

Listening to Gesture
Choreographing Connections Through Socially Engaged Dance Practices

by

Elizabeth Johnson

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Mary Fitzgerald, Chair
Eileen Standley
Alison Marshall

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary U.S. culture, dance is often confined to the young and the trained, isolated on stages and in dance studios, and viewed as entertainment that is disconnected from "real life." Socially engaged dance practices re-connect dance to society in meaningful ways. By connecting individuals to their own bodies, to each other, to ideas, and to social, civic, and educational institutions, socially engaged dance practices use movement, the body, and the tools of participatory art, which contributes to the development of a democratic society, while catalyzing social change, and building healthy communities.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my work to everyone I have danced with. You are my teachers, my inspiration, and you keep this work challenging and rewarding.

I dedicate this thesis to my colleagues, friends and incredible family. Thank you for your encouragement and practical assistance.

And I lovingly dedicate this to you, Megan. You have supported me throughout this entire process in so many ways, and have helped me see that I can be both an artist and an academic. Through you, I am learning how to listen. I look forward to our next chapters.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

We cannot help but move. Movement is central to the process of living, and it is inherently linked to how we communicate and to how we connect to each other. Watch an old man describe his childhood home, or the work he did in a factory. Observe the movement a parent makes when talking about the values she wants to pass on to her daughter. See how teens become physically animated when teaching about neighborhood water contamination. Study the movements a scientist makes when describing her research, and notice how that movement changes when she explains some of the ethical considerations of her work. As a dancer, choreographer and educator working in diverse communities with a focus on socially engaged dance practices, I listen to gesture: the powerful and individual ways all people use movement to convey meaning.

Although we all move and use movement to express our feelings and ideas, relatively few people in contemporary U.S. culture consider themselves “dancers.” In 1937 modern dance pioneer Martha Graham stated, “throughout time dance has not changed in one essential function. The function of the dance is communication” (Brown, 1979. p.49). Although Graham articulated this belief in the communicative nature of movement, she dismissed the communicative movements of the everyday, and developed a highly abstract technique of dance that required a young, lean, athletic body, and years of rigorous training. With examples like this, as well as contemporary commercial images of dance that showcase the super human performers in Cirque de Soleil, or the competitors in *So You Think You Can Dance*, it is no wonder that most people will say, “I

can't dance." Maybe the problem is how we have defined dance, and how we have restricted who is allowed to do it. Curator and educator Simon Dove (2010) states,

Dance is inherently a socially-based practice. It is rooted in community celebration and family rituals around the world. Yet, professional contemporary practice seems to have become so culturally marginal. How has this happened, and why does the field still seek to define professional practice as separate from community activity? Why do people seem to value individual physical virtuosity more than the power of dance to convey ideas and meaning? (p.25)

Dance in contemporary U.S. culture is often confined to the young and the trained, it is isolated on stages, and in dance studios, and is viewed as entertainment that is disconnected from "real life." However, socially engaged dance practices can re-connect dance to society in meaningful ways. While connecting individuals to their own communicative bodies, to each other, and to ideas, socially engaged dance practices build skills with applications not only for art making, but also skills that can serve social, civic and educational arenas. Socially engaged dance practices use movement, the body, and the tools of participatory art making to contribute to the development of a democratic society, while catalyzing social change, and building healthy communities.

I have seen firsthand how dance can make a difference. Working professionally for the past 15 years as a dancer, choreographer, and educator, first with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and now independently, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to dance with amazing and diverse individuals in communities all over the world. I have danced and created dances with a broad spectrum of people from children to senior adults, girls who do roller derby to fishermen, police officers to juveniles in detention,

homeless youth to corporate leaders, and those who have never danced to professionals in dance companies. Most recently, I have been working with inmate mothers and their daughters, teen community health advocates and people living with emotional, cognitive and physical disabilities.

I aim to connect communities through content driven choreography. I create dance that promotes civic dialogue, and I design participatory experiences that use artistic tools in multiple contexts. For several years I have been working with youth and elders promoting leadership development through the arts, and collaborating with educators to design participatory, embodied structures to enhance learning. I left my full time work as Associate Artistic Director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in Metro DC in September of 2010, to develop projects independently. While pursuing my MFA, I have been working as the Coordinator of Socially Engaged Practices at Arizona State University. In this position I am collaborating with an interdisciplinary team to create new professional development curricula for teaching artists who will work in, and engage with, diverse communities. One of the most challenging parts of working with the interdisciplinary team has been articulating common values that underpin the range of artistic approaches in this field, and navigating the complexity of language across the different disciplines associated with socially engaged arts.

Chapter 2

DEFINITIONS

What are socially engaged dance practices? In answering this, a good first step is to attempt to define socially engaged practices, as well as some other terms associated with this type of creative work. In his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, renowned visual and performance artist Pablo Helguera (2011) acknowledges that, “...the terminology around this practice is particularly porous” (p. 1). The boundaries of socially engaged practices are especially permeable because outcomes are often unconventional, featuring non-trained artists in non-traditional venues in events that may blur the lines between audience and performer. Socially engaged practices are also often difficult to define because the process blends with the product. A collaborative rehearsal process or a workshop can be a form of socially engaged practice in and of itself, and is not necessarily dependent on a public performance or exhibition to be considered a socially engaged arts practice. Although I have found the naming of these practices indeed slippery, I have discovered that by aligning commonalities between some key terminologies across disciplines, these creative practices can be distilled to contain three essential elements: community participation, a multi-disciplinary approach, and social relevance.

Community Participation

Community participation means that the artistic work cannot happen without the creative contributions of individuals other than the instigating artist (Helguera, 2011, Goldbard, 2006). These participants can be from a certain neighborhood, they can be

students or senior adults, public officials, congregants of a religious institution, or a group gathered together around a particular interest, such as mothers against gun violence, or the bicycle action league. Community participants are not required to have artistic skills or training.

The notion of including community participants with little or no artist training is not confined to socially engaged arts practices. Some notable arts institutions, such as the Kennedy Center, Flint Cultural Center, and Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts, have outreach departments that serve varied and diverse communities. These prestigious organizations often make tickets available at low or no cost to enable underserved communities to experience live performance, and also bring visiting artists offsite into schools or senior centers to do participatory workshops. Sometimes the organization's staff or media speak about this offsite work as going into "the community." Although these programs' intentions are worthy and provide access to the arts for many, the language of "the community" communicates the notion of community as singular and separate. Other institutions, such as ASU Gammage, whose mission is "connecting communities" (Gamage, n.d.), recognize that their region has multiple communities with different interests and needs.

Every person is a part of multiple communities. One person can be a part of a work community, a neighborhood community, a religious community, a community of dog walkers, a bi-lingual community, a vegetarian community, and a family community all at the same time. We play different roles within our different communities, and our actions and positions within groups create self-identity while at the same time create a sense of belonging. Being a part of multiple communities is a deeply human experience.

Socially engaged practices honor humanity and draw upon rich knowledge embedded in networks of people.

Multi-Disciplinary Approach

A multi-disciplinary approach means that the artist employs a range of techniques and entry points to facilitate the creative process. This includes writing, drawing, talking, moving, making music and using media such as video. The resulting product can be quite layered, and may not easily fall into one category of art. What starts as a visual art exhibit could end up looking more like a theatrical event, and a formal contemporary dance concert could involve the audience and seem more like a conversation between the performers and viewers.

Socially engaged art blurs the line between disciplinary-boundaries. *The Art and Social Practice Journal*, published by Portland State University's Art and Social Practice program, acknowledges how the range of projects that may or may not meet traditional criteria of art fall into the scope of Social Practice. The journal's website states: "It is true enough that the term Social Practice has been applied to an incredible diversity of artworks that traverse multiple disciplines, from community farming projects to activist organizing initiatives, and from antagonistic public interventions to alternative education models."

Often a multi-disciplinary approach increases community participation. Not everyone is drawn to a dance project, but she or he might be interested in designing music, making objects, or creating poetry around an idea. Once connected to the project, the ideas, and the individuals involved, reluctant participants are more willing to try new things, such as dance. Nevertheless, dancing is not a requirement for meaningful

participation. A multi-disciplinary approach acknowledges that there are multiple ways to contribute to a project, and that different people bring different skills to the endeavor.

When choreographer Liz Lerman was working on a project about the ethical implications of genetic research, she found herself working with a sound designer, a media artist, and a network of science researchers. She said, “When you ask a big enough question, you need more than one discipline to tackle it” (Lerman, 2013). Socially engaged practices often tackle complex contemporary issues, a multi-disciplinary approach provides a range of tools to illuminate the multiple facets of an idea.

Social Relevance

Finally, social relevance means that the artwork explores social issues, either directly or indirectly. A goal of many socially engaged art projects is to provide access to opportunities and empower the disenfranchised (Schwartzman, 2006). Often, socially engaged art projects try to raise awareness of a social issue, such as climate change or domestic violence. Socially engaged practices are particularly equipped to take on such a charge because art is at its core. Art has the ability to be complex. Through symbol, metaphor and craft, ideas can mingle with emotion, and lead to productive reflection. Socially engaged art projects frequently use the tools of art making to establish a conversation about social issues, and provide a forum where a range of perspectives can be heard and respected.

Sometimes artists have a direct intent to inspire a particular social change, but often socially engaged artists simply have a desire to make art that makes society more open and equitable overall (Schwartzman, 2006). When people think of social change, it might conjure images of protestors in political marches, or volunteers asking for

signatures on a petition to a government official. While these are effective methods for social change, sometimes the act of bringing certain groups together through a socially engaged art process to create a work of art such as a mural, play or a dance is an act of social change in and of itself. The co-creative process, which equally values and respects all individuals, can lead diverse groups of people to get to know each other, resulting in a greater openness and appreciation. Socially engaged practices can help different sectors of society hear each other and communicate effectively (Korza & Bacon, 2011). For example, *Code 33*, a public art project and performance piece by artist Suzanne Lacy, sought to investigate and alleviate tensions between youth in Oakland California and Oakland city police enforcement. In 1999 a high truancy rate in Oakland and a series of events that resulted in accusations of police brutality, bred distrust and disrespect between teens and police. *Code 33* provided a series of art workshops, video production skills and an opportunity for facilitated dialogues between youth and police. Although it was a challenging process, it enabled the youth and police to communicate peacefully, and gain an appreciation for each other's perspectives and experiences. The project was so successful that a curriculum was developed and distributed to other police precincts, allowing communities to use the artistic tools of engagement to bridge local power divides (Roth, 2001).

People have the potential to be transformed by art, of all kinds. A play, a song, a poem or a dance can move someone personally and prompt political action. In some socially engaged art processes, the political action is part of the artistic gesture. According to Helguera, social action in socially engaged practices is not distanced and theoretical, it is genuine and lived because it is produced through a conscious,

collaborative process (2006). Unlike a proscenium play about a social issue performed by a professional company, in socially engaged art projects individuals participate directly in investigating the social issue, and are frequently transformed. Something happens to the people involved, and real and lasting changes occur. These changes begin within individuals, who then affect their communities, and these communities can then affect society at large. The creative process in socially engaged practices use cooperation, listening, flexibility, self-reflection, decision making, and visioning; skills for applications not only in artistic processes, but also in the creative process of social change.

To summarize, regardless of how it is labeled, three essential elements are at the core of this creative work: community participation, a multi-disciplinary approach, and social relevance. Although these are commonalities, different arts disciplines hold fast to various ways to name and define the work. Therefore, finding common ground is a challenge. An interdisciplinary research team comprised of myself and Arizona State University faculty from each of the units within the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts (School of Art, School of Arts Media and Engineering, School of Dance, School of Music, School of Theatre and Film and The Design School) spent over a year trying to find an inclusive title and a succinct way to talk about our practices in community settings. At the onset of our research endeavor in October of 2010, we referred to this community-engaged work as *public practice*. This term was confusing to many because it did not include any reference to art or design and was not descriptive enough for someone unfamiliar with the term. After several months of deliberation, we decided to

label the work socially engaged practice, a term that is inclusive of multiple disciplines, and points to the participatory engagement activity that is so central to the work.

The interdisciplinary team also collaboratively crafted a brief description about the work. The Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts' (n.d.) website now states that: “socially engaged practice centers around participation, reciprocal relationships and collaborations using the tools of the arts and design to promote civic dialogue and investigate pressing issues of our time.” The website goes on to say, “This practice is also referred to as participatory art, community-based arts, situational art, social sculpture, relational aesthetics, social art practice, public practice and by other terms descriptive of arts engaging communities.”

Although it is unconventional, I have chosen to label my current work in communities as “socially engaged *dance* practices.” Socially engaged dance practices are linked to the term socially engaged practice, but expand to include my discipline of focus, namely dance, within the title. Socially engaged dance practices attempt to embrace the three essential elements as outlined previously: community participation, a multi-disciplinary approach, and social relevance.

The word “social” sets us in the public sphere, and connects to related terms such as “social issues” and “social justice” that can be a part of this work. The words “socially engaged” point to community participation and the participatory process that is fundamental to the work. Suzanne Lacy (1995) describes the ability of an artist to blend their own ideas with the imagination of community members as “integrity” (p.39). The integration of ideas Lacy describes is an inclusive, co-creative process. “Engagement” defines an active process full of curiosity, discovery and involvement. To engage with

something is more powerful than to merely interact with it. It is also a word that is non-hierarchical, unlike the common term “outreach” that places the artist at the top of the power ladder. In “outreach” models, artists have skills and the power to impart their knowledge *onto* others, often the “underserved or disempowered.” This term does not acknowledge that mutual learning occurs for both artists and community participants. In ideal socially engaged practices, reciprocal relationships develop in a democratic process, and power is distributed more equitably.

Both “dance” and “practice” are words that can be used as either nouns or verbs. “Dance” describes the primary artistic discipline involved. Some visual artists intentionally exclude any reference to art, and prefer terms developed in the mid 1970s such as “relational aesthetics” and “social practice” (Helguerra, 2011). The thought is that by omitting the word “art,” socially engaged practitioners eliminate any preconceptions associated with the term art, including who is qualified to be involved, and what the outcome might look like. By removing the label of art, socially engaged art projects have a broader base from which to recruit participation and freedom to expand beyond traditional artistic structures (Helguera, 2011). While I understand the rationale to remove the boundaries associated with the term ‘art’ or “dance,” I personally identify as a dancer and choreographer and find the inclusion of the term more accurately descriptive of my creative process. It is my work as a facilitator to make the word “dance” not intimidating or limiting, but rather to expand the notions of what dance can be and who can do it.

The word “practices” indicates the importance of process. The term is plural because many different types of approaches are used. “Practices” places emphasis not

only on *what* is created, but *how* it is created. The attention given to process invites experimentation and a multi-disciplinary approach. My artistic practices are grounded in the body, but the creative process includes writing, theater techniques, and sound design that incorporate the voices of the participants. I frequently seek input from individuals in other arts disciplines, and research diverse fields such as science and sustainability, which guide the content of the work and inform both the process and the product. As a complete phrase, socially engaged dance practices, speaks to social relevance. It is an artistic form that engages diverse participants in social issues and builds democratic skills through the process of dancing and collaboratively creating dance.

In addition to the essential elements of community participation, a multi-disciplinary approach and social relevance, certain core values guide my work. These include collaboration, craft, reciprocity, risk and social agency. I strive to construct thoughtful choreography through ethical and genuine community engagement. In an environment that is both rigorous and nurturing, I aim to foster open communication and honor diverse participation through a collaborative creative process. These core values and the facilitation methods that support my socially engaged dance practices have been shaped by my own experience, my collaborations with and connection to Liz Lerman, and my work with the interdisciplinary team at Arizona State University.

To understand the core values of my socially engaged dance practices, it is important to unpack what is meant by the terms collaboration, craft, reciprocity, risk and social agency. First, in a collaborative creative endeavor, it is important that community participation is authentic. An example of inauthentic participation might be if a community member was cast as a token representation of an idea without being a part of

the idea's conception, or if an able bodied person performed in a wheelchair pretending to be disabled. In a piece representing issues facing the disability community, my values in socially engaged dance practices would require that I do research about and include the voices of those in that community. I do not coerce individuals into participation; they are invited and respected for who they are and what they bring to the project. Participants' ideas and contributions help to shape the work, and therefore breadth of perspective is celebrated.

Craft is another core value of my socially engaged dance practices. Working in communities pushes me as a creative artist. I am constantly in new situations and discovering new ways to generate movement and structure choreography. Craft indicates an attention to aesthetics, which can manifest in how an experience is shaped, framed and executed. Although it is certainly not expected that everyone participating in socially engaged dance practices has artistic training, as a professional choreographer it is my responsibility to bring my skills to each encounter. I am an artist, not a social worker, and therefore my job is to create the very best art that I can in collaboration with community participants. For example, even when creating a gestural dance with dementia patients that will never be seen outside a workshop, I make sure the phrases have choreographic variation, rhythm, dynamics and flow.

There are many ways to define artistic excellence, or to determine the aesthetic success of a project. I do not think the assessment criteria for socially engaged dance should be fundamentally different from how we might evaluate work created and performed by professional artists. Due to my experience with the Dance Exchange, my framework for assessment is influenced strongly by how Liz Lerman gauges success.

She says that in an excellent dance, the performer is completely committed to the movement and knows why he or she is doing it. Additionally, there is something “being revealed” in the moment, either by the dancer or the audience. Within this framework, it is entirely possible that both professional and amateur work can be unsuccessful. For example, if the dancers are not entirely invested, if they don’t know why they are dancing, and/or if the audience or performers are not discovering something new, then even if the work is highly produced, the dance is not successful. I agree with the three necessary components for success as outlined by Liz, but I question the need for an audience. Can a dance be successful if others do not witness a performance? Some of my work does not culminate in a public showing, but that does not mean it is not artistically rigorous, as previously defined. Some of the most committed performers I have seen are part of a workshop within the sealed walls of a jail or hospital.

Additionally, as work becomes more and more multi-disciplinary, the performer may or may not be dancing. He or she might be performing spoken word, creating music or designing live animation. Therefore, the performance commitment and consciousness of intent is focused not only on the dance element, but also in the different disciplines contributing to the work. These artists can be invested and connected to content, similar to that which Liz describes when she says, “the dancer knows why she or he is dancing”. Therefore I would recommend expanding the statement to include different kinds of arts, through saying, “the artist knows what the art is about.”

Reciprocity, the next core value of my socially engaged dance practices, relates to the previous discussion about the difference between “outreach” and socially engaged practices. Although many outreach departments in arts organizations build sustainable,

mutually beneficial partnerships with community service organizations and schools, the term “outreach” is not descriptive of a reciprocal relationship. In my socially engaged dance practices learning is not unidirectional, from myself as empowered artist to disempowered community members. I intend to level the power in the room by asking many questions, being truly curious, and building reciprocal relationships with community participants. Through honest dialogue, there is an exchange of ideas, and together we learn from each other and create what we could not have imagined alone.

Working in, and collaborating with a community often means investing in a mysterious process. Therefore, risk is a core value, and can be encouraged and supported through socially engaged dance practices. Frequently, I am dancing with people whose life experiences are different than mine. I treat these participants with true respect and consider the ethical implications of my work with them. I make sure I am not “using” people, or appropriating a culture that is not my own. Sometimes in this process an artist can get too careful, and shy away from difficult or challenging topics. I try to create a nurturing environment where people feel safe to take physical and emotional risks, and then provide rigorous artistic structures that push participants and the form into new territory.

Finally, as a core value, I aim to build skills for social agency through socially engaged dance practices. I try to provide a forum for people to discover and deepen their own personal and political voice. Through research that guides a rehearsal process, together we become more aware of contemporary issues. We are thus able to contribute meaningfully to a political conversation and represent informed personal views within a performance work and through personal interactions. In a socially engaged dance project,

we rehearse leadership and followership, listening, speaking, visioning and re-visioning, collaborating, editing, managing discomfort, investing and sharing in a public forum.

This process increases a person's artistic abilities, but also builds skills for applications in numerous social and civic settings. Some of the young people I have taught have become dancers, but many more have gone into education, international relations, social service, peace work, and politics.

Chapter 3

BEGINNINGS AND EVOLUTION

One of the most significant and life altering moments in dance for me was the first time I saw the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange perform. After seeing a site-specific dance around New London's Guard Arts Center that featured Greek dancers, teen ballet dancers, construction workers, and the children and parents I was teaching at the time, the audience moved into the theater to see the professional company perform. In a piece called "Nocturnes," Judith Jourdin, a dancer in her eighties at the time, gazed toward the audience and panned her head from left to right unhurriedly while a recorded Willie Nelson sang "...and time goes by, so slowly...." At that moment, something cracked inside me. It was powerful. Meaningful. It felt both ancient and present, and it was so very beautiful. I cried through the rest of the show and afterwards stood in line to talk to Liz. I said, "I have never wanted anything more than to be a part of this work." She invited me to audition for a new internship the next week. I graduated from Connecticut College the following Friday, and on Saturday I headed to D.C. in my Ford Taurus station wagon. I stayed there for the next 12 years.

I soon realized that I had been doing this type of work before I even knew that there was anything called "community dance," and certainly before I began to label my work as socially engaged dance practices. As a college dance student in a small school, I felt confined if I only featured the few students in the dance program in my projects. At first I included the theater technicians in my work, and then the actors who were in my theater classes. Then I made a dance for the debate club, and expanded my children's creative dance class to make it intergenerational for both parents and children. I became

curious about the movement in sports and made a dance that featured wrestlers. The senior piece I was making when I met the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange included nearly 100 people, only a handful of whom were trained in dance.

While interning with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, I worked with company member, Gesel Mason, to begin the “Teen Initiative,” which later became the “Teen Exchange.” I directed this as a teen dance company modeled after the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. After a year as an intern, Liz asked me to audition, and I began to tour and perform with the company through the *Hallelujah* project. The company worked with Liz to help refine the tools commonly used to engage communities and generate movement. The tools developed into the “TOOLBOX,” available online, and the company started providing training to other artists interested in these practices. I began to lead projects, choreograph with communities and the company, design residencies, and train other artists in Dance Exchange methods. In 2007 I became the Associate Artistic Director of the company.

The economic downturn of 2009 had a devastating effect on arts organizations across the country, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange included. While many companies were closing their doors or converting company members to part-time employees, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange maintained a full company and administrative staff, but looked for ways to become more sustainable in the economic climate. Liz was ready to step down as artistic director, and the company needed to secure outside contracts. Meanwhile, I had spent a semester teaching at Arizona State University, and became more interested in education and less interested in the hardships of living a life on tour. In the fall of 2010 I left my full time position at the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, moved to

Arizona to pursue a new job at Arizona State University, and began working as an independent contractor on local and national projects. Six months later, Cassie Meador assumed the role of artistic director for the company and the name shifted to “Dance Exchange.” I continue to work with the Dance Exchange as an associate artist, and maintain a personal and professional relationship with Liz.

In the past three years I have had the opportunity to grow my personal practices by working in a range of projects while pursuing my MFA at Arizona State University. This has given me the opportunity to reflect, refine, evolve, question my approaches, and to think more broadly about the significance of this work on multiple levels, from the intrapersonal to the socio-political. Through this investigation I have discovered how socially engaged dance practices have an incredible capacity to cultivate connections.

Many of our major social issues stem from a lack of connection. Promoting personal connections; not distanced, cyber connections such as in social media, and building authentic relationships with self and other is an important act in an ever more disconnected world. In an era when obesity is an epidemic and the nation faces high rates of heart disease and other chronic and preventable health conditions, it is all too evident that most Americans are disconnected from their own bodies. As reductive standardized testing increasingly becomes the norm, and as more specialized charter schools emerge, individuals are not trained to access their full potential, or connect to their own individual creativity. As the wealth gap grows and the median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households, communities become more and more divided by race and class (Pew, 2011). As congress shuts down government, unable to pass a budget, and 800, 000 Americans become unemployed

seemingly overnight, the chasm that separates the right and left political parties becomes all too clear (CNN, 2013). It is evident that the skills of listening, visioning, and collaborating- the very skills utilized in community creative practices- are deficient in those entrusted to lead our nation. In this divided world, the potential power of making connections cannot be overstated.

Historical Context

Dance has always been a way communities have connected, but in other eras, art and the process of creating was more integrated into daily living. In a national convening of community artists in 1982 Liz Lerman stated, “I believe dance historically was an incredibly major part of people’s lives. You danced and it would rain, you danced and your kids got better...” (as qtd. in Goldbard, 2006, p. 104). I hear this and I can imagine the times of our ancestors, when art making was an essential element of living, and a fundamental way to understand the world. I envision families gathered around the campfire and witnessing men enacting adventures from the hunt. In my mind’s eye, I can see a figure huddled in a cave, using rudimentary tools to draw stories as a way to communicate to members of their tribe and to other tribes. And I can dream of the dancing, the kinesthetic ways a community would connect, mourn and celebrate.

In an attempt to position my practice within the context of the broader field, the remainder of this chapter outlines a history of socially engaged dance practices briefly from the Romantic period with a particular focus on artists and ideals whose work have either directly or indirectly informed my practice today. I will analyze historical patterns and connect early practitioners’ work to the essential elements and core values of

contemporary socially engaged arts practices outlined previously. Finally, I will relate these trends and principles of practice to my current work.

Connecting art to society and social concerns. The Western notion that art is detached from society and the functions of the everyday has its roots in the Romantic period when artists were characterized as brilliant but suffering souls isolated from society and uninvolved in common everyday experiences (Goldbard, 2006). This sentiment carried through to the modern era where formalists such as Clement Greenburg held the conviction that authentic art must exist “within the charmed circle of social disengagements. Once art steps beyond that circle, and moves from the sublime to direct involvement with the social or political, its moral authority vanishes and it becomes a mundane extension of everyday culture” (Kester, 1998, p. 21).

Despite the social turn in recent centuries, which held artists and art-practices at a distance from society, influential individuals and key social movements have fueled the trajectory of socially engaged arts practices, promoting the essential element of social relevance. As the Industrial Revolution brought about a cultural shift towards utility and purpose, some Americans were also finding useful, socially relevant applications for art in both religious and social service sectors in the United States (Ewell, 2002, Fitzgerald, 2008). In 1874, long before Howard Gardner introduced the theory of multiple intelligences that launched the contemporary development of arts-integrated magnet schools, Rev. John Vincent used the arts to teach the Bible. His artistic approach became so popular that he developed and disseminated methods that allowed others to facilitate the process, thus engaging diverse communities in subject matter through artistic engagement (Ewell, 2002). It is possible that Rev. John Vincent, and conceivably other

turn of the century pioneers, were able to use artistic practices for practical purposes because they had non-arts careers and thus were not labeled as artists in society. Maybe being clergy allowed Rev. John Vincent to experiment with artistic methods in ways that professional artists could not.

Many years after Vincent, in the mid 20th century, journalist, philosopher and community developer Baker Bromwell saw how art could infuse different sectors of society. As a community developer he saw a role for art in what we would now call “placemaking,” connecting artistic practice to social concerns of citizens and cities in concrete ways. He believed that everyone is creative, but felt that traditional art venues such as museums and theaters, did not invite active community participation. He was interested in genuine collaboration and open communication. As a community developer, he would work with communities to co-create dramas in order to have residents share experiences and hear each other’s histories as a means to envision the future (Ewell, 2002). Other contemporary projects such as artist/architect Bill Mackey’s (n.d.) 2012 “Worker Transit Authority” and Sojourn Theater’s (n.d.) “Built 2.0”, have roots in this tradition. Both of these projects cultivate civic vision. They use art to investigate housing and development, and provide structures where city agencies and private corporations can hear community input about land use. These are examples of how socially engaged practices have enabled art to connect directly with society and social concerns in meaningful and productive ways.

Access to artistic experiences. In cultures that separate art and artists from society, access to artistic experiences are often limited to those who can afford to pay for classes, tickets, and museum entrance fees. Socially engaged dance practices require

diverse community participation, organizations must find ways to subsidize these arts experiences. One of the first notable organizations to provide access to the arts for those who could otherwise not afford the cost of arts education was the Jane Addams Hull House in Chicago. Here, early 20th century immigrants received education, basic social services, and free arts programs (Fitzgerald, 2008). University Extension programs also emerged as a way to bring educational and cultural resources to rural areas. Robert Gard at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Frederick Koch established grassroots theater organizations that included diverse performers in plays that promoted the socially engaged practices' core value of social agency by addressing "real issues" (Ewell, 2002, Fitzgerald, 2008). Koch, who understood the benefit of genuine collaboration and diverse participation, recruited students who were young and old, rich and poor, black and white, sharecropper and landowner.

Furthering access to artistic experiences, a contemporary of both Gard and Koch, Alfred Arvold, advocated for the development of community centers not only as recreation centers, but also as science centers, government centers and arts centers. Promoting socially engaged practices' core value of diverse community participation, Arvold believed that all people could appreciate art if it existed out of the theater or museum (Ewell, 2002). A few years later, in 1944, Virginia Lee Comer also believed in and advocated for providing access to artistic experiences to people of all walks of life. She began offering arts consulting services to communities through the Junior League of America. When she visited a community interested in expanding and connecting their arts, she insisted on talking not only to arts groups, but also to diverse groups of people in the places in which they congregated. She promoted the core value of genuine and

diverse participation, and saw the possibility for arts activities in any place where people gathered. She forged arts connections in housing projects, religious institutions, and in union halls (Ewell, 2002, p. 8). Her work broke many class, racial and socio-economic barriers and has contributed to the foundation of socially engaged art practices.

Again, we see how socially engaged arts practices have been furthered not by artists alone, but by artists collaborating with social service and educational institutions, such as the Hull House, the Junior League and universities. These important organizations embraced arts practices as part of progressive missions, and furthered the course of socially engaged arts practices in the United States.

Expanded notions of art. The 1960s, with its questioning of the status quo, was ripe for artists to re-imagine the role of art and artists in society. Artists began to question what art was and what it could do. It was in this social climate that “new genre public art,” a forerunner of socially engaged practices, began to emerge. Unlike previous forms, new genre public art encouraged non-traditional multidisciplinary practices. It revolutionized art in public space with interactivity and direct social relevance (Lacy, 1995).

Also in the 1960s, concurrent to the beginnings of new genre public art, Anna Halprin (n.d.) established the San Francisco Dancer’s Workshop. Her practices questioned the division between life and dance, and used everyday movements and improvisation as a way to engage non-dancers in socially relevant works that invited community participation. Since then Anna Halprin (n.d.) has created numerous participatory dance scores including, "Planetary Dance: A Call for Peace," a work that originally involved over 400 individuals performing on the 50th Anniversary of the end of

World War II. At age 93, Anna Halprin (n.d.) continues to perform, dance, and teach, and has become a pioneer in the arts and health field. I look to her work with hospice patients for inspiration as I work with the very elderly and frail, and those with advanced dementia and Alzheimer's disease. She embraces diverse participation, challenges assumptions about who is a dancer and what dance is, and is a testimony that one is never too old to dance.

Artists as social resources. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) furthered the idea that art could be accessible and have public value and social relevance. The WPA clearly and financially demonstrated that artists are resources for society. Launched in the 1930s as part of Roosevelt's New Deal and designed to stimulate the economy during the Great Depression, the WPA monetarily invested in artists of all disciplines working in the public sphere. With the core value of high quality craft, The Federal Art Project funded artists to create murals for the enhancement of public spaces, bringing beauty into the everyday. The WPA also commissioned playwrights and oral historians through the Federal Theater Project. Calling attention to socially relevant issues, these performing artists created work that directly addressed the concerns of communities (Fitzgerald, 2008; Korza & Bacon, 2011).

Similar to, and inspired by, the WPA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was started in the mid 1970s by the Nixon and Ford administrations as a response to the high levels of unemployment. Seeing artists as a resource for community improvement, CETA put artists to work in the name of public service and launched a new generation of socially engaged artists working in all realms of the public sphere, including schools, housing projects, and social service agencies.

Mexican-American artist, Judy Baca was one of 20 CETA artists hired to work with the city of Los Angeles' Parks and Recreation Department. The city was having trouble with vandalism because gang members had tagged thousands of public sites with graffiti as a way of marking their turf. Baca befriended opposing gang members, who then worked collaboratively with her to make a mural entitled, *Mi Abuelita* ("SPARC", n.d., Lacy, 1995). The way Baca publicly demonstrated the capacity and potential of those who others might call "trouble makers" is something I admire and aspire to accomplish with my work.

Baca's *Mi Abuelita* supported all elements of the core values of socially engaged practices, and is an exemplary model. With refined craft, Baca (n.d) went on to work with over 400 youth and their families during the summers between 1974-1976 to create "The Great Wall of Los Angeles." This world-renowned mural, which stretches nearly half of a mile, depicts a multi-cultural history of California that is underrepresented in conventional education. Baca (n.d.) states,

I designed this project as an artist concerned not only with the physical aesthetic considerations of a space, but the social, environmental and cultural issues affecting the site as well. I am not a social worker, though people mistakenly call me one and I am not a teacher although I have teaching skills. I draw on skills not normally used by artists. I've learned as much as I've taught from the youth I've had the good fortune to know by working alongside of them. They've taught me among other things how to laugh at myself, how to put play into hard work, and how not to be afraid to believe in something. I am extremely grateful.

This two-way learning demonstrates a very important core value of socially engaged practices: reciprocity. Artists are social resources that benefit communities, but working in communities also serves artists and the artwork.

In addition to visual artists such as Baca, the CETA program also fueled the creation or further development of performing arts organizations, several of which are still in existence today. CETA support launched Liz Lerman's early career. In 1975 Liz started teaching classes for senior adults at the Roosevelt Hotel, also known as the "Roosevelt for Senior Citizens," because she wanted to make a dance about her mother's recent death from cancer, and she could not imagine the work having only young, trained dancers (Lerman, 2011). A year later she founded what would become one of the most influential forces in community-engaged dance, the intergenerational Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, which she led for 35 years.

Liz flourished with CETA support. It allowed her to build the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange because it supported the salary of several artist/administrators, including the first company members and a managing director (Lerman, personal communication). Regarding the value of the CETA program Lerman states, "...if the common practice among funders is to take young artists and test their capacity by giving them tiny sums of money with which they can be tantalized but do nothing...then CETA broke the mold and gave us enough to actually hire a few people and thus solidify the fledging ideas. Very powerful" (Lerman, personal communication).

While many other dancers and choreographers of the 1970s were attracted to formal abstract dances that distanced the art from lived human experience, Lerman saw dance as a birth rite, accessible to all, and a meaningful way to explore socially relevant

ideas. Liz became a social resource long before she was recognized with the MacArthur Genius Award in 2002. Liz spent a year in New York as a young dancer, but soon was drawn to Washington D.C. because of her political interests. She created dances with topics ranging from the very political to the very personal, including “9 Short Dances About The Defense Budget and Other Military Matters” and “Woman of the Clear Vision,” a work about her mother’s death which featured older adults.

In each of her endeavors, Liz’s work supported, and continues to support, all of the core values of socially engaged practices. Through a process that connects personal experiences with complex social issues, Liz was, and is, interested both in the raw beauty of “real” people dancing, and the connected qualities that emerge when trained dancers are allowed to bring their full thoughtful selves to the work. This demonstrates the core values of genuine collaboration, diverse participation, and reciprocity that are central to my work as well. Liz realized early on that dancing with senior adults and hospitalized children was not only beneficial for these populations, but also for the trained dancers in her fledgling company. The company members developed interpersonal and facilitation skills as well as skills related directly to their craft. Liz noticed that by bringing dancers out of the studio and into community settings, the dancers’ techniques and performance qualities improved. When removed from the mirror and the competitive dance environment and brought into a space where they were loved and respected by the senior adults, student dancers danced with ease, and confidence. This is one reason why I believe creating a safe environment is so important. Judgment, while important at times, can make dancers self-conscious and hinder performance quality. When dancers feel safe and good about themselves, they are able to do better work.

Professionalization of Socially Engaged Arts Practices. Through the 1980s, in addition to the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, other professional companies committed to socially engaged practices began to emerge. These included Urban Bush Women, David Dorfman Dance, AXIS, Pat Graney and Dancers, and Cornerstone Theater (Fitzgerald, 2008). These companies, still in existence today, are equally committed to both community engagement and concert performance, finding that the two feed and inform each other. Unlike some touring professional companies who might do a one-time master class when in town for a performance, professional companies committed to community work sustain long term projects and make content driven work that is informed and often includes community members. With high aesthetic standards, performances with diverse casts happen on the nation's major stages, such as Lincoln Center and the Kennedy Center, but also happen in untraditional spaces like museums, schools, senior centers, libraries, shipyards, and prisons.

In the 1990s after more than two decades of sustained practices, Liz Lerman began to articulate four main questions that became the mission statement of the dance exchange and provide the foundation of my socially engaged dance practices. These questions are, "Who gets to dance? Where is it happening? What is it about?" And, "Why does it matter?" Lerman has said, "not every dance is for everybody, but everyone gets to dance." In the 1980s her company performed with hundreds of people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and at the Statue of Liberty, and in 2013 I had the opportunity to build on these roots and lead a project through Dance Exchange that included 4000 incoming freshmen at James Madison University. Themes for Liz's dances have always dealt with personal and political subject matter, including works such as, *The Good Jew?*, *Ferocious*

Beauty: Genome, and *Small Dances about Big Ideas*, a work commissioned by Harvard Law school recognizing the 50th anniversary of the Nuremberg trials. During the creation of these works she developed methods to connect the personal to the political. One such method, *Big story/Little story*, is a text based approach that I often use when engaging communities in difficult subject matter. Liz continues to search for words and examples to describe the often ineffable significance of dance, and has recently published a book entitled, *Hiking the Horizontal: Fieldnotes from a Choreographer* delving into some of her experiences, and explaining why she thinks dance matters. Through her new writings, I am learning her theories behind the practices I have been involved in, and through my MFA education, I have begun to formulate and articulate my own.

Parallels in Practices

My socially engaged dance practices today builds upon a rich history, and is grounded in time tested core values. Advances and trends previously detailed parallel my personal practices and resonate with my current projects. These include connecting art to society and social concerns, access to artistic experiences, expanded notions of art, artists as social resources and the professionalization of Socially Engaged Arts Practices.

Connecting art to society and social concerns. Unlike the classic image of the distant and aloof artist, I consider myself an artist, a citizen, and a member of multiple communities. These different communities inform my artistic practices. However, the romantic notion of the artist removed from society is still prevalent. As a child, I remember the first time I saw my dance teacher in the grocery store. She was wearing jeans instead of a leotard, and had common food items in her cart. For the first time I saw her not just as my teacher and a dancer but also as a regular person. Now as a socially

engaged dance practitioner and an educator, I am aware of how my role as a teacher or facilitator can separate me from those with whom I work. I try to level power in the room, and have those with whom I dance see me as a whole person. I ask my students to share good news from their lives as a way to build community, and I too share with them.

This “good news” ritual first became a part my practice when I was working with teens in Baltimore’s Encounter youth theatre program. As I was working with my colleague Julianne Franz, a director and community engagement coordinator at CenterStage, we noticed the teens often came to rehearsal holding onto negative experiences from school or home. These sad feelings manifested as a lack of enthusiasm for participation, prevented connection, and undermined our collaborative process. We did not want to mask the real challenges the students were facing, but we needed to find a way to cultivate positivity and good energy. By modeling personal good news, students were able to recognize even small things that they appreciated in their lives, and were able to celebrate the successes of their peers and facilitators.

Through a humanistic approach, I invite participants to share their personal lived experiences, while reflecting on broader social concerns. In this way I am following in Rev. John Vincent’s footsteps by focusing on issues of contemporary social relevance. For example, collaborating with scientists, I use artistic and kinesthetic structures for biology education while examining the ethical implications of genetic research. Embodiment helps high school students understand embryonic development, reproductive technologies, and consider age-old questions such as “when does life begin?” Participatory structures prompt dialogue between students and help individuals

consider complex issues, such as whether or not it is humane to destroy a human blastocyst for research purposes.

Access to artistic experiences. A core value of collaboration combined with the essential element of community participation requires that many people have access to artistic experiences, even if they cannot afford to pay for it. In my socially engaged dance practices, financial barriers to participation are removed for certain projects to allow for diverse community involvement. For example, the programs I lead for the senior adults through the Mesa Arts Center and several projects for underserved teens and immigrant youth are free to participants. Local and national grant funds make this possible.

When I was commissioned to make a community dance for Arizona's Centennial, I knew, like Guard and Koch of University extension programs, that I needed a cast that represented the diversity in local communities. I worked very hard with the Mesa Arts Center to ensure the cast was intergenerational and multi-cultural by conducting workshops not only at the Arts Center, but also in schools, daycares, and country clubs.

In order to remove transportation barriers for participation in projects, workshops and rehearsals frequently take place outside of traditional art spaces and in locations more accessible to community members, such as schools, and community centers. A current project I am facilitating through the University of Maryland School of Public Health is working to reduce HIV infection in the southeast Washington D.C., a zip code with one of the highest rates of HIV infection in the country. We conduct workshops focused on building leadership skills and making healthy choices for neighborhood teens, predominantly young African American men most at risk of infection, in their local Planned Parenthood teen center.

Expanded notions of art. The typical flash-mob could hardly be called new genre public art, but in 2011 I worked with a group of students who could challenge that idea. When the BioScience High School in downtown Phoenix wanted to raise awareness about water contamination issues in the region, they worked with me to create a dance based on the water cycle and the science of contamination. The students taught the dance to 350 of their peers in school and performed it as a moment of social action at a city council. Then, they broke the flash mob mold and created an interactive, multidisciplinary event with a straightforward, socially relevant message, and taught the dance and the message about water contamination to a diverse public in a vacant lot during a community festival. Later that evening those who learned the dance gathered and performed the water cycle “flash flood mob” while a gospel choir sang “It’s Gonna Rain.” Similar to the new genre public art movement, these young scientists revolutionized art in public space with interactivity and direct social relevance.

Artists as social resources. Although CETA support ran out long before I became a professional artist, I have been fortunate to have my work with communities supported by local and national granting agencies who see artists as social resources. Most often I am commissioned by a presenting organization that receives grant funds to address a particular socially relevant issue or concern, but other times I have the opportunity to spend time with a community or communities and see what content surfaces. This takes more time, and is harder to financially support since so much of contemporary funding is directly linked to content and anticipated outcome. As I deepen my socially engaged dance practices, I am interested in cultivating connections, listening

to communities speak for themselves, and creating work that truly addresses community concerns as the community defines them.

Professionalization of Socially Engaged Arts Practices. I am grateful for the hard work artists did in the 1970s and 80s to establish companies committed to socially engaged dance practices, and the diligence these artists had in sustaining these companies through the decades. Although facilitating in community settings was not a part of my undergraduate dance education, interning with and then working professionally for the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange provided me the opportunity to grow my practices through challenging and rewarding opportunities. The establishment of professional dance companies is certainly important for providing stable income for dance artists and extending the reach of dance in society, but it can also result in a hierarchical relationship between professional artists and amateur participants. Even when professional companies have members of all ages, sizes and cultural backgrounds, the professionalism of practices further the perception that in order to be a dancer or dance, one must have training.

In my socially engaged dance practices, I consciously work to remove the labels people put on others or themselves. I truly believe that despite age, experience or physical capacity, everyone can dance. When working with incarcerated women, I do not want to know about their former crimes. I want to see beyond their stripes and cultivate their current creative capacities. When working with the sick, I celebrate their bodies' possibilities rather than focusing on ailments. In a personal communication with Tara Johnson, the site manager at a senior center where I am currently teaching, she said the class is "a great opportunity to set a diagnosis aside and allow that person who still exists

to come out and to be an active participant despite what their situation may be.” In my socially engaged dance practices I strive to acknowledge the unique capacities in all people, and work to create an environment where everyone, including myself as the artistic leader, grows and develops. Although my socially engaged dance practices continue to evolve, it is rooted the ancient wisdom of body. It builds upon centuries of dances created in communities and celebrates movement as means for connection and communication.

Chapter 4

CONNECTING TO THE BODY

Socially engaged dance practices are grounded in the body. Because movement is the vehicle of expression, it is impossible to separate oneself from the work. We are inherently physical beings on the most fundamental level. Life does not exist without the rhythmic pulsing of the heart and the flowing expansion and contraction of breath. Rarely, though, do we pay attention to this incredible non-voluntary “dance” that our bodies do all of the time. It is absolutely extraordinary. Taking time to pay attention to our bodies just being, and noticing the movement that is always happening *in us*, can be very meaningful.

By connecting to the body physically, participants can also become more aware of their emotions. Influential developmental psychologist and educator Howard Gardner, most known for his theory of multiple intelligences, describes this as “intrapersonal intelligence.” Gardner says intrapersonal intelligence includes, “...knowledge of the internal aspects of a person: access to one’s own feeling life, one’s range of emotions, the capacity to make discriminations among these emotions and eventually to label them and to draw on them as a means of understanding and guiding one’s behavior” (Gardner, 2008, p. 17),

When one is in touch with how he or she feels, physically and emotionally, he or she is better able to understand and express personal thoughts, questions, concerns, joys, feelings, and opinions. Sometimes the expression comes in the form of verbal language, but these words more often than not are connected to physical gestures that

spontaneously surface as one attempts to convey full meaning. This gestural movement that emerges is as descriptive and unique as a person's signature. The natural "body language" conveys more than words alone, and is often quite nuanced and beautiful as movement in and of itself. This movement can be captured and re-embodied as a way to deepen understanding, and can serve as a step towards creating choreography with communicative intent.

A creative dance process can make an individual more aware of his or her own body and, thus, interested in the natural movements he or she makes, but the reverse can also occur. Paying attention to gesture, which makes up natural body movements, can help an individual get in touch with his or her body. When a person is asked to speak about something he or she cares about, he or she can't help but move. Consciousness of this movement can put individuals in touch with their own personal form of physical expression, and it is an effective process for re-connecting with the body. Participants become more aware of their bodies as unique, capable, and expressive, and not merely as a vehicle to transport a brain.

Although many cultures continue to embrace the ancient wisdom of the body, the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" paradigm divorced thought from our sensory experience and created a foundation for the way Western society has separated our physical bodies from our understanding of the world. There is a perception that thought resides only in the brain. Neuroscience shows that through a complex system of neural and chemical signals, the brain is inextricably linked to the body, which is itself inherently connected to the world. Of the 80 trillion cells in the body, the average number of neurons in the brain equals a relatively mere few hundred billion (Blinkov, S.M. and

Glezer, I.I. , 1968). Spontaneous physical gesture demonstrates how we think through the body, and it is a rich embodiment of ideas and feelings. Becoming aware of this embodiment challenges the perceived mind/body dichotomy.

Tools for Connecting to the Body

You are in Charge of your Body: Guidelines for Participation. In order for anyone to participate in socially engaged dance practices, he or she must first feel safe, physically and emotionally. I begin every workshop, residency, class or rehearsal with the statement: “You are in charge of your body.” This statement is fundamental to Dance Exchange work, and something I have adopted in my practices. I always follow the statement with what has become script, in part borrowed from Liz Lerman’s methodology, but I have personalized it with my love of science, and made it participatory.

The script articulates guidelines for participation. It seems long, but since it is well practiced, it takes just a couple of minutes. I say:

You are in charge of your own body, or as my colleague Stephani Woodson says, “You are the master of your own destiny.” That means you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, and you can adapt things as you need. I don’t want to live in a world where everyone does the same thing at the same time, or where people just do as they are told. That said, there is incredible power in participation and in the opportunity that exists with us being together. So with that, if you choose to not participate, for any reason, I ask that you follow three guidelines, and the first one is to keep breathing. Really. Just breathe. Let’s practices. Take a big deep

breath in (I model this), and exhale...(I model this too) Let's try that again. Let's breathe in joy, and exhale anything that is not serving you at this moment. (Pause) If you spend the next bit of time just noticing your breath, this amazing dance that is happening inside your body all the time, then this won't be a waste of your time. Also, when we are nervous, it is natural to hold our breath, but when we do that our fight or flight response kicks in, our digestion ceases and we lose peripheral vision and our possibilities narrow. So just keep breathing! Second, turn any discomfort into inquiry. You might ask, what about this experience is uncomfortable? What might I do to make it more comfortable? Who would enjoy this? How might I learn from this? Fill yourself with questions, and this won't be a waste of your time. Third, keep a pleasant countenance on your face (model), so that others can participate without feeling awkward. Sound good? Let's go!

I have found that when you give participants the option not to participate, and remind them they have choice and ownership of their bodies, they are much more likely to join the process comfortably. I know I can be persuasive because I truly believe in the significance of this work, but I never want anyone to feel forced or coerced into doing anything they don't want to do. That is not a safe environment.

Sometimes it is challenging as a facilitator when participants are in a situation where they are required to be there, such as in a school classroom. This is what Helguera calls, "non-voluntary participation" (Helguera, 2011, p.16). I found myself in this challenging type of situation when working with Phoenix's South Mountain High School

on the “At Home in the Desert Project.” Mary Fitzgerald, a professor in the School of Film, Dance and Theatre, and I worked with a collaborative team of facilitators with certain research goals, reinforced by expectations from the funders, the Institute for Humanities Research and the National Endowment for the Arts. We wanted to see if this socially engaged dance practices project changed the way the students felt about their desert home. As such, we received permission from ASU’s Internal Review Board (IRB) to conduct research with the high school students. My personal philosophy about giving people the choice to participate, as well as the stipulations from the IRB, allowed students to opt out. That put the classroom teacher, Susan Griffin, in a tough situation, since they were taking the class for credit. In the end, most students participated, and Susan never had to use her position of authority to threaten resistant students. In non-voluntary situations, it is essential to talk about the expectations of participation at the inception of a project or program.

Connecting to Breath. Influenced by my recent experience in Movement Language Sources, a course at ASU designed to give students a theoretical and experiential study of Bartenieff Fundamentals, Body-Mind Centering and Alexander Technique, I have begun to incorporate somatic principles into my socially engaged dance practices work because they offer effective tools for individuals to connect with themselves. Somatics, a term coined by Thomas Hanna in the 1970s, describes a number of physically based practices that cultivate a deep listening to the body (Eddy, 2006). Many somatic practices, such as the Feldenkrais Method, Laban Movement Analysis, Alexander Technique, and Bartenieff Fundamentals are united by a focus on breath, especially at the beginning of a practice. In each of these somatic practices, people take

time to listen to the body, and feel their bodies through breath awareness (Eddy, 2006, p. 6).

One of the first steps of connecting to one's own body is becoming aware of breath. Because we are always breathing, it often goes unnoticed unless there is a disruption, such as in an asthma attack or a bronchitis cough. One of the first steps in studying Bartenieff Fundamentals is to become aware of one's own breath pattern. Some people tend to expand their chest front and back as they inhale, and for others their ribs widen sideways as they breathe in and narrow as they exhale. Some individuals move slightly up and down with their breath. Breath patterns are individual, and can influence movement patterns. For example, how we breathe can cause us to sway slightly side to side as we walk, or tend towards bobbing up and down. The movement is subtle, and one way to breath or walk is not inherently better than another. As a way to ground participants and empower them to follow themselves rather than copying my movements, I have people notice their own individual breath pattern. I invite them to touch their own rib cage and diaphragm for a few silent breaths. This act, while seemingly simple, can be quite uncomfortable and also profound for people.

Many ancient traditions, such as yoga and Tai-Chi, have quite sophisticated techniques for cultivating breath awareness. I borrow from these traditions and others as a warm-up for socially engaged dance practices. When working with senior adults or those resistant to movement, I begin slowly. Inviting participants to form a circle first, I ask them to notice their own breathing as they stand or sit. Some people naturally close their eyes, but I do not require this since it often makes people uncomfortable and actually stifles the breath. After about a minute I direct people to put one foot into the circle

“during the next exhale” and to shift the weight slightly forward onto that foot. On the next inhale we “pour” the weight to the back foot, and I model this. As we exhale, we shift the weight forward, and after a few rounds we add a circle of the arms forward and backward, “matching the circle of the arms to the cycle of the breath.” Depending on the group I add a few other Tai-Chi elements, using breath to initiate and guide the movement.

In contrast to my approach with senior adults, when working with younger dancers I often begin by getting the heart rate elevated and breath quickened through moderately intense aerobic activity. I guide participants to walk around the room for eight counts, go down to the ground in eight counts, roll around for eight counts, and rise to standing in eight counts. Then we repeat the series in increasingly smaller timeframes: in four counts, then two counts, and finally one count. Then the whole series is repeated replacing the walking with running or light jogging. In less than five minutes everyone is panting, and noticeably warmer. Abruptly, I ask the dancers to stand, close their eyes, and listen to their bodies. I say, “Notice your breath. Can you feel your heartbeat? Has your temperature shifted?” After a few moments I invite them to actively lengthen their exhales, bringing their breath back to neutral.

As participants stand, eyes closed, concentrating on their breath, I encourage them to “stand without judgment.” I lead them through a guided meditation. I often say, “Resist the temptation to fix and adjust, and allow yourself the moment to focus in... and notice. Recognize the subtle shifts of your body as it works to keep you upright in the constant duel with gravity. Feel the suspension and the release of your breath. Notice your heartbeat. Take a moment to stand without judgment, and recognize all the

incredible things your body is doing for you in this moment, and all of the time. You are amazing, just as you are.” Every time I say this, I re-invest in what I am saying. I fall in love again with physiology and am in awe of every body.

Taking this time to honor one’s own body is an extremely important step in socially engaged dance practices. It sets a tone of respect of self, which can carry over to respect of others. Recognizing our tendency towards judgment and promoting appreciation is especially helpful when working with young people, particularly those in the self-conscious adolescent years, or dancers, because the dance world is often fraught with criticism. Judgment, of self or others, prevents participants from sharing their thoughts, feelings, stories and movement, and judgment denies us access to the creativity that is in everyone. Judgment might be helpful as one is in the final stages of crafting or refining, but it is toxic at the early generative stages of socially engaged dance practices.

Build A Phrase. Another tool for connecting to the body has been described but not named directly: watching for spontaneous descriptive gesture, and crafting this into a movement phrase. This classic Liz Lerman Dance Exchange tool is called Build A Phrase, and it is a cornerstone of my socially engaged dance practices. The process of recognizing one’s own unique movement vocabulary, and listening to that gesture, connects individuals to their bodies. It awakens the recognition that all bodies are expressive, and not just those of trained dancers.

In Build A Phrase, a facilitator asks a question that elicits a descriptive response, such as, “Describe your favorite place in your home,” or “What causes are you passionate about and why?” The facilitator pays attention to the spontaneous gesture that accompanies the verbal response, collects these gestures and teaches them back to the

group in a sequence built one gesture at a time. Although the tool is widely practiced, I have deepened and evolved my application of it.

Often new practitioners to the generative tool simply string the movements together in the order they were said. I tend to listen to several stories, I wait for the most physically animated gestures to emerge and I point out the movement to the group. I capture and teach the movement, being mindful not to lose the details. Then I “go back” to what I had heard previously and design one movement that can be a symbol for multiple stories. I continue to build the phrase, moving between spontaneous gesture, collecting and designing movements for a resonant idea. Fostering co-creativity, I often encourage participants to start designing these symbolic gestures as well. I make sure that the final phrase holds together as choreography, not just an exercise or activity, so I craft it, making sure it has variations in tempo, size of movement, levels, etc. Often music is added, and participants get a sensation of dancing, even if sitting. The series of gestures transform seamlessly into a dance, but the movement does not lose its original meaning. Participants invest in the movement that has meaning to them, and they connect to their bodies through content.

Chapter 5

CONNECTING INDIVIDUALS AND CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Most socially engaged dance projects connect people. I strive to make dances and design experiences that connect members within a defined community, and also implement projects that connect people across differences of age, physical or mental ability, race, class, or ideological viewpoints. Ewell (2006) states, “as community arts workers, we are challenged to wrestle with the biggest possible questions about human beings, communities, life. We are challenged to find a unique vocabulary that — unlike other arts movements — integrates rather than isolates” (p. 11).

It is indeed true that some art, in the name of social critique, is disruptive and uses divisive means to challenge the status quo (Knox, 2013, p.c). Shannon Jackson (2011), a scholar who speaks often about socially engaged practices across arts disciplines says,

While some social art practice seeks to forge social bonds, many others define their artistic radicality by the degree to which they disrupt the social...[but], when a political art discourse too often celebrates a social disruption at the expense of social coordination, we lose a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to interdependent social imagining (p.14).

Co-creative community participation is at the heart of my socially engaged dance practices. Individuals share their stories and their perspectives. They generate movement material and work together and with a facilitating artist to design this movement into a

dance. Through this process, participants come to know each other, and people who would never otherwise be together connect in powerful ways.

Last spring I had the opportunity to work with a diverse multicultural and intergenerational ensemble for a community dance commissioned by the Mesa Arts Center for their annual Creativity Festival. On the day of our final performance, I asked participants to reflect on their experiences. I asked them to tell me a bit about their highlights, their challenges, and their discoveries. Almost every one of the nearly thirty dancers mentioned the sense of community and connectivity they felt in being a part of the cast. In these anonymous surveys participants said:

- I felt so connected to everyone through this.
- It was nice to meet new people and re-new old friendships.
- A highlight was the sense of community built between us...I became closer with the people around me.
- The moments of community building, of people getting to know each other was meaningful. I will remember the day of the performance when people were laughing and eating and talking about life.

This cast ranged in age from three to seventy-six years old. Some were born and raised in Mesa, some were exchange students from Kenya or India. Most of the participants were heterosexual, some were gay. Some were Mormon, some were agnostic. They were Black, White, Hispanic, wealthy and poor. Some had danced their whole lives, some had never danced before. Regardless of their differences, in the words of a participant, they became a “family.” Because of this

“warm-fuzzy” feeling, some of my art colleagues might dismiss this work as “touchy feely.” Rather than get defensive, I think about how incredible it is that through this work, we get to touch, and we get to feel. In this way, I think it is especially significant that our bodies, and thus our whole selves, are involved. Moving together, teaching our own movement and learning another’s develops empathy, and empathy is an incredible tool to promote understanding across divides. For example, it is easy to be against homosexuality, or Mormons or whatever it is you are against, until you know and care about someone who fits into that category of people. Prejudicial tendencies that focus on difference are lessened through this work. People connect through the process, and in time find things out about each other that may have prevented them from being open to each other at the onset. When this happens, they question themselves and then learn to love across differences. Making these connections is a personal process that results in a deeply political act, one that promotes peace and understanding well beyond the project.

When working with mixed-abilities casts, assumptions are questioned and personal connections are made. In a project entitled, *Join the Dance*, commissioned by the Minnesota Chorale, the professional chorale partnered with the Courage Center, an organization that provides services to individuals living with physical and cognitive disabilities. Three groups, the Courage Center participants, members of the Minnesota Chorale, and local professional dancers, worked together with me to design a suite of dances scored by choral music. The Courage Center participants had an incredible work ethic, and innovative ideas that informed the shape of the work.

Through the opportunity to co-create and connect, the able bodied cast literally moved beyond stereotypes and sympathy, to appreciation, empathy and respect. Due to specialized accessible public transportation, the Courage Center dancers would sometimes spend two or more hours getting to and from rehearsal. Even those who could not speak verbally came prepared with questions on an iPad or through an interpreter, and it was evident that they rehearsed independently. Minnesota Chorale singers noticed this work ethic and it inspired the professionals who were reluctant to dance initially to commit more time to the project. People living with disabilities always have to adapt to an able bodied world, in some sections I had the able bodied dancers study and embody the variations made by the wheelchair dancers. One woman, Martha, a former ballet dancer, no longer had access to her right side, but moved exquisitely with her left. I directed the cast to study how Martha used her focus and intent so that her limited range of movement spoke volumes. I did not do this to simply make Martha feel good, although I know it was meaningful for her to be recognized for her dancing again. My intention in my direction was to have the ensemble focus on detail and nuance. This section of the dance ended up being contemplative, connected, and very special to witness.

Socially engaged dance practices can help make connections between different groups, and it can also help reconnect and rebuild established relationships within a community. This was the case when I worked with women separated from their children due to incarceration. In the spring of 2011, I had the opportunity to collaborate with visual artist Gregory Sale on his *It's Not Just Black Or White* project at the ASU Art Museum. Our collaborative project, entitled *A Mother Daughter Distance Dance*, aimed to reconnect three pairs of mothers and daughters, one of which had been estranged for

almost 20 years. In a six-week period I conducted workshops for the women at Phoenix's Estrella jail, and danced with their daughters on the ASU campus. The project culminated in a virtually connected workshop where through a tenuous Skype connection, the pairs danced with and for each other. Even without being able to physically touch, the families connected. Through dance they were able to express that which cannot be communicated in words alone.

Despite technical challenges the virtual workshop was a successful artistic outcome, but it was just one part of a meaningful process that used metaphor and a multi-disciplinary approach to build connections through distance. Very early on in our collaborations, Gregory began to speak of the virtually connected workshop as a "pearl" of "*It's Not Just Black or White.*" He gave me a box of pearls that he had from Thailand and spoke about how the pearl is the only gem that is an organism's response to an irritant, building value under extreme pressure. It became a symbol for the inmate moms, and we structured the art making workshops under themes related to the pearl: change, beauty, and value.

The process included not only the creation of original choreography, but theme related readings, personal writings, the creation of visual art in the form of collage and jewelry given from mother to daughter, and the design of original music. Although there was some initial and even residual resistance from the participants, they came to know each other and themselves in a different way. There was an incredible amount of processing, more than I have experienced in any other project, and at times I was uncomfortable thinking that we may be on the verge of social work, a field where I have no training. Facilitated by a choreographer, *A Mother/Daughter Distance Dance* focused

on the creative act, and while there certainly were therapeutic benefits, the heart of the project was in the art. There were many, many tears, discovery, and deep and meaningful dialogue that I know would not have been possible without the art making. In our debriefing conversations, the women agreed that it was the dancing that allowed them to be vulnerable, and that moving enabled them to express what they hold inside. I know the open conversations we shared served the art as much as the dancing fostered the ability to feel, communicate, and connect. These connections happened in many ways, seen and unseen, between the mothers, between the daughters, between the mothers and daughters, between the artists involved, and within the broader public.

In the words of Simon Dove, the former Director of the School of Dance at Arizona State University, and a witness to the virtual workshop, this program was “really a testimony to the unique quality of dance to express the inexpressible - and build community in such a tangible and potent way.” (Dove, personal communication, 2011). While the program aim was not directed toward an external population, those who witnessed the experience saw a marked change in the individuals involved, as expressed in communications with correction officers at Estrella jail. Written evaluations and verbal reflections document how this process fostered movement as a non-verbal medium for communicating thoughts and emotions, how the project developed self- awareness, communication and collaboration skills and offered a positive method of stress reduction. When the families came together through movement, it created honest, impactful art, and gave participants new tools for expression.

Tools for Connecting Individuals and Connecting Communities

Knowing names. In a socially engaged dance project, it truly matters who is in the room. Because the art cannot be created without community participation, the more diverse the community, the more textured the work. Therefore, it is especially important that everyone knows that they are respected and appreciated. Deciding to participate in a socially engaged dance project is an act of trust, and no facilitator should take this lightly. Unlike other forms of dance, where the movement is already choreographed, we don't know what the outcome will be because it doesn't exist until the group creates it together. When people arrive to the first workshop or rehearsal, they are often stepping into the unknown. The process often involves sharing personal experiences and perspectives, so creating an environment where people feel safe and honored is paramount.

Demonstrating an honest respect for each person is the first step to connecting with individuals and subsequently connecting communities. How I model respect and care informs how participants will treat each other. One important way to show this respect directly is to make every effort to learn everyone's names, as soon as they walk in the door. It seems simple, but it can mean so much. It says I am glad you came, and I value you as an individual. Even if people have nametags on, I learn names so I can look people in the eye and connect.

One tool I use to help me learn everyone's name, and to help a group get to know each others' names, is a name and movement warm-up activity. I ask someone to share their name and either make a movement that would feel good to their body today, or make a shape or a movement that represents the first letter of their name. Once this is generated, I invite the full group to repeat the name and gesture. Depending on the size of

a group, we can accumulate the names and movements, adding one at a time and rehearsing from the beginning. The movement serves as a mnemonic device, helping people learn and retain names, and quickly a full warm-up phrase is created. Beginning like this also helps me, as a facilitator, get a sense of how comfortable the group is in designing movement, and what the physical range is in the group. As in all activities, people are in charge of their bodies, and can participate standing or in a chair.

There are times when it is just impossible to get everyone's names. When in a large lecture hall, or other large venue most people don't even try, but because I believe saying your name brings you to a space and makes a connection, recently I have been experimenting with a new structure. In these situations I am usually onstage or at the front of a classroom, and the physical distance illustrates the divide. I tell the "audience" that as a socially engaged dance practitioner, knowing who is in the room is very important, and that normally I would introduce myself to everyone, and that way I wouldn't be the only one that gets an introduction. Then I say, "Since we can't do that today, in the spirit of bringing ourselves here together, let's all say our names on the count of 3. " After the three counts the room is a mess of sound, names blurred over each other, and often laughter at the ridiculousness of it. By leveling the power in the room, a connection is made.

Duet Structures. In socially engaged dance practices I find it helpful for individuals to work with just one other person before trying to function in a small group, and certainly before we try to collaborate as one full ensemble. There are numerous structures to help connect pairs, including traditional dance partnering and weight sharing, as well as, other tools used to generate movement or ignite a discussion. I will

outline a few such tools that I use most often in diverse communities: Crossing the Circle, Mirroring, and Blind Lead.

Crossing the Circle. We spend a lot of time in circles in socially engaged dance projects. Circles are egalitarian, everyone can see each other and power and focus are not directed to any one person. I start every workshop, class or rehearsal in a circle, and sometimes stay in this formation for the duration. Often a new group will congregate standing next to the people they know best, which means young people are next to each other and apart from the older participants, etc. Although this is understandable, this pattern must be broken quickly so cliques do not form and so there is not a sense of “us” and “them.”

Shifting where people are on the circle is simple, and can do a lot for building connections. I simply say, “I am going to count down from 8 by the time I am at zero find yourself between two people you are not next to right now.” When they get there I invite them to introduce themselves to the people on their right and left. We repeat this a few times, and I might add a prompt like, “say one thing that brought you here” or “share one thing you bring here” or “what is one thing you hope to take away?” Just as we warm-up the body, it is important to warm-up our ability to connect and share.

Mirroring. Mirroring is a tool used commonly by Liz Lerman and other artists for a variety of purposes, such as to build non-verbal skills of communication, level power between old and young, and create connections between people who do not know each other. Pairs form, and as a team they decide who is going to lead first. The leader is directed to move in a way that can be followed, as a mirror, by the other. After a bit of time the facilitator says, “switch,” and they switch roles so leader becomes follower. I

make sure to switch at least 4 times, so leaders can be informed by the process of following and vice versa. After the group becomes proficient in this, they can begin to explore distance and proximity, switching roles without being prompted, and even changing partners.

Blind Lead. Blind Lead is a commonly known activity, often used to build trust between people. As the title might suggest, one person leads another who has their eyes closed around the room. After a bit of time, roles switch and the original leader becomes the follower with their eyes closed. The Liz Lerman Dance Exchange TOOLBOX expanded the process to include the seamless switching of partners and roles, and the addition of partner shape sculpting (DX website). Blind Lead in this expanded form can build group cohesion deeply and quickly through a series of intimate partner connections.

In my independent socially engaged dance practices, I have not altered the time-tested structures of either Mirroring or Blind Lead. However, I do not limit the experience to just a “trust exercise.” So much information can surface through these experiences, and my job is to ask people what they notice, and to frame it within the context of what it is we are working on. For example, I am currently working with teens in Washington D.C. on a community health initiative focused on sexual health. In this context, Blind Lead became an exercise about respectful touch and recognizing resistance non-verbally. Mirroring opened a conversation about when it is good to follow, and when you need to make choices that are right for you. These were conversations that surfaced through the experience and that were articulated by the teens. It led to a rich participatory discussion that connected the teens together as they worked to unpack a complex community issue.

Group Work. Once participants become comfortable collaborating in pairs, small groups can take on tasks together. Theme and Variation is a way that a few participants can adapt material, such as that created in the Build A Phrase (described previously), to create short choreographic studies. Groups learn about how to personalize learned material by changing levels, altering tempo or movement qualities, making movement a different size, traveling through space, or simply adjusting the facing of pre-designed movement. I ask that groups not only try to retain the movement variations so they are able to share compositions with other participants, but to be cognizant of the process of collaboration and the skills required, which reach far beyond the studio walls.

Connecting individuals is a creative and important act within socially engaged dance practices. Embracing diversity is an ideal, and movement tools can help individuals bond and authentically appreciate one another. These connections not only benefit the individuals involved. The cohesion that grows from meaningful movement exchanges benefits the artistic work created together, providing a safe environment to deepen the exploration of content.

Chapter 6

CONNECTING TO CONTENT

Socially engaged dance projects connect individuals to ideas. Content for a socially engaged dance can be a classroom curriculum or a controversial contemporary issue. Socially engaged dance projects use the body to promote discovery and consider ideas in new ways. Through content driven work, I intend to initiate conversations, sometimes difficult conversations, in a space that can hold complexity and embrace diversity.

In most contemporary art, there is a great distance between the “creator” and the “consumer.” Theaters often have a divide between the stage and the audience, and when artists make something that is supposed to *mean* something, often audiences are literally left in the dark. Socially engaged dance projects blur lines between creator and consumer, and the resulting work is the embodied execution of ideas that can communicate to a public (Ewell, 2006).

As we embody ideas, we can connect and reflect on them differently than if we were to just read or speak them. When people use their bodies to represent an idea, often nuanced information is revealed as they describe why they made the choices they did. This is a form of research, and embodiment can prompt interesting discussions between people. The movement is specific and rich with focus and performance commitment because the performer understands the communicative intent.

Tools for Connecting to Content. There are countless tools for generating movement material from content, but not all are specific to socially engaged dance

practices. A few that are especially important in my work are: *Equivalents*, *Somatic Sensory Postcard*, *Moving Q and A*, and *Build A Phrase*.

Equivalents. *Equivalents* is a classic generative tool central to the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange TOOLBOX. In *Equivalents* a dancer makes a movement or a shape to represent, or equal, a word. Each movement has a beginning, middle and end, and sometimes the dancer is instructed to return to neutral between words as an intentional way of disrupting flow, thus generating a surprising, often quirky, movement phrase. When dancers are interviewed about why they chose to create the shape or movement they did, really interesting information can be shared that reveals how the creator is thinking about the subject matter. For example, when working with elementary school children to understand the word “moral,” one student made a movement that looked like opening a book because, she said, “the moral comes at the end of the story.” Another child made his body into the shape of the letter “M.” Yet another child adopted a pose like the Rodin’s famous “thinker” sculpture. When asked why, he said, “Because morals are something you really have to think about.”

Equivalents can help people think about and remember important information. As mentioned above, I am currently working with DC youth on an HIV prevention project. Teens are hired by their neighborhood Planned Parenthood to facilitate peer-led community health workshops, and as part of this the teens need to teach some direct facts about HIV transmission and testing. The director of the Planned Parenthood Center described that section of the workshop as “didactic” and asked if it could be more participatory, while still communicating the important information. While working with the teens, we used *Equivalents* to translate the words of the HIV facts into movement. We

then crafted the movements into phrases, and now these dance sequences (paired with the original words) will be taught by the teens as a way to share facts about HIV.

For most of my experience, I have used Equivalents as a way for the body to translate words. In this way the pathway is directed from thought to action. Recently though, influenced by a few experiences with somatic practices, I have been interested in reversing this, starting with the body first. In a session that I conducted with women incarcerated at Estrella jail and their daughters in the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program, we explored the idea of gratitude, beginning in our body. The theme of the day was “thanks,” and the social workers conducting the beginning of the session spent a good bit of time leading the participants to share what they were thankful for. My initial inclination was to use Equivalents to represent statements such, “I am thankful for my Mom...I am thankful for food...I am thankful for the earth.” But then I considered the word thankful, and wanted to explore just that word more deeply. I asked the women and girls to consider where they feel thankfulness inside. For some it was in their chest, where yogis would call the heart chakra. For some it was in their hands and how they give and receive gifts. For some it was a full body sensation that was better described as a warm temperature or a color, such as yellow and red. The somatic approach of listening to the body sensations and honoring feeling as well as thought, generated rich and specific movement. This was a new application of Equivalents that bridged the original tool with somatic work and Build A Phrase.

Somatic Sensory Postcard. Somatic Sensory Postcard is a new tool recently developed for the *Spark! Creativity Festival*. The content for the work was an investigation into creativity, which inspired me to explore some new generative

approaches. At the time I was working with ASU dance faculty member, Becky Dyer. Becky applies a range of somatic practices in her work, and I appreciated her ability to draw out unique movement through imagery.

Inspired by my work with Becky, I devised a structure that I used in an early rehearsal with the intergenerational cast. Half of the dancers began seated or lying on the ground with their eyes closed, while the other half observed an assigned partner. The dancers had previously done some free writing describing where they came from, and I invited them to think of what they wrote through the lens of creativity. It was a much more open structure than I am used to offering. Some people thought of a place where they feel creative, some thought of a teacher who taught them though creative means as a child. Dancers could take the assignment where they wanted to go. Then I had them imagine what a postcard would look like in that space, paying particular attention to the details. After a period I invited the dancers to move *in* that space with their eyes closed, and then I asked them to *be* that space. Partners observed and collected some of the subtle and specific movements that emerged. It was my hope that these could then be crafted into a set choreographed phrase, but taken out of the guided experience, the movement lost nuance. However, the dancers came to better understand the content of “creativity,” and were able to write about how the postcard experience was a creative act. It also helped them to be more sensitive to the outdoor site, which was the venue for the performance.

Moving Q and A. Moving Q and A is a dialogue-based structure used to generate content. Moving Q and A was previously called The Question Structure, and was first used as a generative tool when Liz Lerman began creating *Ferocious Beauty Genome*. In

Liz's version, participant pairs get together and have a brief conversation about a question asked. Then they turn away from each other and make a movement for something either said or heard. After a series of interactions, everyone has a brief movement phrase that catalogues the series of conversations.

The version I have developed is often used as a means to encourage participants to move through the room and talk to each other. Even though I have subtracted the requirement for the participants to generate movement, it remains a focused way to explore content. I have also added music to cue interactions, and describe the experience as "a combination between musical chairs and speed dating." I turn on music and ask people to walk around the room, thinking about a particular question. When I stop the music, they are to find a partner immediately (like finding a seat in musical chairs) and share their thoughts about the question asked. I suggest that if they can't find a partner right away, they should wave their arms and let themselves be known. This ensures that people are actively trying to participate, and I make sure everyone finds a partner swiftly so no one feels left out. Participants have a brief conversation on the topic, and when they hear the music fade up, that is the cue to start walking through the space listening for the next question to prompt the next cycle. This activity can also be done with some, but not all participants, working seated. After just a few minutes, the group has been shuffled, many people have talked to each other, and content for further exploration has surfaced through tools such as Build A Phrase.

Build A Phrase. In Build A Phrase a facilitator observes natural body language, collects these movements, and then sequences the gestures into a repeatable movement phrase. Already discussed as a tool for individuals to connect to their own

communicative bodies, the tool is also an effective way to generate movement directly connected to content. Even if the original gestural movement is adapted and varied, dancers remember the stories from which it came, the person the gesture originally came from, and the meaningful content is carried forth.

Often our gestures emphasize what we are speaking, but sometimes they juxtapose our words, or offer a different layer of narrative, maybe even one the speaker is not aware of. Through the study of somatics, in which I had to rigorously observe and study a subject in detail to identify their personal movement preferences in dance, I have become more attuned to movement patterns and pattern divergence in conversation. I am better able to see, not only obvious gestures, but the subtle movements that add subtext. Previously, I may have dismissed these smaller movements as idiosyncratic gestures, habitual movements not relevant to the content discussed, but now I sometimes see moments that emerge that can offer insight or open a door for further investigation. For example, in a recent workshop with young choreographers, a student was discussing a news article about the effect of TV watching on children. She made recognizable gestures, frontal and symmetrical that illustrated the box of a television and two children sitting in front. But then, just for a quick moment, she tipped her head and took her right hand just behind her right ear while wiggling her fingers quickly. In that instant, she ceased presentation mode, and was finding something inside about how she felt about what she was saying. When I asked her about it, thinking the flickering fingers might be representing TV static or noise, it turns out she was remembering how the article talked about how many contemporary children's shows are educational, and how TV can actually aid children in learning about crime prevention. Her gesture represented her idea

that there was busy brain activity buzzing inside. Inquiring about this gesture opened a rich discussion about the student's feelings about TV as a teaching tool.

Chapter 7

RE-CONNECTING DANCE TO SOCIETY

Sojourn Theatre's Artistic Director Michael Rhod (1998) writes, "the act of expression is an act of connection - through it we become positive, active participants in our lives and in our communities" (p. xix). Through connecting individuals to their own communicative bodies, to each other, and to ideas, socially engaged dance practices build skills with applications not only for art making but for serving in social, civic and educational arenas.

Socially engaged dance practices provide tools for individuals to discover and deepen their own creative voices. When people recognize their individual creative capacities and when those are brought together with others, we collaboratively invent something we could have never imagined alone. Everyone is born innately creative, but in most American schools children are taught how to learn information and how to follow directions. Then, as adults, Americans want to be a part of an innovative nation. Making an original work through collaborative means in a socially engaged dance project develops skills for innovation in the arts, but also in other sectors of society. These are skills that are needed to help solve our world's biggest problems.

Art provides tools to question and re-imagine the world. Dance allows people to physically manifest creative vision. There are limitless possibilities in a co-creative process, and navigating this can be thrilling and challenging. A socially engaged dance project builds skills to deal with complexity and manage uncertainty, for all involved. Envisioning multiple outcomes is both liberating and overwhelming, particularly for

young people and senior adults, who need help making choices when there are multiple “right” answers. Often in a socially engaged dance project, the generative process is very productive, but only certain ideas can move forward into the final crafted work. The rehearsal processes can help a cast experiment and try out several ideas. In this process participants need to invest in their own ideas, as well as support those of others. The act builds cooperative proficiencies, and models the idea that multiple truths can exist. One would hope that our nation’s leaders could embrace these ideals in action.

A co-creative process builds confidence and leadership skills. I do much work with young people in leadership development in the arts. As previously mentioned, in 2011, I had the opportunity to work with students at the Bioscience High School in downtown Phoenix. They created a participatory “flash flood” mob presentation based on the water cycle as a mechanism to educate their peers and the greater Phoenix public about local water contamination issues. It was remarkable to witness the youth teach the dance to over 300 of their schoolmates, and then have the confidence to perform the dance at a city council meeting before talking to elected officials about the environmental issues embedded in the content of the dance. Watching them in action reminded me of how art making is empowering, and how powerful people can create change, small and large.

Co-creative artistic processes require thoughtful engagement. Participants practice skills of participation: how to survey a situation, formulate ideas, question, listen, make choices based on their informed values, and follow through. These are the same skills of active citizenship.

Extensive work has been done to showcase how socially engaged arts practices build the skills of democracy, on an individual and institutional level. *Animating Democracy*, a program developed by Americans for the Arts, is widely regarded by universities and funding agencies (such as the Surdna foundation) for their research in this arena. Their website, *Resources for Evaluating the Social Impact of the Arts* (n.d.), is an incredible resource for artists and community based organizations interested in how the arts can promote social change at an institutional and community level. *Animating Democracy's* co-directors Pam Korza and Barbra Schaffer Bacon (2011) write:

When the arts and artists are integrated with practices of civic engagement and social activist, they can and are making significant contributions as catalysts...they can enhance awareness, knowledge and discourse around issues, clarify values and confirm or shift attitudes, increase capacity (skills, resources, status) to engage in civic concerns, improve systems and policies that ensure social justice” (Korza & Bacon 2011, p.6).

There are no specific tools for how to reconnect dance to society, it happens through multiple processes of social engagement through dance. The core values of socially engaged dance practices: genuine collaboration and diverse participation, reciprocity and open communication, ethical risk taking in an environment that is both rigorous and nurturing, and building skills for social agency, all work towards making dance with social relevance.

Reconnecting dance with society takes time and participation. It takes hard work to build and maintain sustained partnerships with social and civic service institutions, educational entities, arts organizations, community centers, and senior

care facilities. Additionally, relationships need to be developed with local and national funders who are essential to make the work happen, and who also benefit from the work in reciprocal relationships with the artists involved. Reconnecting dance with society begins with first connecting dance to self, then developing meaningful personal relationships and community connections through dance. For those of us involved in the community of professional socially engaged practitioners, reconnecting dance with society also means investing in the future of socially engaged dance practices. It means cultivating the next generation of practitioners through harvesting our knowledge of the practices and mentoring new dancers who have a broad and comprehensive vision of what dance is, and what it can do.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

Socially engaged dance practitioners are called to this work. We envision a better world, and we witness transformations, large and small, that move us in that direction. The projects I have conducted over the past three years have been enlightening, rewarding, and demanding. My socially engaged dance practices have evolved, and while I have established techniques for generating movement and cultivating connections, no two situations are the same. The communities I work in are constantly teaching me and helping me hone my practices. The work is powerful and effective, challenging and evolving.

A major challenge in this work is describing socially engaged dance practices, an endeavor essential for gathering stakeholders. Because each project is different and created through the unique contributions of the populations involved, it is impossible to describe to a funder or a partner agency what exactly it will be before it is created. Nevertheless, it is possible to label and promote this work. This MFA thesis defines my work in socially engaged dance practices within the larger historical context. Through a survey of the field, my research has distilled the practices into three essential components: community participation, a multi-disciplinary approach, and social relevance.

Another challenge I face as my work evolves, is to polish my craft and refine tools of engagement, but not to limit myself to only these practices. The opportunity to study somatic practices and urban dance, as well as classes in pedagogy, public affairs and criminal justice, has expanded my range as a facilitator, and provided some

theoretical underpinnings for my socially engaged dance practices. As I continue my professional work, and improve processes, I must not become prescriptive with my approach. If this is happening, I will not be listening to the communities I am working with, adapting to their particular needs and skills, nor will I be advancing my artistry.

As society is evolving, so must socially engaged dance practices. The invention and proliferation of social media has made the world increasingly participatory and technologically connected. In a moment, friends from across the world can share a photo and connect their daily lives. With this accessibility of electronic communications, it is becoming more and more important to make opportunities for in person, face-to face connections. These physical interactions connect individuals with their own bodies, and kinesthetically connect people in a way that develops empathy and understanding.

Since the economic downturn of 2009, many of the predominant professional companies leading socially engaged dance practices in this country, including Urban Bush Women, David Dorfman Dance, and Dance Exchange, have needed to contract in order to weather the economic climate. These companies now employ fewer full time artists and have a leaner administrative staff. As a result, they are hiring more adjunct artists, or artists employed on a project-to-project basis, liberating these artists to take contracts independently as well. Although the transition has been difficult, the result is that many of the artists trained through their professional positions in these companies are seeking work in communities all across the U.S. and the world. David Dorfman is still the artistic director of his company, but also the Chair of Dance at Connecticut College. Urban Bush Women dancers continue to lead workshops and residencies as part of the company, but also as independent artists. I have had the opportunity to continue my

professional work with the Dance Exchange, but also to implement locally based projects in Arizona while collaboratively developing a socially engaged practices training program for undergraduate and graduate students at ASU.

While I have been collaborating with faculty at ASU to create courses and a program of study for the training of future professionals with a focus in socially engaged arts practices, I have researched several established or emerging programs across the U.S. and abroad. Because fewer professional companies currently hire and support full time employees, I anticipate that these new undergraduate and graduate programs will become the primary training ground for the next generations of socially engaged artists. Several established socially engaged practice artists, such as David Dorfman of David Dorfman Dance, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar of Urban Bush Women and Michael Rhod of Sojourn Theatre, have faculty positions in universities while continuing to direct and create work with their professional touring companies and in communities across the nation. The fact that some of the most notable figures in the field hold teaching positions demonstrates a commitment to the future of this work. As more young artists expand their craft to include socially engaged dance practices, I expect that the predominant model of large professional touring companies in the '80s and '90s will shift to new structures that will support artists working locally and collaboratively with other artists as well as with colleagues in educational, social and civic service sectors.

Historically, socially engaged art projects were initiated by artists or arts presenting organizations. Recently, though a new term, Civic Practice, has emerged to describe work initiated by community based organizations. Michael Rhod (2013) founded the Center for Performance and Civic Practices at Northwestern in 2010. He

describes this work as, “an activity where an artist employs the assets of his/her craft in response to the needs of non-arts partners as determined through ongoing relationship-based dialogue. The impulse of what to make comes out of the relationship, not an artist driven proposal” (p.21). This new realm of socially engaged practices is particularly exciting, and indicates that non-arts partners, such as educational, social and civic service institutions, are seeing artists as assets. These partnerships can bring artists into even more places, use the arts for a diversity of purposes, and develop meaningful, productive connections across different sectors of society.

The future of socially engaged dance practices is bright. Training programs, such as Portland State University Art and Social Practice program, Graduate Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design, Leseley College’s Masters of Education in Community Arts and Arizona State University’s new Certificate in Socially Engaged Practice are nurturing a new generation of socially engaged artists. I am thrilled to be a part of this legacy. I want to continue honing my skills in socially engaged practices by working in diverse communities, while investing in educating artists new to this important work.

At one point in my career in my late twenties I thought in order to really be successful, I should focus my efforts on a specific population. In particular, I thought my greatest contribution to the field could be through deepening my work with teens, and creating replicable models for developing leadership through the arts and embodied learning. When I moved to Arizona, where there are a greater number of senior living facilities, I had more opportunities to work with elder populations. I began to deepen my practices through working with both active older adults and those with mental and physical health issues. Concerned with incarceration in Arizona, I worked with Gregory

Sale and began dancing with incarcerated women while I continued to work with teens and youth in the At Home in the Desert project and in projects with Dance Exchange. Now, nearly a decade after I thought I needed to narrow my focus in order to refine my craft, I find myself drawn to working with the broadest spectrum of people. I find that the multiple experiences keep the work fresh, and the different projects feed each other. Although the work might seem scattered from an outside perspective, it is all part of one practice. As I continue on my lifelong path as a creative artist, I want to find ways to continue to weave experiences and articulate commonalities across various experiences.

I want to work in the most challenging situations because it makes me a better artist, facilitator and educator. I am no longer interested in touring as much, and find working over a long period of time in my home community is rewarding for myself, and meaningful for the community partners with whom I work. I have had the opportunity to work for three years now with the Mesa Arts Center to develop a creative ageing program. In this work I am able to build lasting relationships not only with participants, but the arts center staff. Additionally, because ASU dance students are invited to intern with me, I am able to connect my work in community settings with my work at the University. I am interested in finding more direct ways to link my work in education with my other creative practices. I am excited about the potential for artists to sustain long term partnerships with educational, social and civic organizations.

As I strive to expand my influence in the field of socially engaged practices and deepen and broaden the work I do in communities, I am inspired by Pat Graney and Rhodessa Jones. For over a decade both women have sustained relationships and have implemented meaningful performing arts programs in correctional facilities in their

respective cities. In these endeavors meaningful and lasting personal social change can occur. These women and others have become artists in residence in spaces that are not traditionally arts spaces. Cassie Meador is an artist in residence for the U.S. Forestry Service, making dances with policy makers in Washington D.C.'s Rock Creek Park. She is also working on projects with the Environmental Protection Agency. I am honored to be an artist working with University of Maryland's School of Public Health, and working on a national project with Catholic Charities. I hope that more and more my work will develop long term partnerships with both arts and non-arts agencies.

In a recent conversation with the Steve Seleznow, the Director of the Arizona Community Foundation, he apologized to me for the lack of arts funding. He described four areas currently most funded: education, sustainability, community development, and children and youth services. By the end of our conversation I think he understood that artists don't necessarily need to be resourced by arts funding alone, because artists could have significant and productive roles in any one of the areas he outlined. For socially engaged dance artists, the potential of working in these sectors is exciting. We seek the opportunity to do the work because of the work itself and not merely because of its fundability.

Artists can influence social change, but we cannot do it alone. We need to work with experts in other fields and work in collaboration with individuals and organizations to make a significant difference in our communities. Fortunately, some of the same activities in our creative practices, collaborating, listening, visioning, strategizing, experimenting and implementing, are used for reciprocal partnership development.

I hope to have more opportunities to develop these partnerships and work with others to contribute meaningful social change in multiple areas.

Socially engaged dance practices are not social service or outreach. They are arts with a wide embrace, not limited to the studio or the stage. They are arts that cannot be pre-scripted and communicate because of who is doing it. Simon Dove (2010) states, “A cultural practice based on products is not dynamic. A cultural landscape based on seeding artists to thrive in diverse contexts will evolve and give rise to work we cannot yet imagine, and transform people and society in ways we have only dreamed of” (p.26). As an artist citizen of the 21st century, the mission of my socially engaged dance practices is to reconnect dance to society in meaningful and socially relevant ways through honoring the wisdom of the body, listening to gesture, and cultivating creative capacities within myself, and in everyone with whom I am fortunate enough to dance.

	Wom en/ Girls	Incarcer -ation	Under served	Sustain -ability	Mixed Ability	Science	Youth	Elders
A Mother/Daught er Distance Dance	X	X	X				X	
Join the Dance			X		X			X
Fibroplasia						X		
Creative Aging					X			X
At Home in the Desert: HS			X	X		X	X	
SOS: Resilience Conference				X				
Science Choreography						X	X	
Mesa Takes Flight							X	X
Porch Dances								
BioScience HS Flash Flood Mob								
Creative Aging					X			X
Padres School Residency				X			X	
At Home in the Desert: GS	X		X	X				
Science Choreography						X	X	
Spark Community Dance							X	X
Pluripotency						X	X	
City Council Meeting			X				X	
Creative Aging					X			X
CREATE Leaders: HIV prevention project			X				X	
GSBB Estrella Jail	X	X	X				X	

Table 1: Elizabeth Johnson Recent Works

Commissioned Choreography

2013 Pluripotency

Length 1hr. Commissioned by New Haven Arts Council. Co-Choreographed with stem cell researcher Laura Grabel exploring ethical implications of genetic research Wesleyan University. Middletown CT.

2013 Spark Community Dance

Length 40min. Commissioned by Mesa Arts Center. Choreographed collaboratively with an intergenerational cast of community members. Mesa, AZ.

2012 BioScience HS Flash Flood Mob

10 min. Commissioned by BioScience HS in Phoenix and Roosevelt Row. Working with a team of science high school students to choreograph a participatory dance based on the water cycle and water contamination issues in Phoenix. Developed youth leadership skills and community awareness to social issue. Youth not only led the teaching of the dance to every member of their school but to the public on first Friday's artswalk in Phoenix. They also designed t-shirts and a website with information about the content of the dance. Phoenix, AZ.

2012 Porch Dances

20 minutes. Commissioned by Glendale Jazz and Music Festival. Developed through personal exchanges with community members at the festival. Glendale, AZ.

2012 Mesa Takes Flight

45 minutes. Commissioned by Mesa Arts Center as part of AZ Centennial Celebration. Created through interviews with over 100 community members, and included an intergenerational performing cast of 56 members. Mesa, AZ.

2011 Fibroplasia

25 minutes. Commissioned by Movement Source Dance Company. Performed by 8 professional dancers, the work explored the biological process of scar formation. Scottsdale, AZ.

2011 Join the Dance

75 minutes. Commissioned by Minnesota Chorale through Dance Exchange. Clients of the Courage Center—Minnesota's largest provider of rehabilitation services to people with disabilities—were paired with Minnesota Chorale singers in the creation and performance of choreographed works, set to music sung by the Chorale. Minnesota, MN.

2011 A Mother/Daughter Distance Dance

Anchored within the Arizona State University Art Museum, this project engaged inmate mothers at Phoenix's Estrella Jail and their daughters in a participatory, creative endeavor that virtually connected the estranged mothers and daughters through image, words, and the ineffable experience of movement. Tempe, AZ.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

ELIZABETH JOHNSON is a choreographer, dancer, and educator with a socially engaged dance practices. Elizabeth connects communities through choreography, and works with both trained dancers and people of various backgrounds. She creates dance that promotes civic dialogue, and designs participatory experiences that apply artistic practices in multiple contexts. She has a particular interest in working with youth and elders, developing participatory embodied structures for science learning and promoting leadership development through the arts. A graduate from Connecticut College with a B.A. in Dance and a minor in Theatre, she has studied at London Contemporary Dance School, taught and performed internationally, and was the Associate Artistic Director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in Metro DC for over a decade. She is currently at Arizona State University as the Coordinator of Socially Engaged Practice, working with an interdisciplinary team to create new curricula focused on training artists to work in, and engage with, diverse communities.