Hope Mohr Dance: Dance as a Vehicle for Questioning | By Marie Tollon

On the way to watch Hope Mohr’s rehearsal, I realized just after parking that I had locked myself out of my car. Right at the corner of Eighth avenue and Folsom, my purse, keys, and cell phone lay in full view in the back seat of the beaten Geo Prism that has granted me mobility for the past few years. Circling the car with the relentlessness of a trapped animal, I felt myself thinking how uncanny and ironic the situation was, as for me, much of Mohr’s work is to crack space open. I thought about Creon’s words in poet Anne Carson’s Antigonick, a text that Mohr has used as an inspiration for her piece ridetherhythm: “You crack me you crack me open you crack me open again.”

ridetherythm is one of three premieres that Hope Mohr Dance will present at ODC Theater from April 10 to 13. In the opening scene of Mohr’s Route 20, which also premieres next week, a dancer enters the stage with a quick, staggered step, and advances with feet and knees wide open, while one rigid arm, antenna-like, pokes forward inquisitively. The seeing in this movement is not only the optical, but is also...
transformed into a mechanism for the sensory, in which the entire body is incorporated. This first gesture from Route 20 signals one of the core operating modes of Mohr’s work: to interrogate space and disclose its content.

In addition to focusing on transparency, Mohr’s work explores the cultural issue of female agency and challenges traditional representations of gender. Characterized by a collaborative approach, it also redefines the role of performer and choreographer, and stretches the choreographic material so that it takes on qualities inherent to both visual arts and music.

An inquisitive and transparent body
Currently an artist-in-residence at ODC, Mohr created Hope Mohr Dance in 2007 after performing with postmodern dance choreographers Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and Douglas Dunn, while receiving a law degree from Columbia University. In Mohr’s work, a deep curiosity drives the creative process. The material she and her dancers generate stems from questions and research. “Notice what you are curious about. Let questions motivate your practice,” Mohr offered to a class of visiting students from the San Francisco Art Institute last March. As they investigated their body’s responses to the environment, Mohr encouraged students to “listen to the rhythm of the space” and to cultivate an attitude of “quiet alertness.” Inquisitive and determined, Mohr creates room for surprises in her process and allows for the material to destabilize her as it ‘reacts back.’ She explains: “I remind myself to step back, to take a distance from the work, and let it respond. If I didn’t let the work affect me, I couldn’t sustain the practice.”

Mohr’s questioning nature prods her to examine what exists beyond appearances. The set of several of her works offers a visual testimony to her interest in turning the inside out. In Failure of the Sign is the Sign (2013), artist Katrina Rodabaugh’s set is a poetic rendition of the inner landscape of the body: tube-like forms of plush blue fabric extend upstage, some in the shape of organs. The set and the movement vocabulary confront the viewer with both inner and outer worlds. Similarly, inside and
outside spaces are exposed in Zakary Zide’s white rectangular PVC pipes that populate *Reluctant Light* (2012). These bone-like structures offer performers a place to move through, cave in, and manipulate.

![Image](image.jpg)

"Reluctant Light" Photo by Margo Moritz

Mohr’s solo *Plainsong* (2012) also gives room to the inner unfolding of the protagonist. The piece revisits the story of Penelope, Odysseus’ faithful wife in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Rodabaugh’s large tapestry of intricately woven red yarn forms the backdrop of the dance. Reminiscent of the thread that Penelope weaves during the day and undoes every night, the long sinew of crimson evokes the blood that circulates within one’s body. Some of the lyrics, written by Mohr, bring to light the hidden movement within the body: “cells burst / membranes hum / one vein flows to the next.”

Yet, in evoking the inner world, Mohr eschews narrative. Her spare but rigorous compositions are an extension of the postmodern lineage. “My experience dancing for Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, and other Judson Church pioneers has left me with a firm preference for abstraction over story telling,” Mohr comments. For her, abstraction offers an opportunity to let the body speak. Transparency is indeed a recurring theme in Mohr’s work: “I’m interested in the extent to which the questions driving a creative process can still exist in performance. I’m interested in the layers of information that accumulate and collide in the creative process. Too often the act of shaping dance for performance creates a package that smooths away the rough edges that are more tolerable in rehearsal. I like to see the seams and the hand of the maker. I enjoy the rawness of a questioning mind. I’m interested in how to leave the act of making transparent within a crafted form.”

**In betweenness: challenging traditional roles and representations**

Embodying both robotic and human qualities, the first movements of *Route 20* also reflect Mohr’s interest in blurring familiar lines, and pushing the material towards an ambiguous state, or an *in-between* place. Mohr explains: “Video artist Bill Viola talks about how people, when faced with a work of art, often ask: ‘What does it mean?’ He writes about the space that opens up if, instead of that question, people ask other questions. I’m not interested in dance as entertainment. I’m interested in dance as a vehicle for questioning. Blurring familiar categories can open up space for doubt,
ambiguity, even discomfort. I think that’s a fruitful place from which to make and experience art.”

Performing objects

“In Failure of the Sign is the Sign, the performers interact with the fabric pieces. Their bodies wrap around the soft, long-limbed sculptures until set and performer become one. Through the props, the inside of the body becomes a performing entity. Route 20 also features a performing object: a massive block of ice, that embodies opposite qualities of cold and hot, solid and liquid. Moving at a dissonant pace from that of the performers, it exists in relationship to them, adding a layer to their rhythm, and “blurring the power dynamic between human and non-human entities” as Judy Hussie-Taylor wrote in regards to objects taking on a performative presence in her introduction to the Danspace Project Platform 2010.

Practice and Performance
Mohr’s work often blurs the line between practice and performance, such as in her collaboration with dancer Christian Burns and musician David Szlasa. In metrics of intimacy (2013), Mohr and Burns share their improvisational process on stage, investigating the question “When does practice becomes performance?” The soundscape includes recordings from conversations between the performers during rehearsal, creating an indefinite territory between the studio and the stage. In Failure of the Sign is the Sign, the audience walks into the theater to find Schwab intertwined and moving organically with one of Rodabaugh’s long limbs of blue fabric. Playing with time, the piece stretches the edges of performance.

Dancers’ role
At times, dancers also take the roles of dramaturges. Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (2014), which will also premiere as part of the company’s 7th home season, includes moments of improvisation, where the dancers respond kinetically to their inner and outer environment. Mohr writes in her blog The Body is The Brain: “Because neither music nor story anchors postmodern dance, postmodern performers have a bigger responsibility than in classical or modern dance (e.g., Graham) to be dramaturges for
choreographers. Again, [André] Lepecki [says]: ‘The dancers in most contemporary works today have to produce the material, to think about the scenes, they have to choreograph themselves. So, it ends up that the dancers are also making dramaturgical decisions in a way. They’re making the choreographic decisions and they come up with ideas to solve the scenes sometimes.” In Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, as Graham voices ‘Bend!’ the rest of the dancers interpret his vocal instruction with their body. Within the framework of the piece, dancers give directions to one another, for a slight moment, reflecting a power shift within the structure of the choreography.

Choreographer’s role

Hope Mohr and Christian Burns in “metrics of intimacy”

Additionally, Mohr has blurred the lines typically defining a choreographer by taking on a dramaturgical or curatorial role through her commitment to heighten the critical discourse around dance in the Bay Area. She established the Bridge Project, a program through which she invites choreographers and teachers to the Bay Area for teaching and performing residencies. Invited artists have included Susan Rethorst (2013), Dusan Tynek (2012), Liz Gerring (2011), and Molissa Fenley (2010). Susan Rethorst set her Behold Bold Sam Dog on a cast of local choreographers -including Mohr- as part of Mohr’s home season at ODC last year. The evening featured Mohr as choreographer, curator and performer.

When dance becomes otherly

Mohr’s exploration of boundaries also appears in how she pushes the medium of dance to become otherly and to incorporate multiple forms of creative practice, such as the visual arts. In Failure of the Sign is the Sign, David Schleiffers settles one of Rodabaugh’s fabric pieces on his shoulders. The moment is sculptural as the gesture allows the body to transfer into static form. Again this shift appears in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction when Schleiffers stands in a diagonal facing upstage, while Lindsey Renee Derry climbs on his shoulders before falling into Bannon-Neches’ arms. As Derry climbs repeatedly on his back, Schleiffers keeps the immobility and stature of a bronze sculpture. Similarly, in Route 20, the three performers form a triangle, their cheeks motion towards each other, and one can visualize them touching, although they remain a few feet away from each other. The moment gives both volume and form to the negative space that surrounds their bodies.

In Mohr’s collaboration with jazz musicians for Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, movement becomes sound. Consider the opening scene: Schwab and Graham are
onstage. Schwab accomplishes a solo, while Graham, in close relationship, stays still, shifting location at times. With his grounding presence, Graham steadies the beat, creating a support from which Schwab is free to improvise. Additionally, throughout the piece, dancers inhabit the line, stretch and breathe within it, recalling the words of jazz pianist McCoy Tyner about the making of John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*: “John had a very wonderful way of being flexible with the music, flexing it, stretching it. You know, we reflected that kind of thing. He gave us the freedom to do that. We thought of something, ‘Oh, then we’ll play it,’ you know? And he said, ‘Yeah, I have a feeling’—you know? And all that freedom just came together when we did that record.”

**A commitment to collaborative process**

Tyner’s words also communicate the union of several artistic voices within one piece, another aspect at the core of Mohr’s work. In teaching a movement workshop to painters, Mohr encouraged students to navigate the constantly shifting line between impression and reaction, listening and responding, consuming and expelling. This instruction echoes Mohr’s own process as a choreographer who allows for the work to be affected and even transformed by the voices of her collaborators. In her blog, Mohr explains: “We’re in an era where old school models of making work (the hierarchical master filling empty vessels i.e. dancers) are fading away and unfashionable... The dancers I work with are my most important collaborators. Those relationships, especially when difficult, teach me what it means to be an artist.”

Similarly, about *The Unsayable* (2011) which features a mixed cast of dancers and veterans, Mohr said: “One of the things that really distinguishes this process from other works that have been about war is that the veterans are not just source material, they are part of the artistic team... They are artistic collaborators.”

Inviting artists from other mediums to see and offer feedback on a dance is another way Mohr destabilizes and invigorates her work. Mohr writes in her blog: “When I initially invited [playwright] Mark Jackson, I asked him to “wreck” what I had made independently with the hope that his intervention would bring my own voice into sharper focus. ... I soon realized that something was happening in the room other than a “wrecking” of my work. Mark was prodding the material to become more fully
itself. Mark made some changes to the content as you might see it notated on the page (for example, removing text, but keeping the blocking), but for the most part, the surface of the dance was relatively unchanged. However, he utterly transformed the guts of the piece. After his interventions, the work had more clarity, energy and impact.”

While bringing together multiple voices within a piece, Mohr insists on retaining authorship of the work. When Mohr writes in her blog about her experience as an improviser, she could be talking about the challenge of retaining authorship within a collaborative environment: “Everyone knows that in improvising, it’s critical to listen and respond to the environment. But equally important is a secure anchor in one’s own voice. How am I present as a performer? Does my movement say, ‘I’m here?’ Does my location in space say, ’I’m here?’ Does my choice of facing? My eyes? My face? My center? My decisions?”

Investigating the cultural problem of female agency

Mohr mentions that she “continue[s] to be interested in the cultural problem of female agency.” In light of Mohr’s comment, the red yarn of Plainsong can also possibly evoke the bloodline that links generations of women to each other. Mohr’s piece seems to question the possible trappings of an individual into existing representations and roles. How does one step out of the confinement of tradition, whether cultural, patriarchal or choreographic?

In addition to Plainsong, The Force that Drives the Flower (2009) investigates the myth of Demeter and Persephone, while ridetherhythm gives voice to Antigone. Mohr’s focus on the female protagonist in Greek myths recalls choreographer Martha Graham’s predilection for Greek heroines (Think Medea in Cave of the Heart, or Clytemnestra in Graham’s dance by the same name).

Although Mohr and Graham belong to different choreographic genres, a comparative analysis of Plainsong and Graham’s Night Journey, opens up new levels of reading into Mohr’s piece. In Night Journey, Graham revisits the myth of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, by giving Jocasta, Oedipus’ mother and lover, the central role. Graham replays the myth by emphasizing a woman’s psychological journey, but remains within Sophocles’ narrative, unchanging its end -suicide- for Jocasta.
Plainsong also focuses on the female character's life within the confinement of socio-cultural expectations. Yet the dance’s ending empowers the woman: upon finding a pair of scissors in the red yarn tapestry, the performer quickly cuts the yarn, drops the scissors, and steps offstage, freeing herself from the narrative that encloses her. Contrary to Jocasta’s grandiose hanging in Night Journey, Penelope’s exit is furtive and unassuming, further evidence of Mohr’s preference for abstraction and postmodern discourse. Within the latter, the piece offers an insight into the possibility of creating a narrative of one’s own.

ridetherhythm also addresses the issue of female agency and voice, both figuratively and literally, as dancers speak in the piece. Where Carson offers a multilayered translation of Sophocles’ play, by adding the character of Nick or referring to authors such as Hegel and Beckett within her text, Mohr superimposes the figure of Antigone with that of Carol White, the California housewife in Todd Haynes’ 1995 movie Safe. Carson’s text is published in her own handwriting, which represents a stamp of individuality. Likewise, Mohr writes that the piece is an attempt at “locating her voice.” It is one that reevaluates the power dynamic between men and women. In the dance, Katharine Hawthorne states: “Girls cannot force their way against men. Yet I will.”

Mohr continues to subtract the layers of inherited models in order to articulate her artistic voice. In her many roles as a writer, performer and choreographer, she questions the process of art making and the essence of an artwork with a rigorous dedication to the choreographic craft. Her dances offer spare but meticulous compositions where both body and space become a laboratory for research and inquiry about what it means to make art and how it relates to our lives.