

Legal Name

Institute of Contemporary Art

Project Title

To host choreographer Trajal Harrell at The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (ICA) to imagine and explore new approaches to demand building for contemporary dance

DDCF Grant Number

2013243

Project Progress and Successes

Choreographer Trajal Harrell was the artist-in-residence at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (ICA) through the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Building Demand for the Arts program. Together with the artist, the ICA investigated transferring strategies the ICA uses to build demand for contemporary visual art to building demand for contemporary dance. Over the course of four visits/thirty days, Harrell met with multiple constituencies in the museum including a core team of ICA staff representing the curatorial, marketing, performance, and education departments; additional staff members from those and other departments (such as the Director, development staff, and the entire education department); and the Performing Arts Committee of the Board of Trustees. Additionally, meetings were held with members of the local dance community and a group of local performance art practitioners.

Harrell also offered pre-show talks before performances by dance group Kyle Abraham/Abraham.In.Motion; met with a group of dance subscribers; and performed a short dance in the ICA's galleries during the exhibition "Fiber: Sculpture 1960-present" to explore the different ways audiences engage with art in a gallery setting. A group of approximately 75 of the gallery visitors who saw this performance was sent a follow-up survey. The project concluded with a pair of two-hour focus group discussions with ICA members who have visited the museum in the past year, but had never attended a dance performance at the ICA. The objective of these sessions was twofold: to understand the barriers members experience in deciding to attend a contemporary dance performance and to understand what the ICA could do to help introduce this audience to contemporary dance.

The biggest success of the project is the enthusiasm it has created among the staff and Performing Arts Committee. The ICA, with a 79-year history of presenting contemporary visual art but only a nine-year history of presenting contemporary dance has a well-honed infrastructure for building demand for the visual arts. But, while curatorial, education, and marketing staff are curious about contemporary dance, they do not have very deep knowledge of or experiences with it. Harrell generated excitement about their engagement with dance and staff commented that he brought new levels of awareness, comfort, and urgency about dance that they believe was needed at the internal level across all departments. Staff also gained a more nuanced understanding of ways to talk about dance and strategies to incorporate into the ICA's larger program for diverse audiences.

From the survey of people who attended the in-gallery performance, the ICA gained some interesting insights: 50% of the people who saw the performance did not know there was a performance until they arrived in the galleries; 80% of respondents said the performance enhanced their experience; and 80% would like to see more dance in the galleries. In addition, 50% had never seen a performance in the ICA's theater, and 30% did not even know the ICA had a theater. This further demonstrated the need to raise awareness about dance programming and the value it can bring to a museum visitor's experience.

The focus groups also suggest, as hoped for, that the ICA's membership is open to contemporary art and willing to be challenged by it; in fact, one of the things they look to the ICA for is to see something new and unexpected.

Finally, Harrell felt surprised by the number of audience members who came to the pre-show talks and their hunger to learn more about dance suggesting that Boston has a well-educated audience (which is confirmed by the ICA's visitor surveys). In fact, Harrell left the residency believing that the ICA is, in fact, building demand for dance in Boston.

Due in part to these observations and interactions, the ICA has begun to work more collaboratively across departments to ensure that dance is not exclusively presented in the theater. Activities have already included: performing arts staff co-curating an exhibition that has included performance from its conceptual stage; a choreographer participating in an Artist Voice lecture alongside a visual artist whose work is currently on exhibit in the galleries; and increasing the visibility of upcoming performance programs at the museum (e.g. screens outside the theater) to make gallery visitors more aware of that component of the ICA's programming.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

The ICA faced no major challenges in implementing its project, which was an exploration grant. However, while the meetings, surveys, and focus groups suggested numerous ways to use education, marketing, and curatorial strategies to build demand for dance, the same data and learnings suggested very real challenges and obstacles to moving gallery attendees to the theater, some of which the ICA had anticipated and others it had not.

1. Perhaps most significantly, gallery visitors are self-directive, deciding which works of art to see and how much time to spend with each one. In the focus groups, while it was clear that they embrace the "disturbances" of contemporary art and they do not always expect to like all of the work they see, in the galleries they also feel a freedom to move and to choose their level of engagement. This presents a challenge for dance presented in the theater at the ICA, in which audiences are expected to spend the entire length of the show engaging with the work. Participants described performances as structured (in contrast to the spontaneity and flexibility of the galleries) and requiring a greater commitment of time and financial resources.

2. Conversations with young artists and young choreographers (roughly 25--35 individuals) also highlighted the difficulty of using visual arts strategies to increase demand for dance, namely a distinct difference in the education of the practitioners of the two disciplines. Visual art students are asked from day one to create original work whereas dancers learn by dancing the work of others in what is more of an apprenticeship program. Likewise, because of "crits," visual arts students are expected to be well read and knowledgeable about the work of other artists and spend a great deal of time visiting galleries and reading critical theory. Choreographers in the ICA's/Harrell's conversations were much less

knowledgeable about dance history, performance art, and critical theory. Visual arts audiences expect and rely upon knowledge of history and criticism and that does not currently drive dance in Boston.

Additional research among more members/constituencies would also enrich the focus group data.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

While there are challenges to moving visual art audiences into the theater, they are not insurmountable (and member focus groups suggest that if convinced to attend dance, members might be ambassadors for dance as they are for the ICA more broadly). This exploration phase and the ICA's experiences and conversations with Harrell suggested some important ways forward. In particular, Harrell emphasized that the ICA (and other museums) might first focus on "knowledge production and value production" for contemporary dance, as opposed to demand, better contextualizing it in relationship to visual art, providing more resources for staff and audiences, and better demonstrating parity with visual art within the institution. Three ways to do this, and to address some of the concerns expressed by members, include:

1) Thinking about dance presentations more in the way museums think about exhibitions. For instance:

- Can we give our audience the opportunity to see more than one work by a choreographer on a more regular basis?
- Can we provide opportunity to see the same work on more than one occasion?
- Can we show more dance work in the galleries to allow choice regarding engagement level?
- Can we provide better ongoing support for marketing and education staff so that we can take advantage of their visual art expertise to promote and interpret contemporary dance?

2) Developing, as Harrell suggested, a "tool box" of materials created for an "exhibition" of dance/choreography that could build knowledge of audience and staff alike and live beyond a single iteration of a performance. (NOTE: "Exhibition" in this formulation might mean the presentation of a group of related works over a few months.) The tool box might include:

- A series of public talks;
 - Public conversations exploring an expanded sense of performance;
 - Talks by artists;
 - In-gallery performances;
 - Catalogues;
 - Openings;
 - Docent and Visitor Assistant training sessions for dance;
 - Marketing strategies that better raise awareness of performance programming, are more on par with those for visual art, and allow for knowledgeable selection of performances;
- and
- Collecting dance as museums do works of visual art.

3) Adding, as focus group participants suggested, subscription packages specifically for performances and post-show events in which audiences are able to mingle and share thoughts about the performance with one another, performers, choreographers, and/or ICA staff. The ICA already offers a service like this for members of the dance community, with great success.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Y - David Henry, Director of Performing and Media Arts, dhenry@icaboston.org