

## **Us And All Of This**

Written response by Martyn Coutts, April 2023

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### **Not Knowing**

The arts industry in Australia is small and due to the nature of what cultural critic Kuba Szreder calls 'the projectariat' (Szreder, 2021) you will invariably, (if you hang in there for long enough) ebb and flow into the lives of like-minded artists. I have been collaborating with choreographer and dancer Liesel Zink ever since I met her in 2009 on a Tasdance show. I met composer and sound artist Lawrence English in a hybrid performance lab in 2004 called Time Place Space, which was a collaborative effort between Performance Space, PICA and ANAT. As the three initial artists on the art project *Us and All Of This* (UAAOT) we dealt with the unknowingness of how a large-scale performance project coalesces. It is hard to imagine what a 100-person dance work will feel like, how the energy within it will track and even who the dancers will be. It is what the tech industry might refer to as 'vapourware' - it exists in the minds of the coders but not anywhere physically yet. And yet this is the alchemy we experience as artists, we don't know what the outcome will be, but we push into the process to discover what emerges. At an early meeting that Liesel, Lawrence and myself held during the process there were discussions around 'dynamic' range within the work. These elemental dramaturgies are a common concern within any performance work. However, we all had this creeping sense that something had shifted, there was a feeling that the old ways of doing things were not registering in the same way.

To understand why this was, it is necessary to return to the genesis of this work. Back in 2019, Liesel's choreographic work *The Stance* had been invited to take part in the City Contemporary Dance Festival in Hong Kong. That year a large-scale protest movement had broken out in response to a proposed extradition law bill that was due to be tabled in the Legislative Council in June. Hong Kong's civil society saw this bill as an existential threat to one of the key tenets of the 'One Country, Two Systems' framework which protected Hong Kong from the authoritarian legal system of the mainland. The protests had grown into a cross-society resistance against the encroachment of the People's Republic of China's government in the affairs of Hong Kong. On landing in the city, ready to engage local dancers in *The Stance* (which was itself a work about the embodiment of protest), it became clear that the work would no longer go ahead. Liesel and I decided to spend our spare time joining the protests in Central in the heart of the financial district. I remember standing on the street at the site of a protest with Liesel, the air crackling with tension. We talked about what could we do in this situation, what was the role of art in times of crisis and more specifically – what was the role of the artist.

This was a formative moment for both of us: I took these ideas and funneled them into a proposal for a PhD, looking at the role of digital protest art in the Hong Kong 2019 protests as well as the spread of these aesthetics to nearby countries via the internet.

For Liesel, she began a process of creating a large-scale public work for community. This didn't immediately manifest into the work UAAOT, but she began a process of testing concepts and ideas in Melbourne and Brisbane over several years.

In the meantime, another event impacted the development of the work and that was the spread of the respiratory illness COVID-19. The subsequent shutdown of economies and societies as they tried to protect themselves from the disease's impact, caused a fundamental shift in the role of governments, the

distribution of money and a realignment of the world's health resources. In Australia, the extended lockdowns of society led to precarious financial situations, mental health issues and the rise of a conspiratorial protest movement. Questions about our role in society and our care for each other came to the fore.

For Australia's arts and cultural industry, this was a particularly dire time. The place of the artist in contemporary Australian society had been diminished through successive conservative government's neglect, mismanagement or blatant fund-raiding. The COVID-19 emergency left the creative sector reeling, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics the overall arts labour market fell by 872,000 people between March and May (Australian Parliament House, 2021). And whilst some of these jobs would have now returned, many artists have chosen to leave behind their creative careers.

There was to be a third major international event that would have influence over UAAOT. In February 2022 Russia launched a brutal and unprovoked war on Ukraine. As a 2nd-generation Ukrainian living in Australia, Liesel has felt these events deeply and has attempted to make her art practice reflect her reinvigorated familial cultural practices. The bravery of the Ukrainian army and citizenry continues to inspire, even as the brutality of war crimes is discovered in places such as Bucha, Lyman and Mariupol. (In an unusual threading of events, it was the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine that inspired the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, which was the precursor to the 2019 Hong Kong protests.)

And so, it is here where *Us And All Of This* lands. In a space where authoritarianism is on the rise and the ripple effects of a global pandemic are still being felt across every sector of the economy and life. So where then do you go from here? How do you cope with 'all of this'? And who are 'we'? And again, without being too solipsistic, what is the role of the artist against these bleak events?

### **Community**

In this situation we had a desire to make something heartfelt, perhaps even earnest. Somehow making clever critical contemporary artworks didn't feel like it met the moment. There was too much trauma and too much realness to be ironic about Kyiv, Hong Kong or Melbourne. To match this realness we turned to non-performers, because what is more 'real' than someone not trained in performativity? It is true that making work with 'community' has indeed got that 'warm fuzzy feeling' that you get when you work in those spaces. The well-researched sense that it is not just the product/outcome which is of value, but the process itself which generates all of the other myriad benefits that 'participation' brings (Comte & Forrest, 2015). These include social, economic, health and civic outcomes (Camic, 2008; Hawkes, 2012).

In Australia, community arts comes from a process of artists working in regional, remote or suburban sites and inviting community into creative practice to make what came to be known as 'Community Art'. It coalesced as a counter to neo-liberalism and heritage artforms in the early 1970s (Comte & Forrest, 2012). The formation of the 'community arts' panel of the Australia Council in 1972 is a testament to the 'sector' of people working in this form. Over the following 30 years questions about the validity of this sector began to be asked by arts bureaucrats and funding to this sector was diminished. In 2005 the Community Cultural Development was dissolved and works that included elements of 'community art' were now supported via the more traditional heritage panels.

The role of participants, community or non-performers shifted with the rise of relational aesthetics and live art in the 2000s as new strategies were developed. During what became known as the 'social turn' the word participation became de rigueur in art circles, especially in the mouths of art centres and venues

wanting to engage the public in creative practices (Bishop, 2006). However, new scholarship challenged these new models – for scholar Grant Kester the ability for participants to engage in meaningful practice when the state has already determined the outcome of the project encourages a shallow engagement. Whereas Claire Bishop's excoriation of these practices is due to the fact that a weak process with participants leads to a lack of efficacy in the art being made (Bell, 2015). She also challenges the neo-liberal ideas that suggest that art can solve many of our social problems using social engagement (Bishop, 2012).

With this historical and theoretical baggage, choosing to work with community members is a particular choice. Indeed, a whole thesis could be written on the ways in which community engagement processes occur within projects such as this. What role does an institution such as Arts Centre Melbourne have in the engagement of participants and how does that impact the final product? For UAAOT the choice to use non-trained dancers in this work was an iterative process. The work was tested on trained dancer bodies in Melbourne, and then on youth dancers. Another research phase included new sound with new dancers in Brisbane. Finally, it was worked into a model in Melbourne with 100 participants in the courtyard space in front of Arts Centre Melbourne in Southbank. These decisions came about through deliberation, testing and greater understanding of the context by the core artists. It should also be noted that a very large team of dance captains, stage managers and community engagement practitioners worked very hard to facilitate this very large project.

### **Radical Slowness**

UAAOT takes on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'anticognivist' approach to the body in space. He argues against the Cartesian viewpoint on the mind/body divide by seeing that the body as the primary site of understanding the world and that the acquisition of knowledge occurs through the body as a whole. Liesel (and her various collaborators throughout this long process) asks of each performer to draw connections between themselves and the space, to their fellow performer and to the temporal world through breath and movement. And it is in this 'corporeity of consciousness' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) that performers, choreographers, dramaturgs, composers and audience can forget about the noise of the world and link in with what is happening right here and now. The body holds its own way of being - "Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent on my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way that I do not choose" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 440).

The choreography was deliberately slow in its speed. This was a choice, as it took into account the body types of the participants (some dancers were in their 70s) and also their dance experience. However, even if it had been choreographed on trained bodies, the score would have remained the same, because this was not about steps, dramaturgical arcs and dynamic - this was about breath, embodiment and the oceanic.

As I watched the second performance of UAAOT, I was mesmerised - gusts of wind whipped up the clothing of the dancers, slight differences that each dancer brought to each moment and sound vibrating underneath everything that happened. "Time was different in there" one participant suggested. Slowness was a deliberate choice. As has been discussed by scholars, speed exists as a factor of contemporary life, it impacts every aspect of our world from the acquisition of knowledge (Hassan, 2003) to the use of state power (Virilio, 1977). And inevitably it is linked to capitalism's ongoing and inevitable march through every element of our lives, it is an inescapable and degrading force on our lives (Wajcman, 2016). Entire movements have sprung up to counter this speed - slow food, minimalism, digital minimalism, but these exist as very much in the minority, small eclectic bastions which often can feel (to our increasingly urbanised and

networked world) like you have joined the Amish. My own embrace of a 'dumb phone' is seen with much bemusement by colleagues and friends.

However, it is here where this work begins to open up new conversations. How is it that we can slow down? How can we re-connect with each other? Is it possible to move and breathe together? The radical slowness of UAAOT asks of its participants and its audience to engage in a different way with each other. It asks us to use our corporeal consciousness to connect with each other at a deeper level. We do this not to forget about Hong Kong, Kyiv or Melbourne, but to try to be honest, perhaps even earnest in our desire to listen and understand each other. Perhaps then we will understand what us and all of this means.

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