

Us And All Of This

Written response by Guy Ritani, April 2023

'We live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response' - Donna Haraway.

Meaningfully occupying humanity in 2023 seems to call upon a unique collective newness in discovering our capacity to respond. This post covid world, shocked with calamity upon existential calamity, witnesses our welfare goalposts shuddering dangerously out of reach as a multitude of tremors erode the once cosy footing of our beloved holocene. What really is it, in action, to stay with the trouble? As Donna heralds above, how do we gather in a thick present, capable of response?

Liesel Zink's *Us And All Of This* en masse production collects various dancers, participants, choreographers and community workers across a 3 year period in search of this aforementioned response. I was privileged to join during November 2022 in the concluding choreographic developments, set to teach in 2023. I partook as a core artist in one of the three locations set for this work (Arts Centre Melbourne-ACM, Bunjin Place & Geelong). Personally, this was a challenging attempt of suspending myself over the flickering thoughts, actions and urgent reactions of everyday city life. A much needed red light on this highway of the attention economy, somewhere between instant gratification and a burnout induced mental breakdown, I found myself caught in Liesel's web of radical slowness. This molasses-like excursion spanning concept, choreography, process and technique felt immediately wrong. How dare the pace of existence be in question. Not so much a thought but rather an embodied experience. This pace is hard, an empty void beckoning further consideration and an acknowledgement that there is indeed a reason for which we hasten. A reason, perhaps in dire need of recognition. My partner chuckled at the prospect of me teaching radical slowness. As with any injured muscle, flexing this void was painful in the beginning yet lingering longer I discovered a will to stay.

'We're trying to slow down the heartbeat of Melbourne'

Cut to the people. Day 1 rehearsals at ACM's prestigious Fairfax Studio featured nervous smiles and fidgeting feet excitedly pondering what on earth this production was. 114 strangers, 4 core artists, 1 assistant choreographer (Joshua Lowe), an army of production support (I see you) and 1 Liesel Zink. Radical slowness requires delicate gear changes, cooling the consciousness of our buzzing Melbournian lives. This was embedded in the project's messaging, the building of relationships and the structure of all our interactions. Off we set on an 8 week downshift, readying this massive slowness and cultivating a thick present. Something profound happened in this space. A communion of pedalled breaks, paused just enough to truly sense one another in a rarity of ways. A slowmaxing. There's a compassion born of this, of shared breath, meeting eyes, of paired stillness, a kinship that renews our capacity for sensemaking and perhaps forms a pavement for future truth. I made some beautiful friendships here, particularly my dear co-facilitator Katrina Rank. I've noticed a hole in my Sundays where rehearsals once belonged. It seems that embracing the physicality of our time catalyses connection in a significant and pertinent way. Something about not using the same thinking that got us into trouble rings here, very much a lateral approach of responding to 2023's wicked problems.

'I want to see them as humans, not as dancers'

I've reflected much on the choreography in this work and Liesel's sensitive pursuit of authentic human expression. Something of a prerequisite to facing this turbid time. I witnessed this as an almost ego-phobic excavation of gesture. An uncovering of physical dialogue through bleeding the bravado in an attempt to reveal one's vulnerable and un-betrayable humanity. This is not a loud or sparkly existence but rather a glorious humility of contemplation, reservation and gentleness. A deeply feminist occupation of space, time and relationship: seeking collectivity, sense and communion in the public domain. A shift from ego to eco-systems in

remembering our blooded beating hearts link to our oxygen exchanging lungs. The story of this work is of seeking & settling: a yearning to sense-make through a quiet and pervasive curiosity, meeting the toils of joining together and the trials of collective action. A reminder that struggle and discomfort are necessary in forming an ongoingness. This discomfort was alive and well with revisions, cuts and tweaks adjusting the choreo up until performance day. Perfectly consistent in staying with the trouble.

This work explores a fascinating spectrum of social licence governing our public experience. On one end sits ordinary acceptable social behaviour, on the other sits behaviour so totally unacceptable it's formally or informally policed. What's relevant is the grey between what *is* and *isn't* appropriate: A realm challenging social licence, without activating persecution, fertile for transformation. Early on, as 4 core artists we practised the choreography in the ACM forecourt. We were met by a troubled security guard, perplexed by our behaviour, asking if we had permission to be there, in public space. Cut to the same choreography with 114 people 4 months later, and the observer's dynamic shifts significantly from concern to wonder, unveiling our social agency. The capacity of challenging social licence is very much in the domain of staying with our troubles, the critical variable here being scale. Underpinning that *social-change* and *licence* is not so much concerned with our individual experience, but rather our capacity to share that experience. Affirming the notion that *together we can* and perhaps the strongest bid in facing the troubles of our time, must feature *togetherness* in a quantity and quality yet to be seen. *Us And All Of This*.

We are drummers in a march on unprecedented times. Beating hearts pounding a path of ideals, justice, joy and pain. Purposefully wandering the apathetic soil of the public realm: a shapeshifting beast resting indifferently so long as the status quo is maintained. It is critical, now, to have an interest in collective human form as our detachment from the natural world & our humanity provokes anxiety, distrust, war and destruction. This work radiates a form of hope and bravery, undeniably influenced by Liesel's diasporan resistance for her Ukrainian homeland. Welling a deep consideration for the presence we cultivate in projecting a better global consciousness. One that's capable of massaging social approach to the planet's issues and awakening a public beast capable of presence for the task at hand, regardless of its troubles. Occupying this space is a challenge of itself and creating this environment is infinitely moreso. Credit is definitely due for both Liesel's vision, Lawrence English's epic and enveloping soundscape and to the Betty Amsden Participation Programme for resourcing a liminal habitat in which these experiences can occur. The role of community, connection and public space was not at all lost on the minds behind this work.

What Liesel has achieved is both profoundly difficult and incredibly timely. She placed three 100+ human boulders in our city's stream of consciousness creating a haven for those under it and a peculiar embrace for those lucky enough to witness. Viewers of not just the performance but all expressions of its process. This work is a somatic modelling of linking our nervous-systems in collective mindfulness. It ponders in the language of the body, a much needed evolution to our paradigm of being. Whether we are ready for that is an entirely other story.

Sitting in the trouble of our time seems to be less about finding solutions and more about madly and willingly letting go. About finding a presence together. With the only grounding tether being a collective understanding that we are undeniably and unmistakably human.

While I am still questioning what that means, this work has left me feeling a little bit more clued in.

A Betty Amsden Participation Program, *Us And All Of This* is produced by Performing Lines, and commissioned by Arts Centre Melbourne through the generous support of the Betty Amsden endowment. It premiered in 2023 at the Arts Centre Melbourne forecourt, Johnstone Park, Geelong (with Geelong Arts Centre) and Bunjil Place Plaza. It was developed with support from the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body, the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland, Ausdance Qld, HOTA, Besen Family Foundation and the City of Melbourne.