val smith was the Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance 2016 (see pages 16–17 to read about val’s project ‘This Cloud Is’). In this article val talks to DANZ Chief Executive Anton Carter.

val smith is a white genderqueer choreographic artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau, whose performance work rethinks the political body through perceptual experiments that challenge the conventions of spectatorship. Queer, feminist and post structuralist theories underpin choreographic tests in a fluid relationship to collaboration, somatic pedagogies and site-oriented practice.

How would you describe the meaning behind being a ‘community dance art activist’?

This question brings into play thoughts about how we label and name ourselves as dancers and artists. Describing what you do as an artist is a process that shifts over time in response to different contexts and situations. These shifting descriptions reply to administrative tasks that are necessary, or at least required of us as artists, such as the scripting of an ‘artist bio’. Lately I’ve been calling myself ‘choreographic artist’ or ‘artist’ depending on who I’m talking to and what I want to emphasise in my practice. Perhaps tomorrow I’ll call myself ‘common artist’, and see what comes of that.

So, I cannot remember in what context or how long ago I called myself a ‘community dance art activist’, but I imagine at the time I wanted to emphasise a connection between politics and community building in relation to my practice. I was likely thinking about how somatic or improvisational dance practices emphasise a social exchange of knowledge through sensing, connection, empathy and kinaesthetic intelligence, and how these processes can activate a sense of belonging or community.

What was the inspiration to make you want to become a ‘community dance art activist’?

Words hold power; they can support some meanings and cut others down. In a re-conceptualisation of our practices, the words we use offer a real potential for change. For example, as we reconsider ‘dance’ and the values we attribute to this term, we can contract or expand understandings around what is it that we do as ‘dancers’, and what might be possible in the field of choreography into the future.

In your opinion, what are some things that could make a difference for the New Zealand dance scene?

I am currently interested in questioning ‘success’ and ‘career’ in relation to the values that underpin the contemporary dance scene in Aotearoa. DANZ recently offered, in partnership with Tempo Dance Festival, How to Hustle: a new platform to help realise a career in the dance industry. I’d like to ask that you stop reading for a moment here, and think about the implications of this.

Ok, so what now? Can you reimagine what ‘success’ and ‘career’ might mean outside of an industry that values ‘hustling’? Can we encourage diverse visions for a ‘successful career in dance’ that reflect our individual interests in the field and principles that we like to work by?
In conversation with Val Smith

What are the things that interest you most with contact improvisation? Why does it attract you?

From a young age, I was fixated on fairness. I studied feminist theory when I first left high school, and continue to be inspired by philosophies that stem from feelings of oppression or discrimination (or maybe love!), with a particular interest in thinking about conditions for minority genders and sexualities. These passionate feelings interweave through social politics that motivate me to do things: queer choreography, improvisation, site-oriented practices, somatic research, and other socially focused practices.

Contact Improvisation presents, in my opinion, one interesting approach to exploring politics (from a Western perspective), and in particular it foregrounds the impossibility of equality. If you try right now to find a point of balance that feels equal through physical contact and weight sharing with another body (or even a chair), you’ll see that reaching for equivalence is precarious and ambiguous. In my observations of how Contact Improvisation manifests in diverse communities around the world, as a jam form, or pedagogical practice, I see contradictions to liberalism’s egalitarian dream of impartiality, freedom or equality. I see systems of inequity – racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism – playing out explicitly and implicitly, despite propositions that the practice liberates us from these dynamics. Yet, if you look into the movement and meditation techniques that inspired the development of Contact Improvisation by Steve Paxton and others in the late 1960s and 70s, (predominantly appropriated and adapted from Eastern practices), you will see a deep investment into breaking down hierarchies of power and inequity in dance.

I also see and feel a swirling of vibrant potentiality alive inside the practice. Contact Improvisation provides an entry point to thinking through a hierarchy of the body, a hierarchy of attention, and a pecking order innate to many other dance cultures which evaluate bodies, abilities and skills. The practices of listening, weight sharing, counterbalance, and communication through touch, can open up our minds and bodies to experimental ways of relating to ourselves, each other and the environment that we exist in, moment to moment. I find this mode of relationality endlessly fascinating. However, I also acknowledge the embedded white privilege and Western assumptions of Contact Improvisation, as a mode of relationality, and see how it is easier for white dance practitioners to access this practice.

How do you develop or engage an audience in work that can be abstract or work that is not meant to be pure entertainment?

I attempt to make work that is anti-entertainment, stresses the tangible and material, yet also frames the unseen and unfathomable. I side-step the idea of ‘audience’, since this
conception seems to uphold certain expectations of watching performers passively from a distance. Rather, I explore ways to invite performance attendees into an experience, often one that is intimate and embodied. My interest is in performance work that encourages attendees to think for themselves, make decisions about how they orient themselves in a performance space, and assert for themselves how and where they place their attention. My work insists on self-responsibility and self-regulation. This is probably a long-term project, but there are many artists internationally contributing to a shift away from the conventions of spectatorship, so I feel excited to be part of this movement.

In recent performance works for the Passionate Instincts group exhibition at Physics Room in Ōtautahi, I test anonymous intimacies through a hole that smashed through the gallery wall, and an invitation to join hands in a protest that hides and celebrates queer affection.

What kind of work are you interested in? What sort of work gets you excited?

I am alert to queer artists who are making work with highly intimate or intuitive methods of engagement, or participatory modes that touch into empathic or proprioceptive modes of relating. I like performance that allows us to connect very deeply or intensely with each other, or touch into aspects of ourselves that we can only feel or sense in the quietest moments together (or alone).

In a recent study, I test Homo-shamanism through queer embodiment practices to revisit proprioceptive experiences of presence and absence. Homo-shamanism was developed through the Caroline Plummer Fellowship, and was also presented as a performance lecture for Performance of the Real Symposium, University of Otago, and the Undisciplining Dance Symposium, University of Auckland.

Lastly... what is your hope for contemporary dance in New Zealand?

An increase of interest in: failure, boredom, disappointment, fakery, plants.

A decrease of interest in: virtuosity, things that look pretty, dance companies, sincerity, striving. ■