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Embedded Dancer:

A Model for Regional Dance Practice Survival in the Context of Crisis

Content warning: *this article lightly references my first-hand experience of the Black Summer Bushfires in Australia in 2019/20.*

Introduction

Amid the devastating Black Summer Bushfires, artists in regional Australia faced unprecedented challenges, revealing critical gaps in our support frameworks. Customary evaluation methods, primarily focused on sociological impacts, often fail to capture nuanced realities of artistic practice in crisis scenarios. This article introduces the Embedded Creative Practice (ECP) model, that I developed in response to these challenges. The ECP model emphasises adaptability and individualised artist needs, aiming to provide a more sustainable and nuanced approach to supporting regional arts in times of crisis and recovery.

I begin by exploring the context and background, setting the stage for introducing the ECP model, which is then defined and contrasted with other prevalent models of practice in the arts. I then review relevant literature and case studies, analyse the impact of crises on artistic practices, critique existing evaluation frameworks, and propose modifications to better support artistic work in regional and crisis-affected areas. My conclusion synthesises these discussions, underscoring the ECP model's potential to enhance resilience and sustainability in artistic practices in Australia and beyond.

Context and background

To understand the propulsion of such a model requires a dive into the historical and personal contexts that shape artistic practices in areas like Mallacoota. This background not only illuminates the challenges artists face but also lays groundwork for the

generative solutions offered by the ECP model, particularly in response to the profound disruptions caused by catastrophic disasters.

In 2008, I moved from New York, where I was embedded professionally in a lively dance community, to a small, remote fishing village called Mallacoota in Victoria, Australia. Mallacoota is part of the 37.5% of Victoria that does not have "formally recognised" traditional owner groups ("Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners | First Peoples - State Relations" 2023). However, several Indigenous nations are commonly acknowledged including the Bidwell, Bidwell-Maap, Yuin *and* MoneroNgarigo nations, and Gunnai-Kurnai people. The complex tapestry of traditional custodianship meeting post-colonial impositions punctuates the unique cultural dynamics of the region.

While there is undoubtedly a millennia-long history of dance and cultural practice in Mallacoota, there is little dance in daily culture currently observable. My transition from New York to Mallacoota marked the beginning of a profound shift in my creative practice. Without a studio, I made dances in shared community spaces, my lounge room, and outdoors. Without other people to join in dancing with, I began to teach dance and to perform as a soloist, neither of which I had any previous experience in. This not only changed my practice, but also changed my life and values. My recent dances explore engagement with dance primarily through performer-audience relationships. I use a variety of labels to describe the foundational elements comprising my practice. Dancing and being a dancer and choreographer are the basis for my pathways of engagement with all the other elements which include performance, choreography, dance education, dance research, teaching the Alexander Technique and yoga. Dance is a primary part of both my personal and professional identity.

Dance intrinsically adapts to flux, a common aspect of artists' work-lives. Disruptions shape our creative practices over time. In crises, the question arises: what is important to carry on? While basic needs like food and shelter are clear, priorities in creative practice are less straightforward. Artists often need deep reflection to decide whether to continue, adapt, or end their practices, even without physical barriers. Crises prompt a re-evaluation of artists' roles due to psychological, economic, and structural shifts. In the context of Australia's recurring bushfires, choreographers have used their craft to navigate the complex interplay between nature and human experience. In "Ecological Combustion: The Atmospherics of the Bushfire as Choreography," Rachael Fensham analyses key works to consider how dance has been employed to interpret and express the devastating impact of bushfires, revealing the intricate connections between ecological events and cultural expression. These works include four choreographed pieces: *The Spirit of the Bush Fire* by Madge Atkinson (Manchester, 1927)*, Bushfire Drama* by Sonia Revid (Melbourne, 1940)*, Pyralis* by Nanette Hassall (Melbourne, 1984), and *Fire* by Ros Warby, choreographed by Deborah Hay (Melbourne, 2001). Fensham describes these choreographies as "social documents" reflecting the expressive aspects of fire in the Australian landscape (Fensham 2020, 12). In Fensham's paper, there is strong recognition of our "ecological embeddedness" and reading about these works resonated with me, not because I have choreographed fire, but because I lived through the experience (12).

Following the Black Summer bushfires, I needed to look at the pieces of my work which no longer seemed germane. I felt around in the darkness of what had occurred and what was occurring for some points of reference. It has been important to return to what I was working on before the fires. Moreover, the dances I have initiated, made, and performed since the bushfires have the fires enclosed within the work simply by the mechanism that they were created in the midst and aftermath of a disaster. The fires are not necessarily visibly present on stage, but nevertheless they are there in a mnemonic form, a deep, underlying influence like a DNA code that I am endeavouring to understand. It is not concealed, but audiences can choose to engage with those aspects or not. Notwithstanding these observations, storytelling and the latitude to share one's experience with another's experience is remarkably important after crisis (Ball 2013, 31).

As my practice in Mallacoota evolved and adapted to the field, it became clear that typical evaluation methods are too narrow to account for the complexities and often invisible aspects of a dancer's work, especially in regional settings. I refer not to the formal field of evaluation, but to the practical ways artists are judged or appraised. In these contexts, artists with radically diverse backgrounds may work within the same milieu. Categorical evaluation of arts workers occurs at every point of engagement — whether in promoting performances and workshops, securing funding, or seeking contracted employment — but both formal evaluations (e.g., government-funded project acquittals) and informal ones (e.g., advice on funding) often miss the nuances of an independent artist's contributions. For example, a colleague was recently advised by their local Arts Network to seek funding through the state health portfolio instead of the arts and culture stream, indicating an informal judgment of their multi-modal practice, which emanates from an adaptive field response. In my opinion it was an incorrect evaluation of where this particular artist's work sits. Such evaluations are difficult to make accurately without formal processes and standards or a refined understanding of the artist's work in context. This form of gatekeeping undermines an open culture that values diversity, favouring project outcomes over process-driven activities that create the conditions necessary for results that reflect the intentions of the creative workers.

After the bushfires and during the pandemic lockdowns, while seeking aid for my practice and that of fellow artists, the limitations of these evaluation methods became starkly evident, prompting a reassessment of what it means to be 'embedded' in a place. This realisation not only led to my development of the ECP model, but also demonstrated its broader applicability to artists in similar crisis-impacted regions. It is clear that the unique challenges and adaptations I have encountered in Mallacoota are not isolated incidents. Rather, they reflect a widespread need for support systems that genuinely understand and adapt to the realities of artists in remote and crisis-impacted regions.

My journey from New York to Mallacoota, coupled with the ongoing challenges posed by environmental crises, illustrates a clear need for adaptable, context-sensitive supports in the arts sector. The ECP model, born out of these experiences, offers an avenue for rethinking how we underpin and evaluate artistic practice in crisis-impacted regions. Unlike existing models, which often apply rigid criteria and do not consider parochial

subtleties, the ECP model integrates the specific conditions and practices of artists, ensuring that support mechanisms are relevant and effective.

Embedded Creative Practice

To explain the concept of Embedded Creative Practice (ECP), it is useful to delineate what it is not, thereby calling attention to its distinctiveness and applicability to crisis-affected regions. 'Embedded Practice' is an expression I started using along with my partner, composer, Padma Newsome, to describe our respective creative practices based in our home, Mallacoota. Key elements and foci of practice in my concept of embeddedness are distinct from general creative practice, place-based, or community-led practices.

I do not exclusively use 'practice' in the sense of 'rehearsal' or, to invoke the French term for rehearsal, 'repetition' (to train, gain experience or competency). Rehearsal might be better considered training in the sense that Chrysa Parkinson distinguishes training from practice in that training is "goal-oriented" responsive behaviour (Parkinson 2009, 31). I also do not mean working within a particular tradition, school, movement, or code of practice, such as a site-specific practice or Body Weather. My use of 'practice' is not strictly limited to artistic activities. A professional artist may be distinguished by consistency within an arena of practical work according to artistic traditions, lineages, and disciplines specific to the occupational sphere. These ideas and structures of practice are also not my present concern. Rather, I am talking about practical work; practice from the Greek root prāg/prāssō, meaning 'to do' in relation to action(s) and built intentions.

The descriptive word 'embedded' is not connected to the concept that dance (or art) can be characterised as embedded simply by being seemingly anchored in or evocative of a particular place, or because it is an art form of the body which is adaptable to such places. Embedded does not refer, in my use, to the isolated totality of an Embedded Creative Practice (its attributes, characteristics, features, or traits) or to what a particular embedded artist does. It could be said that Georgia O'Keefe's work is deeply embedded in the place where she lived, but that is, again, not my gloss at this juncture. Rather, embedded references something more fundamental. It points to the nature of embedded practice as aggregated by the constituent group-body that is supporting and maintaining the present social or geopolitical positionality of the practitioner, as well as the practitioner's attachment or fidelity to this positionality. I link ECP to fidelity because fidelity denotes faith and exactness that is insisted upon. Fidelity etymologically evokes trust, belief, and the verb 'to bide.' Fidelity is used in relation to marriage or committed, intimate relationships, to people or to a nation, but relationship to a place is no less intimate and is tested both in crises and in day-to-day existence. An artist's place of practice is a crucial commitment which changes opportunities, character, and modes of practice.

Embedded Creative Practice denotes the action of practice occurring at the level of the creative process itself. In this sense ECP shapes performance. An ECP of dancing takes shape through the continuity of encounter between dancer and the surrounding world which guides and forms the choreography or performance. The ECP model does not differentiate aesthetic, practical, and social pursuits. The ongoing flow and rhythm of encounter and relationship is integral to the dance performance itself. In other words, embeddedness guides practice.

The model

The Embedded Creative Practice (ECP) model I propose is not a rigid paradigm, but a malleable framework designed to assist arts workers navigating disruptions within complex ecosystems. Unlike other models that prioritise 'best practices', the ECP model centres intrinsic values of creative and cultural practices, tailoring its application to meet specific needs and values in different contexts. The approach I am suggesting stems not from a position of success or eminence in the field of dance, but from my breadth and length of lived experience over three decades in the dance field.

Sector recovery initiatives, such as the Creative Recovery Small Grants Program in which I participated, often prompt artists to adopt models that may not align with their creative intentions or the cultural needs of their communities. These programs typically assess proposals based on their potential to enhance sociological outcomes like community connection, resilience, or recovery ("Regional Arts Victoria" 2020). However, such criteria can inadvertently sideline the intrinsic artistic or cultural value for a community or place, potentially diluting the efficacy of cultural practice in favour of broader social objectives. A more potent approach might assess cultural practice against its own intentions within its sociological context, ensuring that the contributions of artists are recognised and valued in their entirety, not just for their instrumental benefits.

While I appreciate the relatively robust public subsidies for arts and culture in Australia, these models frequently overlook the intrinsic values and objectives of artistic practice. This oversight can compel artists to adopt paradigms from unrelated fields, leading to outcomes that may not resonate with their creative intentions and methodologies. Such misalignment, evident in the aftermath of events like the Black Summer Bushfires, can lead to speculative and contrived projects. Instead of imposing concepts such as 'social impact' as prerequisites, it is essential to recognise that artists inherently strive to make a positive societal contribution. Although the social benefits of art are sometimes indirect, they are no less significant for being so. This perspective does not suggest that cross-portfolio funding for arts and culture should be dismissed (although better coordination across levels of government and portfolios is needed). Instead, it strengthens the importance of recognising that artistic models of practice are fundamentally different from models used in fields such as social work or cultural policy.

The ECP organisational framework

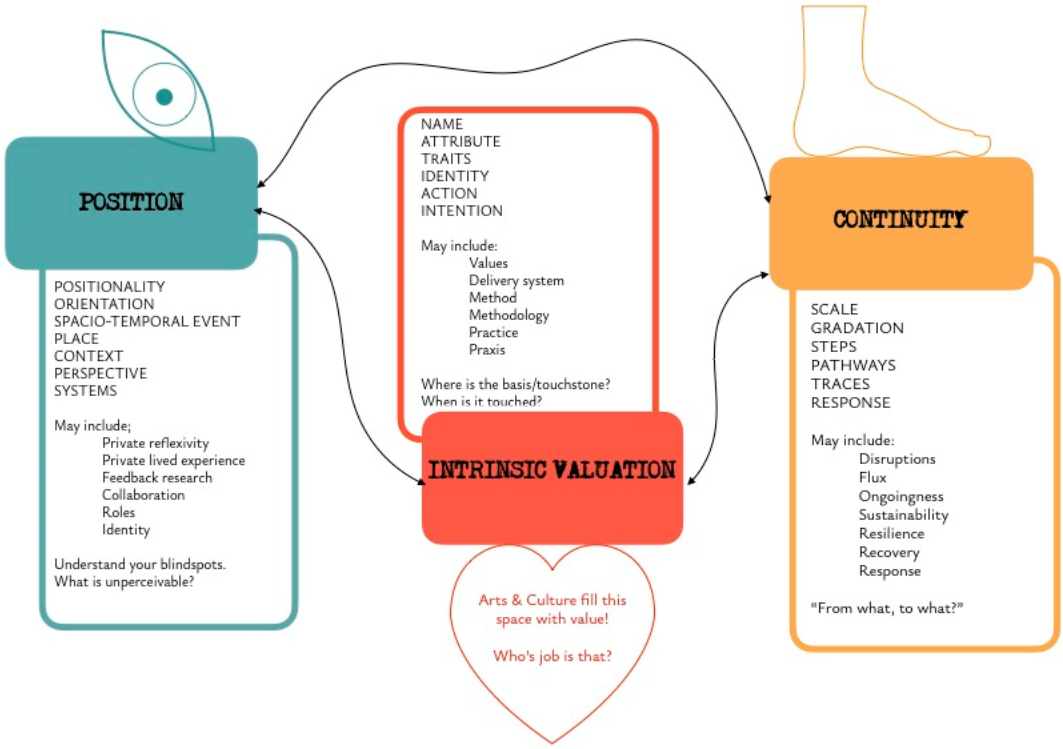

Figure 1. Embodied Creative Practice (ECP) Graphic Model, 2020-2023 © Susannah Keebler.

The following three sub-sections explicate these ideas and describe how the model might be used.

Continuity & disruption

Over the past four years, I have reflected on continuity and disruption as dual lenses to understand their significant impact on my practice, which requires adaptive strategies central to the ECP model (Newsome and Keebler 2020). Days after enduring the 2019-20 firestorms, with our single road out blocked and no mains power, I began researching emergency management and cultural and artistic responses to disasters. This research has an extant and unfolding temporal nature born from dire circumstances. I am motivated by trying to make sense of all the unfathomable and fractious occurrences I experienced in the social and interpersonal realm. Continuity and disruption are concepts found in common parlance and across the literature on disaster response, emergency management, and creative recovery.

Disruption is a constant in the lives of dancers, artists, and indeed all humans. My recent experiences have deepened my appreciation for the labour of dancers during the World Wars and artists currently affected by conflicts like the Russo-Ukrainian and Israel-Hamas Wars, and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. While my disruptions are

incomparable to war, they significantly challenged my life, delaying my return to regular artistic practice. The tenuous rhythm of my current practice has been shaped by a disputatious community, my personal injury (a ruptured ACL), and a pervasive sense of malaise. I suggest that creative responses generated outside of a crisis differ markedly from those that emerge within a crisis-affected culture. Both external and internal creative responses to crises are valuable: the former is perhaps unburdened by immediate pressures, while the latter is deeply informed by direct experience.

The concept of continuity, often used in functional business, government, and operations, continuity supports resilience, is particularly useful here. The National Fire Protection Association, a leading, international non-profit organisation, defines resilience in relation to continuity as "the ability to prepare for, adapt to, and rapidly recover from disruptions" (Society of Fire Protection Engineers 2019). Disaster response and Emergency Management is fundamentally and artificially reticulated, requiring synaptic connectivity across the wide breadth of an impacted community, momentarily fastening together fields of work, services, and society across institutions and partnerships for survival and recovery (Omer and Alon 1994, 273). Thus, while cross-connectivity seeks to bring cohesion, the inherent diversity and complexity of the networks it creates can lead to fragmentation and communication breakdowns if not carefully managed.

In response to these challenges, trauma specialists Nahman Alon and Haim Omer developed "the continuity principle," which proposes that maintaining "functional, interpersonal, and personal continuities" across individual, family, organisational, and community levels during a crisis is beneficial (Omer and Alon 1994, 273). Omer describes these continuities as:

- Functional continuity: The ability to function despite disturbances.
- Interpersonal continuity: Maintaining connections with one's social circle.
- Personal continuity: Preserving a coherent sense of self. (274)

These principles reflect my own experience in attempting to monitor my practice since the fires, throughout the pandemic, and during my recent injury. These events have involved periods of observation and adaptation, reflecting the disruptions dancers negotiate in their practice across a lifetime. This is more pointed in dance than in other art forms, as dance changes and adapts to the artist’s circumstances (or does not) because of the changeable corporeal materials. Across an ageing process, neural patterns and bodily habits can be more challenging to shift in comparison to younger people. Simultaneously, a body is somatically marked by experience. A mature dance practice must adapt to survive.

The field of creative recovery in Australia is relatively new and much of the previous research on arts practice in Australian regional settings in crisis has been conducted by government and arts organisations rather than by artist-researchers with direct, current experience (Australia Council 2015; 2017; Gilfillan and Morrow 2018; Doyle, Fisher, and Talvé 2011; Schwartzman 2011). These publications, while useful, are often put together

for financial and administrative acquittal, lack peer review, and omit key information about unsuccessful aspects of projects. Kim Dunphy's chapter in *Making Culture Count*, aimed at arts programmers and policymakers without practical arts experience, highlights the need for assessment modes that integrate methods of evaluation and reporting, which specifically include a wide range of stakeholders, such as the artists themselves (MacDowall et al. 2015, 243–63).

The interplay of functional, interpersonal, and personal continuities during crises accentuates the significance of sustained, adaptive practices — an area that remains underexplored in current research on creative recovery. While the continuity principle emphasises maintaining functions, relationships, and personal coherence amidst disruptions, there is limited understanding of how artists and communities navigate these challenges. Alon and Omer's emphasis on continuity heightens the need to address overlooked complexities in regional and rural contexts that need more support for adaptive processes essential for creative recovery. The impact of multiple crises exposed complex interconnections within my creative practice. For instance, bushfires disrupted my interpersonal continuity, while my injury mainly impacted my functional continuity. Analysing the pandemic's effects is more challenging due to its entanglement with previous bushfire experiences, complicating the assessment of its ongoing impact on my practice.

During the crises, I accessed various forms of support beyond Job Seeker payments, participating in government-funded 'recovery' and 'pivot' projects linked to the bushfires and the pandemic. This involvement prompted critical reflection: "Who is recovering?" and "Recovering from what to what?" As an artist, the expectation to facilitate 'recovery' was both intriguing and perplexing, given the profound personal impacts of these events.

Observing responses in Mallacoota post-bushfires and New York post-9/11, I noticed a tendency to rush in and offer help — often without the necessary specialised skills. The day after 9/11, I had dance studio space booked and I remember the slow and scary subway route to get there, only to give up on practice due to an inability to concentrate and my own questioning of its purpose. This marked an early adult reflection on my role as an artist. I then attempted to volunteer at the Armory on 14th Street, but quickly realised I lacked necessary skills to contribute effectively. In contrast, following the bushfires, my practice became a means of maintaining personal continuity, reflecting my evolving understanding that dance is a crucial way I interact with the world and make sense of my experience. Personal, functional, and interpersonal continuities during crises are not just abstract concepts but are deeply influenced by one's positionality. For instance, the way artists in regional or rural areas experience and adapt to crises, as highlighted in my reflections, is shaped by their specific positionality — geographically, socially, and culturally.

Position/Positionality

> "To travel between places is to move between collections of trajectories and to reinsert yourself in the ones to which you relate."
> --- Doreen Massey (2005, 131)

An artist's geographical and social positionality plays a critical role in shaping their creative practice and their ability to respond to environmental and community needs. In an ECP, the artist has a home-base from which to work but maintains relationships with and within other places. Dynamic mobility is relational even when situated in a remote locale or when experiencing or recovering from a crisis. Models that do not allow a practitioner to have an evolving multiplicity of relationships to place may lead to isolating the practitioner(s), thus limiting the reach of their practice and work. Practice is always at the service of something, to paraphrase dance artist Alice Cummins (Cummins 2020). The ECP Model advocates for a practice that serves both the artist and the art form(s) no matter where in space their home-base is located. Whether every aspect of their work can be instrumentalised by their communities is not essential to my definition of ECP. A fluid treatment of place-identity through a relational lens imparts a recognition of what is specific to a practice without collapsing under what is insular, segregated, or siloed (Massey 2004). Should not artists working in remote places have access to and connectivity with other places and communities? The answer to this rhetorical question is 'yes,' if the artist's practice in question requires connectivity. State-based funding structures often block this type of connectivity for independent artists. This is evident for independent artists like me who are based on state borders. In this situation, funding or being part of projects with artists who live in different states is quite complicated. For example, in my experience, submitting funding applications to Regional Arts Victoria (the state funding administrator) that involved artists living over the border in New South Wales or in Melbourne was frowned upon. I was advised to submit different applications to multiple funding bodies for those artists and the amount of potential funding is never enough to cover that much administration. This demonstrates how regional artists are expected to stay in their place, denying their need for mobility and fluid place-identity in ways that do not apply to artists in major cities.

The embedded artist is situated from the inside rather than placed from the outside, so they witness community from the inside. In her "taxonomy of spectatorial witness" Caroline Wake explores how performances can act as testimonies to real-life events, especially those involving trauma (Wake 2009). Though she primarily focuses on the role of spectators, her insights also raise important questions about the ethical responsibilities of artists. Like spectators, artists navigate multiple layers of reality in their work, complicating the notion that they are neutral figures simply representing, uniting, or healing their communities. While I am not addressing a specific mode of theatrical witnessing, I believe this duality equally implicates performing artists and facilitators. The ECP model underscores the artist's multifaceted roles, showing that their participation in both witnessing and creating performance is active and ethically charged. Witnessing, according to media historian and social theorist, John Peters, carries "extraordinary moral and cultural force," connected to responsibility (Peters

2001, 708). Embedded artists are responsible for their communities through their locationally based, lived experience. So, accountability is one major difference between an embedded artist and an artist-in-residence. There are many reasons residencies are useful and desirable, but it is pointedly different to being embedded. ECP affords a higher level of access and insight simply due to a longer period of presence.

In *Choreography Invisible*, dance theorist Anna Pakes discusses the useful concept of "action types" to differentiate dance or choreographic works from more tangible art forms like ceramics or painting (Pakes 2020, 119–40). Pakes explores how dance is separate from its performance, viewing it as an action with inherent context, not just a collection of movements (123–24). She emphasises that intention and context are crucial to understanding dance, setting it apart from how context is considered in other art forms (123–24). In the ECP model, embedded-ness is part of the “action-type” under discussion and is part of the aesthetic criteria through which we can understand this kind of artistic work.

Accordingly, movement of travel to and from places could be considered integral dance materials in ECP. So too could inhabiting a particular place if the intention is to make work there. Boundaries of the dance are not necessarily crisp when it is tied to complex intentions and borderless contexts. Movement-based, interdisciplinary artist Eiko Otake writes in the book, *A Body in Fukushima*: “Going to Fukushima is a choreography. Travelling there is a movement. […] When I go to Fukushima, my distance to Fukushima changes even after I return” (Otake and Johnston 2021, 79). This description of the embedded-ness of the location within the action of the work harmonises with the ECP in that there is integration of movement and place as inherent elements of the creative process. Traveling to and inhabiting a place are integral to artistic practice, as both the journey and the act of dwelling profoundly shape creative work. This evolving relationship between movement and place continues, even when working in different locations. Blurred boundaries in dance are shaped by the artist’s intentions and interactions with the space, making place an active, ongoing presence in the creative process.

Artists must often categorically state their base location — remote, regional, or suburban — in grant applications and elsewhere, but locational identity can be complex. I identify as a 'regional artist' with a fluid place-identity, frequently leaving for periods of time to sustain practice through education, professional development, collaboration, and freelance work in Australia and the U.S. Relationships, conversations, and shared experiences are crucial to my creative process, as well as the reflective and reflexive aspects of my performance, teaching, and research. This is perhaps best illustrated in a specific dance piece. Figure 2 presents a visual mapping of a dance over a period of time, utilising video stills from my creative process in making and performing the dance iteratively. The stills are taken from different iterations of the same dance.

Figure 2. Mapping dance through stills from different iterations of the same dance material, 2020-2023 © Susannah Keebler.

Looking at the stills as a map, what do you see? What do you not see? I am not sure yet if an action type is visible in these stills, but, like Otake, I felt the presence of all the different locations accumulating in the piece. When I dance this piece, these different place-times are present with me, and they have formed and imprinted the movements and structures of the dance.

In the stills from the rehearsal of "No Dancing, No Singing, No Mingling", I am dancing on a steep hill near my house. The terrain made the dance about navigating my relationship with Earth and gravity, significantly influencing the future choreography of the dance. Even when adapting the piece to a studio's smooth, flat floor, I recalled the sensation of the rough, inclined surface or improvised movements that emphasised gravity and transitions in and out of the floor. These elements — the site and my memories — became foundational and contribute to the embedded nature of my practice.

Space and place are of primary importance to dance in all its forms. Dance is both situated in context and intentionally process driven. Dance historian and critic Laurence Louppe in “Singular, Moving Geographies: an Interview with Hubert Godard,” a movement theorist, describes “the dancing body” as a “multi-directional geography of relations with oneself, and with the world” (Godard and Louppe 1996, 14). Godard draws an analogy of a dancer as a geographer, “accumulating maps, intra-corporeal dispositions, geographical situations which subsequently produce a history” (15). This history is personal, collective, and/or integral to understanding the materiality of dance. Within the ECP model, *where* one is embedded refers not to an institution, but to *place*. Place refers to an aspect of space-time; unlike a location or site, it is not bound by physical borders (Massey 2002, 294). Place does, however, have a situated yet dynamic perspective.

Place is an important and useful concept in discussions concerning the positionality of artists as well as the evaluation of their work. In the context of my embedded dance practice, I have identified a conceptualisation which embraces multiplicity and relationality as most useful (Massey 1985, 141). Social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey described places "not as points or areas on maps, but as […] spatiotemporal events" (Massey 2005, 131). The implications of this for a dancer or a dance run deep: a dancer cannot rewind or erase how, when or where they have danced; once done, a dance cannot be un-done even if it is forgotten. The place-event may be carried in the dancer indefinitely, so when a dancer and their dance come to a new place, they may still carry the mark of another place. Simultaneously, when ethnographer and social anthropologist Sarah Pink's concept 'place-event' is employed, a dance is always different even when performed in the same location (Pink 2011, 344–55). It is not simply a particular performance, or even an artist's or spectator's experience that is different. By a larger degree, a dance or dancing as place-event is constantly remade anew, comprising a unique manifestation of place with each iteration. An ECP is not just defined by its place in space but arises through its *tended or untended* confluences of activities and processes over time. This concept of embedded practice invokes the uncontrollable lineage of idea or experience that may emerge without warning through an unbounded, relational context. It is through the place-event that a dance's meaning and identity may be discerned, and this evolves through many iterations.

Place and intrinsic valuation

Place is not merely a backdrop but is actively shaped by social interactions and power dynamics, leading to multiple interpretations and responses to environmental and social changes. Doreen Massey in *For Space* suggests that a place's character emerges from the interplay of "wider power-geometries" and "disconnections and exclusions" (Massey 2005, 101–3) Similarly, Richard Stedman posits that "place meanings" are socially and culturally constructed, allowing for multiple 'places' within the same setting (Stedman 2008, 75). These distinct meanings are influenced by individual social experiences and power relations, indicating that place meanings extend beyond intrinsic or economic values and are deeply rooted in cultural contexts and social dynamics (Stedman 2008, 75-76).

Stedman's insights point to the challenges faced by place-based programming, especially in managing diverse experiences of place during crises. The idea that we're 'all in the same boat', which has evolved into a more fitting metaphor, 'we are in different boats experiencing the same storm', aptly describes this complexity. Make no mistake, policymakers and managers play a crucial role in shaping dance culture. Understanding the multifaceted nature of place meanings is key to enhancing cultural value and better supporting regional cultural and artistic work. Engaging deeply with these meanings may lead to clearer and more favourable outcomes for cultural workers.

The social context of arts and cultural practice in crisis-impacted settings often goes unexamined by the people and organisations who are implementing the practices. Emergency Management relies heavily on sociology and therefore should also consider the nuanced social context of cultural practices. An approach that accounts for

contextual and parochial place-meanings, which are already value-filled, is preferable to one that imposes external value paradigms. This evaluative approach acknowledges existing hierarchies and power structures and involves managerial reflexivity, where managers critically reflect on their practices, assumptions, and the broader organisational context. Reflexivity is crucial, especially during crises, as it fosters a more strategic and adaptive response by building on existing cultural practices rather than attempting to reinvent them. Such reflective practices not only facilitate immediate crisis management but also contribute to long-term recovery and resilience by respecting and responding to the existing cultural fabric of the community.

Post-disaster

The challenges of advancing my work intensified after the bushfires, as logistical and emotional difficulties compounded, disrupting both my creative and personal life. In 2018-19, I went to Melbourne to pursue a master's degree at the Victorian College of the Arts. My goals were to build connections, expand my understanding of dance within the Australian context, and explore academic writing, particularly focusing on performer-audience dynamics in regional settings. Despite my eagerness to present my work in Mallacoota and having developed pieces and local support, funding obstacles persisted. Consequently, I opted to self-fund through ticket sales, allowing me to continue with the work I envisioned doing in Mallacoota. I planned to experiment with 'public practice' — rehearsals and development sessions conducted in public spaces rather than behind studio doors. This not only aligned with my research that emphasised the significance of the performance environment but also aimed to enhance visibility and self-awareness in dance practices.

The bushfires, however, blurred the very concept of continuity. Despite my instincts to maintain routine, the aftermath of the fires and subsequent COVID lockdowns exacerbated the issues I had been grappling with — support, collaboration, visibility, and performance. Trauma specialists often note that such collective traumas impact individuals variably, influenced by pre-existing vulnerabilities or systemic inequalities. For example, survivors of domestic violence may find their coping mechanisms destabilised, exacerbating their vulnerability by limiting access to support, intensifying feelings of fear, isolation, and loss of control. This layering of trauma makes recovery even more difficult for those already vulnerable.

My own experience of trying to maintain continuity in my creative life also involved layers of challenges, both logistical and emotional. To reengage with my work after the bushfires, I began practicing public dance performances at the Mallacoota Art Space. Without a regular studio and due to the bushfire smoke, I shifted my practice indoors, inviting the public to observe or join in. This helped me process the disaster while embodying my experiences abstractly through movement. Yet, the intensity of these expressions sometimes proved overwhelming for the community, as evidenced by a complaint about the expressive music played by my partner Padma Newsome, which someone found overwhelming, perhaps because it mirrored the emotional rawness of

the recent trauma. I heard this sentiment echoed by others about other musical experiences at that time. Although no one explicitly mentioned my dancing as being distressing, perhaps they were being polite.

In my experience, triggered responses varied widely, with personal and political issues often dripping together in an unruly, runny mess. I believe clarity is impossible, but dialling down urgency may alleviate hot tensions. Amid these challenges, Newsome and I formulated the principle of "Pause before inventing, entering, and creating the creative space," encapsulated in a wishful document he wrote called, "The Arts Responder Checklist" (Newsome and Keebler 2020, 3–5). This principle guided our adaptive strategies during recovery, emphasising the need for thoughtful engagement rather than hurried action. We were learning and adapting on the fly, but I believe my initial gut observations were accurate, especially regarding the 'recovery' initiatives introduced by external entities after the acute crisis phase. Some of the less prescriptive, recovery-supportive projects that I participated in accommodated continuity while adapting to the new reality. However, unresolvable problems arose in the cultural space from a lack of understanding of nuanced place meanings and the complex interplay of cultural values, personal trauma, and resource scarcity by external entities and their community contacts.

Aligning management with creative practice — reflections on the Far East Music Festival

In my work on several projects funded by federal bushfire recovery grants, I observed that while the overseeing organisations may not have fully anticipated their outcomes, these projects often had lasting positive impacts due to their artist-centred approaches. In contrast, Far East Music Festival drew my attention to critical misalignments between management and creative practice. Supported by a $456,480 AUD grant from the Commonwealth Government's Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program, the festival aimed to support social and economic recovery through various cultural initiatives. However, its execution failed to fully grasp nuanced meanings of place shaped by both the crises and historical contexts.

The festival was initiated by two local arts administrators employed by Music Victoria on a contentious one-year part-time contract. Their roles became more problematic when they secured a substantial bushfire recovery grant, intensifying concerns about the inequitable distribution of resources between salaried administrators and unsalaried, freelance artists. This situation led to my vocal concerns about the festival's management-driven approach, which seemed disconnected from the needs of experienced creative practitioners.

Additionally, there was a community-driven desire to revive the Mallacoota Arts Festival, a historically significant event deeply ingrained in the local cultural identity. However, I believe the changing cultural landscape and increasing logistical and financial challenges have made such grassroots festival models less viable today. This

foregrounds the importance of ongoing-ness — which must evolve from existing efforts rather than attempting to recreate outdated models.

The aftermath of the Black Summer Bushfires brought heightened tensions to Mallacoota, including divisive ideologies about sharing and teaching music — specifically, the binary thinking between music literacy (emphasising formal education and musical notation) and auralcy (focusing on learning by ear). This fabricated divide ignored the value of integrating both learning methods, which is an essential strategy in a town with limited educational resources. Such binary thinking inflamed community tensions and excluded some members from participating in music-making, reinforcing a broader misunderstanding of parochial practices. In such a context, urgency and verve often dominate decision-making, pushing for more and many at the expense of equitable access. This attitude creates another false division between those who are 'inside' and 'outside,' where no such division should exist. The situation was further complicated by heated communications, a response to the community's collective trauma. Ironically, even those in the 'recovery' space, who claimed to follow trauma-informed protocols, sometimes silenced those expressing pain and anger, furthering the very exclusion they aimed to heal.

In 2022, I expressed these concerns to colleagues and representatives from Music Victoria, advocating for greater inclusion of local professional artists in the festival's development and a more democratic approach to creative recovery. In early 2023, I met with the event manager and a music educator colleague to discuss my participation in the festival, but I was hesitant to engage in a project that actively excluded genuinely interested contributors.

While the intentions behind the festival were commendable, large, publicly-funded cultural events should emerge from existing local activities and culture. The festival faced significant challenges, including unforeseen weather conditions during Easter and a lack of contingency plans, leading to widespread frustration among ticket holders. The subsequent cancellation of the festival's second year and the replacement with a smaller, youth-focused event further demonstrated the need for management to work more closely with local artists and to frame their engagement in terms of place-meanings. This approach better embraces complexities while intervening in a sensitive, volatile, or polarised sphere. As Massey notes, "re-thinking spatial identities is an emotionally charged issue," and adopting a more relational approach could help diffuse these tensions, fostering a more inclusive and resilient creative recovery process (Massey 2004, 6).

Moving beyond unity — reflections on the Walkabout Drive-In

One of the most affecting cultural events that happened in Mallacoota post-disaster was The Walkabout Drive-In, which took place on 8 May 2021. The Walkabout Drive-In was an outdoor cinema event that featured short documentary films by Wurinbeena Ltd and Fringe Dweller Films, where Aboriginal Elders from Lake Tyers, Lakes Entrance, and

nearby areas shared their experiences of surviving the displacement and prejudice of colonisation through a balance of adaptation and continuity. Bidawal elder, Lennie Hayes who also has bloodline connections to the Ngairo Monero and Yuin Nations, opened the event with a Welcome to Country that not only paid respects to his elders past and present, but also to the Gunaikurnai people and the non-indigenous people and the township of Mallacoota, saying: "I hope we can help to heal one another and the community after dealing with firstly bushfires and COVID. I hope we all have a good time and come together as one" ("Walkabout Drive-In" 2021). Held in an open-air setting on the same foreshore where many sheltered from the bushfire, participants took part in a cleansing smoking ceremony, watched the films, and danced together in a Cultural Healing Ceremony led by the Djaadjawan Dancers, a women's dance group based in Narooma, NSW. The Gulaga Dancers, a men's dance group from Wallaga Lake, NSW, also danced after the films.

The event's strength lay in cultivating a shared understanding and embracing the diversity of our individual journeys, rather than seeking a forced sense of harmony or striving for a superficial sense of togetherness. Its strength lay in the co-mingling of laid-bare truth-telling and soulful sharing of stories and moving together in a circle around a fire. I do not want to sound like I had rose-tinted glasses on for this event, because I still had feelings of discomfort about things that were occurring in Mallacoota. I did not have a sense of unity. However, unity is not something I personally look or yearn for. I believe that it was the best attempt I experienced to create an event without an inside or outside. It fostered mutuality while also acknowledging our different pathways and experiences that have led us to share history.

Intrinsic vs. instrumental benefit

Since relocating to Mallacoota, my practice has expanded to include a broader range of community arts, dance, and cultural development activities, such as intergenerational workshops leading to public performances. This adaptation, common among regional arts workers facing production and funding challenges, integrates participatory and educational elements to support project-based cultural development. However, this approach often aligns with a sociological framework that emphasises social and economic outcomes, potentially overshadowing the work's intrinsic values and eschewing support for on-going-ness within practice. Despite this, the broader arts community recognises that people do not solely engage with the arts for these benefits. Cultural economic discussions further highlight this tension by contrasting the direct, intrinsic benefits of arts encounters with their instrumental, socioeconomic contributions (MacDowall et al. 2015).

'Socially engaged art' (or other nominal variations) has become widely applied as a descriptor for art that lies outside of art institutions. Vid Simoniti points to two conjoined traits: artistic value of the work is identical to socio-political effect, and production modes assume activistic forms (Simonti 2018, 72). As my teacher Deborah Hay has expressed, dancing can be a form of activism in and of itself (Hay 2015, 20). Dance is

action-based and, in the case of my work, dance itself is my cause. The ECP model does not differentiate aesthetic, practical, and social pursuits. In the ECP model, the practical denominations cited above may function as methods, methodologies, and/or modes of practice rather than as a model. Further, relationships and partnerships need not be manufactured — they already exist. It may be useful to the arts worker to examine relational aspects of their work, but the work is already oriented toward the social (Bishop 2012) because the artist, centred or not, is part of the community they work in. The ECP model is socially engaged, but not defined by this characteristic; rather it is distinguished by its on-going relationship to environment, which includes the ways it engages socially.

The aims of many regional arts funding schemes inherently value work that is framed by social theory rather than by its own intrinsic values. Regional funding applications are often assessed using criteria such as: creative impact and/or community/recipient benefit. Outcomes that "strengthen community connection or engagement," or "contribute to community resilience" ("Regional Arts Victoria" 2020) are associated with sociological frameworks which may or may not bring to bear on the creative practice in a way that is artistically or culturally valuable to a community or to a place. More importantly, this type of assessment does not allow for artistic or cultural endeavours which are not yet appreciated or are yet unknown — that is, experimental practices. By reevaluating how we assess and value art, particularly in regional settings, we can better appreciate the full spectrum of benefits that art provides, from the deeply personal to the broadly societal.

Conclusion

Exploring the tensions between the actualisation of creative practice and its influence in the broader social and systemic context may offer insight into elements that shape the spirit of creative practice. The Embedded Creative Practice model is a non-prescriptive framework for thinking about the ways a practitioner relates to positionality and environment. However, it does imply that they have an on-going commitment to practice within a particular place. Negotiating the spatiotemporal state, a past, present, and localised, shared now, is primarily important to ECP. Over time, the value of history as a driver does not necessarily diminish within one's practice. Individuated values shape practice, but they are also the product of practice — a corollary. The focus of embedded dance practice is the generative power manifested by dance itself. As artists work hard at externalising their practice, the core of that work emerges in the broader social landscape, distinct from its usual surroundings. Put simply, dance has an inherent ability to both engage with and resist complex systems.

Structures are innate to the constitution of ECP and to the emergent behaviours of dance. Moreover, every dance form is deeply rooted in its history, which evokes a provenance of experience through the dancing body. There is a burden of urgency in practicing art or making culture in that it intentionally touches and collides with social life and the public sphere. Creative practice of any sort has the potential to expose

previously unknown but deliberate pathways and bonds that may unbolt possibilities. Does this suggest that artistic or cultural practice may be a characteristic by-product radiating from embedded behaviours and expression? Perhaps, but dancing-ness, the quality of dance, is not the driver of embedded dancing. Embedded dancing is tied to and integrated with its external frameworks, such as locations, narratives, or collaborative contexts. It is the *action* of dancing which drives an embedded dance practice.

What might the continued survival of my dance practice look like? It is difficult to envision. To labour as a dancer, performer, or artist, demands apprehending and holding steadfast to manners or modes which are in turn challenged by the same devotedness, but ECP necessarily does not dictate manners or modes. Reflexive but not given, this drive is composite and thus, delicate if not fragile, careful if not finicky. These qualities arise from practice as a defensive weapon of an embedded artist with an in-born capacity for autonomic realisation and survival. As a result, dance emerging from an ECP is experienced not simply as inhabiting systems of movement or progress. Like sunlight on a shimmering sea, these systems might appear on the surface of the practice, which flows from place to place, not due to immediate conditions like the weather, but because of broader, underlying forces.

I encourage future research to explore the implementation of the ECP model across diverse artistic disciplines and geographic regions to fully understand its capabilities and refine its outlooks. Policymakers, arts organisations, and creative practitioners are encouraged to consider the insights from this model to enhance creative practice in the face of global challenges. Embracing the principles of ECP could significantly alter the landscape of cultural support systems, making them more responsive to the complexities of modern cultural endeavours.

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