

“For if man’s sphere of activity is no longer limited by extension or duration or even opaqueness of obstacles barring his way, where is his presence, his real presence, located? ‘Tele-presence,’ no doubt, but where? From what starting point or position? Living-present, here and there at the same time, where am I if I am everywhere?”

Paul Virilio, “Open Sky”

“I am – the ‘I’ is – another. Sometimes ‘I’ is not one but many.”

Daniel Birnbaum, “Chronology”

In 2009, I participated in the Solo Performance Commissioning Project with Deborah Hay. After spending three months adapting the solo, *At Once*, I presented it several times in Europe and in the US in 2010. After I began performing it, however, I became disillusioned with what I felt (at the time) to be limitations to the work itself: posing questions to myself that Deborah had spent years formulating, dancing a choreography she had spent a year making, and constantly feeling a need to “include” her in my practice of performance. I left the solo to concentrate on my own work.

I began to notice – in my practice and in conversations around and about my work – that Deborah continued to come back to me, as did her questions. More than any other practice (a word which I often shy away from), Deborah’s actually remained my constant, and continued to invite me to return to it, to return to these questions, her questions. Last year, I picked up the solo again, this time pulling it out of its original form as an adaptation and putting it in conversation with various art theorists and philosophers I had encountered between the time when I had stopped performing the solo and when I decided to pick it up again. I titled this new solo – no longer an adaptation – *Déjà Vu, At Once*.

“What if how I see while I am dancing is a means by which movement arises without having to go look for it?”

“The movement may change but the choreography itself does not change.”

Deborah Hay

Déjà Vu, as a title, could refer to the distinction made by the French visual artist, Daniel, Buren to describe how his work differs from that of Marcel Duchamp's - or, rather, how their approaches are fundamentally different. Duchamp used the term "déjà fait" to describe objects that had already been “made” – readymades – whereas Buren uses "déjà vu" to describe his works as representing things that have already been *seen*. Likewise, the solo refers to that which has already been "seen." This differentiation is perhaps most important for me (as performer), to remind myself that my movements – though familiar – have of course never been done before. The piece as a whole, however, has already been seen, and this remains true for every presentation of it since it will have always already been seen. Within the solo,

however, the particular movements and conversations that take place will always differ - this is an essential detail of the piece. There is also a sense that what has been seen before isn't just this particular solo or these thoughts but rather the movements, lines made with the body, breaths taken that have actually already been seen, witnessed. This is not a fatalist reading of "everything has already been done" (of which I am not a fan), but rather an acknowledgement of a kind of familiarity with my own body, a feeling of being at home in it, a recognition of playing witness to my own body and my memories of it.

"Two people who know each other are in the same space. While one person predicts continuously the other person's behavior, the other person recounts (by memory) the other's past behavior."

Dan Graham, Past/Future Split Attention, 1972

The English language took the phrase "déjà vu" from the French to describe this unexpected sensation of living through a moment or a situation that feels familiar, that we feel like we've already lived, *moment for moment*. In revisiting the 2009 performance score *At Once* and allowing my body to re-enter into a very specific practice such as Hay's brings up a lot of these familiar sensations – a near-clairvoyance of what is to come, a prediction, and also a recognition of what is past, what my body remembers, what has already been seen, including what has already been seen by me, what I have already seen my body do. I want to suggest a certain witnessing of my own body, which I consider in this work a part of the physical world – of course – but maybe more specifically, the visible world.

"...everything is bound to return...but the repetition is not identical [...] Difference as such returns...difference is always coming back."

Daniel Birnbaum, Chronology

"There is no repetition in live performance."

Deborah Hay

With this most recent version, the notion that repetition does not exist in live performance, something Hay herself posits in her practice, has been a driving force. I read recently that only one thing ever repeats itself: difference. If what repeats itself continuously is difference, then, actually, what I see and the body I inhabit, have never been seen before. Nothing I perceive have I ever perceived prior – or at least not in this way, not in this moment, this past moment. Yet, with each passing moment, I am creating a potential for familiarity, a physical recognition of an instant. I am constantly creating my own déjà vu.

I think it also refers to what I was maybe trying to suggest when I began the project with the idea of Hay's choreography becoming something "recognizable" - that is, something "already seen," something a spectator who has seen her work before could recognize. For Hay, this should not be the case, yet I am intrigued that I somehow understand this possible critique of the work. I do not want to pursue this potential flaw in what it means to adapt a choreography and to appropriate a practice developed by a singular person on her own body; I would rather aspire to Hay's ideals while knowing that it is most likely an impossible challenge to remain within her practice of performance while attempting to layer critique and distance on top of (or next to) it. Furthermore, I return (*differently, each time*) to a sense of familiarity in *this* body in *this* practice. What I recognize, maybe, is the difference of these living things.

"...one is not limited to correcting a work or to integrating diverse fragments of out-of-date works into a new one; one can also alter the meaning of these fragments in any appropriate way..."

Guy Debord, Methods of Detournement

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction* has been an important text to return to during this process:

"It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already *informed* by other objects. Notions of originality (being at the origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape [...] The artistic question is no longer: "what can we make that is new?" but "how can we make do with what we have?"

In a fairly recent book by the (now-defunct) performance collective Goat Island, they propose an "ecological" approach to performance and art-making that I find to be in line with Bourriaud's own observations. Notions of recycling, re-using, re-making have been inspiring suggestions to continue to work on a choreography that is not technically my own, but one whose pertinence I insist upon.

"Don't look for the meaning, look for the use."

Ludwig Wittgenstein

What if I treat Hay's original choreography and practice as a container *to use* as such? Rather than devoting myself to a dance dogma, I am choosing to shift the *use* of the choreography. Inside it, I propose a [non-linear] series of events – a conversing, a writing, maybe a screen recording of a lecture – to take place, actions that shift each time they are invoked. Unsure of themselves, these actions question (still a central tenet to Hay's own practice) their intentions, their function, their sustainability. Rather than imagining "potential" conversations that *could* take place, I am more

interested in actually realizing these conversations, and allowing them to take place in a way that is determined by me, and by the performance practice. In this way, the topics are curated in such a way that they can – and do – shift each time the solo is performed.

“The past is preserved in itself.”

Gilles Deleuze, Cinema II

“...at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past which is preserved. Time flows and each present fades, but it doesn't disappear.”

Daniel Birnbaum, Chronology

As I mentioned, I am setting up a known impossibility for myself, though the impossibility of it is not what interests me. I know that completing a cohesive thought or movement that could be named or recognized does not have a place within Deborah's practice. The noticing of time passing at every moment – that everything is “here and gone” in every instant – prevents the possibility of recognition, reconsideration or cohesiveness. Thus, what I am doing – creating a sort of cohesion between movement and text – is in some way counter to Hay's established practice. But I have too many interests to stick to only one!

“But Ben, what if at every instant your whole body were producing unimaginably pure instances of specificity?”

Deborah Hay (as remembered by Ben Evans)

My interest in acknowledging the enigmatic nature of movement and attempting to address it directly through language *as I do it* alludes to the work of other makers who are equally inspiring to me and whose influence I would also like to include in the solo. Many of these choreographers are working directly with notions of representation and what it means to place a body in front of another to be watched. Why do we do this? How can we acknowledge, in a very pragmatic way, this relationship between spectator and performer? This lineage already feels somewhat dated – and indeed dates back to the Judson era, and maybe even before – yet it remains even today an important genealogy in dance and performance practice. In the new solo, I invoke this influence by often simply describing what I am doing *while I am doing it*.

Additionally, I began thinking of Hay's original solo as an object. Like any container, this one too remains the constant in the work. By describing what I am doing – and often reciting the performance score verbatim – am I actually giving tangibility (an approach toward object-hood) to a choreography that is otherwise enigmatic, fleeting, already gone? By attempting to explain what it is I am doing, I fix the dance in time.

The text that does not belong to Deborah is not fixed, and changes according to my interests and what I deem important to communicate in relation to the movement score. As Duchamp once suggested, “the act of choosing is enough to establish the artistic practice.” Thus, my choice of including this or that thinker or artist into this solo already forms a suggestion, an artistic “meeting” and ultimately – a practice. This is why I like to think of Hay’s score as arbitrary: it provides a set of parameters within which I can work and bump up against. By recounting the score and reminding myself in real time of Deborah’s questions and practice, I also push it further toward a suggestion of stability, allowing it to be *both* unnamable and named, enigmatic and understood, fleeting and graspable.

“The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen...it sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself...a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future...”

“...my body can include elements drawn from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is the mirror for man.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind

One of the reasons that I have chosen to continue working with Hay’s practice and this single choreography is because it allows me to live and to dance in a body that doesn’t know what it is doing, that is unsure, imprecise, that doesn’t have a technique. I am choosing to recognize the phenomenon of a body that is unsure of himself, that doesn’t do anything except follow his own interests and invites himself to be seen. This doesn’t necessarily mean that you see me – you might see me or you might not, as Deborah suggests – it simply means that all I can do is to invite you to do so. I don’t show you anything; I invite you to see me questioning myself in a heterogeneous body. My goal is not to compare myself to others, to suggest a heterogeneity of work – this already exists, obviously – but rather to dance in a body which is in itself heterogeneous, always living and dying at the same time, always forever passing into the past, changing, dividing, questioning.

- Ben Evans,
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