EMBODIED ECONOMIES

A dialogue about dance, performance and creation in late capitalism

BY JILLIAN GROENING

Hilary Anne Crist in Ming Hon's *Chase Scenes* / Photo by Murdo Macleod

A political ideology and economic system, capitalism guides our movements as individuals and collectives. Theoretically, capitalism can be viewed as a liberating system of governance, by which individuals have the right to own property and gain wealth. But as a global system, it benefits those with social privilege, encouraging hyper-competitiveness and consumerism.

We are currently in a phase of history known as late capitalism, a term that hints at a cheeky awareness. Late capitalism has seen high-tech advances, a dangerously potent concentration of financial capital and what some argue is an exaggerated focus on the individual over the collective.

In what ways does this economic structure influence dance? Theorist Fredric Jameson argues that art created in late capitalism is self-referential and superficial and that it often addresses the collapse of high and low culture. Is there truth to this assertion? How does our current economic context impact who has access to dance? Who can identify as a dance artist? How does late capitalism impact the value of a dance practice and how we view success?

In exploring these questions I spoke with six dance artists – Mike Prosserman, Dainty Smith, Eroca Nicols, Ming Hon, Laura Elliott and Freya Olafson. In these conversations a microcosm of economic vulnerability, action and activism was revealed.

Michael Prosserman is a bboy, entrepreneur and the founder of UNITY Charity, an organization that empowers youth through hip hop mentorship and community outreach. After fifteen years as executive director of UNITY Charity, Prosserman moved on to found EPIC Leadership Support, a business aimed at assisting and supporting non-profit leaders.

JG How has the structure of capitalism informed your work?

MP I like to work with things as they are. I do believe that most social structures, especially here in North America, have the ability to do good if you work with them using intentions that are positive and if you attract like-minded people.

By working with people where they're at, rather than trying to fight the system, I found the ways that UNITY Charity thrived. I think that you can change things from within when you work together. I respect people who 'fight the power' but that's not my approach in life. I've seen people who never got involved in charity work become really engaged in what we do and transform what giving looks like to them. That sort of transformation takes time. While I think capitalism and money can cause some big issues in the world, I think it can also do some great things. We've found ways to create mutually beneficial relationships where everyone solved their goal, and that's the big thing when it comes to corporate funding.

Mike Prosserman / Photo by Glen Co

Dainty Smith / Photo by Gesilayefa Azorbo

JG What sort of backlash or hurdles have you found when dealing with corporate sponsorship?

MP I think that the biggest one was not asking for enough money for all the things we promised, so we learned to figure out what the actual value of doing certain things was, because there comes a point where you're negotiating people's time. That's where it gets complicated – learning what it truly costs to be able to satisfy these promises without burning out our team.

JG Yes! Being aware of burnout and overworking is so important. It can happen so easily in competitive work streams.

MP Burnout is a very real thing. I'm keeping team culture in mind, so the staffing fee is really critical in these funding relationships. There are a lot of taboos around the way non-profit staff should be paid. Towards the end of my time at UNITY, I was advocating for paying people properly. We had to get the funders to understand that this is part of our mission too – to pay people properly who are often underpaid and often undervalued.

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Dainty Smith is a performer, writer and speaker. She is the founder of Les Femme Fatales: Women of Colour Burlesque Troupe and is interested in concepts surrounding race, religion, sexuality and challenging social boundaries.

JG You have referred to yourself as a 'working-class artist.' Is this a term you still identify with?

DS I do still identify as being a working-class artist. We always hear that if you love the work that you do, you'll never have to work a day in your life. Or that you just need to read Eckhart Tolle or have a deeper understanding of the universe. There is a part of me that wants to release that sort of worry. Like, if I think my way into it, I could move up a class bracket.

It involves a lot of risk to try to attempt a life or a career

in the creative industry. It's just hard, and I think that we should admit that. The reality is that we live in a capitalistic, busy, must-be-productive society that doesn't value mental or emotional health and isn't actually honest about how incredibly dangerous capitalism can be to your well-being and your sense of yourself.

JG Totally. The more that folks are able to talk about this disillusionment of a career in the arts, of it not being this glamorous path, the healthier it is.

DS We need to talk about class more when it comes to the arts. We need to talk about money. We really romanticize artists and we view them in a particular way. We put them on a pedestal.

JG Who benefits from the silence surrounding economics of performance?

DS I think that the people who benefit from it are the same people who've always benefited. It's folks who have a tremendous amount of privilege and access. It's folks who have always had an in and have never really had to struggle to get their foot in the door.

I think that the people who don't want us to have those conversations are the folks who benefit the most. They're the folks who get the most jobs. And so you have to think about whiteness. And you have to think about able-bodied folks. The people who don't disrupt the narrative are the ones that benefit the most.

JG How are you able to address commodification and labour in your work and practice?

DS Dance is often not considered real labour. Because of that, people don't understand when you're asking them to pay you. People constantly question your necessity in society as an artist. Dance is at the bottom of the barrel in a lot of ways. To some, there's a throwaway aspect to dance. As if you're just there for the audience's consumption. So because of that, there is this issue around when dancers try to advocate for themselves or ask to be paid a basic living wage. People are surprised by it. Dance is also feminized, and we live in a world that doesn't value women – a world that doesn't like the feminine unless it's for consumption.

JG There is a lot of talk of community riding through these interviews.

DS There's a great performer named Sydni Deveraux and she said we have to remember that burlesque is not just a community; it's an industry. When people support each other, come to each other's shows, advocate, talk about money and pay rates and recommend each other to other dancers, then it works. That is a community. It's a business and part of that means dancers must advocate for themselves and ask for what they are worth.

WE ARE SO USED TO JUST SURVIVING, AND SURVIVING IS SAYING A LOT OF 'YES' WHEN YOU MEAN 'NO'

~ Nicols

JG You host talks on radical body positivity. Can you speak a bit to how that subverts capitalist structures?

DS There is something happening in terms of eroticism and sexualization. I think the audience is used to consuming and devouring dancers. I think that's why in my work it's so important to constantly talk about self-worship, to talk about how I'm going to love myself as a woman, particularly as a Black woman. I've really put that into a lot of my work because it's necessary. It's a radical act.

Anytime a woman puts herself up on a platform, it's an act of defiance. And when she opens her mouth, it's like 'Woah!' But I also understand that I exist in a vulnerable body. So it's necessary for me to talk about it in my work. Because I am vulnerable, all the time.

JG There is so much to unpack there with vulnerability and respect and how a misogynist gaze impacts performance.

DS So much is tied in to our bodies. If you're a woman that gets onstage, it's just never-ending. It's at once liberating and also incredibly risky to be on that stage. Artists have a better way of surviving in this world, in this system. If people that can support artists, dancers and folks who are not only able-bodied to take the stage, it would help. We have a better chance of surviving and thriving if we have a right to our own existence.

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Eroca Nicols is a performance artist whose work addresses capitalism, economics and queer feminist politics.

JG You have addressed economic class distinctions versus cultural class distinctions, and how commodity is power. Can you explain how that impacts performance?

EN What we're talking about is cultural capital, and we can call it cultural capital or we can call it power. Money is power, and cultural capital is power. I think it's important to make those distinctions in dance because it's stuff that makes people really uncomfortable to talk about. If everybody said how much [money]

they made, we would have a real problem on our hands. Then the problem would have to be addressed, because the inequity would be clear. But the inequity is unclear – I mean, there's lots of inequity that is super clear: white supremacy, patriarchy, hetero-supremacy, all of the oppressions – but making things transparent is a way of working towards undoing – breaking the power of cultural capital and money capital.

JG There is a rift between financial recognition and institutional recognition. How do you see this impacting performance structures?

EN Something that's difficult for a lot of folks is the idea that we're working towards something. If what people are looking for is progress-related, then they need to start looking at elder dancers and looking at what their lives are like. The idea of being an elder in this form doesn't leave a lot of possibility unless you have some sort of parallel career or unless you have family money or unless you have a partner who has money. I think money is one of the things that dancers don't want to talk about.

JG And the fact that artists can't often be open about their financial situations or living situations.

EN Yes! That's violence! That is some systemic violence right there. When we get down to it, we are talking about people's livelihood and the complete unsustainability of it. The ongoing precarity does not get better as you age.

JG Right. And this feeds into why it is so important to get rid of that glamorous veneer hiding many realities.

EN Totally. I guess with *Truthteller* what I was doing was realizing that no one wants to talk about money, so I'll talk about it. I've always found it so interesting how few people feel like sharing their financial context. I mean, I guess it's easy to share when you don't have a lot of it, but people are hiding the ways in which they have money. Or they're hiding the shame that they don't have enough. Capitalism is a shame production machine. If we can get past that idea of everything about us being wrong, then we can figure out how to use privilege to leverage things for people who have less access.

JG You work a lot with commodification and how bodies are viewed.

EN I started teaching this thing called aggressive snuggling, which was an idea inspired from Alicia Grant, and there's a part where there is just screaming. We did it, and then some of the dancers were upset because it hurt their voices and they had trouble talking the next day. There is all this stuff we have inside dance around not owning your body. Like, let's do all of this vulnerability training; let's just make ourselves so available to the energies that are moving through the room and then also not get paid and then also have these extreme power dynamics between people in positions of power, and it really is an extreme disaster.

DANCING IS INTRINSICALLY A RADICAL POLITICAL ACT. IT'S THE SIMPLE ACT OF TAKING TIME TO USE YOUR BODY – NOT FOR ANY FUNCTION TOWARDS CAPITALIST PRODUCTION, OR MONETARY GAIN – BUT A FUNCTION OF EXPRESSING SOMETHING ELSE, IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

~ Hon

The #metoo stuff that folks have been doing, that Sarah Ducet and Kathleen Rea have been doing, is super important. Capitalism owns your body. When that becomes clear, it's intense. But also, I feel like this thing that I have been doing with aggressive snuggling reveals that people actually don't know what saying 'yes' and what 'no' feels like. We are so used to just surviving, and surviving is saying a lot of 'yes' when you mean 'no.' That's one of the things that I'm working with people to figure out. Capitalism has confused us in that 'yes' doesn't mean 'yes': 'Yes' means 'yes, I would like to survive'; 'yes, I would like to pay my rent'; 'yes, I would like to put food on the table'; 'yes, I would like to keep this job.' We are trained to subvert what our embodiment of 'yes' means; we are trained to go past our limits; we are trained to let people abuse us. And that's problematic.

JG What do you feel are the responsibilities of making work currently?

EN I mean, I know what mine are and that's to shift the world towards the divine feminine and away from capitalism. I'm doing that bit by bit, but I don't think that has to be everybody's goal. I think it's really important for people to realize how much privilege they have and figure out how to leverage it for collective liberation. If you have a platform, figure out how to use it because no one is winning. And on a very basic level, tell people [how much money] you make. Have a conversation about it because talking openly about money is anti-capitalist.

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Ming Hon is a performance artist whose work explores labour and the economy and politics surrounding the female body.

Laura Elliott (centre) with the Fat Babes Dance Collective / Photo courtesy of Elliott

JG What was your experience in recognizing capitalism in society and in your own life? How did it first appear in your work as a realized structure or force?

MH I grew up in a middle-class suburb in the eighties and nineties with the trend of showing off what you had in blatant logos on t-shirts and knowing which kids had money and who were the poor kids. Being an immigrant family and starting a new life on next to nothing made these class differences apparent to me.

Dancing is intrinsically a radical political act. It's the simple act of taking time to use your body – not for any function towards capitalist production or monetary gain, but a function of expressing something else, in the present moment.

JG Consistent themes in your practice include the economy and politics of the female body. Can you speak to the importance in exploring these concepts?

MH Giving birth to my daughter was a wild return to my animal existence. I took my personal experience of labour and the intensity and extreme sensations I felt and thought of the literal word we give the childbirth process: labour. I translated this into my work *The Exhibitionist*, where labour, work, office politics and bureaucracy were intertwined with women's reproduction surrounding a giant photocopier machine as my lover. *Forever in Blue Jeans* is a piece that is based on a series of actions that play out the lifetime of endless day-to-day chores of the working woman dressed in a Canadian tuxedo to represent the common working 'man.'

To return to your question, these issues are important because a woman's worth and work is tragically still questioned and her body is still objectified, sexualized and sometimes controlled by others.

JG I want to address this tricky balance inherent in performance: how can we acknowledge and empower ourselves as performers (marginalized bodies, female bodies, etc.) doing what we do and loving what we do, while being aware that in putting ourselves in the public sphere, we are being consumed by audiences who sometimes participate in disempowerment. How

can we as performers maintain agency?

MH Much of my work is self-aware in its sexuality and aims to be an act of reclaiming autonomy over it. I look to expose the tension and conflict between the body, object and audience. In our current climate of consent, and the outing of masculine toxicity, it's important and interesting to me to make sexual work that is from a woman's perspective. To be consumed by an audience is part of it. I have agency over my body and performance because I created it. I chose to present myself to an audience and I feel confident in the intentions I am sharing.

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Laura Elliott is a dance artist, educator and advocate. She is the founder of Fat Babes Dance Collective and sits on the board of directors for Dance Manitoba.

JG You've spoken about the effects of capitalism in relation to dance studios. What are the ripple effects of this?

LE I've noticed a big focus on competition, both in an artistic context and between studios. Some of the effects are financial; the studios that choose not to play into that game tend to not be as big and therefore don't offer their students quite as nice of a package. Studios are businesses. It also slants a little bit towards the homogenization of studio-level choreography. When you're looking for dancers, you're less inclined to pick a dancer that doesn't fit the larger group. So I feel like it's becoming less diverse and more a game of money.

JG How do you see this homogenization feeding a hierarchal class structure?

LE It's a product of hierarchy. For example, you have a student who is talented but their parents can only afford two classes a week. Then you have a student who is less talented but their parents sign them up for twelve classes a week, will pay for all the costumes, private lessons and competitions. Who do you cater too? We have a business to run and mouths to feed. Do you pass a little extra support to the student that shows potential, or do you cater to the one who is paying your salary?

JG Yeah, the dance studio can be a microcosm for the societal effects of capitalism.

LE I think about this constantly. I think the catalyst, if we trace it back through dance, started with So You Think You Can Dance. That show changed everything, in good ways and bad. It definitely brought dance to the forefront, but it also created a lot of very unrealistic expectations.

Fat Babes Dance Collective / Photo courtesy of Laura Elliott

JG Yes! As much as that show brought visibility to dance, it also fed into commodification of the form and a focus on the individual.

LE Yeah, it's interesting to see where professional dance is in this. Is it going to stay more 'company-based,' or is the company ultimately dead? When I was graduating, your role was to find a dance company and get a job. But that's not how it is anymore. I feel that we're not preparing students to be self-employed.

JG I want to talk a bit about the work that you do through Fat Babes Dance Collective. To me it's radical, necessary change that would not have existed in the past.

LE Yeah, you're right. Ten years ago I was hiding because I was so ashamed of myself and the fact that I couldn't make myself fit into the box that was expected of me. So it's been really fun and cool to have the support. But it's the babes that are actually dancing and are really putting themselves out there. They deserve the credit.

JG There are often institutional barriers keeping certain bodies out of post-secondary studios or off stages. How can you address this when teaching your students?

LE I can address it, but I think the biggest change that I can make is making myself as visible as possible. Imagine if you are a fat dancer and you injure your ankle. Anyone can injure their ankle. It happens all the time. You go to physio and they tell you, 'I can help your ankle, but the problem is that you need to lose fifteen pounds.' So if I can be visible as someone who can do this kind of physical work, hopefully I can provide some sort of healthy, realistic viewpoint.

JG Yeah, that visibility is so important.

LE To circle back to dance and capitalism, it's becoming more democratized and there are people who are doing the work of making it accessible, and yes, I think the structures will break apart and a new thing will form. It's what I think will happen and what I hope happens.

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Freya Olafson is an intermedia artist and educator. She has a solo practice that is mixed with disseminating video work, eliminating the physical labour of performance.

JG In high school you sold your first painting. Can you speak to that experience of equating your creative labour with monetary value?

FO It was confusing while at the same time empowering. To fathom that something you make or create can have value in someone's life, not just in terms of it being something they look at and appreciate, but that you can move forward and purchase more materials to create further.

But placing a dollar value on your work is also confusing and strange. To take something that is created from your personal place of experience and exploration, then to place monetary value on it for exchange, is a confusing and complicated process that I've never been comfortable with.

JG So often in dance, there is this idea that exposure is valuable. But it doesn't pay rent. How have you been able to acknowledge that?

FO It was an awareness. If I'm lending my visuals to anyone's work, I've gotta be really thoughtful about that. Ultimately, those images exist in the realm of my work, however that manifests. There was another situation where [financial] transparency wasn't there. What was said was basically 'This is a reflection of your worth and value in relationship to the project and the company.' This attitude is a tool to keep you down. So now I aim to have transparency. I'm still trying to figure out what that looks like.

JG There is a focus on the individual that happens in capitalist, patriarchal systems. How is that visible in dance and performance?

FO I think that's quite interesting. I quickly moved away from working as a dancer in company settings, and certainly we see them dissolving. We've entered into another kind of territory. I know in Montréal people are talking about a more horizontal way of creating a work. So these other ways of working and generating material are emerging for collaborating and participating in projects that perhaps have funding acquired from one person or under an entity name but with multiple people. It has necessitated new ways of thinking about compensation and monetary value beyond just attribution.

JG Your practice reimagines the intersections of labour and performance. Can you speak a bit about that?

FO It's a solo practice that is mixed with disseminating video work, which eliminates the physical labouring of performance. It has been a release to the structures that exist around performance and has aided in greater visibility. So, inherently, the way that I work has also been a solution to feel better about the economic models that exist around dance and labour. It also facilitates a certain ease with the sharing of the work on a practical level. ■