ARTEL - A Practical Guide for Emergent Structure Exchanges

In 2013 ARTEL presented Animal Cracker Conspiracy’s performance of The Collector at our venue in Los Angeles. Both companies knew quite instantly that we wanted to find a way to collaborate: on something, somewhere, sometime. It took a while (though not forever) for us to find that project. Both companies invest years of research, training and development into a single production. ACC was developing a new piece Paper Cities at the La Jolla Playhouse and ARTEL was transforming its venue into a performance incubation hub while creating the next iteration of its work-in-process The Kharmful Charms of Daniil Kharns. But potential grants nudged both companies towards a productive conversation around themes and source materials for a collaboration. In so doing, we stumbled upon a story fantastic enough to allow for our multiple interests to find satiation and classic enough to withstand a rigorous tussle: Antony Pogorelsky’s The Black Hen.

While we had a few conversations around our aesthetics and processes, alongside the story of The Black Hen, which were stimulating and inspiring, we’d never practically worked together. This NET/TEN travel grant allowed us to come together for a few days to begin the process of exchanging the “starting points” of how we individually approach a new project.

What is an Emergent Structures Exchange?

We knew going into this exchange that both of our organizations were on the brink of some radical growth. Both companies also were digging deeper into their own processes: ways of working that relied on readiness, serendipity, chance and vulnerability. In discussing the exchange, we knew we wanted to see how much we could allow these processes to influence our time together and what we might share with each other. Rather than come to the exchange with a prepared set of exercises or “starting points” that we already knew worked, we wanted to explore the starting point of our work itself: emergence. So we set ourselves the task of remaining in process and allowing the structure for the exchange to emerge as time went along.

Over the course of the two and a half days, we cooked, ate, drove (it was in LA afterall), wrote, drew, shared psychophysical ensemble training and puppet manipulation techniques, created short found object performances and had what seemed a consistent conversation that continually curved back on itself. While broad ranging, this conversation wove together our artistic processes, our administrative processes, our mentoring and community-building processes, and of course the proposed project of Our Black Hen. We captured as much of the exchange as we could on big pieces of butcher block paper, audio recordings and video recordings but what remained the most lasting and validating aspect of the experience was how fluidly we were able to transition from one activity to another. Being able to do this with other artists you have never practically worked with was a revelation of the ways in which we hoped we could work. It was infinitely encouraging for both companies, not only for the prospects of our proposed collaborative project, but as affirmation of the many years of commitment to a specific process of performance making.

What follows is a rough stab at a Practical Guide for creating your own Emergent Structures Exchange. It’s perhaps better seen as set of tips that might provoke you to organize, or at least think about, your next exchange from a fresh perspective.

Disclaimer: This Practical Guide may be more applicable for mature artists and/or artistic directors of a company.
Provocations for a Practical Guide

A Retreat not a Workshop

Think of your exchange as a retreat and make it one.

Don’t let other pressures (day jobs, admin, socializing, community outings) take precedence. Sometimes this is easier said than done. Be sure in planning that you can actually “retreat” for the time you have planned. Of course, be open to the possibility that a “pressure” might be an emergent opportunity for the exchange to develop in a surprising direction. Perhaps a community building event suddenly happens (a performance, art show, etc) during your planned exchange that provides an opportunity for you to see other work and discuss your experiences. This can then lead to a deeper shared understanding of aesthetics and dramaturgical necessities for your own collaboration.

Give yourself a set number of days rather than a clearly delineated number of hours.

In so doing, we worked longer and more fluidly than if we had set a certain number of hours aside for the “exchange”, a certain number for “meals”, a certain number for “entertainment or personal time”, etc.

Have a Flexible Space.

Whenever possible, hold the exchange in a space or spaces where you can be extremely flexible with hours. We were very lucky to have Paloma Street Studios offer us almost unlimited access to one of their rooms which meant we could work in the studio whenever we chose. Equally we had access to a space nearer our housing that allowed for some less-intensive studio work as well when the commute to Paloma Street seemed counterproductive. This is of course a luxury in the real estate market today, but one that only occurred because of years of hard entrepreneurship, cultivation of relationships and remaining open to seizing the emergent when it appeared.

Trust What Works

Shared Space works.

Try to all be in the same space for as much of the exchange as possible. House each other in the same building(s) so that travel times and distance don’t impede.

Meals work.

You can discover a lot of what you need around preparing and sharing a meal. How we make meals is a collaboration of taste, activity, and spirit. Is it a joyous and easy process or one rife with tension and decision? Equally, the moments of sharing a meal allow for broad ranging associative discussion that can be guided to swirl around the deeper reason of the exchange.

Rest works.

The pressure of running artistic companies means that when you finally allow a moment of retreat you often need a healthy decompression. Allowing for that can greatly increase the depth of the exchange. Similar to “set number of days rather than set number of hours”, if you are intent to get to the studio by 10am you might not have as clear-headed and revelatory exchange as you could if you decided that studio-time can be scrapped for a hearty meal and strong carafe of coffee.

The Relationships are What Count, Not the Production

Meeting production goals is important, yes, but it’s from the relationships that the innovative and uniquely creative aspects of the production will arise. Focusing on the
bonds and the shared experience is the lasting impact of the exchange and will fuel the eventual production and your own company’s mission far longer than achieving immediate rehearsal and production goals.

You’re Already Doing the Work
Life, Art & Work are all a connected practice. It might seem commonplace for artists to talk about a holistic, integrated, interconnectedness to our lives but the reality we inhabit is one of supercapitalist fragmentation. It’s therefore easy to wake up and think “Right, we’ve got to get to work” or to be in the middle of an inspired conversation and think, “Yes, but we’ve really got to get to work”. The emergent structure allows you to create distance, to pause, each time your brain fires this “must get to work” response. Breath. Evaluate. Are you already working? If you set your intentions correctly, most likely you are. This rule of thumb is also a great one because it gives permission for other members of the exchange to remind those who state “let’s get to work” of the agreement, and for the more stubborn of participants to hear it without unnecessary judgment.

Create a Mythology of the Exchange
Create a mythology of the relationship/exchange by taking some risks, finding unexpected opportunities to do something outside the realm of the agreed norm. This might be something that scares everyone just a little bit or it might be some wonderful prank, but no matter what it must be seen by everyone as a gift, something the whole group can bond over by feeling like they had a choice in doing it/making it happen.

Don’t Let it be Too Big Until it’s Ready
20 people is a difficult retreat. 7 people is a difficult retreat. 4 was ideal. From experience we know that if a large group is involved you need to take time inducting them into the principles of the retreat. Artistic directors will also run the risk of being split in focus, needing to manage more relationships carefully and therefore possibly lose sight of what’s emerging in the exchange itself. An Emergent Structures Exchange requires everyone involved to be mature enough to contribute to the give and take of each activity, to be able to flow with seeming compromise, multilayered conversation, surprising action & disciplined rest.