

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Sailing Away, presented by Joanna Haigood's Zaccho Dance Theatre. Photo: Courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre

Dance and Civic Engagement

By Paloma McGregor

Dance practitioners across the country are creating innovative opportunities for community, civic, and social engagement. Choreographer, organizer, and former Urban Bush Women company member Paloma McGregor highlights contemporary community-based dance practice; concert dance that is intentional in connecting to community members and issues; and programs where the next generation of socially engaged dance artists are incubated. Through a wealth of stories and examples of dance artists all across the country, McGregor describes how community-based dance—the work of both pioneering companies and fresh new artists working in collaboration with community partners—bridges boundaries between individuals and communities, and between communities. Concert dance is pushing new boundaries by not only taking on social justice issues but fostering community dialogue, bringing awareness to issues of global significance, and demanding visibility for communities who have historically been overlooked. And incubator spaces are fostering community building while helping shape the future of dance practice and reveal its relevance and relationship to communities. In a variety of community settings—art centers, jails, studios, schools, commercial buildings and more—these new practitioners find ways to help people connect with their own physical experiences, to engage in the civic and social life of their communities, and to discover a new vision of their world.

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INTRODUCTION

Every Monday and Thursday evening in New Orleans, in a storefront space owned by [Ashe Cultural Arts Center](#), more than two dozen womenfolk—toddlers to grandmothers, black, white, and brown—gather to dance together. They spend four to six weeks learning a movement technique, from Congolese to Tai Chi to Salsa. These women, who are participating in Sistahs Making A Change, come to dance, but they get much more.

After the movement class, they line up to be served salad, rice, jambalaya, veggies, and chicken then they sit and visit. Once a week, mealtime is accompanied by workshops about health topics, including cooking, massage techniques, and financial health. Following the model of the dance instruction, Sistahs typically spends four to six weeks on a single health topic, to really drive it home.

“The dance opens people up to be more receptive,” said Jamilah Peters-Muhammad, who has run the program for a decade. “Dance makes you feel alive and connected to everybody you’re dancing with. It helps to build community.”



Sistahs Making a Change, Ashe Cultural Center, New Orleans. Photo: Ashe Cultural Center

It also creates an embodied understanding of incremental change. “Think about what you couldn’t do yesterday and what you’re doing today. The little changes can mean so much,” says Peters-Muhammad. “Now that you’re healthy, how do you make your child healthy, and then your community?”

Half a world away in Oslo, Norway, New York-based choreographer Jill Sigman serves tea to a similar-sized gathering sitting on the floor of Oslo Opera House lobby. They, too, are talking about issues that hit close to home, everything from the last item they

threw away to their wishes for their communities. The conversations are a critical part of *The Hut Project*, a site-specific performance installation in which Sigman creates a temporary dwelling fashioned from discarded and donated materials that range from ski poles to Ace bandages.

Over the course of the month-long installation in Oslo, she performs movement material and invites the public to add to the Hut structure with personal objects and plant seedlings in a fake lawn next to the hut. The project is intended to shift people’s relationship to public space, discarded objects, and one another. “For me, performance and choreography is not about

making steps. It's about changing the energy of the space in some way for the people who experience it," Sigman says. "To let that have a kind of echo, a residue, in the space and in their life."

These two examples of community engaged work exemplify the broad range of ways in which dance practitioners across the country are creating innovative opportunities for communities to reconsider themselves and to see their neighbors, and the world we live in, in a new way.

At the root of each of these efforts is a personal belief that dance practice is fundamentally a transformative act: an idea becomes an action becomes a practice becomes a way of being. The change is incremental over time, practitioners say. The artists who do this work are the first evidence of its effects; they have personally experienced dance as a powerful and essential technique for envisioning and actualizing progress, and so have created ways to share that experience with others.

There is not a lot of study on the quantitative impact of such experiences on communities, but there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that when individuals and communities experience movement together, they can be transformed. As a practitioner myself, I have both felt and facilitated change-making dance practice over the past decade.

With this paper, I have chosen to zoom in on the work of a limited number of exemplary practitioners across the field. These profiles are intended as windows into the wide range of practices around the United States. I hope that readers will be inspired to seek out the powerful work that is happening in their own communities, whether those communities are defined by geography, culture, profession, or politics.

HISTORY

For more than a century, contemporary dance practitioners in the United States have used their work to protest, to illuminate social concerns, and to galvanize movements. This work has been well documented in the Western concert dance context and was the subject of a [Library of Congress](#) exhibition, "Politics and the Dancing Body," in 2012.

Dance outside the professional performance context has been less widely examined and documented in terms of its contributions to civic engagement. This paper includes civic engagement practices in which professional dance is only one part of the work or may not be the focus at all.

Two influential figures whose work is grounded in the intersection of dance and community are helping to reshape boundaries in the dance landscape, not only through their own practice but also through their investment in the next generation of artist-activists.

Jawole Zollar

At [Urban Bush Women's](#) annual [Summer Leadership Institute](#), founding artistic director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar teaches a workshop called "How We Got to the Funk," which guides participants through the dances of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, framed within the political context of each time. In the workshop, Zollar, an internationally renowned choreographer and dance professor at Florida State University, reveals and embodies the connections between political movements and dance movements, making a case for dance as a reflector of our times and a galvanizer of action. She has coached a younger group of dancers in creating a similar workshop about dances of the hip-hop era.



Urban Bush Women at Brooklyn Juneteenth, 2010. Photo: Barry L. Mason

Founded by Zollar in 1984, Urban Bush Women's concert work has always been rooted in telling untold and undertold stories, and the company has long practiced artistic engagement with communities. In the past decade, the company has developed strategic partnerships with likeminded organizations and cultural organizers to connect its work with larger movements for change. And, using its

Summer Leadership Institute, it has expanded and strengthened its core group of artist-facilitators.

More than a year ago, the company invested in a new position, Director of Education and Community Engagement, which is being developed by longtime company member Maria Bauman. This investment is aimed at deepening the organization's methodologies for engaging communities in civic dialogue through artistic practice and at improving the capacity of others—artists, organizers and community members alike—to do the same.

Liz Lerman

Choreographer Liz Lerman has made a career of inviting people who are not involved in professional dance practice to perform in her work. She has collaborated with shipyard workers and grandmothers, preachers and physicists. Winner of the 2002 MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship, Lerman has an innate curiosity about everything—including how vastly different people can dance together—that has led her to develop four questions that have informed her work: Who gets to dance? Where is it happening? What is it about? Why does it matter?

Lerman made these questions the mission of [Dance Exchange](#), a Maryland-based professional company she founded in 1976. The company's dancers range in age from early 20s to over 80 and during Lerman's tenure the company addressed such topics as faith, physics, and genocide.

In 2011, after 34 years at the helm, Lerman turned Dance Exchange over to longtime company member Cassie Meador. Under Meador's leadership, the company spent its first year focusing on investing in more local programming for its Takoma Park, MD site, developing a HOME series that includes classes, performances, professional development, and lectures open to the public. Meador's mission is to raise awareness about healthy, sustainable environments. In 2012 Dance Exchange focused on developing [How to Lose a Mountain](#), an interactive work about the sources of energy that provide power. In Dance Exchange fashion, the work is the result of several years of research, including stories from around the world gathered through workshops and an online platform. Meador has spoken at conferences on climate change and has created a Green Choreographers' Initiative to support creative residencies at Dance Exchange for other dance-makers examining sustainability in their work.

While the methodologies of Dance Exchange and Urban Bush Women have become benchmarks for the reach and multiplicity of such work, there is other important work happening around the country: in incubator spaces that support the development of artist-activists, in concert companies that push the boundaries of the practice, and in community-based work that uses dance as a tool for transformation among people who might not consider themselves dancers.

INCUBATORS

For dance to have community-building impact, there has to be a space in which that community—physical, cultural, ideological—can come together. From an abandoned bank building in the Bronx to a private college in San Francisco, some institutions are creating innovative spaces for exploring the impact that dance artists can have beyond the traditional concert dance venues. Accessibility is a common concern: Who will have permission and agency? How do public spaces create connection and possibility? How can dance cross boundaries of ability, race, class, gender? We will consider three institutions—iLAND, Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, and the University of San Francisco—that are developing practices that invite dancers to envision and embody themselves in ways that could help shape the future of dance practice, and its relevance and relationship to communities.

iLAND (Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature and Dance)

When the wind shifts, Jennifer Monson doesn't just notice—she changes, too. As a choreographer, Monson has long created work tangled with the wild logic and ephemeral

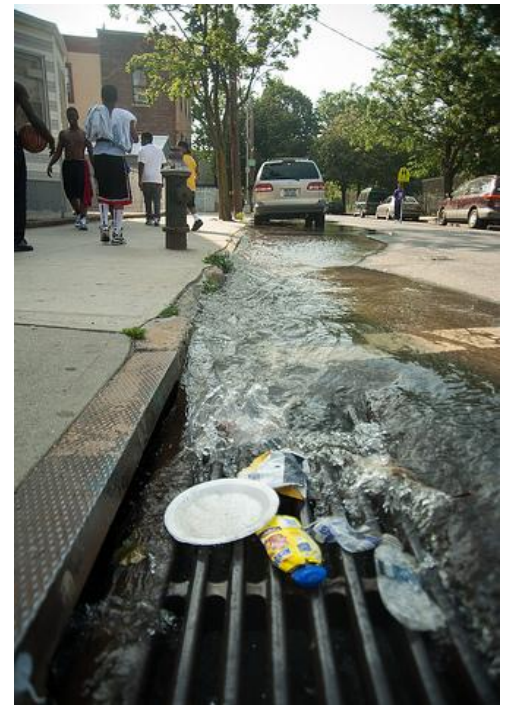
impulses of nature. Her multi-year project, *Bird Brain*, followed the migratory patterns of birds and created opportunities for communities to move outdoors in response to wind, texture, smell, and light.

“The concept of local is more activated when people see the connection with their own space,” Monson said in a phone interview from Champaign, IL, where she is on the dance faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Through her work and her process, Monson aims to develop lasting kinetic understanding of ecosystems in performers, participants, and observers. She wants to deepen the human connection not only to the earth’s wild places, but the urban landscapes we populate. And she wants to support others in doing similar work.

In 2004, she created [iLAND](#) (Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature and Dance), a nonprofit organization that supports research and development of cross-disciplinary collaborations between artists, scientists, communities, and the landscapes we inhabit. The organization initially supported only Monson’s work, but now offers grants to other artists as well as symposiums that address creative and scientific methodologies.

“I felt like it was such a rich terrain that I couldn’t mine on my own,” Monson said. “I wanted to have access to other artists who are also thinking in that way.”



A residency supported by iLAND, Follow the Water Walks is a collaboration between choreographer Paloma McGregor, environmental educator Damian Griffin and ecologist Becky Boger. Together, they are developing interdisciplinary methods for engaging communities with their natural and man made landscapes using mapping, science and dance. In 2012, they began working together in East Tremont, Bronx, after an EPA greening project fell through there. In 2013, Follow the Water Walks will partner with a Bronx-based community organization to continue to develop and deepen this work. Photos: Charles R Berenguer Jr.

7 *here is something about putting your body on the line in public that draws people in, sometimes to participate and sometimes to watch.*

E.J. McAdams, poet and board member, iLAND

The organization's iLAB residency offers collaborative groups of dancers and scientists up to \$7,000 to do research in New York City's landscape. The projects that have developed because of this support include participatory walks, creating new vocabularies for neglected public spaces, and providing access to transitional spaces like the Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island.

"I became involved with Jennifer and iLAND because I was convinced that a kinetic, bodily experience of the environment created individuals who were more committed to preserving the environment," said E.J. McAdams, a poet and a board member of iLAND. He points to Monson's yearlong residency at Ridgewood Reservoir, which drew so much attention to the space that a movement formed to save it from development.

"There is something about putting your body on the line in public that draws people in, sometimes to participate and sometimes to watch," McAdams said. "...to me dancing in public, in civic space, reminds us that we can all put our bodies on the line in public space, if not for dance, then other critical democratic actions."

Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD!)

As a performer for seven years with the internationally acclaimed Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Arthur Aviles experienced the world's most elite contemporary dance settings and in 1995 won the coveted "Bessie" Award. Still, he had a yearning. So in 1998, the Bronx native came home from France to nest, reconnecting his work with communities that are closer to him, geographically and culturally.

His primary vehicle for this work is [Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance](#), or BAAD!, a modest theater space within a large industrial building in Hunts Point, one of the city's poorest economic communities. Throughout the year, BAAD! presents dance, theater, film, and visual arts; it may be the only presenter in New York, and perhaps the country, dedicated to Latino, black, women, and queer voices.

The space's offerings are always provocative and diverse, anchored by four annual curated festivals: BAAD! ASS WOMEN, a cultural celebration of works by women; The Boogie Down Dance Series, a spring festival of dance; OUT LIKE THAT!, the Bronx's only festival celebrating works by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender artists; and The BlakTino Playwrights Showcase, presenting the works of Black, Latino, and mixed-race playwrights.

With Aviles at the helm as artistic director, dance is a major focus. Still, the programming reflects Aviles's and executive director Charles Rice-Gonzales's shared vision of connecting

dance practice to other art forms and to community-building in general. (Rice-Gonzales is a playwright and author, and his *Los Nutcrackers* is an annual holiday hit at BAAD!)

BAAD has made big strides since Aviles's first show 15 years ago, which used clip lights to illuminate the work; by 2012, they had earned enough support to install a lighting grid. They are ever restless and pushing to deepen their work. Recently, BAAD! hosted the first-ever meeting of the Bronx Dance Coalition, a group that has been loosely connected over the years, in an effort to galvanize around some common concerns and goals. The group at that meeting included a visual artist, a half-dozen choreographers, a poet, a community organizer who had never been to BAAD!, and Aviles's 80-something landlord, Mrs. Ross, an activist who has lived in the neighborhood since she was in her twenties.

"This is a place that brings people together. That engages them in artmaking," Aviles said. "It's kind of a social justice vantage point in art."

BAAD! was recently selected to receive support from the Kennedy Center's DeVos Institute for Arts Management so that it could take its vision to the next level. Still, Aviles said, it's challenging to explain the value of their approach to funders, whose support is critical, particularly when the work involves dancers who are community-based. "All the foundations can see is, 'They're helping people,' instead of seeing what impact that work could make on the form, which is dance," Aviles said. "The hard part is convincing those foundations that community-building is an integral part of the art."

Performing Arts and Social Justice Program, University of San Francisco

Across the country, Amie Dowling is helping to train the next generation of artist activists. A choreographer, former dancer with Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, and longtime practitioner of community-engaged process, Dowling coordinates the Dance Program as a faculty member of the [Performing Arts and Social Justice program](#) at the University of San Francisco (USF).

The first undergraduate program of its kind in the nation, it challenges students to make radical leaps. The goal is to develop their understanding of their own bodies and agency; of the breadth of the dance landscape; and of the potential for using dance practice to promote equity and justice. Methods include researching case studies of artists making community-engaged work, examining the underlying assumptions of the traditional canon, and deconstructing preconceived notions about community, service, and the dancer's body.

"They're shifting their own idea of physicality, how their bodies have been trained," Dowling said. "It's not just a theoretical shift, it's an embodied shift. Their body is a space for questioning."

By the time they are in their final year, students have an opportunity to put all they have learned into action. Each semester, a group of seniors and a group of inmates from the San Francisco County Jails collaborate on a performance. Over the course of a semester the group

dynamic shifts incrementally, said Reggie Daniels, a case manager and facilitator for Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) at the San Francisco Sheriff's Department. Daniels, a former inmate himself, co-teaches the course with Dowling.

The shift in participants shows up in the body first, Daniels said. "We go into this very oppressive space. It's very grey and dismal, no natural light. The acoustics are horrible. You can just see the rigidity in the bodies when they first walk in the room," he said. "As you see them start to engage in the movement exercises, you learn things you wouldn't necessarily think about a person, like who has had someone they know get shot. ...You start to see the first cracks of laughter. You see the fluidness in their bodies. It's almost like it's not jail anymore—the space is transformed."

And so are the people in it, say Daniels and Dowling.

"That's something that's not just ephemeral and goes away," Daniels said. "I think it becomes somatic. They have a chance to put it into action. Here's the opportunity for them to live in their bodies and experience change."

Dowling has had students go on to pursue careers in law or social justice after the experience and the inmates are invited to take Dowling's classes when they are released. Some, like Daniels himself, have gone on to pursue their education at USF. (Daniels graduated with a business degree in 2011.)

CONCERT DANCE

"That's the lasting presence after the excitement of being in the space and moving. What stays, I think, with the men is: 'I could really do something. I could really go to school,'" Daniels says. "Maybe they don't end up going to school. But they end up thinking about possibilities that are not in the jail. Hope is invaluable."

Choreographers have long taken on social justice issues in their work. As both anthropologists and dance makers, pioneers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus created work that illuminated the African Diaspora experience in the 1930s and 1940s, a time when theaters and hotels were still segregated. Martha Graham's choreography often challenged political structures through both its content and its portrayal of strong, mobilized collectives of women. A host of contemporary artists and companies have continued in this vein. Some—such as Bill T. Jones, Ballet Austin, Jane Comfort, Victoria Marks, William Forsythe, and Germaine Acogny—have been inspired to take on thematic work that engages people in civic dialogue as part of their overall dancemaking. Others, such as Urban Bush Women founder Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Dance Exchange founder Liz Lerman, have rooted their concert work in such dialogue.

The following three organizations provide examples of artists pushing the boundaries of concert dance and civic engagement in unique and powerful ways. They consistently tackle issues of global significance, demanding visibility for communities who have historically been overlooked and assuring their work reaches people where they live, work and play.

Ananya Dance Theatre



Tushaanal by Ananya Dance Theatre Company. Photo: V. Paul Virtucio

Last fall, a group of women of color took on the global oil industry—not through petitions or protests, but through the power of movement. In September 2012, [Ananya Dance Theatre](#) performed the U.S. premiere of [Moreechika: Season of Mirage](#), an evening-length piece about the environmental, cultural, and human costs of oil extraction around the world, particularly on women of color. It is the

third work in a four-part series exploring violence inflicted on women over land, gold, oil, and water.

Rooting concert dance in social justice themes and women’s issues is the heart of artistic director Ananya Chattergea’s work. “As artists, we’re not legislators, politicians. What we’re responsible for is we have audiences for whom we open up the depths of reality through metaphor,” says Chattergea, who was awarded a coveted Guggenheim Choreographic Fellowship in 2012. She believes dance can reach people in ways that news reports or studies simply can’t. “I don’t want to diminish facts and figures. But facts and figures are not going to move people.”

When the company members, all women of color, take the stage, they offer not only a striking performance but also a powerful picture of community organizing in work that transcends boundaries and transforms individuals and communities. And audiences can feel that power.

“If there is any hope for the world to be a healthy and just place I think it is necessary for women of color to have some space to reconcile their differences with each other, to compare and contrast their stories with each other,” one audience member recently wrote in a post-show survey. “For women to have an opportunity to work that out of their bodies and then show us, the observers, what they’ve gone through is a demonstration of transformation. I

think the process Ananya Dance Theatre uses is a model for healing that helps us all be better human beings.”

The work isn’t easy, says Chattergea. Her movement vocabulary is rooted in Odissi, an Indian classical dance form, with which she melds yoga, Indian martial-arts traditions, and storytelling. “I have to train people from scratch. No one’s going to come in with that mixture of techniques,” Chattergea says. “We train shit hard.”

The group also has to learn to move through boundaries of race, class, sexuality, and nationality. “There’s so much to negotiate in this community,” Chattergea says. “I want to dance among women of color because we have not learned to love ourselves, and we must.”

Chattergea’s interest in hybrids and intersections is a direct response to what she sees as the tendency to homogenize in a globalized world. “This is my answer to that globalization. I am dedicated to the hybrid,” she says. Even if she weren’t addressing political issues in her work, Chattergea believes dance itself is a political act that defies capitalist values. “There’s no dance outside the dancing body. It cannot go anywhere else. The labor of the dancing body cannot be extracted from the laborer to become a product,” Chattergea says. “The active citizenry of dancing. I call it that.”

Beacon Dance

Beacon Dance company’s internal workings are intended to eliminate barriers. The creative process is rooted in consensus and dialogue.

Food justice. Marriage equality. Racial tensions. Mental illness. There is no subject too controversial for Atlanta-based [Beacon Dance](#) to take on. And there is no space too public.

Beacon dance is a public arts entity, meaning all of the company’s shows are free and many are performed outdoors. The decision to operate in this way, made more than seven years ago, was partly pragmatic, says artistic director Patton White. After looking at the company’s budget, he realized it would only take a couple thousand dollars a year from sponsors to replace box office revenues.

But the primary motivation for the shift was philosophical. “I have been such a fan of public art in any form,” Patton says. “I just love, as an audience member, happening upon the unexpected piece of public art...I often feel that is when art is at its most powerful. When people are taken by surprise, they don’t have these preconceived notions or barriers up.”

The company’s internal workings also are intended to eliminate barriers. The creative process is rooted in consensus and dialogue, encouraging multiple leadership voices. They begin rehearsals by setting an agenda; the artists are invited to suggest ideas they want to explore and time is made for each person’s visioning. Some projects have had as many as four directors.

This exercise in dialogue and democratic practice extends to their work with communities. The company's process invariably includes gathering perspectives from outside the rehearsal room—including the children of migrant farm workers in Florida and multiracial and LGBTQ communities in Atlanta.

"We're trying to move farther and farther away from a hierarchical cultural organizational structure," Patton says. "I'm very much wanting multiple voices at many levels in the organization."

Axis Dance Company

Every time [Axis Dance Company](#) takes the stage, it is an act of defiance. As one of the country's few physically integrated dance companies, each performance is a public call for visibility, access and equality in dance and beyond.

"Most people can't imagine that a disabled person could or would even want to dance or that highly trained non-disabled dancers would want to dance with disabled dancers," says Artistic

P*People, disabled and not, tell us again and again how our work changed their ideas about disability, dance, and even human potential.*

Judith Smith,
Axis Dance Company

Director Judith Smith. Though the company has consistently defied stereotypes, assumptions and perceptions—winning support from arts foundations and attracting internationally renowned choreographers to work with them—Axis still faces significant barriers that other companies never face.

"Prevailing attitudes about disability and inaccessibility hinder our progress. Travel is more expensive and more complicated. For example, most people don't have to worry about their legs being broken when they step off a plane, but disabled travelers routinely have wheelchairs damaged or completely destroyed," Smith says. "Studios, festivals, and performances venues are still inaccessible to disabled dancers. The performing arts in general still only give lip service to inclusion and access for people with disabilities. In most discussions of diversity, disability is not mentioned in the long list."

Axis sees education as a key way to transform attitudes and behaviors. They offer a weeklong summer workshop for dancers to learn their techniques and teach ongoing dance programs to youth and professional dancers. They also perform all over the country.

Smith's plans include starting a degree program in physically integrated dance at a university or community college, offering codified methodology and repertory. She hopes her work will help to normalize physically integrated dance.

"I don't think it will happen in my lifetime," she laments. But that doesn't discourage her. "At Axis, we believe that dance belongs to everyone and if you're in a body you can dance" Smith

says. “This form of dance gives people who are disabled the all too rare opportunity to see something of themselves reflected on stage, which has effectively created a new audience for dance. People, disabled and not, tell us again and again how our work changed their ideas about disability, dance, and even human potential.”

Project-based Work

In the past few years, several subject-based projects have emerged that carry on and push the connection between concert work and civic engagement, mining such complex territory as history, sustainability, and citizenship.

Ballet Austin

While civic engagement has largely been the domain of modern dance, [Ballet Austin’s *Light: The Holocaust & Humanity Project*](#) provides an important example of a ballet company committing to a creative process that opens up dialogue in substantial ways for communities. The project, which premiered in 2005 and was reprised in 2012, was developed over the course of four years of research into the Jewish Holocaust. The performance of the ballet was one part of a range of engagement activities—educational programming, seminars, town hall meetings, art exhibits, and lectures—focusing on the dangers of bigotry, intolerance, and hate.



The Moving Field Guide, conceived and directed by choreographer and Dance Exchange Artistic Director Cassie Meador, is an interactive experience led by Dance Exchange artists, naturalists, and regional experts in ecology. The arts can offer creative tools for knowing a place, not just using a place. Participants move through experiences that build upon discovery, appreciation, recognition, and stewardship of the environment. Photo: Jori Ketten

Joanna Haigood / Zaccho Dance

For more than 30 years, Joanna Haigood’s [Zaccho Dance Theatre](#) has committed to creating performance work for public spaces. Her recent piece, [Sailing Away](#), tells the story of seven prominent African Americans who lived and worked near San Francisco’s Market Street during the mid-19th century. The work, which depicts the events leading up to the city’s “Black Exodus of 1858,” premiered in 2010 and was restaged in 2012. The piece takes the audience—bystanders in one of San Francisco’s busiest commercial areas—on a journey down a half-dozen blocks of Market Street to the city’s former shoreline, where the black residents eventually departed by sea to British Columbia, Canada.

Cassie Meador / Dance Exchange

Cassie Meador, the successor to Liz Lerman at [Dance Exchange](#), spent the spring of 2012 on a 500-mile walk from her home in Washington, D.C. to West Virginia, where mountaintop removal provides the source of electric power. Along the way, she facilitated workshops with local communities and collected sound, image, and movement content. Dance Exchange is developing this into [How to Lose a Mountain](#), a performance work examining the relationship between ourselves and our sources of power. The work will premiere in spring 2013 in D.C., then tour. While on tour, the intergenerational cast plans to integrate community participants from each tour site into the performance.



Our Daily Bread, Amara Tabor Smith.
Photo: Courtesy of Deep Waters
Dance Theater

Amara Tabor Smith / Deep Waters Dance Theater

Inspired by her family's gumbo tradition, choreographer Amara Tabor Smith of [Deep Waters Dance Theater](#) has spent the past few years developing and facilitating food parties in the California Bay Area—from a sushi party in a Japanese-American home to a public salad-making feast in an alley in San Francisco's gritty Tenderloin. From that experience, she cooked up *Our Daily Bread*, a performance in which audiences are invited to share food stories, examine the environmental effects of their food practices, and eat together. The work, which premiered in spring 2011 through a partnership with CounterPULSE Theater, was remounted in fall 2012 and continues to be developed.

Jill Sigman / ThinkDance

Jill Sigman's two-year exploration with The Hut Project (referenced at the beginning of this article) has inspired the New York-based choreographer to create a concert dance work, tentatively titled [Last Days / First Field](#) which she plans to premiere in spring 2013. The work, which draws from her

research on sustainability, permaculture, gardening, and ritual, is being developed in the studio as well as through embodied research in gardens, farms, and forested landscapes. Though the work is still in development, she envisions the first part as a dance, while the second part will invite audiences to plant a field onstage to encourage a deeper sense of connectivity and investment in the future of our communities.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph

Through a series of community eco-festivals in urban parks, theater-maker [Marc Bamuthi Joseph](#) created both a container for dialogue among communities of color and a grassroots method for gathering research for performance. Material from the Life is Living festivals was translated into text, choreography, and imagery to create [red, black & GREEN: a blues](#), a multimedia performance work about environmental justice, social ecology, and collective responsibility. The work premiered in 2011 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and toured the

U.S. in 2012 with performances and community engagement activities including workshops, dialogues and installations.

Edisa Weeks / [DELIRIOUS Dances](#)

Over the course of several years, choreographer Edisa Weeks has developed a project exploring Thomas Paine's writings on freedom and democracy, with particular focus on America's promise; what freedom and democracy look like; and the possibility of starting over. The dance and music collaboration with composer Joseph Phillips and his music ensemble Numinous premiered in fall 2012 in Brooklyn. Along with the performance, titled [To Begin](#)



The Living Word Project. *red, black & Green: a blues* by Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Photo: Bethanie Hines. Courtesy map international productions

[The World Over Again](#), Weeks and community partners produced a week of community events, including an art exhibition titled [The Promises and Realities of America](#); public discussions with scholars and activists; a poetry throw-down; and teach-ins.

Daria Fain

In fall 2012, [Daria Fain](#) took on two projects examining economies. Her [BEGGING #1](#), performed at New York's Dance New Amsterdam, was an eight-hour-a-day installation and public hunger strike as part of an ongoing performance project that takes on poverty, the practice of begging, and the current arts funding crisis. The event site is just a half block away from New York City Hall. The second work, [E-V-E-R-Y-O-N-E](#), presented by New York Live Arts, is a town-hall styled musical proposing money as public property, inspired by philosophies of Thomas Paine and Martin Luther King Jr. The work, performed by 27 dancers, singers, and actors known as The

COMMUNITY

Commons Choir, is a collaboration between Fain, poet Robert Kocik, composer Katherine Young, and vocalist Samita Sinha.

When people learn to dance together, they learn more than new steps: They learn new ways of seeing and being with one another. For dance practitioners working with communities who might not identify themselves as dancers, dance is a tool to bridge boundaries between thought

and action; between individuals and communities; and between communities and their sense of worth and agency. Lasting, sustainable work cannot be done without partnership between organizations and, ultimately, with the participants in such work.

Rhodessa Jones / Medea Project

“Art for art’s sake—we don’t have time for that anymore,” says [Rhodessa Jones](#). “What we need now is ‘art that saves lives’.”

Jones, a physical theater artist, embodies that belief every time she works with incarcerated women. For more than two decades, her [Medea Project](#) has created paths to healing and community building for hundreds of women, primarily in Northern California where she lives but also across the world.

She had no idea what she was getting herself into when she agreed, in the late 1980s, to teach aerobics to women at the San Francisco County Jail. Aerobics wasn’t her specialty, so she figured she would use the movement techniques she knew. But the women weren’t interested in moving at all. “Most were depressed, they were incredibly overweight and the jailhouse diet is something from hell,” she said.

So, leaning on her grandmother’s tradition of storytelling, Jones started sharing her own stories “of being a teenage mother, my own destructive dance with destructive men, looking for love in all the wrong places,” she said. “Gradually people started to say, ‘Can we tell our stories? Can we talk?’”

Not everyone bought in, though. Jones recalls that one very watchful woman finally got in her face and asked “why was I telling them my business?” Jones stood her ground and replied: “To create a bridge of communication, out of this place and back to our families and children.”

Soon the women were writing poems and a doorway opened that would lead Jones to her life’s work. She brought every tool of her physical theater training with her. “I would mimic people that we all knew in the jail. I’d exaggerate things. I’d say, ‘Come up and take my body and move it. Imagine I’m like a doll.’ They were so childlike in the idea that they could come up and handle me,” she said. “They had returned to their childhood. They were laughing and rolling and jumping. A lot of the posturing ceased.”



The Medea Project in *Dancing with the Clown of Love*.
Photo: The Medea Project

As they built more comfort and trust, Jones guided them to an exercise that boldly shifted their dynamics: They had to lift one another. “You’re not to drop her,” she told them. “We are responsible for her. ...That was an amazing revelation for some of these women.”

The work leads to a deep transformation that Jones refers to as the politics of experience. “The more intimate you are with another physical body, that breaks down barriers,” Jones said. “We have to be able to take care of each other and we can’t if we’re not aware of our relationship to each other.”

But when the women were released, the circumstances that had led many to jail in the first place—abusive relationships, prostitution, drug abuse—awaited. Jones soon realized she needed community partners whose work could reinforce the practices the women developed with her. She began teaching social service agencies about her work and two social workers joined her team.

“All the things we’ve worked on, if they are not empowered by other agencies, it’s very hard to stay focused. Next thing you know, they’re back in the cycle,” Jones said.

That focus on holistic engagement has led to a partnership with Dr. Edward L. Machtinger, director of the Women’s HIV Program at University of California at San Francisco Medical Center, the first program in the country dedicated to HIV-positive women and their families. Machtinger had experienced the ways in which the clinical approach to treatment and counseling was not working for a number of his patients, and he hoped that Jones’s work might make some inroads. As a scientist, he also wanted to test his theory that it would make a difference, and tease out what qualities and practices made the work effective. So, with a team of four researchers, they set out to study the process and outcomes using a yearlong engagement project with HIV-positive women in the Bay Area. The project included eight public performances.

While it will take some time to analyze the data and publish a report, Machtinger said the initial results have revealed some key findings. “In the previous program, the women work in their brains a lot of the time and it hasn’t touched them,” he said. “There’s something synergistic about reclaiming your body and moving to get in touch with key changes. Without the body and dance this just wouldn’t work.”

He also is convinced that such work is not just about understanding a methodology but about embodying a particular leadership style. He calls it The Rhodessa Figure. “You can’t have it be a very nice, well-intentioned social worker who thinks they’d like to lead the Medea project,” he said. “The Rhodessa Figure needs to be *in it*, to bear their soul and cry, but also be a powerful leader at the same time.”

transcenDANCE

In San Diego's City Heights neighborhood, more than a third of families are living below the poverty level, more than a quarter of all residents have less than a ninth-grade education, and four out of every 10 families is headed by a single parent.

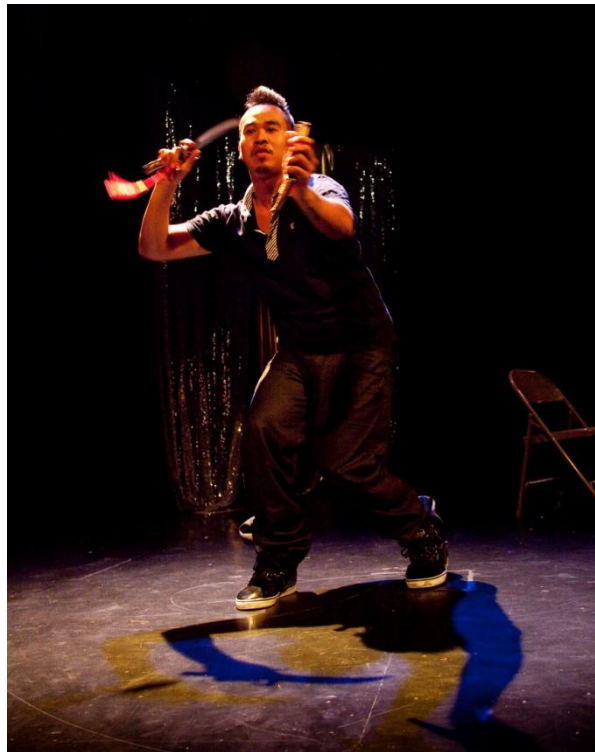
But when you walk through the doors of [transcenDANCE](#), the wealth of City Heights is revealed in ways the Census can't measure. There, young people ages 15 to 19 represent a community that speaks more than 35 different languages and hails from dozens of countries, from Somalia to Mexico to the Philippines.

These cultural differences, which had often led to tension within the community, are bridged through dance practice. "This practice of being physically connected day in and day out dissolves any sense of barrier, or this us-and-them perspective," says Catherine Corral, who founded transcenDANCE to train youth in dance, leadership, and service. "Inside the walls of the studio there's peacemaking and harmony happening with people of different backgrounds who may not have had the opportunity to do that outside these walls."

During her seven years as a social worker, Corral longed to create more harmonious experiences for her clients, particularly youth in foster care. "I felt like there was no joy for the youth in these settings," Corral says. "These young people had gone through

tremendous trauma and hardship. It was pretty depressing. The systems that were in place were not really receptive or open enough to integrate something more alternative and artistic to tap into that joyful place, and really it was my frustration that kicked up my inner spirit to try something that looked different."

In 2003, drawing from her lifetime of training as a dancer, she proposed to a local community center an after-school program focused on dance theater training and personal development. Corral visited local schools to announce auditions in hopes of filling the program's 14 slots. More than 50 teens showed up, and she began to learn about her criteria for selection. She found that rather than judging by prior artistic training, she was looking at how the teens received feedback and what kind of effort they were willing to put in.



TranscenDANCE performance of Tribe, Seiha solo.
Photo: Kevin Walsh

At least 10 hours a week the teens—now called Youth Citizen Artists—trained in dance theater and explored their personal growth through leadership development, community-building activities, and service projects. “Often they came early and stayed late beyond requirements,” Corral said. Though the under-funded local high schools lacked rigorous art training, “the talent that was oozing out of them was mind-blowing.”

In 2005, she formed her own organization to continue to build on the work. And in fall 2012, they moved their headquarters to National City, another San Diego neighborhood, to continue to expand while still serving the City Heights community.

Their performances are their best advertising. The work is built collaboratively, based on the themes that emerge in the group’s annual retreat. They perform wherever they were invited: a slab of concrete at a community street fair, school assemblies, Bank of America. In 2012, their work earned them a local Peacemakers Award from the National Conflict Resolution Center.

“When we share the work, people see the harmony. It shapes people’s sense of what’s possible,” Corral said. “When I hear social service agencies talk about how to address division, there’s this really cerebral way of thinking and talking about it. With dance we’re living it, moving it, feeling it. And because dance involves mind, body, and spirit, it’s capable of moving any conflict, division, injustice.”

And it can build leaders. Over the past seven years, Corral has turned over more responsibilities for running the organization to its alumni. They become teaching artists, develop curriculum, and choreograph work for the performance group. Members of the graduate leadership team, young adults who have graduated from transcenDANCE, commit 10 hours a week to the organization and are responsible for programming and teaching studio classes for the community. Corral also encourages graduates to experience more training, in college or with other organizations. But they are always welcome back.

“transcenDANCE is always considered home and home base. I think that speaks to the collective ownership and collective responsibility and love people feel,” Corral said. “My hope is that we can eventually have a transenDANCE graduate as our executive director, artistic director, program director.”

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of my research for this paper, the Occupy movement burst into the public landscape. It was the dance-maker in me who was most transfixed: People from all over, who did not know one another, had decided that they needed to be in space together to make themselves heard. And not just at a one-time rally or protest, but for an undetermined period of time.

They had decided to practice action, together. They endeavored to move as a community, in sometimes clumsy, painful, and inefficient ways. I was conscious of the many thoughtful critiques of Occupy's organizing approaches; still that didn't diminish an important lesson for me, as a dancer and as a citizen, about the powerful compulsion to be and move together.

For a decade or so, technological advancements have provided amazing tools for virtual community organizing, as the last two presidential elections have made clear. In a world where so much action happens at a distance from one another—via email, social network, and text—it was significant that people across the country chose to animate their civic participation by choreographing themselves in space together.

Their movement agitated important conversations, formal and informal, among dance practitioners about dancing and activism. These conversations were not new, but the hyper-visible platform that the Occupy movement created for itself necessitated more public forums for conversations around public space, bodies, and civic engagement.

In January 2012, New York City's Movement Research and the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics partnered to host a panel discussion on the subject, [*Dance and the Occupy Movement*](#), and released a podcast

A mere four days after the occupation of Zuccoti Park, a self-described "working group" of progressive artists, practitioners, and funders gathered to discuss strategies for sustaining and celebrating New York City's artistic power. Planning for the gathering long predated Occupy but Occupy's presence was palpable in the dialogue. I was fortunate to be at the table with other dance practitioners making a case for dance as a framework for collective action and an animator of vision.

Such interdisciplinary conversations about how each of our practices can be of use in larger progressive movements are critical. Positioning dance as a central component of the work is essential, as such dialogue will support and produce actions that can impact individuals, the field, and communities in powerful and transformative ways.



Paloma McGregor is a choreographer, organizer, and writer living in Harlem. She spent five years as a newspaper reporter and editor before returning to her first love, dance. After earning an MFA degree from Case Western University in 2004 (following a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism from Florida A&M University), she moved to New York. She has toured nationally and internationally, most significantly for six years with Urban Bush Women and two years with Dance Exchange. Paloma has facilitated community engagement projects and workshops across the country, most recently directing *From the Field to the Table*, a multidisciplinary performance work about food created during a five-week process with 36 students and community members at the University of California Berkeley. Paloma is co-founder of Angela's Pulse, along with her director sister Patricia McGregor. Together, they create vital performance works and foster collaborations among artists, educators, community organizers,

academics, and other diverse communities. Paloma is currently developing *Building a Better Fishtrap*, a performance project that explores water, memory, and home, inspired by the stories of her 87-year-old father, a fisherman. The work has spawned a related community-engaged project in the Bronx, called *Follow the Water Walks*, which creates opportunities for communities to engage with their natural and man-made landscapes using mapping, science and dance.

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