

Dance after lockdown report: “I want to see radical change”

The professional contemporary dance sector was already precarious, and then the pandemic struck. What happens next?

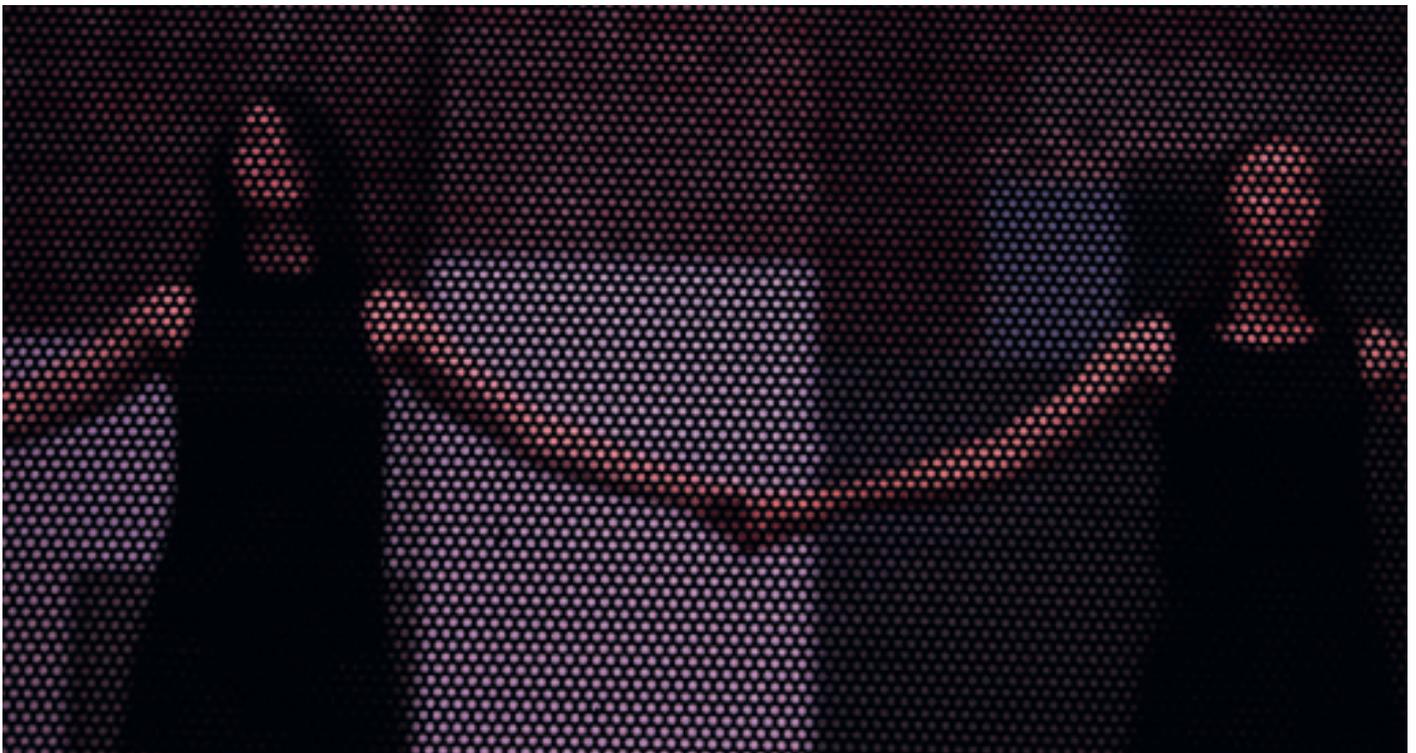
Project aim: to listen to people talk about and imagine dance after lockdown, and to share what we heard.

Who we are: Rowan McLelland, Rosa Cisneros and Simon Ellis from the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE) at Coventry University.

What we did: interviewed 16 people in the UK’s professional contemporary dance sector: dancers, choreographers, producers and teachers. Some were unsalaried (or independent), others salaried. They were united by their commitment to the art form, but also distinctive in their backgrounds, work and ideas.

This document: summarises the things participants said that we consider important, and the opinions we formed through the research. It is a document for artists, educators, producers, venues and policy makers. It recognises that the stories we all tell matter, and that “anything specific enough to be quantifiable is probably too specific to reflect a messy situation.”¹

Direct quotes from project participants are in blue.



¹Harford (2016) *Messy*.

Photos: Rachel Roberts (2014)
Choreographers and performers: Shannon Bott and Natalie Cursio in "Recovery"

Project review

Identity

Participants described how their identities had changed or been compromised when the work stopped in March of 2020. They talked of how the pandemic forced them to re-think the nature of their practices.

“When all of that just comes crashing down in various ways, you’re like, ‘What am I? Who am I? I don’t know what to do.’”

What might a contemporary dance practice look like that is not contingent on unpredictable circumstances? This would mean focusing on ways to build a sustainable practice. After all, practices are fundamentally “not about having something. They are about becoming someone.”²

Agency, helplessness and transparency

“[The funding system] feels absolutely standardised and transparent, but it feels like all the decisions are being made somewhere else anyway.”

Our participants talked about agency and helplessness, particularly in relation to arts funding in the UK. They described how Arts Council England is acting on the whims of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, dance venues are acting on the whims of ACE, and artists are on the receiving end.

“My goal is always more artists making more decisions about more resources.”

Our participants indicated that the contemporary dance community would benefit from increased understanding of how arts policy is constructed, and to look to build relationships with policy makers. They felt though that this ought to go hand in hand with increased transparency (and accountability) in how institutions make decisions, where the money goes and how it is raised.

Exploitation

“Our financial success has, as we’ve talked about, survived on taking money from those with the lowest incomes, ultimately. It doesn’t work.”

Various participants described how contemporary dance is built on exploitation, “whether that’s the unpaid hours [of the] salaried team, [or] the unpaid hours of the artists that are doing things either intentionally unpaid or for just not quite enough money.”

Artists and UBI

“Universal Basic Income is a must. UBI would change everything.”

Contemporary dance is, anecdotally, a middle-class activity with middle-class tastes. The irony here is that arts funding in the UK is largely dependent on the National Lottery system, and this system “has made a lot of poor people slightly poorer while equipping Arts Councils to enrich an arts sector that disproportionately serves the better-off.”³

Our participants were adamant that UBI⁴ would make a difference.

“There is rage. There is real, real rage. People wouldn’t feel that rage if they were able to live OK.”

Our participants suggested that a UBI wouldn’t make socio-economic status disappear, but would mean that anyone can choose to be an artist knowing that there is a safety net; a means for them to get by.

“We would start to be able to be able to use redistributive mechanisms in the workplace because we would know that everyone would be OK.”

“I do believe in UBI but I also don’t want that to be the way that the arts are funded.”

We propose that UBI is essential; that anyone, regardless of their background, should be able to pursue their curiosity and talents with their basic needs met.

Community

“Division, separation. I feel like we are divided because we are not able to gather.”

There was a strong sense of community in the conversations, but at the same time a striking feeling of division between artists and institutions.

One institutional leader described the importance of standardisation of practices across communities and institutions, and how this might help people come together. It might remove the sense of isolation felt by artists and institutions, and would harness a spirit of solidarity to pool resources, understanding and experience.

²Clear (2018) *Atomic Habits*.

³Doeser (2018) *Funding the arts through the National Lottery is not a winning solution*.

⁴en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_basic_income

What next?

We recognised a crucial paradox from the conversations in this project: that contemporary dance is a unique and relatively small and vulnerable ecosystem, and that contemporary dance is not distinct from other arts or other human endeavours in how it reflects culture, politics and ideology. In considering contemporary dance after lockdown we think there are opportunities afforded by both sides of this paradox: adaptation and culture.

Adaptation

The participants described various degrees of dissatisfaction with the resources available in contemporary dance, and how these resources are allocated and used.

The power of small ecosystems is they afford opportunities for rapid adaptation and change. The economist Tim Harford describes three essential components to adaptation:

1. Try new things knowing that some will fail;
2. Make failure survivable;
3. Know when you've failed, else you won't learn anything.⁵

These components of adaptation provide a blueprint for change in the contemporary dance ecosystem, from individual practitioners to publicly funded organisations.

For our participants it was clear that not only is contemporary dance in a position to radically rethink how the sector works, but also that we have little to lose: ["Surely we can't put it all back how it was. That's what scares me the most. It worries me in my heart."](#)

Culture

The participants described their sense that British culture does not value dance. What kinds of changes is it possible to make to the contemporary dance sector to increase its cultural value? The economist Richard Denniss suggests that each of us shapes culture through the choices we make. He also says there are only four things to do to grow any sector.⁶ For example, in the arts sector:

1. People can spend more of their disposable income on what is produced by artistic activity;
2. People can demand that the companies they buy things from buy more from artists;
3. People can demand that their elected representatives buy more things from the arts sector;
4. People can demand that their elected representatives make regulations that require more artistic activity to occur.

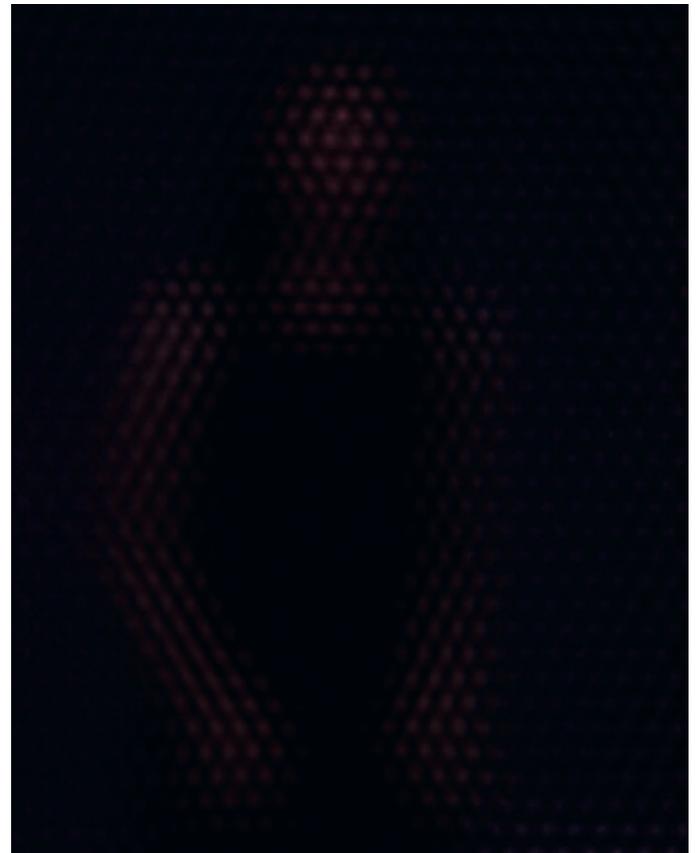
These four things might sound absurd to an artist's ears, but they are also a stark reminder that it is the work of artists to convince others of the cultural value and economic price of the things they are making. If we want the conditions of our community to change we must earn value, not expect it.

Starting over

If contemporary dance were to start over again what might the overall goal be? Our perspective is that if anyone wants to pursue being an artist that this ought to be culturally and fiscally possible regardless of one's economic and socio-cultural privileges (in the same way that someone wanting to pursue being a vet ought to be possible). Such equity may feel like a far-off dream, but through our conversations with the project participants, there are two key steps:

1. Universal Basic Income
2. to work gradually and perhaps painfully to reconfigure the cultural drivers that underpin the UK's relationship to the arts and arts funding.

["It's not about making different work but about involving ourselves civically, seeing ourselves part of society rather than, 'We're this esteemed fancy thing and then you'll all come when we tell you to.'"](#)

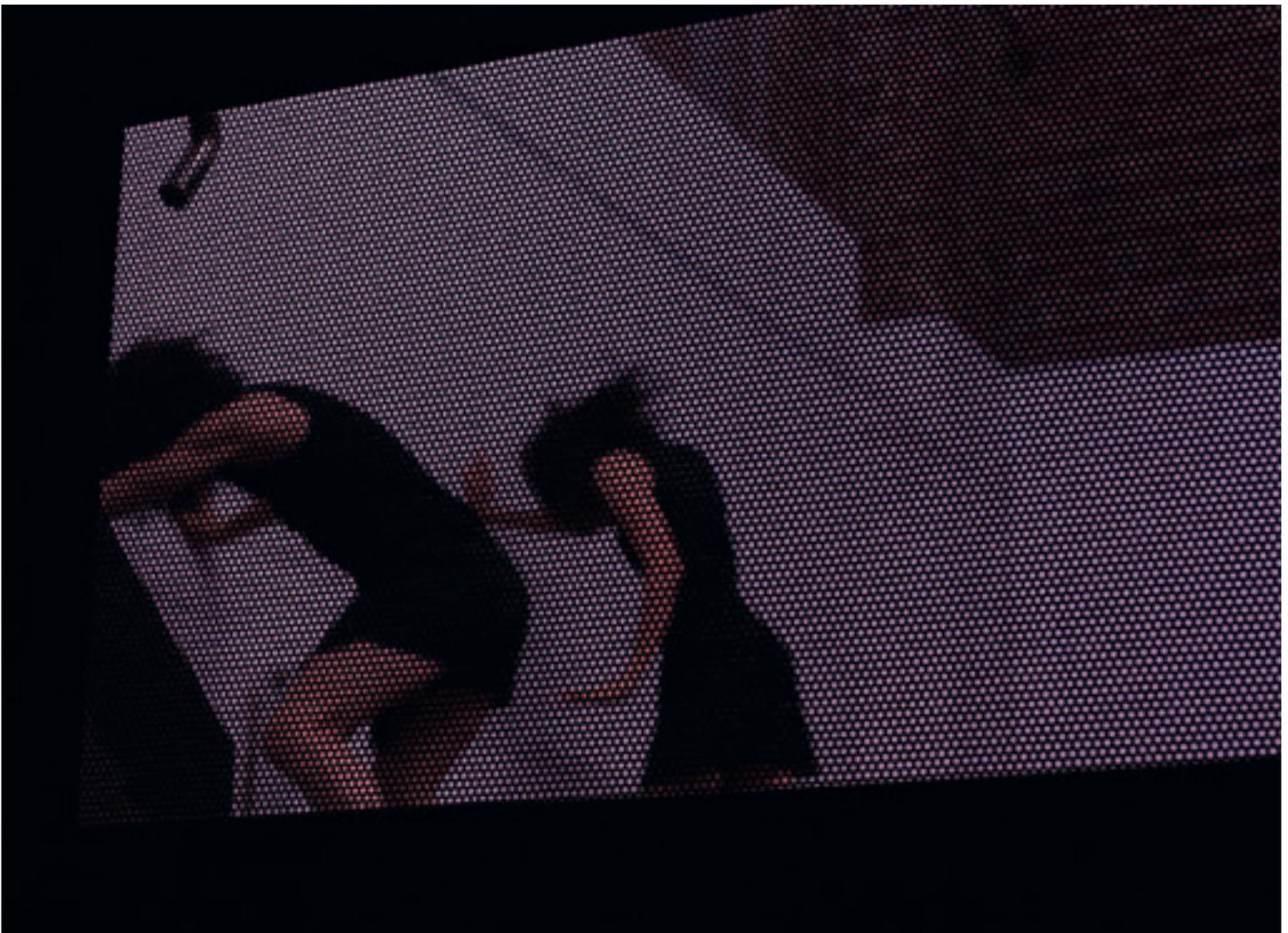


Photos: Rachel Roberts (2014)
Choreographers and performers: Shannon Bott and Natalie Cursio in "Recovery"

⁵Harford (2012) *Adapt*.
⁶Denniss (2017) *Curing Affluenza*.

Further reading

1. Independent Theatre Council (Rate and Pay):
itc-arts.org/rates-of-pay/
2. Equity and Arts Policy:
equity.org.uk/media/3370/equity_arts-policy-2019_final-web.pdf
3. Written evidence submitted by One Dance UK, Sector Support Organisation for Dance:
committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6995/pdf/
4. Understanding the value of arts & culture – The AHRC Cultural Value Project:
ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/
5. Improbable and People Dancing – Is this actually a great time to make some changes in Dance?:
[qiqochat.s3.amazonaws.com/stories/attached_files/000/002/092/original/Reports_\(Dance_OS_-_25_Sep\)_v3.pdf](http://qiqochat.s3.amazonaws.com/stories/attached_files/000/002/092/original/Reports_(Dance_OS_-_25_Sep)_v3.pdf)



Photos: Rachel Roberts (2014)
Choreographers and performers: Shannon Bott and Natalie Cursio in "Recovery"