



PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

DANCE CURATION AS CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Dance curators (or programmers, as they are often called) have a significant impact on the dance field through their selection processes: elevating certain works, practices, and artists, while effectively excluding others. Through this, they have a considerable hand in shaping what kinds of dance pieces a local audience has access to, effectively writing dance history over time. But their working processes remain poorly understood, and there have been limited attempts to theorize their practice. This article begins with an exploration of the etymology of the term *curator* and the historical emergence of the curator in both the fine arts and dance. It then goes on to examine the role of the curator as *mediator* in two common models for dance presentation (the festival and the theater season) and explores two alternative curatorial models (the focus program at Brussels venue Beursschouwburg and the *uncurated* model of Amsterdam festival Come Together). Finally, it explores the practice of dance curation as a form of choreography itself. It concludes that contextualizing dance curation as a form of choreography could be an effective starting point for theorizing the practice, hopefully paving the way for further study.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chris Dupuis is a Canadian writer, curator, and researcher. His work has appeared in *The Dance Current*, *HyperAllergic*, and *CBC Arts Online*, among others. He has served as guest faculty at Concordia University (Montreal), KASK (Ghent), HKU (Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht) (Utrecht), and *DasArts* (Amsterdam). As a curator, he works with RT Collective, a fluctuating curatorial platform presenting screenings, exhibitions, workshops, artist talks, and small-scale publications. He holds an MA in Cultural Studies from KU Leuven and a Post-MA in Curatorial Studies from KASK (Ghent).

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When we speak about dance in any specific time or place, we often mean the pieces, practices, and artists offered for public consumption during a theater season, festival, or other platform. Platforms for the presentation of dance pieces are constantly evolving (artist-driven platforms, residency spaces, *uncurated* programs). But most decisions about what is shown and consequently what is seen (by both the public and the dance community itself) are made by curators (programmers).

Curators presenting dance therefore have a unique power to shape the field. They largely control access to space, which often determines access to funding; both from that space and the larger field, as funding bodies consider existing co-production agreements in their decisions. Similarly, an initial co-production agreement from one space often plays a role in securing future co-productions. Through selecting works for presentation, curators also shape the discourse and define the limits of the field, impacting the work being made, how audiences understand it, and the careers of individual artists (Hurtzig in Brandstetter et al., 2011, pp. 22–23). As Florian Malzacher (2010) states:

Programme makers (curators) have a function in the art market and however much their opinions may differ, together they delineate the limited field. Who they don't see, who they refuse to see, has—at least internationally—almost no chance of being seen...The task of organising this field, the task of playing the bad guy has been delegated: curating means excluding and this excluding has existential consequences for artists. (Malzacher, 2010, pp. 14–15)

Owing to this influence they hold, it is invaluable to better understand their working processes and to develop a stronger theoretical framework for understanding their practices.

It is also important to note, though, that the work of curators is neither autonomous nor autocratic. Curators normally operate as part of a larger team (including business managers, production staff, marketing/publicity) who may shape programming, either directly or indirectly. They are typically responsible to a board that considers their programming in relation to audience numbers, as part of evaluating their job performance. Funders also shape programming: agencies (private and public) and donors (corporate and individual) may prioritize certain artists/works, either because they are of particular interest to existing audiences, have potential to develop new audiences, or represent specific historically disadvantaged cultural/identity groups. All this is to say that, while curators elevate certain pieces, practices, and artists, and in doing so have an impact on shaping the field, these decision-making processes are not executed in a vacuum.

With this text, the goal is not so much to explore these power dynamics (though this would be a valuable area for future study) but rather to theorize the role of dance curator (or programmer, as they often prefer to be called). I will begin by addressing my own experiences as a curator, which I think offer a frame for my arguments and a sense of my personal stake in these dialogues. Next, I will explore the etymology of the

term *curator* (and associated terms), to understand its roots and how they might shape our understanding of this role today. I will then examine the historical emergence of the curator, first in fine arts and then in dance. Following this, I will analyze two familiar formats for dance curation (the theatre season and the festival), and then look at two alternative models as case studies (Brussels venue Beursschouwburg and Amsterdam festival Come Together), thinking principally of how dance curators act as mediators between artists, artworks, and audiences. Finally, I will explore dance curation *itself* as a form of choreography and what might be gained from this positioning.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I have been part of the curatorial teams for Rhubarb (a Toronto interdisciplinary performance festival), Bâtard (a Brussels festival aimed at emerging artists), work on an ongoing basis as part of RT Collective (a Canadian interdisciplinary curatorial platform), and have co-curated a number of fine art exhibitions and film programs. Each context comes with a unique set of concerns dictated by institutional mandates, funding requirements, and the needs of audience, which intersect with the personal tastes and politics of the curators.

Earlier, I mentioned the notion of curatorial power: of curators as institutional gatekeepers promoting certain artists and practices, ultimately shaping the discourse and the dance cannon. I believe all of these things to be true. However, as a curator, I have to say that I am very often left feeling rather powerless. Within the push-pull of the various stakeholders (as well as the fact that I work primarily in collective structures) the selection process is often delimited by pragmatic and financial concerns. Both Rhubarb and RT Collective operate through a proposal-based open call system, where artists submit new project proposals rather than finished works. As such, a significant amount of the process is dedicated to circulating the call, and the final program is heavily dependent on the success of this circulation. Working from what is received, the selection process is then based on the potential of each proposal, the range of projects and identities present (with an aim to represent a broad cross section), and what is realistic to support based on financial and pragmatic factors. Operating within these structures, I have come to see curating as a practice, which, rather than being exclusively about power, is often as vulnerable and delicate as other creative processes.

CHOREOGRAPHY AND CURATION – DEFINITIONS OF CENTRAL CONCEPTS

What is choreography?

The origins of the word *choreography* are generally well known in dance (literally, *dance-writing* from the Greek *khoreia* *dance* and *graphein* *to write*). In a contemporary context, choreography can mean creating or coordinating the movement of performers, audiences, or both, and much discussion has been dedicated to redefining/expanding its definitions. According to *Lexico.com*, *choreograph* is also used outside dance to mean the planning or control of an event or operation (Lexico.com, n.d.). *Merriam-Webster*.

com labels *choreograph* a synonym for: arrange, blueprint, budget, calculate, chart, design, frame, lay out, organize, plan, prepare, project, shape, and strategize (among others) (Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.) Within fine arts, curator Jens Hoffman has used the word to describe exhibition-making (Hoffman, 2015), something I will return to later. For the moment, it is sufficient to say the definition of *choreography* is complex and constantly shifting, often defined by persons using it in order to include or exclude certain practices within the wider dance field. For the purposes of this study, I will begin with the definition of choreography as *the organization of bodies and movement in space and time in a way which makes it apparent that bodies, space, and time are being organized.*

What is curation?

In order to define curation, I will begin by examining the etymology of curator, curate, and curation, which will help to understand the discipline's history and how this history informs contemporary discourse. According to *Etymology Online*, the word *curator* actually predates both curation and curate. Dating from the mid-14th century, curator comes from the Latin (*curator*), meaning an overseer, manager, or guardian, usually supervising children or the mentally ill, only coming to refer to someone managing museums or libraries in the 1660's (Etymology Online, n.d.). Curation appears several decades later, from the Old French (*curacion*) for the "treatment of illness" (Etymology Online n.d. unpaginated). Curate appears around the same time, but originally has a different meaning. Originally a noun from Medieval Latin, it refers to "one who is responsible for the care of souls" (Etymology Online n.d. unpaginated).

Karen Gaskill (2011, p. 2) pays particular attention to this notion of "caring" for the soul, stating that: "This is a particularly evocative description of the actions of the contemporary curator, as one that cares for our cultural products and their critical significance". Gaskill links the term specifically to artworks, placing the curator in a position of caring for them.

Boris Groys (2006) focuses on the medical (*curing*) origins of the term, saying:

A work of art can't in fact present itself by virtue of its own definition and force the viewer into contemplation—artworks lack vitality, energy and health. They seem to be genuinely sick and helpless—a spectator has to be led to the artwork, as hospital workers might take a visitor to see a bedridden patient. It is no coincidence that the word "curator" is etymologically related to "cure".
(Groys, 2006, unpaginated)

With his focus on curing, Groys (2006, unpaginated) extends the reach of the curator to include spectators. The artwork needs "curing" but the spectator also needs "to be led to the artwork". His analogy implies the curator is positioned to explain or console spectators forced to view this "genuinely sick and helpless" artwork, perhaps offering an explanation for its condition and hope for the future: a rather dark view of the relationship between curator, artwork, and spectator.

- ▶ Taken together, there are a set of terms referring alternately to persons responsible for and/or practices relating to the mental, spiritual, and/or physical health of others, which have gradually come to include the same relationship with artworks. What is common through these etymologies is that the curator occupies a position of *authority*, watching over individuals who may be ill, immature, or incompetent: an oddly fitting description for someone charged with overseeing artists.

My definition of dance curation

The tasks of curation, the way they are enacted, and the motivations guiding them are shaped by numerous factors. Along with the specific artistic discipline, these include the frameworks in which these activities take place: regional/artistic contexts and funding requirements, the realities of which are constantly in flux.

Curating can, of course, include financial and production matters (applying for funding, booking travel for artists, making schedules). Depending on the size of the institution, it can include taking tickets, selling beer, and sweeping the floor. The dance field utilizes a wide array of presentation spaces (theatres, galleries, museums, site-specific venues) and presentation formats (annual and one-off festivals, theaters with a full season, *un-curated* platforms, residencies), with new models constantly emerging. This mix of responsibilities, spaces, and formats means a dance curator's job is, in a sense, unique to each institution. As Gaskill (2011, p. 14) says: "The actions of curating mean different things to different curators... It is very much a cultural commentation role, experimental and discursive, necessarily responsive to socio-political and artistic shifts in a fluid culture".

With this article, I am primarily concerned with the relationship curators have to artists, artworks, and audiences, and how they operate between these things, so my analysis starts here. To begin, I will define curation as: *the selection, organization, and presentation of artistic works for public consumption*. Following this, I would propose including *curation* within the broader frame of non-dance based choreography, an activity which (as *Lexico.com* says) includes the planning or control of an event or operation.

Following this definition of curation as an act of selection, organization, and presentation, I would like to briefly address dance practices that might be considered curatorial in their approach. Tino Sehgal's *Untitled (2000)* (2000) is a solo (originally performed by Sehgal and later by other dancers) composed of fragments from 20th century dance pieces/styles. The work aims to form an idea of a cannon of 20th century dance. Ame Henderson's *relay* (2010) sees eight dancers spontaneously re-perform excerpts from past works they have participated in creating as a way to explore the dancer's body as an archive for individual dance works and the larger field of dance history. Boris Charmatz's *20 danseurs pour le XXe siècle* (2012) sees a group of dancers perform segments from seminal dance works in a museum, thereby questioning the position of dance in relation to the fine arts cannon. These projects might be distinguished from other dance works in that, rather than building original material, the artists consciously ▶

- ▶ source material from other dances (selection), creating original works through a unique system of assemblage (organization), and then offering these collected works and the organizational system together as a new work (presentation). This is only a small sample of works from this expanding field, but this shift signals a movement among contemporary choreographers to incorporate elements of curatorial practice into their creation processes.

THE FINE ARTS AND DANCE CURATOR

Finding a precise definition of curation (and of curator) is uniquely complicated in the dance field, in part because many of the persons who select, organize, and present dance pieces do not define the work they do as curation or label themselves as curators. On a personal basis I have noticed a regional difference in whether people use the term curator or programmer. Programmer seems most common in Europe, while curator is more common in the US and Canada. It also seems, anecdotally at least, that there is some correlation between the use of these terms and access to funding and resources. It seems that people working in contexts with greater funding and resources are more apt to *reject* the term curator, while people with less funding and resources are more apt to use it. What this means is not clear to me. But the pattern seems consistent enough to warrant further investigation in a study that employs some measure of statistical analysis. Kate Lawrence (2007) addresses this, stating that the term *curator* is infrequently used within performance - programmer or producer being more often employed. Citing her interview with Pauline Johnson (a music and dance event producer), Lawrence (2007, p. 170) says a producer is “not totally creating an artistic product, but manipulating its coming together”.

Lawrence (2007, p. 170) goes on to say that while producers/programmers tend to be attached to specific theaters or arts institutions, where they present works, they have “no direct role in the creative processes employed in the making [of] works of art”. But when works are commissioned or co-produced by the institution, programmers (curators) “are likely to play a greater part in the creation process with the artists” (Lawrence, 2007, p. 170).

Andrew Tay, choreographer, former curator of Montreal’s Centre de Création O Vertigo, and recently appointed Artistic Director of Toronto Dance Theatre, delimits the fields differently. He cites a difference in the stage at which works are selected; for him, programming primarily involves selecting finished works (artistic products), while curating involves selecting something earlier in the process (artistic concepts) (the author’s interview with Tay in 2020). Tom Bonte, former director of Brussels theater Beursschouwburg (who refers to himself as a programmer), differentiates programmer and curator based on their relationship to a local context; for him, a curator arrives with no specific connection to a city (the way many curators come to international art biennales), whereas a programmer is organizing a program in relation to and with specific knowledge of local artists and audiences (the author’s interview with Bonte in 2020).

▶ Douglas Rosenberg (2009, p. 76, emphasis added) considers *programming* (and by extension the work/practice of a *programmer*) a *showcase model*, stating: “The underlying similarities between artists (in a program) may be vague or not entirely apparent and often they appear together for reasons wholly outside of the content or style of their work, reasons that may be *pragmatic or financial*”. Programming, then, according to Rosenberg, involves selecting, organizing, and presenting works, *without* the goal of making a wider statement, other than perhaps the personal tastes of the curator and/or what they imagine will be of interest to their audience. Curating, on the other hand, he considers “the exact opposite of that model”, saying:

Curating implies that a third party has an active role in choosing and arranging the work in a program in such a way as to create a meta-narrative between pieces, between choreographers and between the content present in the work the audience ultimately sees. The role of the curator is more than active, it is *pro-active* in that the curator’s job is to seek out work that supports a thesis, a thesis that the curator seeks to introduce into the culture of the art form in order to create a conversation about the art form itself. In other words, the curated work is at the service of something greater than itself. (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 76, emphasis original)

Within Rosenberg’s dichotomy between *programmer* (who brings works together based on pragmatic or financial reasons, what they anticipate their audience wants, and their personal taste) and curator (who, in attending to the same considerations, creates a larger thesis and facilitates a wider discourse), we have a problem. Even if someone selecting, organizing and presenting dance pieces classifies this work as programming (implying, based on Rosenberg’s definition, they are *not* making a larger statement with their choices), their actions can still have this effect. Therefore, even if someone actively rejects the label of curator (as many in the dance field do), I would propose to still consider these activities within the wider field of dance curation.

The Emergence of the Fine Arts Curator

I want to briefly explore the emergence of the fine arts curator, as it both predates and provides a model for the emergence of this position in the dance field. The term curator is first used with regard to persons managing museums in the mid-17th century. However, the history I will explore begins in the 1960’s: the decade Paul O’Neill (2007) pinpoints as emergence of the curator as we understand the position today in the fine arts. This emergence was catalyzed by three main shifts. The first was a shift in how and where works were presented; the exhibition format moving from solo shows in galleries and museums, to group shows, biennales, and art fairs (Gaskill, 2011). The second was a shift in content and processes by artists: the introduction of Conceptualism and the move towards collaborative and interdisciplinary practices (Gaskill, 2011). As these shifts came into play, the public needed a new set of tools to understand the art works they were producing. Curators, who until this point had been mainly working in the background maintaining collections, came forward to fulfill ▶

▶ this role, often through curatorial writing. Their role in contextualizing exhibitions for the public gradually shifted into *creating* exhibitions. A third shift (which comes later, but is critical in solidifying the curator's current role) is the implementation of wide-ranging cuts to arts funding in many countries in the 1990's, making institutions more dependent on ticket sales. Since they were already conceiving exhibitions, the job of conceiving blockbuster exhibitions fell to curators (Balzer, 2014). As this shift has continued, curators have also become increasingly responsible for developing parallel "engagement activities" designed to make exhibitions more accessible to the public, in particular for families with children. This combination of shifts brought curators into their current position, where they largely determine access to spaces, have a hand in shaping what artists produce, and mediate these works for the public. These activities mean they are dramatically shaping the discourse within the fine arts and, ultimately, the trajectory of art history.

The Emergence of the Dance Curator

This pattern of shifts leading to the emergence of curators is paralleled in the dance field (and the wider field of performance). While the emergence of curators in both fields is tied to shifts in the 1960's, in the dance field the position did not fully solidify until the 1990's.

Dragan Klaić (2014), Marta Keil (2014), and Isabel Sachs (2015) point to a similar set of spatial shifts for dance in the 1960's as with fine arts. In this case, the changes included the emergence of mainstream and independent festivals, the latter often taking place in locations like empty factories. Klaić ties these new presentation platforms to the development of site-specific performance and various forms of audience participation.

Keil cites the early 1980's as the moment when curators begin to emerge more broadly. Along with the shifts Klaić mentions, Keil posits that these spatial changes paved the way for aesthetic and working shifts, including a departure from linear narration and an increase in collaborative and interdisciplinary practices.

Sachs points to the 1990's as the moment when the curator's position begins to solidify. Here, she ties that same proliferation of festivals Klaić and Keil connect with a series of aesthetic and working shifts to a change in how presenting venues operated, many of them taking on what she calls a *festival mentality*. Keil (2014) picks up this thread, saying:

The consequences of these shifts became almost immediately visible, not just in the system of theatre production, but in the means of theatre distribution and in the redefinition of the value of theatre and dance; the entire idiom has undergone a change of seismic proportions. (Keil, 2014, p. 151)

Along with changes leading to the emergence of curators in each field independently, Victoria Mohr-Blakeney (2015) points out an intersection *between* the fields that was critical for these developments to occur. She notes that as dance pieces moved from ▶

▶ traditional (theatre) venues, they often found space in museums and galleries, “... converging with modes of display most often associated with visual arts” (Mohr-Blakeney, 2015, p. 20). As a result, curatorial practice as it existed in these institutions, intersected with the dance field, leading to the development of dance curation as an independent curatorial practice. Esther Boldt (2011) takes this a step further, suggesting a conscious attempt by performance makers to align themselves with the fine arts. As with the fine arts field, the practice of dance curation has a significant impact on shaping the discourse and, ultimately, the trajectory of dance history.

CURATORIAL APPROACHES: CURATOR-AS-MEDIATOR

When curators appeared in both the fields of fine arts and dance, their first task was primarily one of *mediation* - explaining newly emerging practices and presentation formats to the public. While their role has gradually expanded to include other tasks (which I believe also warrant study), here I want to focus on this question of mediation. As a starting point, I will posit that as Mediator, a curator serves as an intermediary between artists/artworks and audiences, explaining, contextualizing, and in certain cases, complicating the works in different ways.

Within the wide array of presentation platforms, I want to focus on the two most common models—the theater season and the festival, and then explore two alternative structures. Curated programs are often viewed as places where conversations can happen - between artists and audiences, as well as within audiences. According to Andy Horwitz (2014), curators create a context for these conversations to happen over time and in different sites through their work, ultimately producing a larger discourse between artists and publics, as well as within the public.

Malzacher (2017, p. 20) also points to this idea, saying that by bringing works together and allowing them to interact with each other and the world, “...there is a possibility of creating a collective experience not only within the performance itself, but rather turning the programme, festival, event, or venue into a larger field of communication and communing.”

Katarzyna Tórz (2014) focuses on how curators stimulate questions, asking how they can determine the *right* questions to ask an audience, thereby making programming choices relevant. She goes on to say that:

We can take on our curatorial responsibility by highlighting the social and political context of artistic work, showing relevant links that bridge artistic searching with local discourses (also hidden and marginalized), and taking into account the need to define a model of meeting with the spectators and their intellectual and emotional engagement. (Tórz, 2014, p. 213).

Curators are then creating contexts for conversation, highlighting the social and political context of art works, and thereby creating a collective experience with the ▶

audience. In doing so, they are, as Tórz says, ensuring their programming choices are relevant. Successful mediation, therefore, ensures the curator's position within the field, ultimately making it (in certain ways) an act of self-preservation.

The Theater Season

Bonnie Brooks (2015, p. 188) summarizes the curation of a theater season as "... the assemblage of a series of events designed to invite and provoke the making of meaning, stir discourse, and/or entertain, and perhaps enrich the viewer's or consumer's experience". As it stretches over a longer time, a theater season is aimed primarily at a local community, so the needs and interests of that community are key in the curator's decision-making. In part, a curator is also trying to *build* audience in their local community, turning one-off audience members into longer-term patrons. However, this longer timeframe makes it more challenging to produce a focused experience. People will see different things, but few will see everything. Therefore, the conversation produced and the space for that conversation are more fractured and open: a series of spaces and conversations unfolding over a year or a period of years.

The Festival

With a festival, works are concentrated into a narrower time, ranging from a few days to a few weeks. Here, not everyone will see everything, either. Also, because of the volume of work, festival fatigue can set in: people have less mental space to consider works individually. But there is generally a greater overlap in what people have seen, producing more common vocabulary. Festivals often have a central hub or bar where people go at night or between shows, creating a common space for dialogue: a sort of festival agora. While conversations can be more focused in time and space, they can be simultaneously more diverse. Festivals often attract out of town populations, meaning conversations can include a broader range of aesthetic preferences, cultural experiences, and political leanings. Conversations are then potentially more complex and more contentious, as people navigate these different perspectives.

In general, festivals and theater seasons often come together for a combination of pragmatic or financial reasons, along with the curator's personal tastes and the needs of their audience. This final point is often determined just by looking at which past shows have been successful and bringing those artists back. So if this is the case, how then are these conversations being posed? It would seem that much of this work happens simply through placing these works alongside each other for consumption.

It should be noted that even if the curator is not directly proposing relationships between the works, these relationships still exist. Particularly in a festival context, where audiences are seeing works in a compressed format, works often shape each other's viewing by chance: a work you saw yesterday or a few hours earlier can shape the viewing of a work you are watching now, making certain elements more prominent based on differences or similarities between the works, drawing certain politics or

ideas to the surface, while minimizing others. Within this structure, it is worth asking how different works are informing each other, how audiences find connections between them, how works create a context for their own understanding, and what the relationship is between this context and the context the audience brings.

In an attempt to address these questions, I will analyze two unique curatorial models: Beursschouwburg's Focus Program and the "uncurated" approach of the Amsterdam festival Come Together. I am not citing these as "ideal" examples since each is specific to its context. However, they offer different ways to think about the selection, organization, and presentation of dance pieces, providing tools for curators in structuring programming and revealing certain flaws in conventional models.

CASE A: BEURSSCHOUWBURG

Beursschouwburg follows an unusual presentation model. Works are arranged in Focus Programs, normally two or three annually, with group performances with exhibitions, films, lectures, and other events, under common themes. Programs have included *The Future is Feminist* (exploring feminism post-Trump) and *The Kids Are Alright* (exploring generations and family ties).

History

The programming shift began in 2012, with Artistic and General Director Tom Bonte, who took over the space the year before. I interviewed Bonte in 2020 to discuss his curatorial approach and what he thinks it achieves. When he assumed the position, Beursschouwburg was dedicated primarily to thematic festivals: several concentrated programs over the year. Bonte wanted to create greater visibility for the space. Since Brussels already had many festivals and theater seasons, either model would make it difficult to stand out. The focus program became a kind of middle ground - grouping works around a theme as a festival might, but spreading them over a period of months as a season does. As Bonte said, "We decided to use topicality of the festival with the rhythm of a season, and combine the best of both worlds" (personal communication, June 3, 2018).

Curatorial Approach

Themes are selected by the programming team: Helena Kritis (film/visual arts), Gilke Vanuystel (music), and Elisa Liepsch (performing arts). Sometimes an urgent topic arises (as with *The Future is Feminist* in the wake of Trump's election and the Women's March). In other cases, it starts from a single work and they expand to create a program around themes or ideas in that work. The season is divided into two or three parts, allowing different themes in a single year and greater programming flexibility in terms of timelines.

► *Analysis*

The focus program offers a frame for audience to consider works together, revealing common threads - aesthetic, thematic, political, or process-oriented. This approach can also shape the reading of an individual work. Knowing that a work is part of a specific program may encourage audiences to consider that work from that perspective. The disadvantage is that it might also foster a reductive viewing of a work dealing with multiple themes. However, Bonte does not believe this is a real concern, saying of the audience:

Once they are into the performance, they very quickly tend to forget the broader umbrella and start to engage with that specific work. They can like it or dislike it or question it. But inside the theatre the focus theme actually plays very little role. It's when people start seeing more shows within the program that they start connecting the dots between them. They will either be stimulated by the whole program or they feel that the dots are connected in a forced way. But this is also interesting, because it creates a critique of the whole dot connecting system that is sometimes proposed. (Bonte, personal communication, June 3, 2018)

In examining works through a common lens, new questions are also potentially raised. For example, with *The Future is Feminist*, considering Bryana Fritz's *Indispensible Blue* (which explores the choreography software imposes on the body) alongside Dana Michel's *Yellow Towel* (which explores stereotypes of black culture), audiences are asked to consider radically different thinking around a feminist future. By bringing works together they also ask questions of each other (e.g. What is the relationship between a feminist future and technology? How does racism impact the realization of feminist goals?)

In creating this field where audiences are asked to consider works through a common lens, they may also be inclined to push back against the lens itself. For example, while both works cited above are created by women identifying as feminists, neither discusses feminism or even female identity directly. One might then be led to ask: What constitutes feminist art? Is it any work made by women, regardless of whether the creators define it as feminist? From here, an interesting series of debates can unfold.

Conclusion

This model produces a heightened space for creating questions and ways of thinking about works that can provoke discussion and debate. It provides a frame for conversations in a clearer way than other theater seasons, rather like a festival might (though with a festival the public and space are more concentrated). Through the selection themes, the curators are also making a clear statement about what they consider worth discussing in any given moment. In this way, it makes the curatorial process more transparent.

According to Bonte, the key is to choose themes offering a lens through which to access

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works, but which are broad enough to include a wide range of works/artists (Bonte personal communication, June 3, 2018). The challenge emerges in what and who might be left out of that conversation and what this says. Every curatorial process is, in a sense, a process of *exclusion*. In bringing works together, a curator by default makes statements about which works, artists, and identities they want to include in conversations they are trying to stimulate, and which they choose to ignore. Through these processes, curators are, in a sense, defining what the dance field is in any given moment, or at least which dances pieces, artists, and practices they consider worthy of attention. My next case proposes an approach that, at least partially, addresses this problem.

CASE B: COME TOGETHER

Founded in Amsterdam in 2014 by Nicole Beutler, Keren Levi and Andrea Bozic, Come Together is a three-day festival operating as an *uncurated* platform, without a specific theme or aesthetic frame. Works are programmed through an open call. Amsterdam-based artists in the field of performance (dance, theatre, performance art, music, installation, etc.) may submit. Most works are in their early stages, though some artists submit finished works for consideration. Here, aesthetic questions are unimportant. The curators are only concerned with whether a work is possible (i.e. that it will not damage the building or create a danger to the public). Presented at Frascati, the festival places works throughout the venue, including the theatres, rehearsal rooms, hallways, toilets, etc. Each night's program is unique, often upwards of twenty pieces per night. Many works overlap in the schedule, so it is impossible to see the entire program, and the capacity of spaces varies from several hundred to less than ten.

History

Beutler, Levi, and Bozic initiated the festival as a platform for their own work. After the first incarnation, they wanted to open it up, turning it into a space for dialogue with other artists. With the 2011 funding cuts implemented in the Netherlands, there were fewer presentation and development opportunities where artists could connect, and the scene was starting to fragment. They wanted to create a space where, as their title suggests, artists could come together, share work, and engage in dialogue.

Curatorial Approach

The open call structure is a unique approach to curating, sometimes labeled as *uncurated*. Removing the curator as an authority breaks down disciplinary and aesthetic boundaries, allowing a wide range of works to operate in dialogue. It offers a platform for artists of different generations to connect and space for emerging artists and works that are otherwise difficult to program. The festival is also artist-driven (Beutler, Levi, and Bozic remain choreographers alongside their curatorial practice). The task of organizing works is therefore seen through the lens of creators, rather than cultural managers, perhaps offering a greater sensitivity to the needs of artists. In an interview I conducted with Beutler, she describes their thinking:

I still think it's curating and it's still done with care. The criteria of selection is just slightly different. It's not about whether you like how something looks. It's more about how it's being done, who the person is, or what they have to say. We wanted to take as many of the usual boundaries away and just bring as many things to the surface as we could. (Beutler, personal communication, June 6, 2017).

Beutler went on to explain that much of the curatorial approach relates to how the open call is publicized. After receiving submissions, they often engage in dialogue with artists, discussing their ideas and assessing their commitment. Since artists only receive a small materials budget and no performer fees, they must be committed to the process based on what they will actually get from it. Rather than a common set of aesthetics or interests, the curators seek a commitment from artists to the process and realizing the work in whatever form it might take.

Analysis

This curatorial approach invites the public to consider a diverse collection of artworks within common frames: the frame of the festival and the frame of "Amsterdam" as a creative location. Through this, audiences might see common themes, aesthetics, or working modes in different artists and disciplines not immediately visible if they saw the works in discipline-specific programs. It also brings artists together in dialogue: one of the stated goals of the curators. Because there are so many projects, the artists themselves form a significant portion of the audience. By assembling creators who might never ordinarily meet (despite inhabiting the same city) the festival fosters conversations critical to forging new artistic relationships and collaborations, leading to new approaches and forms. The interdisciplinary programming element is also important. Audiences can consider a dance piece and a music performance created in the same time period and geographic location within the same frame. Artists can also find these connections, seeing how their work might relate to that of other artists in the same city.

Historically, artistic disciplines rarely exist in isolation. Painters, writers, choreographers, and playwrights often engage in dialogue, forming communities around common aesthetic and political interests rather than artistic genre. (One might think of the Paris Salons of the 1920's or New York's Judson Church of the 1960's.) This curatorial approach draws attention to the potential of these conversations: one can imagine two artists meeting through the festival and collaborating on a future project.

As a curatorial statement, this is also more transparent than a conventional programming practice. The thesis is, in a sense, "This is what is happening in Amsterdam right now", which may provide a clearer lens to view what is happening socially and politically in a local context than a conventionally curated program, by removing the curators' biases about which works are valuable and what issues are important.

▶ *Conclusion*

Come Together is largely about local community and local artists. Here, the curatorial approach is primarily about mediating these relationships, rather than framing the works for audiences. Indeed, because many of the works are new (often artistic experiments) artists and curators may have limited ability to discuss them because they are still searching for language to describe what they are creating.

It also proposes different ways of thinking about production from an economic perspective - something less relevant to audiences but critical to artists. In the aftermath of the 2011 funding cuts, artists in the Netherlands have had to explore different production and presentation strategies. While I would not argue funding cuts are ever of direct benefit to the cultural sector, here artists have conceived new working approaches as a result of limited resources: scarcity, as they say, is often the mother of invention.

In terms of whether other organizations or platforms can adopt this methodology, the main question is less about whether it is possible and more about whether it is necessary in a local context. If the above issues (creating dialogue between local artists in different disciplines, asking audiences to consider works through this frame) are needed, this approach may be useful to adopt in certain contexts.

Conclusion on Case Studies

What is common to both cases is the use of a different lens or framing device to assemble works: with Beursschouwburg, a common theme, with Come Together, a common location. Through this device, different questions are stimulated. In each case, assembling artworks from different disciplines also seems to be important. While this study is about curating dance pieces, it seems that curators looking to produce richer programs might consider interdisciplinary programming in order to highlight different elements of the dance pieces presented.

Since the medium of dance is fundamentally local, it is important to consider that, while the strategies employed by these curators have been successful in these local contexts, they may not directly translate to other contexts. Different audiences, funding structures, and regional politics will determine what works and what does not. For further study, it would be useful to compare these types of approaches as applied in different regions - comparing focus programs or uncurated structures in different places, to see commonalities and differences, and to collect knowledge that can be applied more broadly.

CURATION AS CHOREOGRAPHY

Since curation through its various modalities shapes the dance field by elevating certain practices and artists, and also (because of the local nature of performance) defines what

dance is in any specific context, I would argue that we cannot truly speak of dance in the current moment (i.e. *Choreography Now*) without examining how it is curated and the theoretical approaches (or lack thereof) underpinning these processes. There are many ways to position curating, each with a different set of implications shaping our understanding of the field: curation as collecting, curation as dramaturgy, curation as power-brokering, curation as taste-making, and others. I would like now like to explore one variation to see how it might reframe our understanding of this practice: *curation as choreography*.

As mentioned earlier, the term choreography is used outside the dance field to mean (among other things) arrange, calculate, design, organize, strategize, etc., terms frequently used in curatorial practice. Describing curation as a form of performance-making generally or a kind of choreography specifically has appeared in fine arts since at least the 1960's. Harald Szeeman (credited in part with creating the figure of the contemporary curator) frequently compared exhibition-building to theater-making (Malzacher, 2017). Contemporary curator Jens Hoffman also compared mounting exhibitions with performance, specifically referring to it as a kind of choreography (Hoffman, 2015). Both Szeeman and Hoffman trained in theater before coming to fine arts, so they make these comparisons with the knowledge of what it means to create for the stage. As shown, there is a historical interplay between the fine arts and dance in terms of formulating the role of the curator, and so here, I would propose to explore Szeeman and Hoffman's positioning of curation as a kind of theater-making/choreography and transplant this from the fine arts to dance to see what it reveals.

Like choreography, exhibition planning is a spatial practice, in part about guiding an audience through a space with a flexible geography, where the public has some level of autonomy in choosing their path. In some exhibitions, like Jon Davies' 2011 show *Coming After* at Toronto's Power Plant gallery, where the exhibition architecture dictated a singular route for the public to follow, the curator guides the audience in a more rigid way. In preparing a theater season or festival, a dance curator schedules the works (though this is often dictated by when certain shows/performers are available). But the public ultimately controls what they see and sometimes (with festivals) the order in which they see it. Here, then, curators are offering a significantly more open form for the public to explore works they have selected, something less akin to theatrical dance and perhaps more like a durational choreography, ranging from a few days for a short festival to the better part of a year with a theater season. Perhaps it is no coincidence that some of the more prominent durational choreographies being presented today like Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Work/Travail/Arbeid* and Boris Charmatz's *20 Dancers for the XX Century* are staged in museums.

Certain contemporary dance curators I have interviewed find this positioning/comparison useful, particularly those who originally came to the dance field as creators and continue to choreograph alongside their work in curation. Canadian choreographer/curator Amelia Ehrhardt, head of Toronto's Dancemakers Centre for Creation (DCC) from 2015-2019 and the ongoing performance series *Flowchart*, positions curating as a

type of *macro-choreography* (Ehrhardt personal communication, January 22, 2020). She notes that both choreography and curating are about arranging bodies and movement in time and space; in the case of choreography this applies to a distinct event of a few hours or less, in the case of her curation at DCC, an eight-month season of works, or perhaps her entire five year tenure with the institution.

Nicole Beutler links both practices under the idea of care (the root of curation): in choreography, caring for dancers, in curating, caring for artists, and in both cases, caring for the audience, albeit in different ways. On the notion of power, she positions choreographic practice as one of decision-making, while curation focuses on stepping aside to allow other people to flourish. Within this notion of “stepping aside” we find resonance with certain choreographic works (like Ame Henderson’s *relay*, already mentioned), which offer the dancers improvisational frames to create within, rather than fixed movement sequences.

Along with his work a CCVO, Andrew Tay co-helms two long-running independent initiatives with choreographer/curator Sasha Kleinplatz: *Short & Sweet* (a program of twenty five artists, each allotted three minutes of stage time) and *Piss in the Pool* (a program of eight choreographers presented annually in an abandoned swimming pool). He began curating independent events early in his career, so he feels that his practices in both fields have evolved in tandem and influence each other in myriad ways. Like Beutler, he positions curation and choreography as forms of care (for both artists and audiences). With the latter he adds the dimension of “offering”: the idea of giving something to the audience, an act of generosity. The operating structure of CCOV means they normally reach out to artists directly (rather than an open call) and work with them over a longer span to develop works: a series of activities, which together form a larger kind of choreography, perhaps a creative and administrative *pas-de-deux* between artist and curator. He also adds the obvious but perhaps overlooked commonality between both practices, the aspect of choice-making:

In both cases, you’re making a series of choices which play off each other and together form some kind of product, either a piece or a program. Any time you make a decision, about a specific artist you want to program or a specific movement sequence you want to place in a certain moment, you are, by default, killing everything else that could have existed. It’s not that we never want to make decisions. Obviously we have to. But it’s about articulating well why certain things were chosen so that people have a basis for understanding your decisions, even if they don’t agree with them. (Tay personal communication, January 23, 2020).

All three curators initially came to curating as artists wanting to create spaces for their own work, which gradually evolved to include other artists. Anecdotally, this *creation-to-curation* transition seems particularly common among independent dance curators, relative to fine arts curators, who tend to come from backgrounds in art history or conservation. This suggests a tendency among dance curators with this profile to bring

- ▶ the knowledge, working sensibilities, and politics from their choreographic practices into their curatorial work, intentionally or not, thereby strengthening the notion of curation as a form of choreography.

The unique nature of presenting performance (in contrast to fine art) is that curators more often select works that do not yet exist. There might have been a research process by the artists with some amount of material to show. Or the work might exist almost entirely in the artist's mind. As curators, we select these works not for what they *are* but for *the potential* we believe they have, but then later we have to take ownership of them, regardless of whether or not we believe them to be successful. In this way, curating a program becomes a bit like selecting a group of artists/dancers for a project: each is chosen for their unique abilities and what they will bring to the project; but ultimately, you do not know where you will arrive until the process is complete.

This creates a vulnerability in working. As a choreographer, you are often highly or completely dependent on other people (dancers, designers, stage managers, technicians) to realize your vision, and the act of creation is therefore more like a long series of compromises than simply deciding how things should be: your artistic vision is in constant flux relative to what the other stakeholders are capable of and willing to do. Curating is, in a sense, like a larger version of this, except that you are further removed from the process. You have a vision for the event (and may include input on marketing/publicity, mediation materials, and ancillary programming, along with the selection process), but other than the conversations you might have with artists during workshops and try-outs, there is little you can do to shape the works. Instead, your job is to respond to what other people create and provide a framework for the audience to receive it.

So if we consider dance curation then as a type choreographic practice in and of itself, what could be gained? It frames the work as a collaborative act rather than a singular gesture (a collaboration between curators and artists, and potentially audiences as well). It signals the need for both deeper study of curatorial practice in the dance field and deeper theoretical foundations, suggesting the need for codified training of curators (a trend beginning to emerge, but which still lags behind training for fine arts curators). It suggests a need for innovation in dance curation, opening the field to new models and new curatorial voices to build those models. It means curators should be called upon to speak more about their processes and to frame what they do in terms beyond pragmatic or financial matters, regardless of how these matters shape their decision-making. Most importantly, I would argue, it gives curators the right to fail, and to learn from and build on their mistakes in the way choreographers and other artists do every day. ▶

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► **Curators, Festivals, and Venues**

Bâtard Festival (Brussels)

Beursschouwburg (Brussels), Bonte, T., (director), Kritis, H., (film and visual arts programmer),

Vanuystel, G., (music programmer), Liepsch, E., (performing arts programmer)

Centre de Création O Vertigo (Montreal), Tay, A. (curator)

Come Together (Amsterdam), Beutler, N., Levi, K., Bozic, A. (curators)

Dancemakers Centre for Creation (Toronto), Ehrhardt, A. (curator)

Short and Sweet/Piss in the Pool (Montreal), Kleinplatz, S. (curator)

Rhubarb Festival (Toronto)

RT Collective (Toronto), Dupuis, C., Wisniewski, M. (curators)

Power Plant gallery (Toronto), exhibition *Coming After*, curator Jon Davies (2011)

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