

COOL

FLAME

FLAME

COOL

We acknowledge the Dharug people who are the traditional owners of the Land on which Blacktown Arts and the participating collectives are based. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and thank them for their Custodianship of this Land. We recognise that culture and collective practice have thrived here since time immemorial. This always was and always will be Dharug Nura.

CONSTELLATIONS

Constellations

An exhibition featuring:
The Adorned Collective, Arab Theatre Studio, Dance Makers Collective,
The Finishing School, opnsrc.co, Pari and We Are Studios.

Curator: Tian Zhang
Assistant Curator: A'isyiyah Prahastono
Dharug Cultural Consultant: Erin Wilkins

Constellations was presented by Blacktown Arts.

The exhibition took place at The Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Centre
from 7 November to 16 December 2023.

Table of Contents

Constellations

Erin Wilkins

p.5

There is beauty in this chaos

Tian Zhang

p.6

Collectives as anti-oppressive arts praxis

Eda Gunaydin

p.8

On Creative Collectives

Paula Abood in conversation with Alissar Chidiac

p.10

The Adorned Collective

p.14

Arab Theatre Studio

p.16

Dance Makers Collective

p.18

The Finishing School

p.20

Opnsrc.co

p.22

Pari

p.24

We Are Studios

p.26

Credits

p.28

A series of commissioned essays and interviews to accompany the exhibition *Constellations*.

Constellations

Erin Wilkins

Constellations guide our movement. They come into our seasons and they're part of our navigation systems. Where they are visible and their placement in the night sky provides guidance. The emu in the sky, she's the darkness within the Milky Way. As she shifts, it's telling us when to hunt the emu, when to leave the emu laying, and when to collect her eggs.

An individual star may shine brightly but without the rest of the constellation, that star can't find a way. Each constellation has its own time to shine brighter than the next. Each season, we might focus on more prominent constellations, but they are all important – each has its own guiding principle, its own teaching and its own path.

We come from the stars and we return as a star. A star is our Elder sitting at the campfire. When you see a shooting star, it's because they've kicked their fire out and they're returning into a new life form.

When you apply the metaphor of constellations to people and collectives, it teaches us to support each other, build each other's strength and complement one another. When we support and grow together, we encourage everyone to reach their full potential. Everything is interdependent and intertwined.

The foundations of our culture are: love, respect, humility and reciprocity. Without the give and take of reciprocity, without the respect of each other, without the humility for yourself and for others, and without the love of everything combined, there is no community. There is no collaboration or collective; there's nothing. It's not always easy but reminding yourself of these foundations makes it work.

We have a saying that when we come together around a campfire, we come together as a circle. When we come to the circle, we come as a collective where everybody is equal. In traditional society, we have Elders, but there is no hierarchy amongst everybody else. There is equality and equity amongst the community. It's Western ways that have created hierarchy and the instability of inequality.

We all bring something different to the fire. We've all got a strength that is highlighted, and that strength can complement someone else who's not as strong in that area. Fire holds knowledge, fire holds memory. And the smoke from the campfire is the burning of negativity, shame, injustice, and self-doubt.

Nothing is more prominent than the next. Everything that everyone brings into the space is important. Everything that someone brings is valued and has a different sense of value. And everyone that brings something into that space has the support of the network that encircles them.

Erin Wilkins is a saltwater/freshwater Dharug and Wiradjuri woman living and working on Dharug lands as a cultural educator and consultant.

There is beauty in this chaos

Tian Zhang

There are as many ways to be in a collective as there are collectives. In their most simple form, collectives are groups of people who converge over a common purpose or desire to work together. Collectives may sprout to serve a particular community, moment or project – some may dissolve just as quickly while others continue on to meet evolving needs. Perhaps what is most important about collectives is not who they are or what they do but how they do it. There is a spirit of collaboration, solidarity and care that shines through.

Collectivity and collaborative modes of working can be found in families, friendships, teams, workplaces, associations, neighbourhoods, communities and more. This practice is not new; it's as old as we are but sometimes it's hard to remember. Collective practice ensures that everyone is valued and heard. It prioritises relationships; it is slow and requires trust to be built over time. In the absence of hierarchy, decisions are made collaboratively – through discussion, debate, feeling, intuition, and trust. There is something magical about a group of people with diverse opinions, skill sets and experiences, coming together over a common purpose. Collective practice allows for more complex discussions, rigorous decision making and more rewarding outcomes. There is beauty in this chaos.

It feels important to recognise how difficult it is for collectives to persist – to stay together, stay connected, stay making and stay relevant. Maintaining work, life and collective balance is not easy. We are made to be so busy that it can feel like we don't have time for this way of working or relating. Collective work is deeply anti-capitalist and anti-individualist. It's not always rosy – disagreements happen, momentum can stall. Life can get in the way. But for those of us who have committed to this way of working, thinking and being, there's something that keeps us coming back

Constellations brings together seven arts collectives or initiatives based on Dharug Country in western Sydney – The Adorned Collective, Arab Theatre Studio, Dance Makers Collective, The Finishing School, opnsrc.co, Pari and We Are Studios. As a cluster of stars, constellations can serve as a metaphor for how collectives can function – a group of people coming together to create something greater than each individual part. We might think of each collective member as a single star making up a constellation, and all the collectives in this project coalescing to fill the night sky.

We acknowledge that this place has a long and strong history of collective and cultural practice. We are grateful to Dharug Knowledge Holder, Erin Wilkins for sharing with us stories and insights into ongoing Dharug practices of collectivity and community. We recognise the integral role that the Blacktown area has played in supporting artist-led collectives and initiatives. For example, Garage Graphix (1981–1998), a printmaking collective in Mt Druitt, ran for 18 years creating posters and projects with a focus on education and advocacy around topics such as women's rights, Aboriginal rights, anti-racism, domestic violence and housing insecurity. Another artist-

run initiative, Street Level, was instrumental in supporting hip hop and street art culture in western Sydney, opening in Penrith in 1988 before relocating to Blacktown from 1990 – 95.

Artist-led collectives and initiatives have been foundational to arts practice in Sydney's west, providing peer support to the artists involved and a platform to create work that speaks from and to the area. In an arts landscape that is otherwise dominated by council-run art spaces, artist-run collectives and initiatives are a critical part of the western Sydney arts ecology – providing the necessary space and support for artists to make, do and be on their own terms. We also recognise the important role that local government organisations have played in the initiation and sustainability of collectives in the area through financial support, presentation opportunities, studio space, networks and advice.

Some of the collectives in *Constellations* have been together going on a decade, while others have just emerged. Some are a revolving collection of people while others have been driven by core members over a sustained period. They were formed for a variety of reasons – over common practices, shared interests or similar lived experiences. Many of the members were strangers before coming together, finding friendship, kinship and like minds within the group. Collaborating over shared purpose and history forges strong bonds, particularly in a place like western Sydney.

It feels important to highlight that most, if not all collectives involved in *Constellations* were initiated to support underrepresented creatives and counter dominant means of cultural production – due to practice, gender, culture, disability, class and/or geography. Our members came together because something was missing – in the arts ecology, in our communities, in our lives. Working collectively has been a way to build solidarity, find power in numbers and gain control over our practices and our narratives.

We have channelled collectivity in the making of *Constellations*. Each month, members from each collective came together as a working group to meet and discuss the project. This method reflects many collectives' processes, where a subgroup is entrusted with ironing out project details, in keeping with a collective vision. Throughout this project, I've been met with intrigue and concern from people wondering how a group of collectives could ever make decisions on time; I can honestly say that the process has been focused and collaborative, rigorous and rewarding – full of mutual care, respect and understanding. Organisations and institutions from the broader arts sector have a lot to learn from collective practice.

Constellations is a celebration of western Sydney collectives and the importance of these practices. While collectives have become somewhat of a global contemporary art phenomenon in recent years, we recognise that these practices have been here for a long time. While specific stars and configurations may change over time, the constellations are ever-present. Similarly, collective practice has been part of this place since time immemorial and will continue to be nurtured into the future.

Tian Zhang is an independent curator, facilitator and writer based on Dharug Country in western Sydney. She is a founding co-director of Pari.

Collectives as anti-oppressive arts praxis

Eda Gunaydin

The idea of the auteur – the notion that one artist’s creative stamp can be so distinctive, and their control so total, that they emerge as the sole owner of a creative work – is pervasive in how we think about a variety of art forms, including film, design and literature. Names like Scorsese, Fosse, Allen, Hitchcock and Spielberg are easily recognised, and their reputation as geniuses relatively uncontroversial. The word auteur comes from the French word for author, a term that began to be used in English in the middle of the 14th century to describe one who makes or creates, or one who fathers. That these are all the names of Western white men, some of whom also leave behind legacies of destruction, misogyny, and the erasure of their collaborators, is not a coincidence. Making art as part of a collective is to expose the ideal of the solitary creative genius, the auteur who labours away alone in a sea of mediocrity, for exactly what it is: a myth. This myth is a powerful one, because it is tied to the way that power operates in society. To refuse it is also to refuse Western individualism, and racist, ableist and classist ideas about artistic greatness.

The collectives represented in *Constellations* seek to recognise, rather than obscure, the many names that go into producing an artwork. In studios and ateliers across the world, we sometimes look for just one name: the one that makes it onto the label on the dress, onto the plaque next to the sculpture, or the one that receives top billing when the credits roll. But artistic work does not come just from the mind, it also comes from the body. Collective artistic practice says that the sets of hands that sew and shape and shoot and edit are just as important as the one that collects the trophy. It is a way of honouring that none of us labour alone, and that this process does not pose a threat or a limitation.

Instead, collective art-making can be joyful, in part because it refuses the logics of capitalism, a social and economic force that narrows our world down to the individual, eroding our ability to experience the emancipatory potential of collectivity. Under capitalism, all labour, including artistic labour, is alienated. As artists, in order to succeed in the market we are often asked to engage in a degree of self-commodification. Market thinking also pressures us to view our fellow artists as competitors. In a competitive, capitalist system, for one person to win, another has to lose. Markets, however, are not fair judges of the quality of art. Instead, they often get gamed by the quality of one’s networks and credentials, or one’s privileged identity. Artistic collectives allow us to put aside this impetus, forced on us by neoliberalism, to distinguish ourselves, to be better than others, to be the best, to be a brand. There are ways to opt out of this system. The photographer Vivian Maier, for example, produced an enormous body of work throughout the course of decades, choosing never to air any of it. Instead, it was discovered after her death, and now she is famous. But fame and happiness are not the same thing. Likewise, collectives provide another way forward: instead of

8

9

competitors, we become collaborators, and the success and joy of any one of us becomes the success and joy of all of us.

I don’t want to be a brand: I want to make art that reflects concerns that may involve me – my positionality or my lived experiences – but are not just about me, and that may not be limited to me personally, but may also capture what’s important to my community. In her book *Crowds and Party*, the leftist philosopher Jodi Dean writes that ‘political change is always and only collective’. For example, the Borneo-based arts collective Pangrok Sulap produce woodcut prints that capture life in the rural communities of Sabah, work that is highly critical of modern threats to these communities’ environment and ways of life. These threats include the destruction wrought by large-scale development projects and by tourism. Their largest and most striking pieces are produced by a group, who work on the same piece at the same time, and the end result bears no one name. This way of working is endemic across south-east Asia.

Likewise, the collectives that make up *Constellations* are informed by the artistic traditions of our diverse cultural backgrounds, many of which de-prioritise the individual and the notion of personal ownership. The work of *Constellations’* collectives, too, reflects the unique perspectives of western Sydney’s artists about this place, one that is socioeconomically marginalised and sometimes targeted with deficit narratives. In response, the work of these collectives demonstrate the strength and flourishing of Black, brown, queer and disabled artistic communities. These collectives, through their work, also often confront the legacies of colonialism, a necessary task given that artists who are settlers – both migrants and displaced people – work on Dharug land. In its ideal form, building collectivity also looks like building solidarity.

Collective ways of working also challenge the patriarchal history of art. In the service of the auteur myth, women’s artistic contributions have often been made invisible, with women cast in the role of mere helper or typist, rather than equal collaborator; or mother or wife, asked to abandon her practice in the name of another’s. Artistic collectives not only seek to make the invisible visible, and reject the patriarchal connotations of the auteur, but also value artforms traditionally deemed not to be art at all, precisely because of their association with women. These include weaving, needlework and textile work. These are, not by coincidence, ways of working that are conducive to collectives.

Although collective work can be care work, artistic collectives are also what allow artists the space and time to step away to care for others and for oneself. Sharing the load – of making ideas, producing work, everyday tasks like administration and grant applications – between us means that fewer of us are disposable, because more of us can continue to make art while we also attend to being care-givers or activists or day-job-havers or people who need rest or refuse to cleave to ableist ways of ordering time. To speak of collectives, then, is to speak also of collectivity.

Eda Gunaydin is a Turkish-Australian essayist and researcher and member of The Finishing School. Her collection ‘Root & Branch: Essays on Inheritance’ won the 2022 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction.

On Creative Collectives

Paula Abood in conversation
with Alissar Chidiac

To begin, we acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Burramattagal and Wallumattagal of the Dharug Nation, the lands upon which we live and write these words.

We pay our heartfelt respects to Elders past and present, to the educators and healers, the knowledge holders, storytellers, and to community.

We recognise the knowledge shared by First Nations people is a gift. We are conscious that care for Country and community is a collective responsibility, and we honour that responsibility by being true to the embodied practice of anxious caring in the spaces we move in and across Country.

At the moment of writing, the words don't come easily as we bear witness to the violence of settler colonialism, here on Dharug land and in Gaza. Our work as community-minded artists, activists, organisers, and cultural workers is informed by the racialised social and political contexts that our shared communities endure. We have bonded through political and cultural action since 1991. Iraq. Palestine. Lebanon. Our present here and now is no different.

This essay maps a constellation of collective organising using culture as a realm of action to foster solidarities and alliances, to activate creative tactical disruption, to resist and refuse, to affirm and nourish our life-worlds amid racist imperialist violence.

Collective ways of working draw upon multiple histories, and individual and communal ways of knowing across time and space. We start with 1988 by remembering the collectives that worked in solidarity with First Nations activists to disrupt the obscenity of celebrating the bicentenary of the settler colony. Building affective bonds with First Nations Elders, artists and communities speaks to the relational praxis that we have nurtured in shared genealogies of community cultural work and collective creative interventions. Our archive of collaborative work draws from the well of creativity forged in the cultural traditions of social movements.

We meet on the streets in January 1991 at an anti-war rally, crossing paths with the disparate to consciously perform both dissent and affirmation as a spontaneous community of spirit. Rallying cries on cardboard, a line of poetry on a placard, a canvas of community demands at the injustices of the world is expressive of our shared histories of making beautiful trouble.

In thinking about collective performativity, we connect across generations in community spaces on Dharug land with *Café Hakawati*, produced by Death Defying Theatre (now Utp) in the shadow of the bombardment of Iraq. In this space, the embodied practice of diasporic storytelling mobilises community subjectivities in defiance of colonially constructed knowledge that saturated our screens at the time of the 1991 Gulf War. All of us, though differently and unequally, collectivise knowledge as praxis where our stories are shared

10

11

rather than owned, where knowledges from below breathe life to sustain community in the present. The dehumanising terms 'collateral damage' and 'carpet bombing', first used to describe the bombing of the Iraqi civilian population, remain with us as we are here once again in October 2023.

Language and power, critiques of gender and coloniality weave their way into the poetics of anti-colonial feminist performance with *the politics of belly dancing: a choreopoem* in 1994. Produced by the transient Sydney Arab Feminist Alliance (safa), this work is illustrative of decoloniality as a praxis of thinking with collective identities. Threads of this work connect to Taqa Theatre's *and they called her Silence* in 1992, and *Writing with the Hip* in 1993 and 1996, two works seeded in writing collaboratives, an ensemble practice persisting across time with *The Cartographer's Curse* in 2016. Marking 100 years of the colonial injury that is the border, embodied scholarship produces texts that illuminate the present and honour creative warriors across time and space who fight against capitalist patriarchal brutality, against colonialism, against nationalism.

Creative activism is our inheritance as artist collectives come together in visceral rage against a massive invasion of Lebanon by Israeli military forces, with *t'fouh* تفه in 2006 as a quick response exhibition of works with over 40 Arab artists at Mori Gallery on Gadigal land. And again in 2009, protest art as a rapid response to the grinding military occupation of Palestinian people in, *To Gaza with Love*. The cause of political justice is a guiding principle in collective efforts that consciously create nourishing spaces of freedom to think ourselves into being. From the queer creative activism of the early 2000s that included gatherings of Bayt el Hob and performances at Club Arak, to the collective and caring practices within visual arts expressive of self-determined works in the face of seasons of Islamophobia with *No Added Sugar* in 2012, these connective moments are grounded in and by cooperative ways of working that value an ethics of practice.

Reflecting on histories of collaborative ethical artmaking, creative engagements seeded in and with communities on Dharug land mobilise methodologies that produce a multiplicity of ways of thinking, being, knowing, sensing. The field of community arts and cultural development provides a living library of creative responses to the injuries of war and the trauma of violence – to displacement, exclusion, and loss. Work conceived with and determined by communities intersects a world of realities. From *The Book of the Living: Sierra Leone Women Tell their Stories* in 2006, to *Huriyya and her Sisters* in 2009, with young Muslim women animating self-defined life-worlds as a counter to the Islamophobic racism of the local and global; to people seeking asylum, in recovery from the carceral violence of the settler colony via the quiet practice of creative healing within the project *On Being* in 2018.

Our lived experience as community cultural workers gifts us with the joy of sharing space with community, with Elders, with children and young people, with artists and other fiery kindred spirits. Building creative communities in ways that are careful, collaborative, consciously ethical, co-operative, and critical can be both transformative and transcendent.

As we bear witness to genocide in real time against the Palestinian people in Gaza, the grief and visceral rage impel us to act. Again, we take to the streets.

Alissar and Paula are members of Arab Theatre Studio. Both have been recipients of Creative Australia's Community Arts and Cultural Development Fellowships and the Ros Bower Award, recognising arts practitioners who have made a lifelong contribution to community arts and cultural development.

The Adorned Collective

Est. 2015



Adorned artists. Image by Jacquie Manning.

What does your collective do?

Adorned is a collective of artists who gather to share ideas and skills, and make together. Works are created in textiles, thread and fibre using a variety of techniques. As makers and artists, we create artwork that draws from our experiences and tells our stories, including the one we are weaving together.

What makes you a collective?

Adorned is where we bring our culture, our story, our language, and our passion for our materials and methods, as something to share and bind us together. Our respect and appreciation for one another and our cultural diversity underpin who we are as a collective.

Members are in fact all artists who work independently. The fact that we come together in unison to create for common projects makes us a collective. We enjoy a strong sense of belonging. We have unique perspectives and interests that inform our collective as something we contribute to, and draw from – to enrich the lives of everyone involved.

14

How does your collective work?

Outside of projects, we are a group of friends and chosen family. It's not always about the craft, or what we are making. Often we spend time together to share the big and small moments in life. When we have a creative project or a focused process, we meet at Parramatta Artists' Studios Rydalmere, as well as each other's homes, and other public spaces. Making and creating allows us to connect in a deeper way, and forms the fabric of sharing. There are things you can say with your materials and ways of making that you can't say with words.

Our gatherings and shared meals are always joyous, a bit like coming home. Our connection with others and the unlimited skill sharing is fabulous. The friendships we have forged over the years are very very special.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

It's not always easy to get together or be on the 'same page' with projects and goals. Making time within our day to day lives and balancing commitments can get in the way of our desire to meet and make together. We have lots of different ideas and interests that inform us. Choosing a shared focus is something we continue to seek.

We are also a collective of collectors! Our shared resources exceed the time we have available to work with them. But the collective has helped us channel our time and activate our materials through our skills.

15

What are the joys of being in a collective?

To answer this question, we wanted to include some perspectives from Adorned members themselves:

'Adorned gives me the confidence and voice to tell my story with no judgement.'

'Being with The Adorned Collective has brought my wishes into being.'

'This collective helped me think about my ability to create art. Before joining I never thought I could do textile work or embroidery but now it is one of my favourite artforms and it makes me feel excited to experiment and try new things.'

'I like the synergy created by being involved in Adorned. The joys of being a collective are that there are other people to bounce ideas, and get opinions about ideas. Talking "shop" with likeminded people is something we cherish. We discuss fragments of fabric, fibre, beads, thread and stitch. We share ideas and projects, we support, encourage and offer suggestions when needed.'

'I feel I have found my kin, and this I will always hold dear.'

Arab Theatre Studio

Est. 2014



Arab Theatre Studio at Granville Town Hall, 2018. Image by Maissa Alameddine.

What does your collective do?

Arab Theatre Studio (ATS) is a small independent artist-led Arab arts and cultural organisation on Dharug Country. We ground our thinking and practice in the principles of First Nations First. We engage and collaborate with artists from diverse backgrounds, inclusive of first, second and third generations, and emerging, developing, and established creatives. Our multi art form activities include artist gatherings, collaborative multi-artform performances, music jams and concerts, supporting and mentoring artists, book launches, critical talks, bilingual kids arts workshops, creative solidarity interventions, visual art installations and digital media works.

What makes you a collective?

We identify our structure and process as 'hybrid' – both in relation to shared decision making and to creative practices. This is not a unique situation, as many small to medium arts and cultural organisations blend collective practices with the workings of a legally incorporated association. There are different understandings and embodiments of 'what is collective practice' and that is also reflected within Arab Theatre Studio.

How does your collective work?

In earlier years ATS operated as a small group. Then the need to become a legal entity brought a formal structure with governance responsibilities as an incorporated association. Within the framework of a Management Committee there are sub-committees that focus on governance and organisational policies, and on artistic visions and programs. Working across a range of art forms and contexts, some creative projects are facilitated and produced collaboratively, others artistically directed and implemented in more conventional ways.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

The biggest challenge is our capacity to grow as an organisation that is outward looking whilst ensuring that our practice and processes remain grounded in our values. As a small organisation without core funding, we rely on volunteer labour to maintain our operations, develop partnerships and seed new programs. Artists only receive fees when projects are funded. Most of Team ATS have other work (either full time employment or precarious freelance). It's challenging to manage collective program planning with limited human resources, especially as there is always the urge to take on opportunities and partnerships. It is imperative that we examine our capacity and capability, as well as our liability when it comes to what we can viably do. Limited time and human resources also affect our capacity for in-depth creative discussions and critical evaluation. We do our best to navigate these, all too often with eyes and hearts on the bigger vision – with the drive and passion for making critical new work and facilitating shared cultural spaces.

What are the joys of being in a collective?

There is joy in the belief that as a collective, we are making a difference; that we are part of a movement that challenges political and social contexts through art making. The joy comes from coming together in a spirit of generosity and care, from recognising that everyone has insight and a story to tell, that collective organising and creativity provide a space for everyone to make space for the other. There is much joy in the spaces we create with, by and for communities. The unpredictable. The beauty. The transformations. The subversion. The love. Sharing space, sharing power, sharing the light is what makes collaborative work truly joyful.

Dance Makers Collective

Est. 2012



DADS, Dance Makers Collective, 2016. Image by Dom O'Donnell.

What does your collective do?

Dance Makers Collective, fondly known as DMC, makes dance, as it says on the tin! We are a group of contemporary dancers, choreographers and multidisciplinary artists who co-create and perform new choreographic works, mostly for live audiences. We are committed to the development of the artform and the wider dance sector, delivering a variety of programs to service emerging to established artists, as well as the wider community. We bridge professional contemporary dance with social dance, dance theatre and other dance practices. We are obsessed with dance and feel it is an innately positive and social act that makes us feel good and connected.

What makes you a collective?

We are a collective in every layer of our workings. We are foremost collective makers, that is, we create work collectively. Collective creative processes are also embedded in our organisational decision-making. We are the only collective-led dance company in Australia because dance companies are predominantly led by one Artistic Director, or in a few

18

cases by co-ADs. DMC comprises 11 Artistic Directors who co-design the program, have equal agency over partnerships, strategically plan together, and share all the jobs that the organisation needs to function.

How does your collective work?

DMC is an incorporated association, with a Board and staff. DMC members hold more than 50% of Board positions. We meet formally 6 times a year, 1 week prior to Board meetings, where we pitch programming ideas. We also have annual programs where we invite others to engage, so we not only collectively refine our ideas but also support other artists with a robust process for ideation. DMC artists elect to take the lead on projects as they are pitched and taken up. When we create work together, the process is highly collaborative. The role of the artistic lead is to guide and, when push comes to shove, call any shots needed to complete and resolve projects.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

Our biggest challenge is time. To be genuinely collaborative, there must be space for DMC artists to contribute fully, which means all decisions are made with the voices of up to 11 people. Not everyone is in every project or program, we have a great 'sub-committee' system that has naturally evolved. We have a strong and positive culture of flexibility responding to diverse needs and challenges. We have a 'life happens' policy, which gives individuals agency to do what they need to maintain a healthy life outside of work. This causes difficulty when members have coinciding personal needs that prevent critical mass in the studio, however we have developed a solid network of peer artists who can step in when these situations occur. What makes this work is open dialogue, which has been developed through a culture of care and responsiveness that we have cultivated over many years of working together.

19

What are the joys of being in a collective?

Being in a collective amplifies our capacity. Dance as an artform is incredibly social, and to do it in isolation can be isolating. We are a family, we have each other's backs, we cry together and laugh together and feel safe to ask hard questions and to make mistakes. Our artistic work is greater for having a diversity of voices contributing to it; it is deep and well-thought-out and complex and nuanced. Our artistry gets better when we have each other egging us on and cheering us on and helping us back up when we fall over, which dancers inevitably do. Artists and communities feel an affinity to us because of the culture we have cultivated over many years, which has only grown because we are a collective.

The Finishing School

Est. 2015



Finishing School. Image by Jacquie Manning.

What does your collective do?

The Finishing School is a collective of women writers dedicated to creative excellence and exploration. We are inspired by and responsive to the communities and concerns of western Sydney, where we are based, but our gaze extends far beyond its psychogeographic boundaries. Finishing School has a radical commitment to making honest work, through pursuit of independent creative work, as well as collaborations with other writers and artists on literary projects, cross-artform installations and performances.

What makes you a collective?

We identify as a collective because we create our vision together, and share a clear conviction, or set of values, that guides our work. Making art and labouring in an era of hyper-individualism, it felt urgent and imperative to come together for both political and artistic purposes. We foster connectivity and collaboration from a wide range of writers and artists, while the looseness of our structure promotes a great deal of independence as well.

20

How does your collective work?

Our collective is made up of a core of three working artists, who are primarily writers of fiction and non-fiction, but also produce podcasts, plays, live events and installations. We tend to work on our independent projects, but endeavour to create at least one collaboration – either all together, or one of us working with another collective or artist – per year. These collaborations are explicitly cross-disciplinary, and we have worked with, among others, sculptors, painters, musicians, and dancers.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

We've evolved a lot over the years and being in a collective is like being in any kind of relationship, though perhaps it's most like being in a band! One of the things we do is foster a safe environment to think differently and to not agree. We don't all think or create the same way, or have the same views on what makes great art – those disagreements are powerful, fruitful things. We also try to work with a wide network of people without necessarily 'owning' them as a collective, because we want ourselves and others to be exposed to new ways of thinking and doing all the time. We navigate this by allowing for this diversity in practice rather than insisting that everyone thinks and creates the same way. Not being afraid to say no to each other is also important, maintaining personal boundaries as well as collective ones.

21

What are the joys of being in a collective?

Having a shared vision and sense of purpose has helped us to flourish as a collective. Writing, like a lot of art-making, is inherently a solo pursuit, but being part of a collective reminds you you're not alone – and that there's a lot of joy in creating together. Making any kind of art collectively is a way of opening up new/challenging/joyous/confronting experiences. You can't have that on your own.

Opnsrc.co

(open source / open)

Est. 2018



Image by Kenneth Laurel.

What does your collective do?

Our collective specialises in producing shows and events that connect and develop the creative community around us. We participate in a range of art forms, including music, dance, fashion, photography, and videography, enabling us to create diverse and dynamic experiences.

What makes you a collective?

We identify as a collective because we're a group of individuals immersed in the creative field, mutually supporting and elevating each other. When work is initiated or produced collaboratively within our group, it is presented under the opn. banner. Our distinctive feature is this collective idea to help individual pursuits – to help facilitate and support where we can.

How does your collective work?

We operate by being open to all that would like to participate, understanding the skills, progress, and career stages of each participant. Each participant helps with personal and group projects, supporting

everyone's work and team efforts. Meetings are on a project by project basis, projects are decided by the participants with the project initiator usually being the decision maker.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

One of the challenges in being part of a collective is the adaptation to changes, such as welcoming new participants, scaling to growth, or persevering through various situations. Our way to handle these problems is by sticking to why we initially started as a collective – helping each other – which keeps us focused, flowing and united.

What are the joys of being in a collective?

From a personal viewpoint, being part of a collective offers the joy of being immersed in a like-minded community – one that not only provides understanding and support but one that also reinforces the comforting reality that we're all in the same boat, navigating the same journey.



Pari exterior view. *Sports Show*, 2020. Image by Document Photography.

What does your collective do?

We run an art gallery on unceded Dharug land in Parramatta. In addition to exhibitions, Pari is also a site for workshops, gigs, events, books and gatherings!

We want to facilitate dialogue between artists, communities and like-minded thinkers across generations and locations. We also aim to equip Pari and our communities with knowledge, skills and resources.

We provide curatorial, financial and moral support for artists, particularly those underrepresented in the field, enabling them to make and show work that is relevant to this time and place.

What makes you a collective?

Pari is an artist-run space led by an evolving team of co-directors made of artists, curators, writers, designers and other arts professionals.

We are organised in a way where there's no hierarchy. We make decisions by consensus and everyone's input has equal weight. We recognise that Pari will evolve along with our members. There's always room for growth

24

and improvement, bringing people up to different roles and fostering everyone's individual interests and the skills they would like to work on. While Pari's co-directors facilitate the space, Pari is shaped by the context we exist in, the people who show here, the people who come and look and listen, the conversations that happen, the things that get said and thought and reconsidered.

How does your collective work?

We usually have weekly meetings, though there are periods when we drop down to fortnightly depending on how much is going on. We have an Annual General Meeting to appoint new members and report on the year. Most years we have a visioning day to check in with Pari's values and long-term goals. Each year we have a series of exhibitions, curated from an open callout to artists. We look for common themes explored by individual artists, and bring them together to form a group show. Co-directors will take turns supporting the exhibitions, while the programming decisions are made by the whole team. We have a lovely team of Gallery Keepers, usually artists or creatives, who mind the exhibitions and engage the public.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

Being aware of our capacity, individually and as a group, is really important. We juggle our work at Pari with our jobs, creative practices and other commitments. We introduced a 'check in' to our regular meetings to help us understand where each of us are at, at any given time.

We try to be responsive to the capacity of the group and do our best not to overcommit ourselves. For example, there was a period in 2021 when we needed to put a pause on applying for new project grants so that we could see through existing ones that were postponed due to Covid.

What are the joys of being in a collective?

Bringing people together and being in community is a huge part of it. Helping artists who are having their first show, first workshop or first time trying something new is always so exciting!

Supporting everyone to bring their different perspectives and strengths to projects is also wonderful. Seeing things progress and evolve during discussions is so satisfying and can lead to unexpected outcomes, something that no single member could pull off on their own. We find joy in the purposeful movement towards doing things differently, such as paying artists to exhibit old work, being transparent about how we assess applications, and collectively curating shows based on what common thematic have emerged from the community. There is a thrill in moving towards what we hope to see in the broader sector.

25

We Are Studios

Est. 2023



We Are Studios, 2023. Image by Liza Moscatelli, Mosca Media Australia.

What does your collective do?

We Are Studios is a fully disability-led, inclusive studio that empowers artists with disability to reach their creative potential by creating space to thrive.

We address the barriers experienced by artists living with disability by providing mentorship, networking and professional development opportunities to creatives with disability across western Sydney and advocating for their inclusion within the contemporary creative arts sector.

What makes you a collective?

We Are Studios artists/members make up our board and ensure that we are 100% disability-led. The initiative, our projects and engagements are all peer-led and designed by the artists and community that it supports.

How does your collective work?

We activate our artists' holistic lives through their creative practice. Sharing ideas, processes and collaborating together forms the basis of

a rich and interconnected socially inclusive space. We meet in person, and online because having a variety of accessible spaces meets the needs of our community.

By accessing arts and culture together, we are advocating for and activating inclusion within the greater cultural landscape. We use these spaces to engage with each other as artists and as people with disability, sharing experiences about art but also our own lives. We utilise available workshop and studio space to meet and make together.

What are the challenges of being in a collective and how do you navigate them?

It takes time, ongoing dialogue and a variety of connection points to make sure that everyone has an equal say. The opportunity to provide input necessary for providing equitable support and meeting people's access needs is an ongoing constructive process. We continue to find ways to recognise and meet access needs that are not as easy to define, and being flexible to support needs that might be conflicting is an ongoing balance.

What are the joys of being in a collective?

Inclusion and connectivity saves lives – many of our artists can attest to this. Our collective offers a network of support and ongoing, achievable goals and activities for us all to strive for.

We have all expanded and dramatically improved our quality of life through being in a collective of artists with a shared lived experience – going from loneliness and isolation to having an abundance of friends.

Together we have created a community/environment with access needs being met that parallels an art school experience – but one that is shaped to fit who we are.

Participating Collectives

The Adorned Collective, Arab Theatre Studio, Dance Makers Collective,
The Finishing School, opnsrc.co, Pari and We Are Studios.

Curator & Editor

Tian Zhang

Assistant Curator

A'isyiyah Prahastono

Dharug Cultural Consultant

Erin Wilkins

Designer

Huy Nguyen

Constellations working group

Marian Abboud, Maissa Alameddine, Gail Barclay, Liam Benson,
Felicity Castagna, Celine Cheung, Alissar Chidiac, Ian 'Esky' Escandor,
Eda Gunaydin, Emma Harrison, Hareen Johl, Dylan Mangunay,
Louisa Minutillo, Nicole Oliveria, Sheila Pham, A'isyiyah Prahastono,
Marina Robins, Carl Sciberras, Ricky Tana, Jordan Valageorgiou,
Ebony Wightman and Tian Zhang.

Written on unceded Dharug and Gadigal Country.
Designed, edited and printed on unceded Dharug Country.

Copyright the authors and creators, 2023.

Constellations was commissioned by Blacktown Arts.
Blacktown Arts is supported by Blacktown City Council
and the NSW Government through Create NSW.

ISBN 978-0-646-88746-3



**Blacktown
Arts**



ONES

TONES

STONES

WOODS