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A Conversation with Laura Nanni

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Ecology and Site-specificity in Festival Production: A Conversation with Laura Nanni

LAURA LEVIN

LAURA LEVIN: In theatre and performance studies, we spend a lot of time talking about the artists who are featured in festivals, but much less time thinking about the curation of festivals as itself an important form of artistry. This means that we miss the important background work that curators and producers do.

LAURA NANNI: There is a creative element that feeds me as a curator and producer. I approach process, collaboration, and context in these roles the same way I do in my artistic practice. And now more so, as I become more experienced in an organizational leadership role. There is creativity to thinking about public engagement and restructuring an organization, for example.

LL: I am fascinated by the creative strategies that you have been using in the last few years to help foster in Toronto festival culture ways of thinking more collaboratively and ecologically.¹ I wonder if you could talk about how this work has been informed your history as an artist, curator, and producer—as a person who wears many hats?

LN: I grew up in Toronto and completed a degree in Theatre and Visual Studies at University of Toronto. Being informed by both a visual arts context and a theatrical context taught me about the potential for approaching similar questions with very different strategies. When I first started school, I was interested in directing, but I gravitated away from work in a theatrical environment because I became fascinated about performance outside of the theatre and the potential for engaging with accidental audiences. I was interested in site-specific creation—how site informed experience and more immersive practices.

While I was in university, I worked for larger-scale festivals in the city—for the [Toronto] Fringe Festival, SummerWorks, and TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival]. I was working front of house and box office, engaging with audience. That also informed my excitement about festivals: the particular energy around each and the experiences that are possible in them. After school, I still pursued directing but I went on the stage management track as a way of working with directors that were of interest to me. I ended up doing a mix of work as a stage manager for indie arts companies like Public Recordings and Small Wooden Shoe [both focused on interdisciplinary, experimental performance creation], and also working at the Stratford Festival as a production assistant. I've always been interested in looking at festivals that are drastically different in scale—in how seemingly opposite things can learn from each other, and how some of their goals are the same.

LL: Despite their differences, these festivals are part of the same larger environment. Their mandates might be different, but they share audience members.

LN: I don't think at the time I recognized how they feed each other, but that has become part of what I consider now. Then I made a concerted effort to move away from stage management because I had an active artistic practice doing solo work and site-specific and installation performance. Working internationally with an artist overseas, Sorrel Muggridge,² starting in 2006, also informed my perspective on collaboration over distance.

It was around this time when I connected with Franco Boni, Artistic Director at The Theatre Centre [one of Toronto's most significant incubators for live arts]. I reached out to him about a *Canadian Theatre Review* issue that I was co-editing on site-specific performance and identified him as a curator supporting that kind of work. SummerWorks was one of the first places where I experienced site-specific performance in the city—*What the Thunder Said*, a piece by bluemouth inc. [a Canadian-based collective known for its site-specific and immersive performance work]. The performance started on a school bus, but happened in multiple spaces: a warehouse, a funeral home, and Trinity Bellwoods Park. It also took us along the route of a creek in Toronto that had become a landfill, a buried river. Franco and I had such an engaging conversation about the show, and he suggested the possibility of a mentorship with him. He had taken over The Theatre Centre (then based in The Great Hall), and I ended up getting a Theatre Ontario Grant to intern in the area of artistic direction. In our conversation, we asked: What does that mean? What are all the facets of it? We identified that part of that role is the programming and the curation of work; there is also financial management and community engagement. That was the first time that community building was brought forward to me. Lastly, Franco encouraged me to consider my own creative development. He said, "You also need to make space as part of this mentorship for making work too."

In the 2009/2010 season, when I was mentoring with Franco, The Theatre Centre's Free Fall Festival had just started a partnership with Harbourfront World Stage [a showcase of global performance], an acknowledgement of the importance of the smaller-scale, riskier work that The Theatre Centre was presenting. While I was working with Franco, I was invited to have a deeper conversation about some of my professional goals with Tina Rasmussen and Alison Bottomley [Artistic Director of World Stage, and Artistic Associate, Performing Arts at Harbourfront Centre, a multidisciplinary cultural organization on Toronto's waterfront]. That led to me being offered a position at Harbourfront working on HATCH. It was the first time that I curated performance and was helping to create space for new work development.

Rhubarb Promotional Image for Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, featuring Laura Nanni. Photographer: Tanja Tiziana.



LL: That's HATCH's focus, as the program's name suggests, an incubation of new work?

LN: Yes, I was interested in creating space for process. At a certain point, I made the transition to Rhubarb at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre—the oldest new works festival in the country. It was my first experience of inheriting a festival. HATCH was different because it was newer; as it evolved, it was a bit easier to shape.

LL: And Rhubarb has a much longer history, stretching back to...

LN: ...'79. But in a lot of wonderful ways, it meant inheriting something that is so loved by the community. Those conditions inform the kind of creative risk-taking that can be done at Rhubarb. Also, the relationship between audience and artist is different. There's something really intimate and sacred about that experience.

LL: Do you think it's because reviewers are not invited there? Or is there something about that space and the format of Rhubarb that generates that sense of intimacy?

LN: It feels like you are inside something special because of the community. Buddies feels like home. Yes, there is something about Rhubarb not being a reviewed space; it is a safer space for that reason. I recognize that critique of work is a really important part of the dialogue but, because of those conditions, it is a very special thing within Toronto's arts ecology.

LL: In terms of cultivating this intimacy, it's interesting that the performances at Rhubarb tend to happen at Buddies. As a community site, Buddies' theatre is physically at the centre of the festival. By contrast, SummerWorks is more dispersed geographically, using a variety of spaces. I wonder how placing Buddies spatially at the centre of that festival's activities shapes the work?

LN: There were a few things I built on when I was at Rhubarb that speak to your question. The slogan of the festival the year that I came in was "Convergence of Contemporary Performance." I thought, "Yes! Everyone is converging on Buddies." That said, this was in response to my interest in work outside of conventional, purpose-built performance spaces—my love of the environment and the context that Buddies creates. I thought, "How can we blow the doors open and spill onto the streets? How do we create the convergence so the festival is inviting other parts of the city?" We weren't able to do it on the scale there is the potential for, but we ended up having a mobile dance party that travelled from Union Station [Toronto's central train station and transit hub] to Buddies.

LL: There were other site-specific "mobile works" happening at Rhubarb when you were curating it: public interventions at Yonge/Bloor Subway Station and Nathan Phillips Square [in front of Toronto City Hall], one-on-one performances at the 519 Church Street Community Centre... Even if the goal was to converge on Buddies, there was...

LN: ...an effort to really amplify the concept of convergence and, at the same time, open...

LL: ...what potentially could be an insular intimacy.

LN: SummerWorks, on the other hand, has, over the years, continued to condense and define itself. I think about Queen West being the spine of the Festival [an art and design district that runs along Queen St. on Toronto's westside]; this year [2018], we are centralizing even more of the Festival's activity around Queen West. Factory is not part of the footprint.

LL: Factory is not considered part of Queen West?

LN: No, it is, but for lots of different reasons that have to do with sustainability, and managing the scale of the Festival, I'm condensing the programming. It takes a lot of resources to be able to spread yourself out as a Festival. A really beautiful energy is created when things are in close proximity to one another. When you create a...

LL: ...a walkable area for a festival?

LN: ...a walkability. And this is important for this particular point in the Festival's life because Queen West has also dramatically shifted. There was a period of time where even Tarragon was part of its footprint. When Michael Rubinfeld took over as artistic director of SummerWorks, he condensed the Festival to Factory, Passe Muraille, and The Theatre Centre. At the time when he declared Queen West the landscape for the Festival, there were a lot more artists living there and far fewer condos... Many spaces in the neighbourhood have been in transition for a while now; a lot of the galleries that created the Queen West district have moved out. So, it's really important for us to reintroduce ourselves to the community that has moved in. Even though we are almost a thirty-year-old festival, we're new to a lot of people. I think geographically about community—where we are located—just as much as I think about the artistic community. We need to be in conversation with the people passing our venues—with their dogs and their strollers and shopping for groceries on the weekend—just as much as the people who are purposefully travelling there. One of my approaches is to ask: What spaces can come alive when you meet audiences that don't usually come to see performance, or when performance intersects with the everyday?

LL: Going back to your personal genealogy as a Festival Director...you didn't immediately move from Rhubarb to SummerWorks. You went to Alberta's Banff Centre for the Arts next?

LN: I did. I also worked as a programming supervisor for Nuit Blanche in Toronto, and Producer for Luminato [two massive arts festivals engaging many thousands of participants each year]. That involved going from 20-minute pieces at Rhubarb to large scale installations and city buildings, and collaborations with mainstream well-funded art organizations like Art Gallery of Ontario, Artscape, and the Gardiner Museum.

LL: What did the work at Banff entail?

LN: It was more of a professional development and life choice move for me to go to Banff, to move west, because I felt like the next natural step for me was to build more bridges nationally. I wanted to immerse myself in a context other than Toronto and Ontario to expand my understanding. Banff was a place that I responded to well as an artist, as a space for incubation and reflection, and I also was invited by Jerry McGrath [Director, Innovation and Program Partnerships for Leadership Development] to take part in a leadership initiative there called the Ambassador Program, where they had gathered emerging cultural leaders from across the country to respond to questions around the future of leadership. I became really interested in that because I had organically found myself in positions, but I hadn't identified myself as a leader at that point. I started to think: What do I have to offer to the conversation around leadership development? I did some reflection when I moved to Banff because it was the first time I had moved without a formal job. This was about making space for me to be in an environment and see how the environment informed my next steps.

LL: It was a moment to incubate yourself.

LN: Yeah, exactly.

LL: Because you had been incubating everyone else's work.

LN: In a way, maybe. But I was also, at that point in my career, so open to whatever came along. Then the call for SummerWorks was sent around. I paused for a while before I applied because I had really made steps to move away; I sold everything in Toronto except for a few items I left in storage with family. I was committed to immersing myself elsewhere but recognized the role that SummerWorks plays in the community. It felt so in line with my entire trajectory and what really sealed it for me was recognizing the Festival's potential to bridge communities across the country.

LL: This idea of bridging communities speaks to your interest in shaping a larger arts ecology. Where did your interest in arts ecology begin?

LN: When I was at Harbourfront Centre, Tina, along with The Theatre Centre and [Toronto-based company] Crow's Theatre, introduced The Culture Congress. It was a symposium that first happened alongside Free Fall. In its second year, Harbourfront took the lead on it. I was the producer and we decided to focus on Canada's performing arts ecology. The concept was introduced to me by Tina, who was thinking about it in relation to touring networks—how work moves across the country and internationally. It resonated with conversations I had with Franco at The Theatre Centre when he was curating Free Fall and co-commissioning with groups in Vancouver.

The Culture Congress was responding to a need for a conversation about and across networks. Because I have such a love of mapping, as part of the Culture Congress, we did this huge mapping project and we invited presenters from across the country—at the time through Google Maps—to map themselves onto this map. It was a very large project that we tried to take on with such limited resources, but it could've been a really deep research

project. We wanted to understand what work was going on around the country. What are we informed by? What are the contexts other artists are working in? Because sometimes the idea of building networks just because work *can* move across locations isn't necessarily the best idea.

LL: Absolutely. Site-specificity matters in this conversation too.

LN: Yeah, completely.

LL: It goes back to artist Richard Serra's idea, "To remove the [site-specific] work is to destroy the work" (qtd. in Kwon 12). Obviously, that's too puritanical. But transporting the work from one context to another, without thoughtfully adapting it or understanding the context to which it is transferring, can set up a piece for failure or be extremely disrespectful to the new site.

LN: That's where I think it's the role of the curator to create context—create the context for the artist and for the audience. It's the curator's role to frame a piece and adjust where necessary...and to know when the timing is not right. Sometimes it can feel important for a particular artist or work to come to our community, but in order for there to be a fruitful exchange a lot of lead-up work needs to happen, from workshops to community conversations. I'm not just talking a week before. I'm talking, sometimes, a year before or more. How do you build a relationship with an artist so that, when a particular work arrives, the community can't wait to see it?

LL: Can you think of an example of a time when you have seen that kind of preparation?

LN: I would say that happened with [UK-based performance artist] Adrian Howells. There was really careful consideration about bringing him into the Toronto arts community. He visited before working with the community to get to know the organizations, sites, and artists that he would potentially work with, and when his work was eventually presented, it was preceded by or alongside workshops with the local artistic community.

LL: He led a workshop for graduate students and artists, which our program at York [University] co-presented with Buddies and Harbourfront. It made a big impression on our students.

LN: It was 2009, and then 2011. Buddies and Harbourfront Centre partnered to present a talk by him and then he came back and did a one-to-one [performance]. In 2012 we also did a one-to-one call for Rhubarb. We nurtured a way of working over a period of time rather than just parachuting an artist in. This investment and engagement with practice helped build audience but also transformed the community in terms of...

LL: ...a sharing of ideas.

LN: I still see the impact of that in the way some artists have chosen to create work. That's one way of looking at ecology. It's about the long game, thinking about seeds planted.

LL: That's another metaphor related to sustainability. It's evident that you're not concerned with quantity—with programming *as many works as possible* in what used to be called “Canada's largest juried and curated performance festival” (SummerWorks 6)³—but rather with nurturing work and thinking about its future within and beyond Toronto's arts environment. How is SummerWorks fostering this kind of development?

LN: I could tell you about the cycle of new work development. There's been some re-envisioning of the Festival this year. I'm seeing three streams of activity. First, there is the SummerWorks Lab, where works in their incubation stages are using the Festival as a laboratory. That is the space for nurturing works in development. Then there's our presentation stream: works that are in a more finished place and that have already had an incubation period. These works receive longer runs and are potentially ready to tour, or already touring. Finally, there is our SummerWorks Exchange, which encompasses market development, engagement between artists and presenters, pitch sessions, symposia, etc. I see this as a mini-ecology: the work in the lab can be moved into presentation and the work in presentation can intersect with presenters from other cities.

LL: This final stage is the industry activity part?

LN: Yes, but in the Exchange, we also make space for artists to do what we call “open studios.” This is work that's at an even earlier stage than the pieces in the SummerWorks Lab. It's an opportunity for an artist to do a studio showing—stuff without tech, even just talking about the work and getting initial investment from presenters, funders, or the community. I see this as the work coming full circle. SummerWorks has become a place where programmers pick up work or are introduced to an artist's work for the first time. That's why, on average, about 25% to 35% of the projects end up elsewhere within two to three years of being presented at the Festival. At SummerWorks I ask: How are we either planting the seeds or moving something to its next stage? I think about ecology that way as well.

What we're trying to recognize, and give more opportunity for artists to do, is to identify where they are in the process of their idea. It helps presenters, curators, and the audience navigate the festival because they have a better understanding of the expectations around the work. There are audience members, presenters, and curators that enjoy seeing stuff in its initial stages because any of the work that has a long touring life started somewhere in a studio. It started with ideas on a page or with two people having a conversation.

LL: As you describe this cycle, I see you mapping it with your fingers...and I know you're into mapping! You seem to be mapping a mini-ecology within the festival, which is embedded within a wider cultural ecosystem. Are you thinking about how this work can circulate beyond SummerWorks?

LN: Yeah, and more immediately, what's the internal circulation? What is feeding us? I think of the partnerships we choose to make. We're working with some communities or organizations that don't have the resources or space that we have—whether that's The Amy Project [a performance mentoring and training project to develop voices of young women and non-binary youth] or Generator [an arts incubator providing mentoring and training



Progress Festival Closing Night Party, curated by Uma Nota Culture, 2019.
Photographer: Henry Chan.

to indie artists in the performance field]. We can give a platform to some initiatives we want to align with.

LL: It sounds like another aspect of ecology here is resource sharing. Have you considered the ethical and political stakes of that sharing in terms of who normally has the resources and who doesn't, and how those resources are made available?

LN: I don't think a lot of the community knows how much we depend on some larger organizations. Luminato and the Fringe, other summer performance festivals, help us hugely with material resources. They have picnic tables that we borrow. They have tents and white boards. That infrastructure is important. And we talk about that too. How can we help each other out? A lot of the larger organizations have material resources, but they don't have the same ground-level engagement with the artistic community. So, there is also cultural currency that can be shared. Even though our budget isn't as large as those of some other organizations, we have a long-standing relationship with certain artists and audiences; so the sharing of resources is sometimes knowledge sharing. It's a sharing of perspective.

LL: Sometimes it involves sharing space too. In Progress, the "international festival of performance and ideas" that SummerWorks has run since 2015, The Theatre Centre is providing the space but isn't necessarily curating the work. Similarly, the Festival has multiple curators but



St. Peon of Parkdale. Playwright Caroline Azar. SummerWorks Lab 2019.
Photographer: Andrew Williamson.

SummerWorks isn't the headliner, subsuming the curators under its own branding. It's interesting that you don't call it the SummerWorks Progress Festival. What does SummerWorks provide in this context?

LN: Progress is co-presented by SummerWorks and The Theatre Centre. But it's collaboratively curated by the roster of guest organizations [Anandam Dancetheatre, FADO Performance Art Centre, Little Black Afro Theatre Company, Toronto Dance Community Love-In, Volcano in 2017]. What is achieved by Progress is bigger than the sum of individual...

LL: ...its individual parts? Its presenters?

LN: It sounds cheesy but it's true. To respond to your question about what SummerWorks provides: if SummerWorks is a platform creating opportunities for indie artists, Progress is a platform for curators. We provide the infrastructure. There is a production manager and producer. We provide a small production subsidy to the curating companies. We also provide the main marketing materials and publicity, streamline messaging around the Festival, apply for grants to support it, all of that. Right now our contribution curatorially is to the ancillary programming. As co-presenters of the Festival, The Theatre Centre provides space and production resources, as well as contributes to curation and long-term planning. Together we provide the container, the umbrella, and the glue. There are a lot of indie companies

engaged in an international dialogue about contemporary performance that don't have access to a space or platform to present international work. There are some organizations within the Festival, like FADO [Performance Art Centre], that have a long history of presenting international performance but they've been able to step up the scale of the risk-taking they are able to do because of...

LL: ...the infrastructure you have made available.

LN: The infrastructure and even just the context; this particular collaboration brings FADO a new audience. It brings attention to an organization that may not be on some people's radar. Shannon Cochrane, FADO's Artistic and Administrative Director, curates for Progress with the theatrical context in mind. She's interested in what it means to situate performance art in a theatre, taking into consideration its formal conventions, and also what it means to curate performance art works alongside theatre works, for example.

Similarly, in SummerWorks, what has been important for me is the community building. This goes back to the move away from obsessing over being a "large festival." It's about breaking down the competition involved. All of the artists in SummerWorks should be supporting each other. What I'm trying to promote is seeing each other's work. I say, "There is a reason I assembled all of you in the Festival this year. There's something to learn from conversation with each other." What's most exciting about a festival is that artists are also discovering each other—and you see collaborations arising from that years down the line. It's like, "We met at SummerWorks."

LL: And you've been creating spaces for convivial exchange in-between shows—programming social events with good DJs, so that the experience isn't just about presenting your show and then going home. There are opportunities for assembling in the same space, cross-pollinating ideas.

LN: Cross-pollination, yeah.

LL: I want to go back for a moment to your aside about "mov[ing] away from being obsessed with being a 'large festival.'" It sounds like you're advocating for a political approach to the artistic direction of theatre and performance festivals:⁴ an anti-neoliberal model that flies in the face of capitalist intra-city competition ("we're the BIGGEST and the BEST and the OLDEST") and inter-urban competition: Toronto's use of festivals to secure its status as a global tourist destination. Stepping away from the global cities race and festival supersizing allows you to focus on sustaining artists and community.

LN: Yes, it's about sustainability, but also about recognizing that we are a multiplier. It's trusting that, if we do things really well, and the engagement is really deep, and the accessibility is super thoughtful, the Festival has the potential to create cultural shifts. And that is way more important than being "BIG." I'm more interested in...

LL: ..."the long game," as you said. I think that's also about sustainability—nurturing artistic relationships and behaviours that will be beneficial to the community in the future.

LN: Yes, and part of this is informed by the fact that SummerWorks has always been a space for challenging conversations and hasn't been afraid of shifting its ways of operating in response to larger cultural shifts. I spoke with Benj Gallander, one of the founders of the Festival, to revisit its roots. He reminded me—although this was also in my gut—that SummerWorks was responding to a need. For me, that's the guiding principle that I've gone back to when envisioning this year's festival, that making opportunity for artists needs to be at the core. The other thing that resonates with me when I look at our historical mandate is investing in innovating possibilities for performance—asking how it's created, experienced, and presented. That's what defines us, being willing to ask those questions.

Last year we prioritized accessibility, for example. That meant that some spaces were no longer used for the festival. There was a cultural shift in making that change a priority for all of our artists and engaging them in informed discussions and workshops on accessibility. The artists take that knowledge to their next project and then, the next thing you know, we are all having deeper conversations with our venues...and on and on and on. It's not that we were the source of this idea; we were being informed by local arts organizations like Tangled Art + Disability and Cahoots Theatre [whose mandates are to provide opportunities for artists with disabilities and from culturally diverse communities, respectively], and artists that were coming to us and saying that accessibility is a priority for them.

LL: There's also an issue of accessibility in your decision to eliminate financial barriers to participating this year.

LN: Yes, we eliminated the entrance fee for participating artists.

LL: That is another way of thinking about accessibility, but in terms of economics.

LN: Sustainability, for me, is not just about the organization. It's sustainability for the artistic community too. I think we perpetuate these really unhealthy cycles. There are moments in a lot of organizational histories where funding gets cut but the organizations maintain the same level of activity. It's our responsibility to be honest about what we can't do and prioritize. We're moving towards properly compensating people and acknowledging how much things cost. It does mean that we have to get creative about how we do things, but we're also getting more creative as a community in terms of how we can help each other out. It's about approaching things with a sense of generosity, as opposed to being territorial.

LL: That sounds like the opposite of competitive neoliberalism as an approach to culture building: "This is *my* festival, *my* space, *my* artist."

LN: You're not going to survive—and you probably shouldn't—if you're going to be that way.

LL: We've been talking mostly about interorganizational resource sharing but what about fostering intercultural exchange? You're sharing your platform with those who historically may not have had access to certain resources or audiences.



Industry Welcome at SummerWorks Exchange with Kristina Lemieux and Laura Nanni, 2019. Photographer: Henry Chan.

LN: It's also about recognizing the work that organizations like Tangled Arts + Disability have been doing for a long time. They have long-standing relationships with the community that we also don't have, or a perspective that's really important to include in a particular conversation.

LL: You've talked about how you've collaborated and made space for people from the disability arts world but what about individuals of other historically marginalized communities?

LN: One of the ways that we have done this has been through inviting guest curators. Last year, artist, activist, and scholar Syrus Marcus Ware co-curated the opening and closing festivities with me. Each evening highlighted disabled-identified artists and artists of colour. We entered into the Festival with those perspectives and that energy, which held the space for all of the other work and conversations.

I'm interested in asking what particular communities we could be deepening our relationship with. And my strategy for doing that has been through engaging curators that are involved with those communities and bringing different perspectives to the decision-making process, which in turn shapes the Festival. My national artistic advisory last year was Ravi Jain, Joyce Rosario, Wanda Nanibush, Kevin Ormsby, and Ann Connors; these artists and curators brought perspectives from different age ranges, disciplines, and cultural communities [Asian, South Asian, Indigenous, Afro-Caribbean].

Access was a really important part of our free professional development workshops too and increasing dialogue around decolonization. The focus of some of them was anti-racism practices and disability culture. It was great knowing that they were well attended by artists and cultural leaders. There were even people from the Arts Councils who travelled from Ottawa to attend. We used to have artist talks with 30-40 people in the room. This time the interest was so high in those particular sessions that we ended up live-streaming; we had over 1,600 people watching the events. This also speaks to going back to what the community needs and responding to that.

LL: So, creating a different platform nurtures not only the arts ecology of Toronto, but also different arts communities nationally and internationally. Would you say that you are reviving some of the spirit of The Culture Congress in these transnational sessions?

LN: No, the trajectory is not that neat. This grows out of SummerWorks' history of running professional development workshops. We had a program called SLIP, a SummerWorks Leadership Intensive Program. It used to happen behind closed doors. There were twelve participants from across the country annually. It was meant as a place for artists to develop skills in business for the arts. When I arrived at SummerWorks (2016), it was one of the only things that hadn't been programmed yet. I saw this as an opportunity to think: what is this for the community? What can SLIP be? If we're really looking at leadership...

LL: ...is that the kind of leadership that we want to grow?

LN: Exactly. We've returned to this question because there are so many shifts in arts organizations around leadership recently.

LL: And huge shifts in how the arts are perceived provincially and nationally.

LN: Which shifts are you talking about?

LL: I'm thinking provincially...and bracing myself for what is to come should Doug Ford get elected as Premier.⁵ I'm remembering his brother's (former Toronto Mayor Rob Ford) vexed relationship to the arts and belief that arts organizations should be completely self-reliant and court private investment. This mirrors changes that are happening under Trump in the US, like the proposed defunding of the National Endowment for the Arts. We keep hearing reports of people in leadership roles at US arts institutions being forced out of their positions because their views are too political. There is an opportunity right now for artistic leaders to insist on the vital role of the arts as a space for voicing dissent and engaging in critical dialogue in times of political crisis.

LN: Civic engagement and advocacy are part of my job too. I've remained connected to the leadership development program at the Banff Centre and I'm a facilitator for the Toronto Arts Council's Leaders Lab. But, just to go back to SLIP for a second. I decided to forget about the closed doors for SLIP and use this as an opportunity to get community input on

what the future of leadership should look like. Let's actually *ask* them rather than tell them what they need. In response to that, we kept the programming public the following year.

Where that's evolved even further is that, in the last twelve months, there's been an infusion of investment from all three levels of government [municipal, provincial, and federal] around hosting presenters. This has allowed us to be a major player in even larger conversations. Chris Reynolds [Producer, SummerWorks Exchange] has been involved in the shaping of that.

LL: This returns us to the question of how you are bridging artistic communities across the country. Can you talk more about specific initiatives that you've created for promoting artistic work in larger national and international festival circuits?

LN: With Chris, significant seed money from the Toronto Arts Council, and the support from the Ontario Arts Council, we are establishing the SummerWorks Exchange, which is meant as a banner for our industry and market development activities. The exchange is between artists, presenters, and industry leaders. There's a professional development component; last year those sessions focused on access and inclusion and this year we are looking at systems change—like addressing systemic problems within our industry through new models of producing, presentation, and curation.

The SummerWorks Exchange will have workshops, pitch sessions, and curated meals and encounters between presenters and artists because, for us, it's really important that we are fostering strong relationships and making the introductions that need to happen. We host the presenters in Toronto, we curate a schedule for them, we have industry coffees, we have opportunities for them to see studio showings. It allows presenters to learn more about an artist at SummerWorks, to ask questions, to have those deeper conversations. As much as I talk about market development, organic relationship building is the most important foundation for work to move. We're starting to develop relationships with international presenters such as Matthew Austin at MAYK (UK), Ruth McGowan at Dublin Fringe (Ireland) and Chiara Organtini at the Terni International Performing Arts Festival (Italy) to do more exchanges because there has traditionally been funding for presenters to travel and see work, and a desire for artists to have their work move. But, as I noted before, there is also a need for artists to understand those contexts elsewhere and there is a real benefit. Part of the SummerWorks Exchange is coordinating a delegation of local artists to come with us to an international festival to get to know the context and artists in that community; that delegation, in turn, would host international artists that come here and help immerse them in the Toronto context. We're hoping this exchange results in stronger collaborations, opportunities, and better engagement with audience and community if, and when, the work moves. There's an interdependent and complex relationship when it comes to culture.

LL: You have repeatedly come back to the idea that recognizing interdependency is important to you. Privileging interdependency is also a central goal of ecofeminism. I am thinking here of ecofeminist practices that foster interconnectedness within environments and challenge us to become more cognizant of the multiple environments (and structures of power) in which we are embedded. I also wonder if there is something feminist in a mode of curation

that is about, as you put it, “creating context” for artists and audiences. The act of creating the environmental conditions for the flourishing of community is a role that historically has been performed by women and individuals from marginalized communities. Is there a feminist, queer, or decolonial aspect to your approach to producing and curating?

LN: It’s interesting to hear that analysis. For me, it has been organic and not necessarily a label I’ve used. It starts with community engagement and a realization that, even if I’m making decisions or leading something, I can’t have all the connections. I want to bring in people who have opinions that challenge mine. I think a lot now about intersectionality, about how different oppressive structures are interrelated, and I am working to find alternatives to structures that are really destructive. For me, this is not about working with “consultants” but developing long-term relationships with communities—like our relationship with Tangled Art + Disability. And if there’s going to be a cultural shift for us around accessibility, it needs to happen at all levels of the organization. It needs to be in our hiring practices, the conversations, the workshops, our selection process. The government standards for accessibility, for example, are really only geared towards audience experience. So, you can have an accessible venue for an audience but you can’t have an artist in a wheelchair get up on the stage. That’s problematic.

LL: Intercultural collaboration was an important part of the Progress Festival this year in terms of inviting guest curating companies connected to different cultural communities.

LN: And companies involved in intercultural collaboration themselves. For example, we collaborated with Anandam Dancetheatre. Their offerings to the Festival, in the form of *Contemporaneity 2.0*, were works by culturally diverse artists drawing on Asian, African, Latin American, Arab, and Indigenous dance forms that challenged Western-centric understandings of contemporary dance.

LL: And Little Black Afro Theatre Company was involved too—a company that has been creating platforms for developing and showcasing the creative work of emerging artists of colour.

LN: The Theatre Centre in Association with Little Black Afro presented [UK artist] Selina Thompson’s *Race Cards* [a participatory performance project where spectators answer one of 1000 questions about race written on note cards by Thompson and deposit it within her archive]. There was work done with Little Black Afro to connect Selina to the local community as part of her ongoing development of the project and there was further engagement where [Artistic Director] Luke Reece led a conversation in response to *Race Cards* as part of the ancillary programming.

LL: Going back to your idea of “creating context” ... Progress is a mini-ecology that is focused on developing an intersectional politic, providing a space for mentorship opportunities and international/intercultural exchanges to happen. Creating context for artists is about creating platforms that allow for certain kinds of sharing, exchanges, and interdependencies to become visible. In my view, this is feminist work; you are participating in a feminist tradition

of building communities and environments, and there is an ethics to making cultural interdependencies apparent. That said, being the creator of context is also a complicated position for women to occupy, as it often means that they are positioned as background, providing the environmental conditions for others to emerge as celebrated “artists.”

LN: It’s interesting how you mention those behind the scenes—but that has also been a choice of mine at times. For example, in speaking with [*Toronto Star* theatre critic] Karen Fricker, I wanted to impress upon her the collaborative nature of the curation of Progress, to let her know that some of her questions would best be addressed by the curator that worked on a particular Festival show. Luckily, Karen was really open to having input from each of the curators, but that is not always the case. This was a shift for Progress because, in its first two years, the leadership structure was communicated and understood differently. Michael [Rubinfeld], my predecessor, was foregrounded as the Festival Director. But that didn’t feel right to me. We paused for a year with Progress, and there was a reassessment of a lot of things; I realized that I don’t need the title of Festival Director for something that is collaborative. I see myself as facilitating the collaboration as Artistic and Managing Director of SummerWorks.

There are different layers to making space for collaborative curation. Sometimes it requires a lot of articulation and reframing of events because the media isn’t used to approaching the work that way. They ask, “Who is the spokesperson?” And they aren’t necessarily ready for me to respond, “We are all equal in this.”

LL: In feminist and ecological terms, you could say the work you’re doing is less about embracing performance as a site of individual, virtuosic artistry and more about making performance visible, as Shannon Jackson puts it, as an “art of interpublic coordination” (9).

LN: I’m even more mindful of my position after the Women’s March and the critique that white women have taken a lot of space in the feminist movement and need to step back. To step back, to listen, and give others space are still acts of supporting. Sometimes I felt that I had to apologize for not taking more space in a leadership role... It’s interesting because there are different leadership styles. There’s the supporting from behind and letting others take space, ensuring other voices are heard, and asking what support they need. There is supporting alongside. And then there are the times where you have to take leadership from the front. It’s a constant dance because it’s a live practice. There’s no one way to do it. That’s what also makes collaboration with others complex. You’re constantly shifting the approach to collaboration depending on what the needs and the goals are.

LL: That’s a way of thinking environmentally.

LN: Yes, completely. It goes back to considering context and shaping the environment.

LL: Responding to festivals in a site-specific or site-responsive way!



CLOSER. Choreographer Jenn Goodwin. SummerWorks Lab 2019.
Photographer: Henry Chan.

Notes

- 1 For an in-depth discussion of performance ecology in Toronto theatre, see Knowles (especially 5–10).
- 2 Sorrel Muggridge is an artist based in Norfolk, UK whose work is primarily site-specific and is influenced by cartographic methods. Nanni and Muggridge have engaged in transatlantic collaborations since 2006 to create performance walks and installations that re-map local sites. See “Sorrel Muggridge and Laura Nanni,” and “Laura Nanni.”
- 3 During Michael Rubinfeld’s tenure as Artistic Producer, SummerWorks moved from a juried festival model to a curated one. In 2018, under Laura Nanni’s leadership, the festival dispensed with the framing of SummerWorks as “Canada’s largest curated performance festival.”
- 4 Over the course of our conversation, it became clear that the distinctions between terms “producing,” “programming,” and “curating” tend to blur in the context of the artistic direction of theatre and performance festivals and also that, according to Nanni, the meaning of these terms will depend on “an organization’s scale and mandate.”
- 5 Ford was elected Premier of Ontario on 7 Jun. 2018.

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