



Photo by Twitter user @TheiKevin, Hong Kong, 2019.

Text: "We cannot return to the normal, because what was normal was the problem"

Esplanade presents *da:ns* lab

Co-immunity: How to Dance When We Are All Ill

9 – 12 July 2020

Produced by

Dance Nucleus

Curated by

Daniel Kok and Shawn Chua

Co-facilitators

JK Anicoche (Manila)

Ranjana Dave (New Delhi)

Huang Ding Yun (Taipei)

Wayson Poon (Hong Kong)

Daniel Kok & Shawn Chua (Singapore)

Claire Hicks (Sydney)

Event Synopsis

da:ns lab is an annual workshop-seminar for artists and arts practitioners to critically reflect on key issues surrounding their creative practice.

The theme **Co-immunity: How to Dance When We Are All Ill** invites participants to reflect on what has been disordered amidst the global crises and health emergencies. In this paradigm of illness, we challenge the precepts often assumed of the dancing body, as one that is able-bodied, productive and live.

This year's lab will be a remote meeting taking place online with 60 participants, from 6 regional clusters across Hong Kong, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney and Taipei.

Participants will explore how dance can operate within the paradoxical framework of co-immunity, to develop infrastructures of support and thicker relations of care, building resistance and resilience across the different arts ecologies in the region.

Abstract

"Now might be a good time to rethink what a revolution can look like. Perhaps it doesn't look like a march of angry, abled bodies in the streets. Perhaps it looks something more like the world standing still because all the bodies in it are exhausted—because care has to be prioritised before it's too late."

- Johanna Hedva

The world is standing still amidst transnational choreographies of movement control orders, curfews and lockdowns. Governments implement stricter measures to enforce social distancing, as an immunological response to curb the spread of the global pandemic. As events, performances and festivals are cancelled or deferred to an uncertain future, many arts and cultural workers are left suspended in its wake. In these extraordinary circumstances where we are unable to gather, to move, and even to touch, dancers are faced with an impossible set of conditions—how to dance when we are all ill?

While COVID-19 is a global health emergency, it also manifested the symptoms of much longer socio-economic, political and ecological crises, exposing complex systems that have already been chronically ill. It painfully revealed the debilitating conditions and vulnerabilities of being a dancer within a precarious arts ecology. In the region, the Hong Kong protests are roiled by deep sociopolitical unrest while the Australian bushfires warn of larger climate catastrophe. 2020 is a state of emergency. But these crises have demonstrated that recovery in this context should not be a nostalgic return to the normal, because the existing conditions of the 'normal' was what precipitated the crisis.

To dance in such times, we must recuperate the paradigm of illness, reorienting some of the precepts that are often assumed of the dancing body, as one that is able-bodied, productive and live. What choreographies become accessible with the ill-bodied dancer, and can this embodiment offer different strategies for navigating the crisis? What remains live when our bodies are screened, and augmented by the prosthetics of new media technologies? Amidst a *contagion*—a term that etymologically denotes "together touching"—can we reimagine the parameters of dancing together across social distancing, where other forms of assembly are realised?

The restless ensemble of exhausted bodies is a symptom of the precarious labour conditions that plague many arts and cultural workers. It is time for us to take a break from the frenetic rhythms of production, to slow down, and to deprogramme. By relinquishing our obsession with the relentless

metrics of productive output, we can rehabilitate our working processes by recalibrating the conditions, protocols and procedures to more sustainable modes that prioritise our creative practices and wellbeing.

Inhabiting illness calls for a praxis of care that extends beyond immunology. Immunological systems are predicated on the exclusion of a threatening other—a foreign body. Instead of reinscribing the xenophobic logic of immunitary nationalism, we aim to foster interdependent networks of solidarity across borders. To reconcile this immunological metaphor with the contaminations of community, we will explore how dance can operate within the paradoxical framework of co-immunity, to develop infrastructures of support and thicker relations of care, building resistance and resilience across the different arts ecologies in the region. Through a different kind of embodiment, we might even feel the possibilities of a movement even as we remain still.

Background

da:ns lab is an annual artist meeting as part of the *da:ns* festival presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in Singapore, and produced by Dance Nucleus since 2018. It is a programme to interrogate choreographic practice that began in 2015. *da:ns* lab 2020 is the programme's 6th edition.

Objectives

- To engage dance practitioners in Singapore and the Asian region in artistic discourse, research, reflection and exchange; thereby enriching critical thinking for dance practices in the region
- To tackle tangibly an issue that concerns many artists in the current moment
- To introduce progressive international practices to Singapore
- To build an informal network of independent artists with aligned interests

This year, we will conduct a remote meeting partly inspired by a format developed by the Flanders Art Institute (March 2020, Belgium) when the Reshape meeting in Zagreb (Croatia), which aims to actively rethink and reshape organisational models for the arts sector in Europe was abruptly cancelled upon the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

da:ns lab 2020 will likewise foster a region-wide discussion to better understand the socio-political situation in different contexts in Asia, how the arts sector is impacted by a dramatically-changed landscape, how to imagine new modus operandi for the future, and how we can chart strategies for international cooperation based on principles of knowledge sharing and mutual support.