

# **‘Follow your heart and something will come’: Subjective factors in the Sustainability of early to mid career contemporary dance artists**

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## **Introduction**

This project comes out of a desire to investigate the subjective factors that influence how and why people become and stay dance artists. When dance artists in Australia earn, on average, \$27,000 per year, and only \$16,700 of that income is dance-related, according to David Throsby’s (2003) recent study for the Australia Council, one has to start to think that maybe sustainability, that is, artists’ ability and willingness to stay within the industry, is not solely governed by economic factors. One has to also start to think that subjective factors, things to do with the value, satisfaction and quality of life dance artists get from what they do, might be as significant, if not more significant, drivers of sustainability than pure economics.

This paper reports on an exploratory study into the kinds of subjective issues that drive sustainability amongst young dance artists. What kinds of factors make being a dance artist so valuable and fulfilling to dancers that they are prepared to create ways of sustaining themselves and developing their artistic practices in such a bleak economic environment?

In undertaking this kind of study, I’m approaching the issue of sustainability from the perspective of ‘quality of life’. The Australian Centre for Quality of Life defines quality of life as

both objective and subjective. Each of these two axes comprises several domains which, together, define the total construct. Objective domains are measured through culturally relevant indices of objective well-being. Subjective domains are measured through questions of satisfaction (Australian Centre for Quality of Life).

In this study, I set out to identify and articulate some of the subjective domains that influence dancers' ability to continue their practices. In doing this, I was engaging and testing the idea that sustainability, i.e., the ability and willingness of dance artists to continue to practice and develop their artform, is driven to a significant extent by the degree of satisfaction and fulfilment these artists get from their work.

While on the one hand, this idea may seem self evident, the significance of this study is that it starts to frame discussions about how to best sustain dance artists in terms of the kinds of 'soft' factors that govern their day to day decisions and choices. This is to 'drill down' into the kind of economic work that has been undertaken by Throsby and Hollister (2003) for the Australia Council in order to start to tease out the personal and subjective dynamics that underpin those economic figures.

### **Theoretical underpinnings and Research**

The conceptual framework for this project came out of my PhD research into the production of subjectivity in dance. In thinking through the ways in which dance produces an embodied and physically unique subjectivity, I came to think about being a dancer/choreographer in relation to Gilles Deleuze's idea of desire as an aggregate; one never desires something in isolation, but always within a complex linkage of subjective 'elements'; ideas, conventions, objects, events, signs and histories. As Parnet puts it

...in desiring an object, a dress, for example, the desire is not for the object, but for the whole context, the aggregate. "I desire in aggregate"...So there is no desire, says Deleuze, that does not flow into an assemblage, and for him, desire has always been a constructivism, constructing an assemblage 'agencement', an aggregate: "aggregate of the skirt, of the sunray, of a street, of a woman, of a vista, of a colour...constructing a region". (Parnet 1966).

In the same way, constructing one's subjectivity as a dancer/choreographer is not to engage with a single activity, such as dancing, or perfecting technique, or exercising creativity, but always involves a multiplicity of elements. Constructing oneself as a dance artist is a process of engaging with a diverse set of subjective elements; "...very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states,"(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.21). The dancing self is an aggregate, an assemblage that traverses very disparate fields of reference, for example economics, sexuality, physicality, dance history, bodies, events, texts and codes of movement.

Developing the perspective that to construct a life as a dance artist is to construct a subjectivity that weaves dancing into a web of disparate and heterogeneous elements of subjectivity, I set out to investigate the connections between the subjectivities dancers construct and the sustainability of their dance practices. What are the subjective, as opposed to the purely economic (although these terms are not necessarily unrelated) factors that fuel, drive and motivate dance artists to pursue their practices?

My approach to these questions was to undertake a small pilot study in which I generated a series of conversations with a group of young dance artists about what it is that underpins their continued commitment to dance. I interviewed seven dance artists who had graduated from tertiary dance programs 5 to 8 years ago. I chose to interview only women, not necessarily as an ideological stance, but because the issues raised by men and women could be expected to be very different, given the advantages men have over women in gaining work in dance. (I'm not implying here that men in dance don't also find sustaining their art challenging. I'm just alluding to the fact that there are many more women than men in dance, and that this changes the dynamics of working and surviving in the field substantially).

I interviewed dance artists who defined themselves as active artists. I didn't attempt to homogenise the contexts that the participants worked in. I didn't for example, take into account whether the artists were currently performing or choreographing professionally, or whether they had had 'work' in any particular time frame. I included people who I identify as part of the dance community, and who, themselves, identify as dance artists. This was a deliberate methodological decision on my part. I didn't want to pre-suppose

what kinds of contexts and engagements people had with dance. I purposefully sought out a broad and diverse group, partly because I think the field is diverse, and partly because I didn't want to pre-determine the outcomes of the conversations by selecting people that had chosen or gravitated towards particular kinds of working models. I wanted to be surprised.

Having said that, however, the sample is skewed towards the positive. That is, I chose people that I perceived as having been successful in maintaining dance practices. I also chose people that I knew, some more and some less well. This again was a deliberate decision. I wanted to get the maximum possible depth out of the interviews, and I felt that I could do that best by interviewing people that I already had some rapport and connection with. It was also important that I am and have been an independent dancer and choreographer. This history enabled me to draw on my experience to understand what the participants were telling me.

This is also a reflection of my philosophy in relation to interviewing. I constructed the project as a generative and intersubjective process. This follows from my adoption of a Deleuzian understanding of subjectivity. For Deleuze, subjectivity is a rhizome. That is, it is a strategic alliance of elements that someone puts together. In his words,

... the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice... To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call myself (Moi) (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p.84)

This kind of subjectivity isn't a template that can be copied. It's not a 'thing' or even a 'set of data' that can be reproduced. It's a productive, generative process. Deleuze and Guattari understand subjectivity as collectively 'produced'. Guattari describes it as being "...collectively manufactured like energy, electricity and aluminium" (Guattari 1995, p.19). Diverse and not necessarily connected elements of subjectivity; attitudes, opinions, ways of dressing, ways of working, for example, form a kind of circulating economy of subjectivity from which people construct their identities.

Working from this philosophical perspective, I constructed the interviews as intersubjective processes in which knowledge was produced in conversation. That is, I was not asking the interviewees to ‘tell me what they already knew’. Instead, we had discussions, which, in many cases, led us to together formulate new ideas, as much mine as theirs, but developed in conversation.

I found this approach to be ‘artist–friendly’ in the same way as feminist researchers such as Oakley (1981) and Reinhartz (1992) have described intersubjective approaches to interviewing as ‘woman–friendly’ because they value the unique perspective of the interviewee. The whole idea of being an artist is bound up with ‘being different’. Artists are often striving to be different, both from each other and from mainstream culture and ideas. Art is paradigmatically a pursuit of the unique, the unexpected and the previously unthought. This is not a straightforward or unproblematic issue. I’m not arguing that artists exist outside culture or that they express a modernist–style ‘interiority’. However I think there is something structural about art–making that skews it towards process and the production of the new, and away from reproducing what already exists.

Setting up my interviews as processes in which ideas were not so much reported as generated in discussion was a way of valuing the individual perspective of each artist. This approach gave the study a resonance with the kinds of subjective issues I was trying to raise and articulate. It also led, in many cases, to a level of sharing and to the development, between the two of us, of supportive ideas for the future. The interviews became incredibly rewarding processes, and the means of generating possible strategies and solutions for sustaining dance artists. Most importantly, this generation was not top–down, researcher to interviewee, but rather an interactive process through which useful knowledge and strategies were generated.

The underlying premise of the discussions, from my point of view, was that dance provides inherent subjective benefits that motivate dancers to continue to find innovative ways to put together work–life solutions enabling them to continue with their art. The project was a means of testing this premise against the perceptions and experiences of a small group of dancers. How do subjective factors interact with dancers’ willingness and

ability to maintain their practices? How important is the physical sensation of dance, for example, in defining one's ongoing relationship to the field? Is it important to dancers to maintain a connection with the field in any form, whether that be through writing, teaching or administration or is the connection with dance only important insofar as it is mediated physically? Is the construction of one's identity and subjectivity a significant factor in defining a relationship to dance? Does dance afford a sense of autonomy and identity? Is constructing an identity as a choreographer an integral part of the practice or a necessary means of securing opportunities to perform?

The significance of the outcomes of these discussions is not the specific answers to these questions, which vary widely between participants. The importance of this project is that it introduces a consideration of subjective factors into the debate about sustainability in dance.

### **Outcomes**

In reporting on the outcomes of this study, it is important to acknowledge that maintaining a balance between valuing diverse and individual responses on the one hand, and drawing conclusions in order to say something productive about sustainability is problematic. How do I interpret such a wide ranging set of discussions? I've taken the approach of discussing what I think are the most promising and strategic directions that came out of the discussions. As this is a pilot study with a small sample of contemporary dancers (and I should also say that they were all based in Melbourne), there is no suggestion that these issues can be extrapolated to all dance artists. What I do want to suggest is that the issues raised by these discussions provide useful and strategic directions for future research that might clarify how to best support dance artists and provide a clear basis from which to consider policy.

The first thing that struck me about the dancers I spoke to was their optimism. I was impressed by the ability of each of the artists I spoke to, to, as Avila<sup>1</sup> and I decided to call it, 'push into the future'. Isabella called it "what I have to offer". This involved seizing opportunities that came up and taking work or projects, even when the artists didn't know

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<sup>1</sup> The participants are identified by pseudonyms.

where they would lead. Several artists talked about just keeping ‘doing things’, paid and unpaid. Somehow, these projects taken ‘on spec’ or, perhaps more accurately, because the artists were interested in them and wanted to take them, seemed to lead to other projects, either immediately or some time later.

This optimism seemed to be underpinned by what I came to think of as a ‘fundamental’ connection to dance. I called this connection fundamental because it didn’t seem to arise from anything. I didn’t hear people say ‘I like dance because....’. It seemed the other way around. Valuing dance seemed to be axiomatic, and everything else followed from that.

This connection, a desire to be involved in dance no matter what, seemed incredibly robust throughout all seven interviews. It survived lucrative job offers in other fields, and seemed to fuel a resistance to the idea of giving up dance. One of the questions I asked was, ‘have you ever given up dance?’ followed up by the supplementary question, ‘have you ever thought about giving up dance?’. Only one of the seven dancers had, in fact, given up dance for a short time. All of the others had thought about it, but gave reasons for continuing such as “I can’t imagine not dancing”. Avila, for example, was offered a full time teaching position in dance for a year. She said

the thing that stopped me was that that would mean I can’t do my projects...I can’t go for pick-up work with companies that I work with and it means that I’m restricted in this one area, this one field.

Naomi, a year into a senior teaching role, shifted her allegiance from another subject area back to dance, because she ‘just had to’. Mia, despite having thought about giving up dancing “long and hard, lots of times” said “In terms of giving it up completely, I don’t think so, even if I wasn’t doing it professionally I’d be somehow doing something”.

The strength of the connection and commitment these artists have to dance could be considered surprising, given the economic bleakness of the independent dance landscape. I was curious about what underpinned this connection. The nature of the dance experiences the artists valued varied quite widely. I asked ‘what is the heart or core of

the experience of dance for you'? The answers were diverse and included choreographing, doing class, performing, the sensation of moving, pursuing a spiritual path, communicating, overcoming challenges, the connection between moving and thinking, and technical challenges.

These responses seemed to be, in almost all instances, related to a broader 'orientation' or agenda that was woven through what the artists' described as the core of their dance experience. This same orientation or activity was also apparent in the more peripheral parts of the artists' dance practices (for example, corporate gigs or teaching), and even in non-dance, work they were involved in, such as café work and life-modelling. It was as if this broader orientation reinforced and acted in synergy with the artists' fundamental connection to dance, and provided a link to other contexts of art practice and work.

Avila, for example, described her connection to dance in the following way:

I love communicating to different people. I love to watch people think about things, to think about something differently, and that works across teaching, across choreography, across community art.... I would never call myself just a dancer...the word educator really works for me because that sort of fits in ([with]) the kind of community artist I am as well, embedded in that word.

For Avila, her sense of identity as an educator allows her to move between multiple work contexts and still feel that that work is connected to her art practice. She said "I feel like I'm using the same intelligence when I'm working at a program of community classes, as I would working on a creative process to show something at the Arts Centre." Avila attributes the fact that she has been in continuous work for the last two years to the fact that she has a reputation for being able to work across dance, choreography, circus, teaching and community work. The combinations make her ideal for highly specialized roles, such as choreographing for circus, or teaching dance and circus skills in community settings.

For Mia, the core of her work is choreographing, putting things together. She says

I like that kind of cutting and pasting and directing – and I don't really know why I like that, but I very often like seeing it coming to fruition – and the relationship with dancers – very much the hands on sort of stuff, putting something together.

She carries that enjoyment of assemblage, putting things together, through forays into photography, teaching and even marketing. She said about her varied projects, “that’s what I want to be: a professional potterer”. While she prefers dance, she is happy to ‘potter’ with projects in other fields and feels that these are all part of her identity as an artist.

For Naomi, overcoming challenge is a theme that runs through her dance practice and her work life. She says what she likes most in dance is

... the level of enjoyment out of movement – the challenge of being able to doing someone else’s movement that perhaps is physically very different to you - learning and physicality and the challenge - and that’s one of the attractions of teaching for me. There’s nothing better than a kid who couldn’t do something at the beginning and then they do and that challenge has been mastered. And seeing that (mastery of a challenge) on someone else as well is really satisfying.

Teaching appeals because it is something she can treat as a new challenge, and because she enjoys helping her students to conquer the physical challenges of dancing. She applies the same attitude to her work life. About applying for a senior teaching position she said, “I wanted to see if I could get it”. She did. She likes a new challenge, and has typically changed career directions every two to three years, although always maintaining and developing her connection to dance.

For Gabriel, “The heart of it is the heart”. Her dance practice is centred on improvisation, which she understands as a potentially spiritual and transformative practice. She says that going

into the present moment is very much about being in that place where transformation can happen. There’s something about being absolutely in the moment that allows magical things to occur.

She said that as she has progressively defined more clearly who she is as a dance artist and teacher, work has started to come to her in a way that it never has before. For Gabriel, clarifying what she gets out of dance has enabled her to offer that experience to others. She said, “I’m beginning to define who I am and people are coming to find me”.

I wasn’t so much interested in the origins of these ‘orientations’ or *modus operandii*, that no doubt have to do with a combination of personality, training and opportunity, as their functionality. In thinking about how they function, I was originally tempted to imagine them functioning with dance in a duality, like two poles on a continuum, for example dancer-educator, dancer-spiritual quester, etc. Being the good Deleuzian that I am though, I couldn’t stay with that idea for very long! I think the Deleuzian image of the rhizome makes a much better model for the way these connections work structurally.

These different modes of activity seem to me to form strategic alliances with dance practices. There is no imperative to them. People assemble them. They are not inherently contradictory, but they don’t have to go together either. Dance doesn’t have to go with education. Dance doesn’t have to be a spiritual practice. They are functional.

They are also multi-directional – they connect a range of elements, the dancer’s own subjective orientations and preferences, the dancer’s circumstances and opportunities.

They involve flow. If I could model it, it would be a three-dimensional and multi-directional flow: a rhizome. Dancer flows into circus, flows into corporate gigs, flows back out again to community circus classes, to a project company. The flows involve an exchange. Information, ideas, subjectivity, identity work fluidly between one context and another. This fluidity isn’t just metaphorical, or even philosophical, with ideas from one context blending into the other, they are also practical, physical and temporal. Dancer drives to circus, goes home, plans class for tertiary students, dresses for corporate gigs. There’s a physicality, an embodied subjectivity that is built on flow between contexts.

The artists I spoke to rarely seemed to make choices based purely on economic factors. Most decisions, even decisions to work in a café, seemed to take into consideration very

carefully the dancer's whole sense of what was valuable – not just valuable to their dance, in an instrumental way ('this job lets me dance more'), but in accord with their personal aesthetic and life values. For Natasha, for example, there seemed to be a connection between her ability to actively draw around her a community of dancers and her gravitation towards café work in which she found a network of like-minded artists from other fields. Avila, for example, who said "it takes me a week of tossing and turning to decide whether to take a gig" undertakes a complex juggle of her aesthetic interest in the work, its profile, her ongoing relationship with the group or company, how long it is for, what else she has to say no to and the impact of travel on her family and relationship when she decides whether or not to accept a work offer.

These complex decision making processes seemed to be strongly grounded in issues of satisfaction, and this suggests a link between sustainability and satisfaction. Deriving satisfaction from their fundamental connection to dance, and from the way that connection to dance plays out through other areas of their lives, they were prepared to keep doing what they were doing, despite the economic and personal obstacles involved.

Satisfaction seemed, in many of the conversations, to be extended beyond dance into other, related and unrelated, contexts by what I called 'hybridity'. My idea of hybridity is that the underlying orientations with which dancers approach their dance practice form a kind of bridge through which they are able to expand their work in a satisfying way to include/encompass other contexts, both within and outside dance. It seemed to make little difference to the artists' sense of satisfaction whether these connections were made within the dance field or outside. The satisfaction seemed to come, at least in part, from the orientation itself. While all the artists obviously preferred to pursue only their core artistic work, and in the best of all possible worlds the economic structures would exist to allow them to do that, they seemed to gain significant satisfaction from having the necessary, economic, parts of their lives integrated, or aligned in value and purpose with their art making.

If my hypothesis is correct, the concept of hybridity, as opposed to the utilitarian 'day job', provides a double support for the sustainability of dancers' work life. Hybridity provides an underlying sense of satisfaction even when dancers are working significantly

outside their main field, as it harnesses and makes active the kinds of underlying orientations or modes of activity that characterise the dancer's art practice. Satisfaction provides the motivation to continue. As Mia says "you just have to be happy with what you're doing".

Hybridity also, however, provides a fluidity in moving in and out of the dance profession. It provides dancers with other forms of income, and access to a broader economy outside the dance industry. That is, it enables dance artists to both survive and keep dancing.

There is a cost to this hybridity, however. The kinds of work life solutions these artists have put together involve instability, constant and ongoing choices about where and how to work, and uncertainty about where the next money will come from. There is also a cost in terms of energy drawn away from the core artistic practice. The ideal is a synergy which is simultaneously financial, artistic, and satisfying. The reality is sometimes less than ideal, in that the hybrid activities sometimes draw energy away from the prime task. Avila, for example, finds tertiary teaching drains her ability and desire to go into the studios after work, despite the allure of their availability. So I'm not arguing that hybrid practices are without cost or without drawbacks.

David Throsby, in 'Don't Give up Your Day Job' suggests that artists are the biggest subsidisers of the arts (Throsby and Hollister, 2003). I am going a step further and arguing that some dancers are actually creating for themselves potentially sustainable micro-economies, and that underpinning their ability and willingness to do that is finding continuity between their dance practice and what I call 'para-dance' activities that share an underlying orientation or mode of activity that also drives their approach to dance. One approach to the question of sustainability for dance artists might be to investigate how these hybrid structures might best be best nurtured, supported and facilitated.

This brings up a contentious question. Do we want to cultivate a dance ecology built on hybridity? Is this hybridity something to nurture, or is it simply a necessary evil, something that 'gets dancers by' while they wish things were different? I'm making a case for supporting and embracing hybridity.

Why nurture hybridity? Because it's the only feasible alternative. In the current economic climate it is not possible to fund enough artists with public money to an extent that would allow them to focus solely on their core art practice, whether that is dancing, choreographing or both. We can and do fund some, but is this enough to generate an industry with enough critical mass to make an impact in this country? Is it enough to provide diversity of artistic output? Is it enough to provide depth and substance in the range of artists and the influences they can have on each other – that is, a community as well as an industry?

I'd argue it isn't. And if we can't have an appropriately sized dance industry populated by fully subsidized, appropriately waged artists, then we need to have, and find ways to develop and support, hybrid work solutions. And if we are going to have those, we should have and develop ones that provide a fundamental satisfaction to dancers, ones that feed rather than detract from their art work, and ones that integrate the arts economy with resources available in all kinds of other fields.

What do I mean by that? I don't exactly know. This is the subject for further research. We need to know whether this idea of hybrid work structures is widespread among contemporary dance artists, or whether it is a phenomenon that can be embraced by a relatively small few. We also need to know if it extends to men given that all participants in my study were women. We need to know what happens when hybridity fails, and when it fails, why it fails. We need to talk to the people for whom a hybrid lifestyle does not provide satisfaction, does not provide an income and does not enable them to continue to dance (and I'm not saying that the dancers I spoke to necessarily had the level of income that they should have or wanted to have – only that this is an idea that could be developed so that these kinds of artists could aspire to decent incomes). All these issues remain open questions.

What I would like to suggest, however, is that, from a structural point of view, developing the idea of hybridity is a theoretical and practical perspective that has the potential to greatly widen the sources of income available to dance as a sector beyond box office, philanthropy and the public purse. What would it be like, for example, if some categories of funding carried add-on amounts for initiatives that would seed the

development of artistic projects into other areas, increasing the economic return on the project to the artist and fostering their ability to generate more income from their art in the future? What would it be like if policies like this had the goal of reducing artists' reliance on the uncertainty of public funding?

As I indicated earlier, these are contentious questions, and I hope they provoke discussion, debate, and ideas for future research. Putting the answers to these speculative questions aside, however, I would like to end with the suggestion that sustainability of dance artists, that is, their ability and willingness to continue their practices, can be productively and proactively studied from the perspective of subjectivity. It is my contention that subjective factors underpin the dynamics of the dance sector because they drive the decisions dancers make about how, where and if they practice.

Perhaps the most compelling argument that can be made for this view comes from the incredible positiveness and optimism of the artists I spoke to. These are not people who are 'putting up' or 'making do', wishing they had other lives. These are people of extraordinary courage, initiative and vision, making complex decisions that further both their dance practices and their lives. I'd like to end with two quotes from two different artists.

Mia said

I've just never wanted to go back on the dole. I just hated going on it. There were some people I knew that would just ... write applications and be on the dole. Maybe in hindsight I should have done that and I would have got more funding, but I just couldn't do it.

I asked 'Do you think those people got more funding than you did'? She said

I think they did, but, in terms of where we are now, they're not much better off. I've been in work, pretty much all the time, and a lot of that's teaching work admittedly, but that's the stuff that's going to keep me going for a longer period of time, compared to some people who haven't done that.

Avila said, "follow your heart and do and something will come".

For me these quotes sum up the importance of this direction in researching and understanding sustainability. It's about people's lives, not just their art, and the goal is to enable people in dance to have rich, rewarding, fulfilling and sustainable, both in terms of satisfaction and economic reward. This is the challenge for research into the sustainability of dance.

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