

APAM WIRE #11 | Summary Notes Changing Models of International Engagement

20 November 2020, 10:00 AEST

Speakers:

Amrita Hepi, independent artist and choreographer

Tristan Meecham, All the Queens Men

Sue Healey, independent artist, dancer and choreographer

Gemma Pepper, independent artist

Panel host:
Norman Armour

APAM Host:
Melanie Burge

Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country

Good afternoon everyone, thank you for joining us today for APAM Wire #11. I'm Melanie Burge, Associate Producer at APAM.

I would like to acknowledge the custodians of land on which I live and work, the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations. I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional lands this digital platform reaches and extend this acknowledgment to First Nations people with us today and elders past, present and emerging.

Introductions

Norman Armour – Panel Host – International Development Consultant, North America (Canada, Mexico and USA) at Australia Council for the Arts

Norman introduces himself and opens with the relationship Australian artists have with international exchange and how it has been fundamental to the sustainability of their artistic practice. What happens when it is no longer possible to travel internationally? Each artist introduces themselves, their practice and relationship to international exchange:

Sue Healey is a choreographer, a film maker and installation artist whose work navigates connections between the embodied and the digital. Over 25 years her practice has taken her to Asia for collaborations. Since COVID hit, many works have been postponed but in reaction to the pandemic new work was realised including the recent commission for Liveworks Festival *Live Action Relay*. This work about liveness was broadcast to national and international audiences. Shot using drones and edited live, the work was indeed an experiment and opened Sue's eyes to the potential for expanding this idea without the need for travel.

Amrita Hepi is a dancer and choreographer who works across a few different spaces. She describes as a body-centred, real world practice that from time to time touches on the digital. When COVID happened, there were international opportunities that needed to be configured. Two works have been created and reimaged in this time: *Soothsayer Serenades* a provocation for moving together while apart; and *Without Proof of Presence* and the *Kiss* (originally meant to be a part of Canada's *Nuit Blanche*) about running, kissing and constant surveillance moving to film.

Tristan Meecham along with Bec Allen is director of *All the Queens Men*, a values-based company that collaborates with communities of all identities. They champion the rights of LGBTIQ communities, especially the needs of elders within that community. They were set to have about 12 months of international presentations ahead of them before COVID hit, and have since pivoted to create digital dance clubs for their loved and established LGBTIQ dance club along with working with a Scottish community remotely/digitally to realise a work.

Gemma Pepper is the producer for Side Pony Productions and Audio Play, and they explore the nexus between technology and live performance. Their company has been working with audio specifically and looking beyond screens, but maintain the qualities of live performance. The work through Audioplay is focused on kids' works in which they listen to via headphones and physically play out the action, using their imagination in the real world heightened by the audio provided. This was originally set as an installation but now through an app can be experienced in people's homes.

Norman: How have you approached re-thinking the mobility of your practice with the disruption of COVID-19?

AH: Around preparedness, artists are always readapting and changing. Artists are nimble whilst having rigour. During this time she has spoken to First Nations people including a lawyer for treaty and land rights who said the pandemic is not the first time we have seen this, we have seen survival and even in mundane circumstances there is a preparedness there. This bolstered her spirits and the question of artistic nimbleness.

SH: It's not an easy process to let work breathe and speak in the digital realm, and for years she has been developing the skills to create dance which can exist in this space. With the rush to go online suddenly the world is full of cringy performances and badly lit bedrooms. She works to give vigour and freshness to the frame of being on screen and there are many pros and cons. Before COVID, her strategy was to be thinking about adaptation and becoming interdisciplinary, diversify and adapt.

Norman: What means have you developed to ensure the artistic integrity of your work? How did you see the process of working through COVID and still standing by your values?

TM: ATQM always collaborate thus responsibility of others always at the fore. This is consistently interrogated and the form appropriate to the people, issues and social contexts. Located in contemporary contexts they are always embedded in community intrinsic to their form. Values are always important. Inclusivity and access they underpin our work and the outcomes are the result of long term relational practices which has prepared them for COVID. Always working with communities and interrogating processes with so many different lived experiences means creation of a collective and individual practice. With international touring, they try to instil those values and what they have learnt is unless the community is leading, not the artists then the values are not always upheld.

Norman: Does audience and artist relationship benefit via the online world?

TM: This a case by case situation. Some elders are digitally competent and there are those that are missed. Currently looking for funds to support digital competency. Online has created some opportunities such as in Salisbury in the UK where they have continued partnerships and reframed the work in a new way. Through the online they were able to stay connected to the community, create a local context and artistic responses. There were beautiful versions of their original impetus. It means the need to create new frameworks and working out how to let go so others can build.

Norman: For Audioplay was it a natural pull to using a platform other than the screen, and how has the work changed or developed during COVID?

GP: They have been exploring working with young audiences for some time and then everyone went into lockdown. A number of the mechanics of our creative practice really fit at home experiences. The challenges were around the psychology of dealing with lockdown. Talking with families, children use play to communicate with their friends; when they are physically separated how they stay connected and maintain relationships with peers was a concern. How can kids play physically in different locations and

maintain connection through play? They built the tools around technology pre-COVID and now want to invite others in. How else can artists engage? There is a need to move forward together collectively and inviting in collaboration across form and practice

Norman: Working online vs working in real life there are number of elements beyond your control. Can this be a struggle and does it test integrity?

GP: About looking at what we have control over and what we don't and mitigating risks similarly to that of a real life experience. What you can control to establish the highest possible engagement within that realm and allowing fluidity in those that don't.

SH: An article by [Nicholas Berger on the forgotten art of Assembly](#) assisted in working through the online space and integrity. Artists need to hold back and not put everything online and take away the importance of liveness.

AH: Agrees, art moves so rapidly it can be hard to just wait in a moment. There is a mode of hyper production that the internet exacerbates. Artists understand the urgency but also the sustainability in other things, so it's about how do they instil this in their practice and works when it's one's livelihood.

SH: Simply relocating existing structures or work onto an online space isn't going to save artists from issues we had before COVID. Take time, sit back, wait.

TM: It's a good opportunity to talk about artists as community and review the hierarchy of presenters and platforms of art. As a project ATQM don't have ongoing funding so they have to choose where art is being placed with whom. This moment of pause means the structures do need to be reconsidered. The online form is an ability to take control over how things are being made and where they are being seen. This needs to be talked about in a live space too. Need to reassess how we are communing. International partnerships and models are not always working but there is a reality around art making and international models being part of sustaining a community.

Norman: In dialogue with presenters and this conversation around un-producing, what have been the exemplary conversations? If you had a chance to say "this is how we should be doing it"?

SH: Had a great experience with Performance Space, [Artistic Director] Jeff Khan reacted with the times and helped Sue create something relevant.

AH: Had a conversation with a European presenter at APAM this year about chat bots and they were very interested in premiering the work, but then COVID hit. They were still very committed and keen to include her in a film program so the audience can be introduced to you.

GP: Less about presenters, but more of a willingness around channels and creating new introductions. APAM has assisted in connecting us.

TM: Experiences have varied. Interesting how everyone moves forward to align values and relational practice. Being more strategic around those partnerships and outcomes, not just jumping into relationships. Also leading with values and intentions. On a practical level, pay artists for meetings or commission the development of those ideas and that will sustain the development of the practice around it. As artists, have rigorous conversations to determine how collaborators take on this form and social mission is key. What does it look like when there is deep engagement as artists with community but to then let them go and for collaborators, community to continue on the mission without us? Looking at frameworks of reciprocity how to do this well so when it's done right it is joyous and easy to negotiate.

AH: Reciprocity when looking at artist and presenter is key. We are in a 'market' but in the project of loving art.

Norman: Reciprocity has been talked about a lot in the realm of mobility and international market development. Is it a core value?

SH: Reciprocity, collaboration is critical. Ideas of touring work is one about collaboration and creating working in close partnership and reveal the love about art.

GP: Reciprocity is about an openness to forms of practise or ways of working you hadn't thought of. If you value lots of contributions then you find interesting new developments in practice.

Norman: Going forward and thinking about sustainability do you see yourself touring less, being in locations longer and only working with those more attuned to your values? Will this limit or open opportunities?

TM: ATQM has always been about a model of deep community engagement and establishing relationships, not just touring. Working with a community and determining for how long and with who. Moving forward, it is about a shared model, where we work with others. We trust the right opportunities will beget more opportunities.

SH: It's difficult to be sustainable but there is a need to be optimistic and pragmatic, creating opportunities without doing harm and sharing/assisting community.

GP: Working to figure out practice in this frame is exciting. Climate change is bearing down and COVID has been the circuit breaker – we have to adapt with practical applications to environmental sustainability. There is a need for hybrid models, there will still be travel but we have not been as disciplined as we need to be for the planet.

AH: Flying isn't always the way, but the internet and the digital is not sustainable either; there is so much energy used to power this. Important to be in the place where you are, a shift to being in place. There are still international models and festivals but the need to look at their immediate community.

Norman: What is the biggest risk, personal or professional?

AH: That we don't acknowledge from history that this is a for shift and innovation. That we are so involved in future proofing we don't think about the now.

TM: Risk in terms of communities and place. The negotiation around the value of liveness and what arts and community can do has been fractured. Therefore advocating around this value in the Australian political context is the mission.

GP: Risk is practical in terms of navigating power structures, landscape, where money sits, the long term frame for programming. The dance of where you invest your time and how do you maintain a financially sustainable practice.

SH: One element of risk is the loss of the embodied knowledge of dance, the push to go online and what the future holds for the next generation of dancers and choreographers.