

AUSTRALIAN
PERFORMING
ARTS MARKET

APAM

The Future of Live Performance

A workshop presented as of the *Eventide Conversations* Series presented by Hong Kong Arts Administrators Association (HKAAA) and the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM)



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Introduction

Throughout 2021, HKAAA and APAM jointly presented *Eventide Conversations*, a virtual cultural exchange between Hong Kong and Australia to explore possibilities for the performing arts sector in the age of social distancing. The series of talks and workshops was held between April and November, opening dialogues, encouraging engagement and facilitating knowledge exchange between arts and cultural leaders in both countries. The series explored new and emerging strategic challenges facing artists and arts organisations in the wake of COVID-19, accessing the best thinking from arts leaders.

The pandemic's disruption, delays, and cancellation of live performance, and the sector's consequent innovations, provide the context for this conversation on the futures of 'live' performance.

Streaming from Australia, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and further locations from around the globe, performers, creatives, and producers gathered to talk, thinking through the questions:

What if artistic and curatorial practices can shape futures that we are yet to imagine?

What if this means that we must redefine our values, principles, and methodologies for how we want to live and work together?

What if the demands of current global conditions are an opportunity to collectively rehearse for a world to come?

This Eventide Workshop asked us to re/consider protocols for, approaches to, and assumptions on the future possibilities of making, engaging, and sharing 'live' performance. The Workshop was facilitated by Low Kee Hong with guest speakers Jeff Khan, Jacob Boehme and Michelle Rocha.

Low Kee Hong – Facilitator

Kee Hong is the Head of Theatre, Performing Arts at West Kowloon Cultural District Authority. He is responsible for formulating the district's artistic direction for Contemporary Performance and Theatre. In this role, he created Hong Kong's first International Workshop Festival of Theatre, an ongoing series on Scenography, a programme on dramaturgy, international residencies with Scotland, New Zealand and Australia, new commissions with the Manchester International Festival and GREC Festival Barcelona. Since 2018, he has been the co-curator of the Hong Kong International Black Box Festival with Hong Kong Rep. In Summer 2022 at Freespace, West Kowloon Cultural District, Silvia Bottiroli (currently Artistic Director of DAS Theatre and former Artistic Director of Santarcangelo Festival) and Low Kee Hong will co-curate a new platform built around Queering – a practice inspired by theories that re-examines and dismantles accepted frameworks of identity, power and privilege – as a political field and as a methodology to transform artistic institutions into the tools that are needed for a democratic participation in designing the cultural and social dimensions of the arts of the present time. The platform proposes many speculative futures and an understanding of curation as one of the attempts we can make to rehearse and trial the world that we would like to live in. He was Artistic Director of the Singapore Arts Festival (2010–2012) and General Manager for the Singapore Biennale (2005–2010).

Jeff Khan

Jeff is Artistic Director & CEO of Performance Space, Sydney. Originally from Western Australia, Jeff is a curator and writer working across performance, dance and the visual arts with a particular interest in experimental projects and interdisciplinary practices. At Performance Space, Jeff oversees the development and delivery of the annual Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art, as well as a range of residencies, curatorial projects, laboratories and artist development programs. Performance Space's programs situate Australian practice in an Asia Pacific context and Jeff has undertaken extensive research across East and South-East Asia in the development of the organisation's work, growing a wide international network of experimental artists and organisations. From 2006–2010 Jeff was Artistic Director of the Next Wave Festival (Melbourne), and he has held roles and undertaken guest curatorships at Gertrude Contemporary (Melbourne), Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (Sydney), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Melbourne), Perth Institute of Contemporary Art and John Curtin Gallery (Perth), and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York). Jeff is a Board Member of Chunky Move (VIC) and also sits on the Multi-Arts Board of Create NSW. He has served on award and assessment panels for organisations and funding bodies including the Taishin Foundation (Taiwan), Australia Council for the Arts, Create NSW, the National Portrait Gallery and Bundanon Trust. As a writer, he has contributed texts and essays to numerous publications, exhibition catalogues, magazines and artists' projects.

Jacob Boehme

Jacob is a Melbourne born and raised artist of the Narangga and Kurna Nations, South Australia. Alumni of the Victorian College of the Arts, (MA in Arts: Playwriting, MA in Arts: Puppetry), Jacob is a multi-disciplinary theatre maker and choreographer, creating work for stage, screen, large-scale public events and festivals. Jacob has led the artistic direction of Tanderrum (Melbourne Festival), Boon Wurrung Ngargee (Yalukit Willam Festival), Thuwathu (Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair), Geelong After Dark and was the founding Creative Director of Yirramboi Festival, recipient of the 2018 Green Room Award for Curatorial Contribution to Contemporary and Experimental Arts. Jacob is the writer and performer of the critically acclaimed solo work *Blood on the Dance Floor*, recipient of the 2017 Green Room Award Best Independent Production. Jacob sits on the Board of Directors for Dance House and Polyglot Theatre and is a member of the Ministry of Culture Taiwan South East Asia Advisory Panel. Jacob is an Australia Council for the Arts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Fellow and the new Director, First Nations Programs at [Carriageworks](#).

Michelle Rocha

Michelle is the Head of Touring at the [Manchester International Festival](#) (United Kingdom), responsible for bringing original new works co-commissioned by MIF internationally. Before this, she was the Producer, Performing Arts (Music and Outdoor) of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (Hong Kong), responsible for producing both audience and artistic development projects. As the Producer of Freespace Happening, West Kowloon's regular outdoor event that has reached over 170,000 audiences, she curated performances, invited partners and initiated cross-genre collaborations. Other projects under her belt include Freespace Fest (2012-2014, which reached around 100,000 audiences), *Compartmentalized* (contemporary x hip hop dance piece that toured to Australia), various New Works Forums for dance and theatre, initiated Hong Kong indie bands' debut performances at the Iceland Airwaves Music Festival and produced Freespace Mixtape Vol.1 and 2, whereby her team match-made musicians from different genres to collaborate on live and recorded performances. Before joining West Kowloon, Michelle was part of the Cultural Olympiad and Torch Relay programming team for the Olympics and Paralympics in 2012 at the Wales Millennium Centre. She has also worked as the Company and Programme Officer of the Hong Kong Dance Company, a theatre educator at Theatre Noir, a freelance producer for the international rock concert promoter Lushington/ Live Nation and for the Hong Kong Museum of Art and Fundraising Manager for the Hong Kong International Jazz Festival. Michelle was a fellow of the Hong Kong Advanced Cultural Leadership Programme and is a Fellow of the Clore Leadership Programme and was seconded to the Islington Mill in Greater Manchester.

Part 1: Guest Speakers

Three guest speakers shared recent approaches, reflecting on how we can, and must, insist on more sustainable and equitable collaboration, moderated by Low Kee Hong, Head of Theatre, Performing Arts, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Hong Kong.

Jeff Khan, CEO and Artistic Director,
Performance Space, Sydney

Context: Performance Space emerged almost 40 years ago to nurture new directions in contemporary practice. Liveworks is its annual two-week festival of experimental and multidisciplinary art practices from the Asia Pacific. Liveworks 2020 started with 75% reduced audience numbers before moving online, the following year Liveworks 2021 was 100% online.

Topic: What are the critical moments in liveness and togetherness when physical gatherings are no longer possible?

The pandemic forced us to reinvent in order to survive. Liveworks is a program that operates in the local global context of the Asia Pacific, so we went digital to hold onto those relationships. In the early stages of COVID-19, there was a lot of hype around the 'pivot' to the digital. We wanted the festival to be a critical investigation of liveness because we are invested in experimental models and ways of doing performance differently, and if experimental art practice didn't harness this moment for re-thinking and re-doing, then when will it?

The past two years have taught me that there is no substitute for the magic of physical bodies sharing a space—but—the digital opens up possibilities that are not available to in-person theatre.

Sue Healey's Live Action Relay (*Liveworks 2020*) livestreamed footage of a performance in the Australian landscape from two drone cameras. This digital method enabled the thrill of seeing both the micro details of a performance and the macro vision of a landscape in the one work. The following year, Healey built on *Live Action Relay* for On View: Panoramic Suite (*Liveworks 2021*), with cinematographer Ken Butti. Created over 8 years and across 3 countries, this work with 27 dancers, live percussion, portraiture and music was an intimate and panoramic vision of diverse cultures, landscapes, and individuals.

In 2021, when the pandemic affected Sydney even more harshly, Liveworks leant into the digital through international commissions, performances, and audiences.

S. J. Norman and Joseph M. Pierce's Knowledge of Wounds: S/kin (2021) brought together First Nations artists and cultural workers from around the world for exploring s/kin: as sacred and scarred, beginning and end, touched and touching. A technology-enabled project like this wouldn't be possible as a face-to-face event with our resources. As international audiences joined, especially from remote locations, this project supported community, opening up equity and access for audiences that could not physically visit.

This revealed a lot to us and has been on my mind: How do we take these lessons of COVID's digital turn into the future? How do we harness the capacity of the digital without letting go of the magic of physical, in-person, liveness? And what can the digital offer us in terms of intimacy—I'm coming to you from my loungeroom—vulnerability and humanity? I'm optimistic about how these experiences will change the way that we work. The pandemic has necessitated a levelling of the playing field, and leads me to further questions regarding how we build infrastructures of care and dissolve the barriers of the past and the present.

**Jacob Boehme, Multidisciplinary Theatre Maker
and Choreographer/Director, First Nations Programs,
Carriageworks, Sydney**

Context: Carriageworks is the largest multi-arts venue in Australia. In late 2021, Carriageworks appointed Boehme to the newly created role of Director, First Nations Programs. The increased time spent online and onscreen due to COVID filtered our connections and affected our mental health, highlighting the need for care and prompting institutions to rethink relationships with artists.

Topic: For First Nations' communities, cosmology, care, and kinship systems are critical for thinking about desirable futures. What conversations are you having in your new role?

I joined Carriageworks at a pivotal moment, as it emerges from COVID and voluntary administration, and as their culture is changing. I've raised with leadership the need to look at our values, visions, and actions away from Western models of branding and purpose.

What happens if we remove the goal of artistic innovation and add a commitment to caring for country? Imagine what impact that value has on systems and protocols in terms of sustainable practice and mitigating climate change. Consider what it would mean in terms of travel, touring programs, and commissions.

What else happens if we embed the value of respecting elders, and how might this change our desire for innovation and our relationships with emerging artists? In Australia, with its Western revisionist model, this is critical. There is a strong focus on youth and innovation in our cultural organisations, but are we overlooking our past? Are we throwing away masters and their knowledge? I wonder what respecting elders could mean in terms of policies and procedures, practices and protocols, and in fostering real reciprocity.

Maree Clark is a Mutti Mutti, Yorta Yorta, BoonWurrung/Wemba Wemba curator and multidisciplinary artist. She provides an embodied example of this thinking, explaining that when she agrees to international opportunities, she does so not as a solo artist but as a member of a family, thinking about relationships that can be fostered through international travel beyond the art. I wonder how to we build this type of thinking and action into institutional conversations.

Jeff Khan has raised the need for long term investment in artists and ideas, nurturing the interactions of the arts and civic society, creating community and place. This is a return to the long-term trading relationships that existed between First Nations communities prior to Modernity and the Western influences of colonial governments.

These questions and conversations have guided my practice. Elders and mavericks have come before me and have been raising these same topics for decades.

Low Kee Hong: Many of us operate in a late-capitalist framework that the pandemic has revealed as unsustainable. Because current systems are not working, there is a shift in values taking place as we make sense of our context. Most explicitly: the timelines, scales and delays of the pandemic have required us to work differently, and these new ways of working are percolating. Moreover, in this new territory, it is important to always look at our history and our lineage to avoid being caught in a loop.

Rachael Wallis: [On the topic of Elders] Hi everyone. This is Janet Guypunura Munyarryun [a Yolngu woman of the Wangnurri clan, North East Arnhem Land; dancer, choreographer, tutor and founding member of Bangarra Dance Theatre].

Jacob: Hello my love. I am so excited to have you here. This is one of our legends, one of our Elders.

Janet Guypunura Munyarryun: It's important to acknowledge Elders, to share our dreams, our culture, our language, this is really important. Love and respect, and enjoy in the sharing and the giving, so people can understand and support each other.

Rachael: We can create new dances and styles every day but holding onto ancestry and lineage is so important for all of us. We all walk this land, and we need to do this together. Acknowledgement is crucial for Australia and for the land to survive.

Michelle Rocha, Head of Touring,
Manchester International Festival (MIF), Manchester

Context: MIF launched in 2007 as an artist-led festival, bringing together diverse international artists for events in traditional and experimental locations.

Topic: What values are you looking at?

My answer is a series of interconnected points:

Let's Create is Arts Council England's 2020–2030 plan. Key to this plan is a shift of emphasis from excellence to promoting continuous improvement. This is a more human and inclusive framing, accepting creatives and organisations for where they are, and promoting movement, rather than mainly supporting the traditional high arts, such as operas and orchestra.

Coming to Manchester has highlighted for me the economic/educational disparity and distinction between the UK's North and South. And in the context of COVID, we've been having discussions about accessibility, including internet access and environmental access, and building inclusive infrastructure.

I believe that large institutions like MIF have a responsibility to experiment, improve, and share results with smaller/independent producers, making it easier and cheaper for the rest of the sector to transform.

I'm interested in attending to the narratives and perspectives that are heard, and amplifying the voices—such as those from the Black Lives Matter movement—that are not. In the UK, arts organisations are attempting to shed their skin, acknowledging the history and impact of British colonialism, and constantly challenging themselves in changing deep-rooted habits. At MIF, working groups on race representation, social class, gender, health, and wellbeing, look at both our creative work and our staff workplace. This is a caring way of working together. Our Board consists of members from the Young People's Forum and People's Forum. And it recruits (with the aim of) being representative of Manchester.

We have a digital team, who use the digital as a platform and a new aesthetics. This redraws the line between platforms, producers, and audiences, allowing producers to connect independently to new audiences.

Part 2: Discussion

Following the above reflections and anecdotes, the speakers joined with audience members to tease out interesting themes. The following summarises some of their speculations.

Collective Thoughts

On Imagining Futures: It's difficult to imagine what the future holds when we haven't known what next week will look like. But artists have always imagined alternative futures, and this has been sustaining over the past two years. Conversations with creatives provide a space for picturing new ways forward. Platforming and amplifying these alternative visions of the future is what the world needs right now. Through the catastrophic disruption of the past two years, arts organisations are finding forms and ways to think about the future as well as creative legacies and lessons from the past.

On Indigenous Legacies: Creatives can look forward but if we don't look back, we are only working in service of our own ego. How will work in the present benefit five generations from now? Indigenous artists are always aware of the responsibility to families; there is an understanding that contemporary actions affect future generations. We hope that the work we do provides an easier pathway for them.

On Anti/Racism: Institutions need to address systemic racism and abuse at the hands of the coloniser. Immigrants have a responsibility to First Nations people. First Nations people and communities of colour need to come together to discuss future possibilities.

On the Digital: The internet and its digital platforms have physical properties. When we meet online it's valuable to remember that the internet is a physical place, and that it passes through many the land of many First Nations people.

On Power: Let's talk about who is at the table, who is at its head, and the redistribution of power. Artists are here to disturb the peace. Hold that part of yourself dear. Take it into institutional roles and say: "This is what we need to do." Give away power. Redistribution can mean: "Here is a tiny bit," but give yourself completely, acknowledging the power structures that already exist, and opening yourself to re/negotiation. Give up space for Indigenous people and people of the diaspora, enable them to contribute new processes, concepts and solutions. Not having minority leaders can be paralysing, and conversations can be difficult, but inviting diverse voices into programming roles is one powerful method for working through historical baggage and invisible power structures to set new agendas.

On Language: How do we articulate the future with pre-determined/pre-existing vocabularies? And when we are in conversation how do we move beyond words into action? We must define before re-defining, name areas for change before talking about change.

On Alternative Structures of Care: Communities and audiences have been forgiving through the pandemic. Performance Space has a history of working closely with queer communities, especially in the [Day for Night](#) program, which is an example of the unlimited potential of people sharing space together. For over two centuries, queer communities have developed alternative structures of care. In turn we can take cues from queer communities, borrowing their tools of survival and visions of utopia for developing alternative structures of care.

On Artist-Led Action: Cultural institutions exist because of artists and not the other way around. Institutions need to learn how to shift. They have anxieties, agendas, and egos, that make these discussions difficult, and they hold onto vestiges of the past.

The current generation of artists and curators are infecting them—from the outside and the inside—for change.

We can talk about vision, but we also need new behaviour. Institutions best understand this through the mechanics of policies and procedures, and independent artists can be instrumental in developing these. They can articulate the things we yearn for and teach institutions to factor them into structures and budgets. MIF21 commissioned South African artist Kemang Wa Lehulere to create *I Love You Too*. 100 in person and digital participants shared stories of love, family and landscape for re/writing as stories and poetry. With love at the centre of the project, MIF allocated a wellbeing budgeted to support participants through a mental health wellbeing officer and sending them self-care parcels of biscuits and tea. This demonstrates a method for operationalising through a budget line that can be repeated in future projects.

On Artist-Led Change: In the arts, we regularly share values that are distinct from non-government services and organisations. When we intersect, there are opportunities for clashing differences but also movement. MIF worked with *Blast Theory* on *Manchester Street Poem*, telling the stories of local rough sleepers. Programs like this affect arts organisations' relationships with government funders and their relationship with rough sleepers. Artists can generate solutions for society.

On Being Human: Organisations are good at removing humanity from humans. Consequently, conversations on topics such as childcare become complex. The reality that institutions don't embrace the whole person, and their family, is a problem and is a priority area for change. Without our whole selves, the arts are mercenary. Creatives are factories and creativity is a product. New models are incorporating budgets into caregiving and shifting responsibility from the individual to the institution. A resource for family friendly residencies is provided by Resartis: [Family friendly residencies](#).

On Relationships: *Our Neighbours* with Tania Brughera (2018), asked Tate Modern audiences to commit to a neighbourly action, valuing reciprocity and long, slow, enduring relationships. As we come out of lockdowns, there is a backlog of scheduled work that highlights to the excesses of artists, curators and producers, and points to the need to slow down. Our community and being together is undervalued because it is not a product that can be packaged and sold. But the shows that we present come and go while relationships endure. We need to lean in and learn more from First Nations colleagues on relationships, kinships, legacy and deep time. Re-defining relationships between creatives and institutions, and rearticulating reciprocity, is central to the future. We need to keep reiterating why we are here, coming together in events like this to wake up and rearticulate our purpose.

Part 3: Participant Responses

Invited performers, creatives, and producers gathered to share their thoughts on circulated provocations and urgent topics.

How could artists take the lead in re-negotiating care between artists and institutions? What are alternative infrastructures of care?

Artists are conduits and intermediaries. Although they don't have resources, funding, or power they can challenge organisations. In turn, organisations need to open themselves up to dialogue and self-reflection. It is the institution's responsibility to lead this process, inviting and centring artists in radical shifts, inventiveness, new language for the future, dismantled systems, clarity around meaning and collective action.

There is an opportunity to see where artists' skills are 'essential,' a phrase that was so important in Australia's lockdown. As artists moved into new non-creative roles (or 'radical intensive residencies,') stepping stones for reimagining the future became clear. One is trusting creatives to enter new scenarios where they might be useful, but not yet knowing how that would be. This is a key artistic skill that is not harnessed as often as it should be.

Artists should be talking about processes that are co-led and co-written: nothing for me without me. That is easy language but difficult in practice. Putting ourselves in new, complex and unknown places requires leaving status behind for radical, necessary, re/beginnings and figuring out what we have to offer. This is about being brave enough to enter a new situation, sharing the risk equally, and envisioning something amazing. We need both individual actions and collective reorientation.

How can we dissolve the binary between 'in real life' and 'digital' performance, to create new models for the future?

Music/sound has been left out of this conversation. They have been navigating the intersections of live vs digital for years. We need to look to other industries and histories rather than re/inventing new models.

What are the ways that concepts of kinship might be built into the development and presentation of performance, as well as in international relationship-building?

Artistic processes can be about kinship, care and imaginary futures. How do we explore this and open this to community, away from the models of production? Vice versa, if we move away from production, how can we have professional alliances of care and for resilience?

Matt Hsu shared his *Obscure Orchestra*: three videos of three visions of himself playing a reinterpretation of *Happy Birthday*. This work transcends high brow and low brow, utilising a universally joyous tune to communicate without and beyond language.

What role does learning from the past play in shaping your practice? What legacy / impact do you want your practice to have in the long term?

Experimenting with tradition: breaking boundaries, discovering physical limitations, and developing new forms, is a way of bridging the past and the present. Being creative and innovative in the present and the future, doing things that have never been done before, with a traditional instrument, medium or genre can also be rooted in a responsibility to the past.

Legacy requests that we restructure our practice to work deeper rather than faster. As lockdowns lift, we are all being rushed into the rhythms of capitalism, but we can resist.

What does reciprocity with audiences and communities ideally look like when presenting performance? How can artists and institutions collaborate to achieve this?

Pragmatically, the travel restrictions of COVID-19 prompted institutions to re-focus and invest in local creatives and local audiences.

Speculatively, can we harness 'Starbucks' thinking, co-opting neo-liberal tactics to deeply familiarise audiences with theatre and harnessing the same audience numbers as movies and Netflix?

Philosophically, thinking through this question conjures ideas of exchange, privilege, power, and (mutual) benefits and prompts the further question: is reciprocity possible in performance? This question might also be about economics and that is a trap. In the recent publication, *The New Platform Papers vol 1, What Future for the Arts in a Post-Pandemic World?* the authors argue that the application of market economics to sectors that are fundamentally not economic has burnt them. This stings. They note how art is positioned as a luxury, only funded when we have money, but this should be otherwise. Another trap that we fall into is thinking of artistic expression as a fundamental human right yet forgetting that access to culture should more fervently be protected.

Practices engaged in reciprocity are not necessarily quick or glamorous, however by moving away from economic measures the arts can find new ways of valuing and measuring, such as aesthetic enrichment and cultural mediation. This type of social impact modelling is already happening. Embedding social impact in art is possible, and speaks to and with diverse audiences.

How are you rethinking 'excellence' and 'continuous improvement' in your practice?

The language of this question is a sticking point and raises the crucial question of how excellence is defined. For some, excellence is presenting in prestigious venues but for others it's about knowledge sharing. Every artist and artform is different. In turn, measures need to be different.

In colonised countries, we have fundamental problems with language. Although the mental pivot intended here is positive how do we really change the language to value different perspectives? In Ruha Benjamin's *Race after Technology*, the author argues that seemingly progressive technological innovations perpetuate existing inequities. There's a potential parallel here.

Excellence can also change within the one project, depending on one's role and perspective. An administrator is interested in marketing, ticketing and evaluations; performers are focused on their craft; and a funder is interested in budgets and outcomes. Although the shift from excellence to continuous improvement is valuable, the two are not necessarily in conflict: the latter leads to the first. Ultimately, if we prioritise excellence for audiences then everything else only has to be done well.

Topics of Urgency: Budgets, Care, Collaboration, Communication, Community, Craft, Creativity, Dialogue, Interconnectivity, Joy, Kinship, Leadership, Learning, Lineage, Listening, Nuance, Post-COVID, Production, Relationships, Research, Time

Workshop Participants

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