
Feminist Movement: Deborah Hay, Artistic Survival, Aesthetic Freedom, and Feminist Organizational Principles

Deborah Hay has liberated contemporary dance on many levels, from her early days in New York to her international influence today. Not in the least from within the design of how she chooses to disseminate her choreography. In my opinion, her multiple inventions and innovations for transmitting her aesthetic through community building are in line with the women's rights movement and the principles that guide a feminist organization. While "questioning authority" by dismantling the presenter-performer (or choreographer-dancer or teacher-student) relationship or restricting access only to women were never goals of her Solo Performance Commissioning Project, Hay designed a unique structure that worked for the most part independently of a mainstream system (depending on some of the participants' funding sources) in keeping with feminist organizing. Hay provided an alternative not only in the content of her solo choreography but also in the transmission of it. As a result, she has influenced generations of dancers and infiltrated several dance communities globally through coalition building at a grassroots level.

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I first met Deborah Hay in 1994 as a student of the European Dance Development Center in Arnhem, Netherlands. Her teaching deeply inspired me at that time (you never forget the first time you dance her instruction "invite being seen") and her

influence has since transformed my career path as a dance activist. In preparation for this writing, I interviewed Hay during the Tanz im August festival in Berlin, Germany where she performed her 2010 solo *No Time to Fly*. While I have never participated in a Solo Performing Commissioning Project personally, I have supported many of Hay's productions and followed her achievements closely since 2002. My involvement with Hay led me to draw on my observations over the years to compile this research paper.

Hay redefined the hierarchical structure of a typical dance workshop, a master class, and the remounting of repertory choreography in order to empower a new generation of solo dancer/choreographers and further her own research. Hay did this by creating the Solo Performance Commissioning Project (SPCP). Established in 1998 and running for fourteen years, the yearly SPCP was an eleven-day intensive choreographic residency where Hay taught and coached the participating performers of any gender in the practice and execution of her most recent solo work. A unique quality of the SPCP, is that the participants are self selected and must raise the substantial commissioning fee and residency expenses entirely through donations and grants from within their community. Participants may not use their own funds in order to be accepted.

In the performing arts field, the commissioning process can mean differing levels of investment and artistic ownership depending on a production's financial arrangement with the producer, creative leader or artistic team. In the design of the SPCP, commissioning entails an artist purchasing the rights to perform a solo work according to Hay's contract, more on that later, in perpetuity. The fee to commission Hay's last solo within the SPCP program was roughly \$1,750 (1,100 GBP) which included housing and one meal per day. Additional meals and transportation were separate.

From a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s in New York City's modern dance scene, to touring as a dancer for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Deborah Hay has always pushed the boundaries of contemporary dance. In a move unparalleled in the New York centric world of modern dance, she moved to Vermont to establish a commune called Mad Brook with fellow dance makers in 1970. She had symbolically burned her belongings, literally ridding herself of everything she owned, in order to simplify her life and get back to basics. All she had left was her body and her community.

In order to contribute to the cost of living at Mad Brook, Hay raised \$187/year, her share, for the land trust. This was when and where her solo dance practice and current choreographic research began. She gave herself the task of dancing every day in her studio. Hay recalls, "My practice for those years was to listen for the dance, perform it, and surrender it simultaneously for one hour everyday. I wanted to

include some form of movement practice in my life although I was quite certain that I had, at the same time, made a decision to live off the land in community with others at Mad Brook despite the fact that this was never agreed upon as a goal. After six and a half years, without it being my intention, I could identify a sensation of faith based on the fact that a dance was there, for me, everyday, without my having to look for it". Hay continued to pursue a professional touring career and sent over 7,000 letters to presenters with very few resulting in invitations.

In order to raise her portion of the lodging and supplies, she began to work in different communities offering workshops in the form of performances with no audience only participants. Hay's *Circle Dances* applied the findings she was experiencing in the studio in solitude to a group process. Hay describes the instigation of the *Circle Dances* as "how do I get twenty people I never met before to dance together for one hour without teaching anything? This research was when I started noticing the whole body as the teacher, noticing the people around you, which are the initial seeds of my work today." In 1976, Hay moved to Austin, Texas. She left the communal life due to disenchantment. "I was looking for a collaborative community," she says "Mad Brook was and still is anarchistic."

Throughout Hay's career, she sought an environment that would value group process and artistic freedom. Hay left Vermont during the period of second-wave feminism in the United States. In Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin's book *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, they write, "The women's liberation groups that grew out of the student left and new women's rights organizations such as the National Organization for Women gradually defined themselves as part of a single larger movement that they came to call feminism. The term feminism thus was expanded and rejuvenated, to cover a multitude of movements... Some of the activists involved claimed to have invented a unique type of organization, a feminist organization, which they defined as embracing collectivist decision-making, member empowerment, and political agenda of ending women's oppression." When talking with Deborah Hay about the strategies and structure that went into the design of the SPCP, she mentions survival often. Ferree and Yancey identify that "Feminist organizations question authority, produce new elites, call into question dominant societal values, claim resources on behalf of women, and provide space and resources for feminists to live out altered visions of their lives." By changing the words 'women' and 'feminists' to 'artists' or 'dancers', the parallels in oppression between popular culture and the arts, especially dance, in which the power presides within the male-dominant capitalist society of art market and production commodification, in contrast with the alternative that Hay and the SPCP have offered the field of experimental dance. Although, Hay's work has never limited the access to male dancer/choreographers, her sensibility is truly liberating and raises the awareness of possibilities and choices through a feminist consciousness within the context of her dance explorations.



When asked ‘what is dance?’ Hay answers, “Dance is how you choose to see movement. In every conceivable way, it keeps me interested in being on this planet. It is how I feel politically active, not on the street waving signs, but in the studio. This is a way to survive. If I thought about it financially, I wouldn’t have done it. I had to mastermind my survival. There wasn’t an alternative. People say: *You are such an example, not compromising, only on your own terms.* I think it is really deep, what makes an artist an artist. It is not like I had a choice. It is like having a rope around my neck. I envy people with a lot of interests.”

After settling in Austin and building some infrastructure as the Deborah Hay Dance Company, a board of directors and advisors, non-profit status, and small but loyal gathering of interested dancers and non-dancers who would gather for three months to workshop and perform her group choreography, Hay was ready for a new challenge and to start a new chapter in her research. She asked herself “what do I make that will attract dancers” and she thought of the next generation of choreographers and anticipated their potential angst when making a dance. “What if I gave them a dance and the excitement of practicing in the studio?” SPCP was born. At first however, she bounced the idea off some dancers from within the demographic she hoped to serve and got a weak response, but she felt that it would have been an opportunity that she would have jumped on if offered at the beginning of her career. “This was not for dance students but for practicing artists to commission the piece not take a workshop,” Hay justifies. In stipulating that each participating artist must fundraise for their access to the intensive from their community, whatever community means to them, each artist really has to articulate where they are in order to raise the money. Typically the American artists accumulate between 50 to 400 patrons, each contributing \$5 or more sometimes through bake

sales and yard sales in order to raise the necessary amount above any foundation grants, where as the European artists rarely need more than one or two government cultural council grants to cover their expenses. Upon starting the commissioning process, either on the second night or occasionally the first if energy permits, the participants share their stories of how they got to SPCP. Hay remembers, “the Americans are envious of the Europeans, however the Europeans are jealous of the Americans’ excitement of their ability to raise the money.” When Hay bounced the early notion of SPCP off some young dancers, it seemed inconceivable to those individuals their capacity to raise any money but she has noticed that the sentiment has changed and dancers find confidence in achieving this financial goal through voicing their needs and reaching out to their community. In Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker’s article COMMUNITY ORGANIZING OR ORGANIZING COMMUNITY?: Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment, we learn that “the women-centered model begins with organizing community—building expanded private sphere relationships and empowering individuals through those relationships.” To bring the funding process full circle, Hay insists that the donor “community, whether family, friends, local, state, or national granting agencies, corporations, become the patrons for each dance. All patrons receive program acknowledgment every time the solo is performed by any of the participating dancers.” The funding credits in any of the future program notes can fill several pages, listing the donors in order of country, with the section for the USA always being the longest. This “empowers artists to ask for what they want, what will benefit them, their community, it can be a big shift, asking for what they feel they deserve. That was the type of person I wanted to work with, someone who would step up, step up to their choice” remarks Hay.

The starting point to all Hay’s choreography is a question. An example coming from her solo *No Time to Fly* (2010) is: “What if the question ‘what if where I am is what I need?’ is not about what I *need* but an opportunity to *remember* the question ‘what if where I am is what I need?’” During the SPCP intensive, Hay would introduce the choreography with the new group of dancers on the first day in the studio by reading the written score out loud. The dancers wouldn’t understand the question or the directions they had just been handed. However, that first day Hay would teach the entire dance and they would start immediately practicing the performance of the choreography. Each day began at 9 am and ended at 6 pm with a two-hour lunch break in the middle. The dance studio would always remain open in the evenings and impromptu gatherings, discussions, and/or presentations of previous works would often occur. The communal living aspect of the intensive would lend itself to artist directed collective decision-making about the nights and what interests and needs arose from the group. Starting around the fourth day in the studio, each dancer would eventually receive individualized coaching by Hay, at least two times as a solo throughout the process, witnessed by the others. Hay intentionally would mix up the arrangements of groups, solos, more groups, in effect that no one performer would sit

for too long. On day six, the score would be reread out loud and the dancers would start to find access on how to take hold of the generous choreographic directions. On the last day, Hay notes when reading the score for the third time as a group, “they can see how the language informs the work.” During the intensive, there is time built into the schedule to discuss the dancers’ questions and develop language to express their experiences of discovering the possibilities in the score. The observing dancers do not however provide personal feedback to one another as everyone is learning from Hay’s coaching and the specificity of her language and feedback in association with the written score. Hay makes the distinction that “the feedback is about *how* they are performing and not *what* they are doing.” By creating a learning environment with open and inclusive access to knowledge and experiences, Hay’s principles are aligned with “co-mentoring [which] is rooted in a feminist tradition that fosters an equal balance of power between participants” as described in the article *Feminist co-mentoring: a model for academic professional development* by Gail M. McGuire and Jo Reger. Hay’s artistic practice is about perception and the observer is as important in creating the context for the dance as the performer in this state of awareness. Hay elaborates, “when you are alone on stage with this intangible material or in the studio, you have to work fully to be supported by the space, you cannot rest, nothing can be taken for granted. As a group, you can see the tangible material, served by how you are seeing, so it feeds the process. There is an unspoken sense of gratitude for the collective work ethic. It is not about being nice, it is about getting what you can get, it is about survival.” Finally on that day, artists have the opportunity to perform their solos simultaneously in smaller groups. To complete the legality of the commissioning process, each dancer receives a contract that includes the rules for their eventual adaptation of the solo choreography and their responsibility to the choreography and the community for future public performances which can only occur after a minimum of three months of daily practice of the piece. Choreographer and feminist scholar, Ann Cooper Albright acknowledges in her book, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, “daily practice also structures a physical identity of its own making. Simultaneously registering, creating, and subverting cultural conventions, embodied experience is necessarily complex and messy.”

Having cultivated a deep solo performance practice from her early days in Vermont, Hay admits, “my challenge is to define what can the material I gather do to serve the curiosity and interest of the artists doing the dance? How do I trick these people to practice for at least three months minimum? How do I create a form that keeps opening with their interest?” Hay has written three books chronicling her dances and has published several articles about the questions she has developed to inform her performance and to ‘trick’ her into being curious and interested in choreography. She writes on her website that “What I mean by my choreography includes the transmission from me to the dancer, of the same set of questions I ask myself when I am performing a particular movement sequence that ministers shape to a dance. I will

not talk about my movement choices here, except to say that as an aspect of my choreography they fall almost exclusively into three categories: 1) impossible to realize, 2) embarrassing to *do*, or, idiotic to contemplate, 3) maddeningly simple. These movement directions are not unlike my questions that are 1) unanswerable, 2) impossible to truly comprehend, and, at the same time, 3) poignantly immediate.” She has always remained open to possibilities and the individual performer’s choice in the moment as an endless resource for discovery. In the foreword to Rebecca Walker’s anthology *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Gloria Steinem writes, “the greatest gift we can give one another is the power to make a choice. The power to choose is even more important than the choices we make.” Plus given the excitement of new frontiers, Laura Mulvey expresses in her foundational feminist theory critique of film about her goal of destroying beauty through its analysis, “the alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with... expectations in order to conceive a new language...”



Each SPCP participant commissions the solo by Deborah Hay but is empowered to create their own solo adaptation, and own the resulting piece. One such participant, dancer/choreographer Ros Warby of Australia, notes, “Through her courageous choreographic and performance practice, remarkable language and immediate presence, Deborah has touched and stimulated the most essential places in my artistic expression, encouraging the integration of every aspect of my performing self with my dance.” Another affirmation from SPCP participant Kathryn Johnson, “Deborah has taught me to notice the physical presence of my favorite things about being a human being, and that they themselves, not representations of them, can be the material for choreography because I am an agent for their physicality. To me, this

really is an invention that I have never seen or felt before.” These adaptations will be part of Hay’s artistic legacy, which have reached communities internationally through the SPCP participants and have continued to be a lesson of how to let go of the outcome. What is adaptation? Hay writes, “I keep amending the meaning of adaptation over the years. After seeing four earnest adaptations in a program, I changed the language to make sure that their artistic and aesthetic choices needed to be present. There have been other experiences of seeing adaptations where I don’t see my choreography when ego and adrenaline are present in the work. Or when following instructions so closely the dancer is not situated in their experience of the dance, still obeying the teacher’s instructions.” The evolution of the SPCP, aims to relieve the performer of the burden of creating a unique solo choreography while providing each individual the tools to fully embody their performance and express their choices in the moment. A successful adaptation depends on what Hay describes as “the unforeseeable and imponderable factors that make up the performer’s virtues of fidelity, sympathy, and streaming perceptual challenges” of her choreographic instructions. As the article *COMMUNITY ORGANIZING OR ORGANIZING COMMUNITY?* confirms, “The goal of a women-centered organizing process is “empowerment”—a developmental process that includes building skills through repetitive cycles of action and reflection that evoke new skills and understandings.”

The structure of the SPCP, similarly to feminist principles in community building which emphasize “the importance of cooperative, egalitarian relationships for learning and development” has grown into a network of grassroots presenting through artist-centric platforms around the world. From *COMMUNITY ORGANIZING OR ORGANIZING COMMUNITY?*, “Small groups create an atmosphere that affirms each participant’s contribution, provides the time for individuals to share, and helps participants listen carefully to each other. Moreover, smaller group settings create and sustain the relationship building and sense of significance and solidarity so integral to community.” The participants have presented their solo adaptations in their local communities and invited others to travel and join their events. Economically, this has contributed to the sharing of choreographic principles by Deborah Hay without the draining process of her touring and funding the expensive endeavor. bell hooks contributes, “Whenever we chose performance as a site to build communities of resistance we must be able to shift paradigms and styles of performance...” Hay has engineered a vehicle of dissemination and execution that values process over product and encouraged performers to explore their role as dancer and choreographer through her work. This is unusual for a choreographer to remount work and tour it in this way. Generations have grown and Hay’s influence on the field has risen to garner the attention of leading internationally renowned choreographers such as William Forsythe and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, who now seek out her training for their dancers and her contributions to their artistic projects.

In evaluating the SPCP for its progressive philosophy, SPCP can be closely compared to feminist organizations which are describes as “centered around five main principles that we believed to be guiding forces in the implementation of feminist thinking to a community agenda. Inherent in... a community based on feminist ideology were the following: (1) greater availability and access of resources, (2) genuine value and respect for human diversity and self-determination, (3) caring and compassionate members, (4) increased value placed on personal connections and collaborations, and (5) political empowerment. These values are interconnected and interactive and therefore, it is important to focus on all of them as we pursue our ideal feminist community setting” in Dorcas Liriano’s article, *Fostering feminist principles in our community: how do we get there?* The SPCP models values that parallel those in feminist organizing and community building, however with experimental dance makers. The hope is that they are to become fully engaged in a creative process that provides tools for generative and personal movement research based on Hay’s practice techniques and explicit language. The empowerment that is built into the funding support and the consciousness and responsibility that is taken to ensure that each participant has a community to return to and share the work and their achievements with, are thoughtfully calculated. Hay’s wisdom and skill for creating a network of supporters who have surrounded her many research platforms, informs the generous experience inherent in the SPCP environment. Hay is able to counter the mainstream systems of dance training and choreographic transmission and create deep access to her process while, in my opinion, honoring the second-wave feminist motto of “the personal is political.” So Hay doesn’t need to wave signs in the street to affect change for the next generation of dance innovators around the world.

I wrote this research essay as part of my studies at the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance and invite any feedback you may have. Thanks!

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