

Shifting Cultural Power

Case Studies
and Questions
in Performance

Hope Mohr

*with contributions from
participants in The Bridge Project*

Foreword by Michèle Steinwald



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Foreword

Curating Oneself Out of the Room

Michèle Steinwald

I have long craved practical, hands-on language describing curatorial processes in the performing arts, particularly for dance programming. *Shifting Cultural Power* is a dream come true. In this book, Hope Mohr takes an honest, disarming approach to mapping out the stories within The Bridge Project, resulting in a refreshingly relatable publication that is part handbook, part archive, a pinch of memoir, and complementary somatic explorations.

In January 2015, Christy Bolingbroke, then the Deputy Director for Advancement at ODC Theater in San Francisco, introduced Mohr and me. We were all in New York City for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (now the Association of Performing Arts Professionals, aka APAP) conference. Bolingbroke and I had been in conversation around presenting *Reorganizing Ourselves*, a three-hour, salon-style think tank I codesigned and facilitated, incorporating two performative lectures, one by Judson Dance Theater choreographer Deborah Hay and the other by Bay Area philosophy professor Alva Noë. She knew that including out-of-towners (Hay and me) in her season programming at ODC would be a hard sell, even with a renowned artist such as Hay.

Bolingbroke wisely steered Mohr and me toward one another, knowing that my collaboration closely aligned with Hope Mohr Dance's curatorial platform, The Bridge Project. The early years of The Bridge Project centered on influential Judson-era choreographers Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, and Simone Forti, alongside Bay Area dance makers; adding Hay's performative lecture was in keeping with that model. Our first meeting led Mohr to incor-

porate *Reorganizing Ourselves* into The Bridge Project's 2015 program, *Rewriting Dance*. Mohr and I have been colleagues and supporters of one another's work, albeit from a distance, ever since.

Moved by what I was seeing and reading in The Bridge Project's annual programming announcement emails, I was particularly struck by its 2017 *Radical Movements: Gender and Politics in Performance*, which came out just as the #MeToo movement was going viral. Most of us had been expecting America's first female president to be in office and were still reeling from the election. The collision of gender and politics gave us an urgent reason to curate. Between the artists' names and photos listed, gender representation in that issue was broadly displayed and defiantly redefined for a general public. The platform's curatorial backbone was firmly asserted.

At the time, I deeply wished I could fly to San Francisco, attend *Radical Movements*, and experience the performances and dialogues firsthand. I would have loved to witness how audiences participated from their seats, to feel the room, the resonance between the artists and audience members in real time. Flash forward: this book offers the next best thing, including somatic prompts for relating kinesthetically to the concepts behind The Bridge Project's curatorial programming.

While *Radical Movements* marched on, the male gaze continued to invade society as well as performing arts offerings in my local community. Time was pressing for a curatorial platform to speak directly to feminism and matters concerning consent. Mohr's thoughtfulness was evident in 2017's artistic planning. *Shifting Cultural Power* catalogues the circumstances around *Radical Movements* within The Bridge Project's entire programmatic history.

Mohr interviewed me for her blog, *the body is the brain*, in response to my 2018 APAP conference session with choreographer Dr. Ananya Chatterjea entitled "Decolonizing Curatorial Practice 101." During the conversation, I shared some core resources I had learned to lean on to start undoing white supremacist thinking in my curatorial work. I talked about the need to reprogram myself and embody accountability through my practices. We also spoke of tangible ways, as a former dancer and choreographer myself, I could unravel binary rationales that limit my perception of aesthetics and artistic development.

As it happened, at the time of that interview I was preparing for another APAP session, "Artists Building a Code of Ethics in the Era of #MeToo," with theater director Emily Marks in 2019. While I had long admired voices in movements for social change, I had primarily stayed in the wings, as a producer, since retiring as a performer. I had felt more confident in my role behind the

scenes. Mohr and I talked honestly and easily over the phone that day, but I still felt vulnerable committing my responses for public scrutiny. Sharing my internal processes turned out to be worth the risk. The resulting blog post, “Building Accountability in the Dance Field,” spoke to other justice-minded artists when I posted it on Facebook and is still one of my proudest career markers to date. As she did in her shorter-form written work, Mohr boldly aligns the professional and the personal within the historical through line of her book, including many of the ideas discussed in our interview.

In January 2020, Mohr and Bolingbroke, now director at the National Center for Choreography at The University of Akron, invited me to be this book’s dramaturge and support its development as an outside eye by offering conceptual feedback.² Because I, personally, have been fed by how Mohr’s curiosity and humanity are made evident in her curatorial platforms, the choice to be involved as an editor for the book was an easy one. It’s clear the accumulation of The Bridge Project’s events and community interactions have been guideposts for Mohr’s curatorial journey.

While I would characterize my own curatorial approaches as interventions—unlike Mohr’s sustained interactions—I, too, am grappling with how to employ a complicated set of privileges as a white, educated, cis-gendered, queer woman over the course of a career. With social justice and racial equity as the undergirding values within my current curatorial approaches, I know that someday soon, if I am true to my morals, I will be curating myself out of the room. As an activist curator, I have made my motives visible and relied on grassroots political organizing. I aspire to reparations, not just diversity and inclusion. Even as the structures I create around presenting dance become hospitable, resonant, and accessible to more than just white artists, I, as the curator, increasingly become an obstacle for BIPOC leadership. The rationale around being a “woke” white curator holding space for artists of color is ultimately self-aggrandizing. Once my ability to infiltrate white systems of power is no longer necessary, the best I can hope for is to discreetly leave. Like a painter finishing the floor of a room with only one door, I need to head for the exit in order to avoid painting myself into a corner.

ABOUT MICHÈLE STEINWALD

Marked by four major influences (seeing Rosas at age fourteen, producing a post-punk show at age fifteen, studying with Deborah Hay at age twenty-one, and watching for decades the TV series *Law & Order*), Michèle Steinwald is a Canadian, feminist, DIY, artist-centered, pseudo-forensic, embodied, community-driven, cultural organizer working in the US.