are as concerned with the experience of collaborative interaction itself, the new insights and new forms of knowledge that are catalyzed through this interaction, as they are with the creation of a physical product. Here the "work" of art refers as much to a process as it does to an object'.³¹

There is a body of arts research that explores the nature of collaboration, but this research typically focuses on collaboration between choreographers and artists in other mediums. Certainly the practice of collaboration across artistic mediums has had a long history in Western professional dance performance.³² There are many great examples of such collaborations in Australasia too.³³ But dancers themselves are not always fully included in this collaborative process, perhaps being perceived as merely 'bodies' or 'instruments' for presenting the artists' visions. However, some researchers, including Douglas Risner, have described dance making as an inherently collaborative activity in which movement ideas are workshopped with the dancers who will dance them. Dancers themselves are actually integral to the dance-making process and yet their experiences are not often acknowledged.³⁴ Research into the value of collaboration for dancers and choreographers has revealed that the social context and the relationships developed within the choreographic process are also significant for the dancers and the choreographer.³⁵ Doug Risner commented that 'the relationships the dancers share help to define each as an individual. Therefore, it would seem appropriate for choreographers to acknowledge and nurture the social context within the rehearsal and, at the same time, recognize the complexity of the issue'.³⁶



Patti Mitchley and Karen Barbour (l-r) performing their 2005 collaborative choreography *You Know How I Feel* at the WEL Energy Trust Academy of Performing Arts Dance Studio in Hamilton. Photo Robert Fear

Risner's research acknowledged the very social nature of choreography and of the importance of relationships within the processes of dance making in terms of self-definition for those involved. Developing a positive social environment that engenders trust, respect and support would seem crucial to dance making, and integral to the nature of collaboration. Collaborative dance-making processes can function to situate all involved in a social context through which each can continue to develop relationships with others and understand themselves as part of a community of artists.

To review, I understand 'sustainability' in this specific context, to be practices that meet (or at least attempt to balance) the needs of all involved within the broad processes of dance making. In addition, sustainable dance-making practices should engender respect for those involved, allow all to act in ways that are nurturing, and avoid personal harm in relation to wellbeing, health and safety. To borrow from Alison East, I would like to see if we really can make dance as if the world mattered and as if each individual person involved mattered.³⁷

From my perspective, the possibilities offered through working collaboratively in dance making, offer potential for sustainable practices that can meet the needs of all involved whether it be within community activities or professional dance performances. Two particular recent research projects have provided me with potential alternative ways to understand dance making, and while both research projects are much broader than my specific interest in sustainability through collaboration, I can draw from them some relevant findings.

The first was a substantial project undertaken by myself, colleagues in the Waikato University School of Education and both community and professional performers. Our first guiding research question was: What is the nature of collaborative artistic research, both across our artistic disciplines and across our culture? We also considered how self-determination could be maintained for individual artists within collaborative artistic research.³⁸

In the second project I worked collaboratively with a local community dance practitioner and friend, Patti Mitchley. We were guided by a general research question as to how we could make dance based on our own lived experiences. In order to investigate this question, we considered what the social, cultural, political and economic enabling constraints were that affected the context of our dance making. This led us to explore specific choreographic strategies to express and communicate our lived experiences with our audiences. So I will draw from both projects in presenting findings that support the value of collaborative process in dance making.³⁹

The first and most obvious finding was that the process of collaboration or co-creation and coming to value collaboration was quite new for some of the performers, whether professional or community dancers. The following quotations from performers illustrate that the collaborative process was novel:

New – never been involved in a process where I've had the chance to say what a performance is going to be collectively. This is a new process that I have never experienced ... even in devised work, an equal share of vision is not involved. A director takes control of vision ... [we] interpret that vision, inform it.

I enjoyed this process – it was the first time I had acknowledged the collaborative process as needing to be included and treated as a worthy research process. Taking time to acknowledge other people's abilities and talents, fully as well as letting their working process to be included in the development of this piece allows other worlds and takes of worlds – to be seen.

As a consequence of the newness of the process of collaboration, more time was required than typically expected for the development and production of a performance work. Time allowed for relationships to develop, processes to be negotiated and trust between those involved to be nurtured.

A second relevant finding was that the relationships between all involved and the personal growth and self-definition of each person was integral to the process. One mature performer suggested that the experience of being respected as a collaborator had previously been only a dream.

Words escape me over the privilege and fulfilment of a dream ... to gain the sense that I was respected enough as a dancer to be asked to join, and that the collaborators' intentions are also to respect rather than judge, frees me the person and artist to relax and let my creativity and my sense of others to begin to flow. For the first time I began to make connections more consciously.

Developing relationships and trust through collaboration may allow dancers to realize personally held dreams and to experience a sense of ownership within the process of dance making. Such a sense of ownership may well outweigh the experience of the audience applause following the performance.

Of great interest too, is the relevance of collaborating throughout the entire process of dance making, allowing the initial crystallization of ideas for theme and processes to be a shared activity, alongside the more obviously naturally collaborative aspects of choreographing, rehearsing and performing a dance. A greater sense of ownership and involvement in co-creation of the ideas allows the each person to understand themes and processes within the dance work and to add personal layers of meaning. The following quotation reveals a dancer articulating the value of collaborative processes in relation to them fulfilling their performance role.

I have really appreciated the improvisation and exploration allowed in this process and the opportunity to work closely with, and listen to the individual collaborators... Seeing how the others work I think has strongly influenced my interpretations/concepts. This has been great because as a dancer this is what I enjoy doing – layering my part with meaning and understanding.

The potential to negotiate group processes, as well as the opportunity to self-define in greater detail one's own individual role in performance can be fostered through collaboration.

Within the dance-making process, a focus on working specifically with the lived experiences of those involved in the process (as distinct from imposing other's experiences or dealing with abstract notions) opened up more opportunities for these personal layers of meaning to emerge. Lived experiences were offered voluntarily and use of such experiences then negotiated tactfully (rather than



Dancers performing in the 2004 collaborative choreography Kaitiaki: Reasons to Care at the WEL Energy Trust Academy of Performing Arts Playhouse in Hamilton. Photo Robert Fear

emotional traumas being 'mined' by a choreographer for aesthetic use). As a result of the self-determination involved in the sharing and use of lived experiences, the potential for the process to be personally fulfilling was enhanced.

For both of us, the dance-making process was pleasurable and nourishing. Instead of trying to extract a dance work, we were able to share and validate what was already there in our lived experiences ... movement came from real experiences, not exploited for effect, but simply revealed ... it became an affirming experience.

As the comment above suggests, a sense of personal fulfillment from the processes of collaborative dance making may well extend into the dance performance itself, providing an empowering experience.

Of course, the processes of collaboration do require more time and, arguably, more personal effort, something professional artists often do not have the luxury of. Funding constraints impose time pressure to produce performance works and this may be supporting the belief in the necessity of hierarchical structures. In addition, arts funding policies that favour 'pick-up' companies and project-based models also constrain the ability of dance artists, choreographers and performers alike, to develop ongoing relationships and processes over time. Nevertheless, in exploring sustainability in dance making I have begun to appreciate that there may be alternative practices that at least attempt to balance the needs of those involved within the process of dance making, and additionally, that engender respect, allow nurturing and foster wellbeing, health and safety.

Consideration of sustainability in dance making led to a number of new investigations for me through research into literature and collaborative practice. In particular, I reflected on and examined practices within the contexts of community dance and professional dance making. While aware of the social and personal value of dance within my own experiences and within the educational literature, I recognized the need to consider social and personal needs within professional dance-making processes specifically.

Reflecting on how else dance making might be undertaken, I considered the potential of collaboration, and the possible shift that collaboration supports from traditional 'dancer' and 'choreographer' roles, to shared roles as co-creators in dance making. Drawing from research findings within broader research into collaboration across art forms and cultures, and into dance making from lived experience, I conclude by issuing a challenge. I believe that it is time to reconsider dance-making processes so that respect and care for all involved can become central to our ways of working in dance, particularly in the professional dance 'industry'. I believe that, whether through collaboration or through other processes, dance making can and should be a sustainable process that serves to nurture all those who dance.

NOTES

- 1 New Zealand Conservation Authority, Maori Customary use of native birds, plants and *other traditional materials*. *Interim report and discussion paper* (Wellington: New Zealand Conservation Authority, 1997).
- 2 Peter Collin, *Dictionary of Environment & Ecology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 207.
- 3 Collin, 2004; Earth charter (2006), retrieved 22 June 2006 from <http://www.earthcharter.org.nz/e/charter.html#secureearth>; Enviroschools (2003), Enviroschools: How it works, retrieved 22 June 2006 from <http://www.enviroschools.org.nz/howitworks.php#principles>; New Zealand Government Resource Management Act (1991), section 5.
- 4 New Zealand Conservation Authority, *Interim report* (1997), p. 132.
- 5 Arthur L. Dahl, 'Measuring the unmeasurable', *Our Planet*, 8, 1 (1996), 29-33.
- 6 Ministry of Education (1999), *Guidelines for Environmental Education in New Zealand Schools*, retrieved 22 June 2006 from http://www.tki.org.nz/r/environ_ed/guidelines/key_concepts_e.php
- 7 Earth Charter Aotearoa, 2006; UNESCO (2002), *Education for sustainable development. Concepts*, retrieved on 22 June 2006 from http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23292&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- 8 Karen Barbour, 'Embodied ways of knowing: Women's solo contemporary dance in Aotearoa New Zealand', PhD thesis (University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, 2002).

- ⁹ Susan Foster, 'Choreographies of gender', *Signs: Journal of women and cultural studies*, 24, 1 (1998), 5.
- ¹⁰ Karen Barbour, 'Embodying Engagement in Arts Research', *The International Journal of Arts in Society*, 1, 2 (2006), 85-91.
- ¹¹ Foster, 1998, 7.
- ¹² Barbour, 2002; Foster, 1998.
- ¹³ Barbour, 2006.
- ¹⁴ The Foundation for Community Dance, cited in Anthony Peppiatt, 'What is a framework and what does it matter?', in The Foundation for Community Dance, ed., *Thinking aloud. In search of a framework for community dance* (Leicester: The Foundation for Community Dance, 1996).
- ¹⁵ I note that the issue of what constitutes a contemporary dance aesthetic is debated by many professional choreographers and dancers and I do not wish to rehearse these debates here. For further information see Karen Barbour, 'Experiencing diversity: a response to 'Seeing dance trends in New Zealand'', *DANZ*, 11 (2000), 12-13; Kristian Larsen, 'Conjecture 3.0. Or your money back' *DANZ*, 17 (2003), 9; Marianne Schultz, 'Seeing dance trends in New Zealand', *DANZ*, 10 (2000), 10-12.
- ¹⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'The ethics of collaboration', retrieved 20 October from <http://www.capelan.com/texts/ethics.htm> (2000) p. 1.
- ¹⁷ Anthony Peppiatt, 'What is a framework and what does it matter?' in the Foundation for Community Dance, ed., *Thinking aloud. In search of a framework for community dance* (Leicester: The Foundation for Community Dance, 1996), pp. 2-3 (online).
- ¹⁸ Petra Kuppers, *Community dace: a resourced file*, retrieved 22 June 2006 from <http://danz.org.nz/resources.php> (2005).
- ¹⁹ Kuppers, 2005, p. 1.
- ²⁰ Kuppers, 2005, p. 1.
- ²¹ Barbour, 2002; Michael Parmenter, 'The tower of terror – developing the choreography of Empty Chairs', *DANZ*, 12 (2001), 6-10; Douglas Wright, *Terra incognita* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2006); Douglas Wright, *Ghost Dance* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004).
- ²² Jo Butterworth, 2003, 'Dance devising in the community context: A framework', *Australia New Zealand Dance Research Society Journal*.
- ²³ Butterworth, 2003.
- ²⁴ Gay Hawkins, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: Constructing Community Arts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), p. 117.
- ²⁵ Karen Barbour and Patti Mitchley, "'Staying real": Issues in choreographing from lived experience in You know how I feel'. 4th DANZ Research Forum Proceedings. *Tuanui whakamaru. Dance canopy 05*, DANZ (July 2005), 7-14; Francesca Horsley, 'All fall down. Is contemporary dance in New Zealand facing a crisis?' *Listener*, May 18, (May 2002), 50-51; Kristian Larsen, 'Conjecture 3.0. Or your money back' *DANZ*, 17 (October 2003), 9.
- ²⁶ Karen Barbour, Donn Ratana, Cherie Waititi and Kim Walker, 'Collaborative Artistic practice', *Waikato Journal of Education* (2007), 49-76.
- ²⁷ Following Kuppers, 2005; Peppiatt, 1996.
- ²⁸ Nikos Papastergiadis, p. 1.
- ²⁹ Grant Kester, 'Conversation pieces: Collaboration and artistic identity', retrieved 20 October 2005 from http://digitalarts.ucsd.edu/~gkester/GK_Website/Research/Partnerships.htm (2000).
- ³⁰ Kester, 2000.
- ³¹ Kester, 2000, para 9.
- ³² Barbour, 2006; Roger Copeland, *Choreographers, composers, and visual artists: Models of avant-garde collaboration* (Seminar presented to The University of Waikato, Hamilton, April, 2008); Merce Cunningham, 'Thoughts on dance, music and the visual arts', in C. Farrow. ed., *Art and design profile No 33. Parallel structures* (London: Academy Group, 1993), pp. 16-23; Michelle Potter, "'Wild Swans" and the art of collaboration', *Brolga*, 17 (2003), 26-31; Charles Spencer, 'Parade. A scandalous affair',

in Clare Farrow, ed., *Art and Design Profile No. 33. Parallel structures*, (London: Art and Design, 1993), pp. 6-15; David Vaughan, 'Merce Cunningham. Thoughts on dance, music and the visual arts. Introduction', in Farrow (1993), pp.16-23

- ³³ See particularly publications about collaboration by Peter Belton and Daniel Belton, *Dance and visual art: Modelling a collaborative practice*, (ATEA Conference 'Knowledge Fusion', Brisbane, July 2002); Alison East, 'Making and thinking dance of the origin', in Denys Trussell, *Dance of the origin* (Dunedin: Origins Dance Theatre, 2004), pp. 47-57; and by Potter, 2003.
- ³⁴ Douglas Risner, 'Voices seldom heard: The dancers' experience of the choreographic process', *Impulse*, 3 (1995), 76-85.
- ³⁵ Risner, 1995.
- ³⁶ Risner, 1995, 84.
- ³⁷ East, 2004. There is limited research in relation to sustainability in the dance-making process specifically. Research undertaken by Liz Schwaiger identified two particular themes related to sustainability, and a number of strategies emerged from the interviews she conducted with mature professional dancers. The themes identified were lifestyle and family, in relation to how having a family and everyday lifestyle needs impact on full-time performance, and the cultural valorisation of dance, in relation to how valued the practice of dance was perceived in wider culture. These broader and more pragmatic concerns are not of as much interest to me as the actual processes within dance making. (See Liz Schwaiger, 'Sustainability in dance practice: The case of the "mature dance artist"', *Australia New Zealand Dance Research Society Journal* (2004), 66-76.
- ³⁸ Barbour, Ratana, Waititi and Walker, 2007.
- ³⁹ Barbour and Mitchley, 2005.