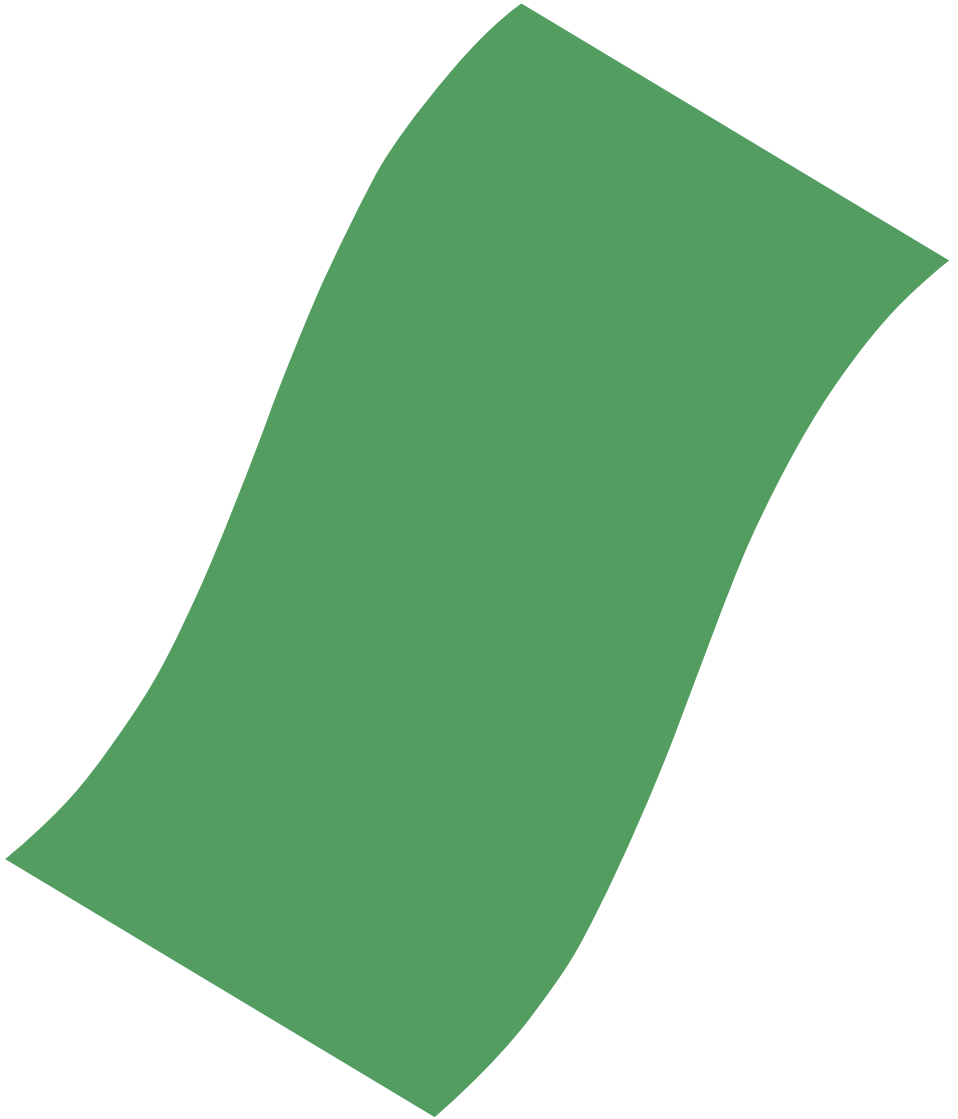


Don't Forget the Money!

Working with Dancers in Contemporary Art Spaces



Working with Concepts
March 4, 2017

Don't Forget the Money! was a half-day forum organized by the Blackwood Gallery to facilitate conversations around the presentation of dance, choreography, and live performance in various contemporary art contexts. The gallery invited artists, curators, dancers, choreographers, and activists to each make short presentations that addressed challenges inherent to interdisciplinary projects, including compensation, resources, funding, advocacy, and structural and systemic inequity. Respondents offered comments on possible models of engagement that might be usefully deployed in various contexts. The round table conversation that followed addressed many of the questions framed at the outset: What is the role of an art gallery in supporting the work of artists and dancers? What are the challenges specific to the presentation of dance or choreography within a contemporary art environment? And how can we ensure, across disciplines, that all artists are equitably compensated?

Writer **Fabien Maltais-Bayda** was commissioned by the Blackwood Gallery to produce a report that captured some of the concepts and organizing strategies put forward by the group.

The presenters were **Michael Caldwell, Emelie Chhangur, Francesco Gagliardi, kumari giles, Jenn Goodwin, sandra Henderson, Johanna Householder, Brandy Leary, Jessica Patricia Kichoncho Karuhanga, Bee Pallomina, Kim Simon, Bojana Stancic, and Bojana Videkanic.**

The respondents were **Karl Beveridge, Greig de Peuter, Catalina Fellay-Dunbar, Molly Johnson, and Sally Lee.** For more information about the participants, please see blackwoodgallery.ca/publications/wwcMoney.html.

Working with Concepts is a series of professional development workshops and events that position concepts as useful tools for fostering advocacy, dialogue, and resource-sharing across disciplines and sectors. Organized and hosted by the Blackwood Gallery, each iteration is accompanied by an essay that reports on the key terms, ideas, and strategies—in short, the concepts—that come to the fore through presentations and discussions.

Don't Forget the Money! Working with Dancers in Contemporary Art Spaces was held on March 4, 2017 and was the first event in this series.

Don't Forget the Money!

A Report by Fabien Maltais-Bayda

“Can we try over-valuing?” asked dance artist and writer Molly Johnson during the Blackwood Gallery’s forum *Don't Forget the Money!* It is a radical question in a moment when most dance artists struggle to reach the most meagre economic thresholds. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, and historical data from the Labour Force Survey, dancers remain the worst-paid arts professionals in Canada, earning 60% less than the national average and well below the low-income cutoff.¹ With the current visibility of dance in visual art contexts, such statistics demand our attention and require consideration within a new set of artistic and institutional frameworks.

This was the project set before us at the outset of *Don't Forget the Money!*, and the resulting conversation flowed with the same exploratory timbre present in Johnson’s question. Presenters, respondents, and discussion participants drew on a variety of professional experiences, personal stories, forms of embodied knowledge, and practical processes, in order to rethink the logistics of supporting, sustaining, and compensating dancers across various visual art spaces.

Yet, in referring to dancers as a singular category, I have perhaps already contradicted one of the most essential ideas generated by this conversation: that the subjects who assume the title “dancer” are infinitely varied. Dancing bodies occupy heterogenous positions, experience distinct relationships with museums and galleries, and inhabit widely differing economies of art production and consumption. With this in mind, any future action arising from the forum must recognize two parallel tasks: to address and improve the financial and material conditions of the labour that creates dance in the art institution, while actively acknowledging the differing needs of diverse moving bodies, living and working in

ecologies that do not support them equally. Indeed, it is our responsibility not only to acknowledge, but also to correct, the structural inequities that exist for all dancers. This text summarizes the themes that emerged during *Don't Forget the Money!*, and conceptually maps a constellation of questions, concerns, and ideas that might inform our approach to the tasks at hand, in terms of both advocacy and activism.

While it is beyond the scope of this report to comprehensively survey the many artistic, theoretical, and cultural implications of the current interest in dance among visual art spaces, these considerations do contribute to the discursive context within which the forum unfolded. Internationally, dance artists and choreographers including Boris Charmatz, Simone Forti, Miguel Gutierrez, Xavier Le Roy, taisha paggett, Yvonne Rainer, and Sasha Waltz (to name just a few) have experimented not only with placing choreography in museums and galleries, but also with how these spaces can be choreographed, how moving bodies engage with exhibitional modes, and how, as Mark Franko and André Lepecki write, dance may be a “force that ... allows the visual arts to re-imagine the image.”² Indeed, the 2014 special issue of *Dance Research Journal* that Franko and Lepecki edited forms just a part of the significant recent scholarship that has taken up dance in the museum.

As many of these scholars remind us, the presentation of dance in visual arts spaces is not entirely novel. Claire Bishop cites previous flare-ups of interest in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and again in the late 1960s and 1970s. She writes,

The current love affair between museums and dance is in part an acknowledgement of the longev-

ity of visual art's relationship to dance: from the historic avant-garde to Black Mountain College to post-punk. The reinsertion of dance into the museum acknowledges this long history, and allows it to be made visible again.³

Similarly, during *Don't Forget the Money!*, performance artist Johanna Householder showed an image of *The Artist's Oath*, from 1987, "to give a nod to the fact that this is a very long and nuanced conversation about artists, and performance artists, and dancers being paid." The oath was written by Clive Robertson, and performed by him, Ric Amis, Frances Leeming, and Householder herself. Recreating this performance, forum participants stood and recited aloud: "I will never, never ever, forget that there is nothing creatively rewarding about not being paid."

Yet even understood within the long entanglement of dance and the visual arts, the present moment carries a unique set of cultural, political, and economic circumstances, which demand specific attention, and there are many factors influencing the current institutional interest in the form. Dance artist Brandy Leary offered a galvanizing proposition when she observed that her collaborative performance work seems to be "showing up in galleries ... because the body is a real site of resistance, and in this current moment it feels like bodies are under attack."

At the outset of the forum, it was essential to address some fundamental concerns. Nearly all participants stressed the importance of both **fair compensation and proper working conditions** for dancers. In the session's first presentation, choreographer and performer Michael Caldwell observed that visual arts institutions should be cognizant of the unique set of requirements that accompany dancers' labour: "dressing rooms as a rest area, privacy issues, security, food and water, sprung floors, temperature. These

are all considerations when negotiating with dance in these kinds of spaces."

Assessing the current terrain of dance in museums and galleries, many participants described a spectrum of distinct **institutional models for engagement**. Several referred to a "parachute" model of programming, wherein an institution selects and temporarily drops a performance work into a pre-existing exhibition framework. Caldwell stated, "I'm less interested in this idea of a parachute model," and inquired, "What are the tangible and sustainable relationships we can form with performance-based artists?" Perhaps the most concrete alternative to parachuting proposed during the session came from curator Emelie Chhangur, who described a model she refers to as "in-reach." This methodology is predicated on **reciprocation and transformation**, where the institution adapts its structures based on the needs of the performance and performers it engages. Chhangur recounted the experience of curating *The Awakening/Giigozhkozinim*. Bringing together "members of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation and a group of parkour athletes from the Greater Toronto Area in a collaborative performance," the exhibition required the Art Gallery of York University "to initiate or follow unexpected pathways, learn how to problem-solve differently, and ... move in an improvisational way, including when it came to the payment of fees." Taking place over three years, and compelling the gallery to take on new roles, protocols, and procedures in accordance with the cultural priorities of the artists involved, the project Chhangur described, like the model she proposed, demonstrates the kind of sustained and transformative engagement for which many forum participants expressed their desire.

The built infrastructure of the museum or gallery itself was discussed throughout the proceedings as another potential site for reciprocal engagement. As performance

artist and scholar Francesco Gagliardi observed, people working in the performing arts need **space**. Similarly, Gallery TPW curator Kim Simon noted that providing the space they have available to dancers is one way institutions can practice more supportive relationships with the performers they engage. Returning to the parachute model, the notion of institutions picking and choosing dance as it suits their frameworks is not inherently problematic. Rather, as Gagliardi pointed out, the challenge lies in the **gradients of power** along which such actions take place. By way of example, he observed that comparing the number of publications devoted to the visual arts to those addressing dance or performance reveals a striking imbalance in visibility and cultural capital between these fields.

A result (at least in part) of such power dynamics is that limited **definitions of dance** have gained currency in art spaces. Artist and performer Kumari Giles observed how dance from non-Euro-American cultures and traditions is often undervalued or overlooked. Such forms are frequently, and troublingly, excluded from the conventional art historical canons in which so many economies and ecologies of contemporary art remain rooted. Gagliardi noted, for example, that postmodern dance is well-suited to the pre-existing models of art presentation favoured by most galleries and museums. As such, it enjoys the artistic and cultural capital these spaces provide. Facing these dynamics, Brandy Leary expressed the urgent need to "...[decentralize] dance that drags a lineage of visual privilege with it, coming out of a Euro-American, white tradition" in order to "...[flesh] out the idea of the contemporary." As she very astutely observed, "...galleries are still [a] privileged space descending from whiteness." Her statement speaks to the overlapping systems of value that affect dancers working in visual art contexts—spaces where hierarchies exist in terms of artistic discipline, as well as race, gender, ability, and a host of other categories.

Any conversation about working conditions and compensation for dancers must then engage an **intersectional** approach, equally accounting for these interlacing considerations. In their presentation, Giles described how lived experience is often ignored when thinking about payment. Indeed, for gender non-conforming artists, queer artists, artists of colour, disabled artists, and the many other diverse bodies that participate in dance and performance, making and sharing work presents a wide range of challenges, which must be acknowledged when we consider compensation. As artist Aisha Sasha John quite succinctly observed in the Q&A period, institutions need to find ways to compensate artists for "... feeling fucked up while working because we live in a white supremacy." Another anecdote from Giles astutely illustrates this point: they recounted that a friend, who was hired by several organizations during Black History Month, decided to invoice the institutions that employed her for the emotional labour she performed as a Black artist during the period; the cost reached thousands of dollars. Giles followed this example with an especially poignant observation, wondering how many white, cisgendered, male artists would be better paid as a result of the afternoon's conversation, while women artists, gender non-conforming artists, and artists of colour still wouldn't be hired. If we seek to enact truly equitable and supportive labour practices in the arts, it is essential that we take this question very much to heart.

Differentials of privilege, power, and access present some of the many reasons that fee schedules, like those proposed by the Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists (CADA) or the Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) cannot be exclusively relied upon as comprehensive tools. As dancer Bee Pallomina recounted, "I recently had an experience here [at the Blackwood Gallery], where we were negotiating a contract for the exhibition that's going on right now. We

were using the CADA guidelines on both sides, and came up with some radically different numbers.” Indeed, artist and labour activist Karl Beveridge commented that CARFAC has been weak with regard to performance and dance, while CADA Ontario co-chair Catalina Fellay-Dunbar observed that the organization’s professional standards guidelines are out of date, having last been updated in 2011. CARFAC executive director Sally Lee remarked that while her organization updates their fee schedule yearly, “our resource situations are different,” acknowledging, once again, the disparities that exist in, and between, visual art and dance economies. Lee also explained that the vast number of variables at play in any project make it impossible for generalized guidelines to adequately take everything into account. What’s more, it is important to recall that a fee schedule is, in Lee’s words, “not an aspirational thing.” Rather, such directives represent a minimum, something of “a safety net” for emerging artists in particular.

Another issue with fee negotiations between performers and institutions is the veil of mystery that seems too frequently to accompany them. In a recent performance concurrent with the Festival TransAmériques, artist Eroca Nicols asked the audience for a financial confession: she requested that each artist involved in the festival, or any simultaneous presentation forum, reveal what they were being paid. Nicols’ performative intervention illustrated the notion of **transparency** with particular clarity, and as such, is a fitting intertext for this conversation—where transparency emerged as an essential principle in facilitating ethical, equitable, and generous exchanges between dancers and the arts institutions that employ them. Speaking from her experience as a choreographer, Jenn Goodwin recounted that in some instances, she has the resources to pay dancers well, while in others this may not be the case. In any situation, however, she tries to be transparent. Kim Simon made a similar observation from her institutional

perspective. “Basically every time a performance possibility comes up at TPW, it starts with a pretty transparent conversation: this is the money that we have. Is it really going to support you in the way you need to be supported? And frankly sometimes the answer is no, and that has to be ok.”

Transparency is especially important for fostering dialogues that can address the wide range of concerns surrounding labour, working conditions, compensation, and structural inequality. And it is through open, trusting relationships that conversations about the effects of marginalization and structural oppression on creative work can begin to take place. Another essential factor here is **accountability**. Author and cultural labour activist Greig de Peuter brought up the model of the New York-based organization Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.). Like CARFAC and CADA, W.A.G.E. provides fee schedules and other tools for facilitating transparent negotiations between artists and institutions, but they also run a certification program, which “publicly recognizes non-profit arts organizations demonstrating a history of, and commitment to, voluntarily paying artist fees that meet a minimum payment standard.”⁴ As de Peuter explained, W.A.G.E. “is also creating a program in which artist members commit to work with W.A.G.E. certified organizations.” This example demonstrates one way to hold both institutions and artists accountable for promoting and enacting fair labour practices.

Artist Jessica Patricia Kichoncho Karuhanga described how her work has undulated through various modes and media, with the form of her practice contingent upon the resources available to her. She observed that her turn toward performance emerged from “urgency and **precarity**.” The latter term seemed to resonate across the experience of many dance artists who pursue their vocation amid a paucity of resources and support. As presenter Bojana Videkanic

writes in *Kapsula*, “Performance art’s inherent precarity and risk are also its greatest strengths, as many artists continually, purposefully sabotage any attempts at the instrumentalization of their work.”⁵ And yet, precarity as a performative strategy, or personal experience within an evolving practice, is very different from precarity as an institutional or structural imposition upon artists within current art ecologies and labour forces.

As de Peuter explained, cultural workers are too frequently “narrated as contemporary capitalism’s model worker: self-employed, adaptable, virtuosic, self-reliant, and supposedly willing to put passion before pay.” In light of this tendency, de Peuter suggested that we revise our views of arts workers, asserting that they can act as “agents in resistance, and builders of alternatives.” In many ways, dancers are uniquely positioned to imagine new ways of working together. Projects like the performance work *Capitalist Duets*, which Sandra Henderson described in her presentation, approach the economies of art production and presentation choreographically, providing opportunities to rethink the power dynamics and embodied relationships comprised in artistic labour. Such interventions can both contribute to and benefit from broader movements for fair pay and equitable labour, like the fight for \$15/hour minimum wage, or advocacy for a guaranteed minimum income, which Beveridge and Videkanic addressed during the discussion.

Unfair and ungenerous demands on the labour of dancers are inherently linked to larger systemic shortcomings, including increasing neoliberalization and the economics of scarcity apparent in the arts sector and more widely. The burden of improving compensation and conditions for dancers rests not only on the arts organizations that employ them, but also on funding organizations and larger social institutions. The conversations that emerged at *Don’t Forget the Money!* should not be limited to their application in the artistic field, but should also extend to, and account for, the position of diverse bodies throughout the networked capitalism in which we move and work.

Undoubtedly, dancers working in visual art spaces face unique challenges, and all of their distinct needs—from sprung floors, to more sustained engagement, to fair, or dare we even say generous, pay—must be addressed by institutions and funders. As much of the conversation at *Don’t Forget the Money!* intimated, however, the necessary changes extend further afield, requiring self-reflection and reassessment for those working across all terrains of contemporary art. In this process, intersectional awareness and collaboration are essential. Towards the end of the conversation, Sally Lee remarked, “I actually feel this sense of solidarity and goodwill in the room.” It is precisely such collective energy that will help carry forward the initiatives and ideas sparked by these conversations.

1 Kelly Hill, *A Statistical Profile of Artists and Cultural Workers in Canada* (Canada: Hill Strategies Research Inc., October 2014): <http://www.hillstrategies.com/content/statistical-profile-artists-and-cultural-workers-canada>

2 Mark Franko and André Lepecki, “Editor’s Note: Dance in the Museum.” *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 03 (2014): 1.

3 Claire Bishop, “The Perils and Possibilities of Dance in the Museum: Tate, MoMA, and Whitney.” *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 03 (2014): 64.

4 See wageforwork.com

5 Bojana Videkanic, “Working Precariously in the Arts.” *Kapsula*, December 2014: <http://kapsula.ca/actingout3of3>

Acknowledgments

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Gallery Hours
Monday–Friday: 12–5pm
Wednesday: 12–9pm
Saturday: 12–3pm



The gallery is FREE, open to the public, and barrier-free.