

**Legal Name**

On the Boards

**Project Title**

To host Michelle Ellsworth at On the Boards to imagine and explore new approaches to demand building for dance

**DDCF Grant Number**

2013244

**Project Progress and Successes**

Over the past year, artists Michelle Ellsworth (dance department chair at University of Colorado Boulder and lead artist for this project) and Claudia La Rocco (guest lecturer at many universities and dance critic for The New York Times and ArtForum) worked closely with On the Boards (OtB) to research audience building opportunities through our OntheBoards.tv project. Specifically, we focused on the potential of undergraduate and graduate level students to engage with performance using OntheBoards.tv films. This research confirmed for us that in order to better share these works with students we must first add college-level curriculum options to OntheBoards.tv. This artist-led process has been invaluable to OtB. By following Ellsworth's lead OtB has been able to think differently about engaging students through potential curriculum on OntheBoards.tv and growing future audiences and art supporters by providing context for this work. Throughout this grant, "we" and "our" refer to the artists and the organization collectively.

Currently, OntheBoards.tv serves thousands of students through 86 universities in the US, Europe and Australia. Academic Subscriptions make up only 35% of total subscriptions sold but academic views (students and professors) make up 82% of all subscription views. For the past five years we have seen an average annual increase of 89% in use by our university audiences. Based on this growth, we anticipate that between 2017 and 2018, OntheBoards.tv student and university audiences will surpass OtB's live audience numbers, growing our ability to reach global audiences with our filmed performances. We believe adding curricula content alongside new and existing films will only increase this rate of use as the site becomes even more critical for university classrooms. Those surveyed through this project expressed enthusiasm for new and readily available curricula alongside performance films, and in many cases are eagerly awaiting content we produce. This project has the potential to revolutionize the way contemporary performance is taught in universities internationally. By using current practice to train new artists and audiences, it also has wide implications for future audiences and supporters in the contemporary performance field.

Ellsworth noted, "It was powerful to see the relationship and potential relationship of artists, presenters, professors, administrators, and students. The interest from all parties in developing a more complete and supported conversation/curriculum around contemporary dance was exciting."

By allowing Ellsworth and La Rocco to lead us through conversations with working scholars

and artists about their real life interests and needs, we believe OtB is able to create a fundamentally different and more valuable product than the organization could have made alone.

Ellsworth spent 30 days in Seattle over the past year working closely with OtB staff and La Rocco. While here, Ellsworth reviewed the current catalogue of OntheBoards.tv films, led a convening of university scholars in November about curricula building, and worked with OtB staff to develop potential curricula opportunities with existing and upcoming performance films. Ellsworth also spoke in-depth with current OntheBoards.tv artists about their work and possible involvement in curricula development for OntheBoards.tv. To gain an in-depth understanding of our culture and community she attended OtB staff meetings, annual Board retreat, and non-performance events the organization has designed to connect audience members to one another. La Rocco visited Seattle three times over the past year (July, August, November) to work closely with Ellsworth throughout the project.

In addition to their time in Seattle, Ellsworth and La Rocco spent a total of eight days in New York City and Tallahassee (FL) talking with dance administrators and OntheBoards.tv artists for this project; Ellsworth additionally spent a day discussing high level OntheBoards.tv dance curricula with university department heads in Salt Lake City (UT).

Through the initial phase of this research we successfully engaged five constituencies. With each group we focused our conversations on what might best suit their needs. These conversations included:

1) Future artists, audiences, and art supporters - University Students. We engaged students through surveys which comprehensively included undergraduate dance and non-dance majors and graduate students in contemporary dance. We spoke with and surveyed students among OntheBoards.tv users at Florida State University, University of Colorado Boulder, Arizona State University, Stanford University, University of Texas at Austin, and Pikes Peak Community College about the impact viewing OntheBoards.tv (and/or other dance video) had on their appreciation and understanding of contemporary dance performance, and what they wanted and/or needed in terms of additional information about the viewed work.

2) Working artists, current audiences, and art supporters - OntheBoards.tv Artists. We interviewed artists who currently have work featured on OntheBoards.tv about building curricular materials around their work. We spoke with dance artists Dayna Hanson, Zoe Scofield, Tere O'Connor, and Beth Gill about their work on the site and what supplemental materials they felt would be valuable for students, and asked theater artist Kristin Kosmas the same set of questions with an eye toward expanding the project beyond dance in the future. We additionally discussed each artists' potential involvement in developing material to accompany their work. In particular, Kosmas followed up with us shortly after our conversations, eager to get access to the list of questions we asked (see below) to both think more deeply about her work in this way and to also help frame future assignments using OntheBoards.tv films for higher-education classes she teaches. Generally, we felt each piece on OntheBoards.tv would have different possibilities for curricular offerings, and that it would be important to provide a balance between artist-generated material and that made by outside scholars and critics. Throughout this work, it was exciting to see the mutual benefit adding curricula to the site has for artists, educators, and students and the possibility to grow audiences among these constituencies; the more programs using OntheBoards.tv with greater context, the more artists are able to build informed audiences and train future artists as well.

- Specifically illuminating questions Ellsworth and La Rocco asked artists included:
- What do/could viewers/students need to know or consider to best understand your work?
- What did you learn from this work?
- Who do you consider your artistic/aesthetic ancestors?
- What was the genius of this work?
- What were the significant collaborations in the creation of this work?
- Is there anything structural about the work that should be considered?
- Anything political, philosophical, socio-economic, or historical that would be helpful for viewers to know?
- Would you want extra resources available before or after viewing your work?
- Did you have any "goals" with this work? If yes, what?
- Do you have any thoughts on or interest in creating an "art assignment" to accompany your film -- something that would give viewers an embodied/creative interface with the work?
- Is there a field of study outside of dance that you feel your work is connected to (such as Ethnic Studies, Art and Art History, Gender Studies, U.S. History, or Physics)?

3) Current educators, audiences, artists and supporters - University Dance Scholars. We talked with university dance scholars regarding future collaboration in creating curricula for OntheBoards.tv. During OtB's November 2014 presentation of Tere O'Connor's "BLEED" university professors and scholars met to discuss OntheBoards.tv and how it can function and collaborate with universities. The convening was led by La Rocco and Ellsworth. Attendees included instructors of introductory, advanced, and graduate level courses as we hope to develop material to appeal to students at various levels of study. Scholars/professors included Janice Ross (Stanford University), Harmony Bench (Ohio State University), Thomas DeFrantz (Duke University), Onye Ozuzu (Columbia College Chicago), Renée Archibald (Whitman College), Kitty Daniels (Cornish College of the Arts), Rashaun Mitchell (New York University), Rebecca Rossen (University of Texas Austin), Jennifer Salk (University of Washington), and Tonya Lockyer (Cornish College of the Arts); as well as OtB staff Lane Czaplinski and Monique Courcy. A list of potential resources was developed through this research, including:

- Diverse readings of each dance/choreographer
- Diverse reviews of each dance/choreographer
- Contextualizing essays/artworks on related topic(s)
- Choreographer interviews
- Choreographer research materials, artifacts, photographs, etc.
- Timeline for creation of work
- Sociopolitical context during the creation period
- Suggested readings, bibliography, etc. (generated by artists and us)
- Collaborator interviews
- Anatomy of a scene, deleted scenes, etc.
- Samples of past works, both by the artist and the artist's influences
- Artist-generated creative projects

Additionally, Ellsworth had valuable conversations with the Heads of the Dance Departments at the 2014 Conference of Dance Administrators in Salt Lake City, and at Ohio State University, Wesleyan University, Arizona State University, University of Utah, Columbia College, State University of New York Brockport, University of Maryland, University of Michigan, Temple University, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Texas Austin, University of Hawaii, State University of New York Purchase, California State University Long Beach).

4) Current audiences, supporters and advocates - Contemporary Dance Presenters. Peers from the contemporary performance presentation field met at OtB for a conversation led by Ellsworth and La Rocco about potential collaborations between OntheBoards.tv and their organizations along with what presenters could do to help create and collect supplemental materials. By partnering with presenters as we develop this project we are able to increase our reach and the reach of the field geographically. The meeting was attended by Brian Rogers (The Chocolate Factory, curator), Sixto Wagan (University of Houston, director of the Center for Arts Leadership), Erin Boberg Doughton (Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, curator), George Lugg (Show Box Los Angeles, co-director), and OtB staff Lane Czaplinski, Sarah Wilke, and Monique Courcy.

5) Current presenters, supporters, advocates and audiences - OtB Staff and Board. Stakeholders at OtB also met to solidify ideas for the project, and to create a clear framework based in the organization's artistic values and aesthetics for the way OntheBoards.tv films and accompanying curricula are presented with an eye toward building audiences. Ellsworth attended OtB's annual Board retreat (also attended by the majority of OtB's staff) to discuss these issues with this constituency in more detail.

As a direct result of this work, next year the University of Colorado will offer an online class taught by Claudia La Rocco that uses OntheBoards.tv to teach a non-major class about how to read contemporary dance performance, and we are in conversation with the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) to create short creative process videos and make "anatomy of a scene"-type videos with artists after a work is complete. MANCC already has creative process footage of many OntheBoards.tv artists as well as staff with skills and interest to help execute these ideas.

An additional result of this work is that Lea Marshall at Virginia Commonwealth University reached out to OntheBoards.tv after her conversation with Ellsworth, and is seeking funding for OntheBoards.tv crew and staff to travel and film an upcoming performance.

Overall, OtB learned much from letting Ellsworth and La Rocco lead this process. While OtB has contacts within the constituencies outlined above, as artists and professors both women have an insider understanding of and communication style with university scholars, students, and artists. Additionally artists ask different questions than presenters would, and including questions coming from peers changes the power dynamic from presenter:artist to artist:artist. It was valuable for OtB and OntheBoards.tv to have access to inside perspectives as we begin this work.

We are looking forward to applying for DDCF's Building Demand Implementation program to build the curricula researched through this project and expand our audiences for OntheBoards.tv and live performances throughout the field.

### **Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project**

An ongoing challenge we face in this project is trying to figure out how to narrow our focus of who to document for OntheBoards.tv specifically for university curricula. This is a challenge both because of the amount of work being produced and because of the production and touring schedules of venues and artists and their availability for filming as well as the time it will take to develop curricula surrounding their pieces online.

Funding continues to be a challenge for OntheBoards.tv as well. OtB is actively and

aggressively continuing to pursue support for this project and OntheBoards.tv as a whole.

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

We found valuable insight from this project through seeing the relationships and potential relationships this work could form between artists, presenters, professors, administrators, and students. All parties had an interest in developing a more comprehensive, supportive curriculum around contemporary dance. Adding curricula to OntheBoards.tv will enable professors with limited backgrounds or experience with the genre to teach work outside of the old school canon of dance videos; it will also potentially bridge departments, making dance relevant in interdisciplinary arts departments as well as public practice curricula. It is additionally a way to teach a performance-based class online.

We further learned that the way the work is framed for students is important, and that student choreographers' exposure to contemporary work will contribute to both building audiences and evolving the form. Exposing students to choreographers working today has the potential to give living choreographers the same realm of influence over the genre historically held by Paul Taylor, Alvin Ailey, and Martha Graham; it elevates work that is being created now and gives students the ability to respond to current practice. Simultaneously, providing online supplemental material for students can make the work more relevant and easier to understand, provoking deeper engagement and emotional response.

Finally, we discovered that there is a great deal of dance documentation being collected around the country. There is also a wealth of documentation of important dance artists existing in pre-internet formats on shelves and in boxes; there is a need to get these recordings digitized. Currently, no system exists that links all of this work together. We believe OntheBoards.tv is a potential home for this documentation.

Current arts students have a huge potential to become future artists, audiences, and arts supporters. The potential also exists for a non-arts student to become invested in performance through this project because art becomes more accessible when context is readily available. As we start to build curricula for OntheBoards.tv we will increase our ability to serve artists, universities, and the field; there is great potential to increase global audiences for contemporary performance through this work.

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

OntheBoards.tv

**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).

Please contact Monique Courcy at OtB, 206-217-9886 or [monique@ontheboards.org](mailto:monique@ontheboards.org).