



ARTFORUM

[fjennett](#) | [log out](#) | [ADVERTISE](#) | [BACK ISSUES](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#)
 [search](#)
[ARTGUIDE](#) | [DIARY](#) | [PICKS](#) | [NEWS](#) | [IN PRINT](#) | [FILM](#) | [500 WORDS](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [PREVIEWS](#) | [TALKBACK](#) | [A & E](#) | [BOOKFORUM](#) | [中文版](#)

PAUL
KASMIN
GALLERY

[links](#)

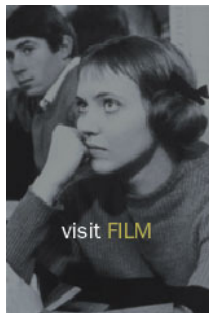
IN PRINT



SUBSCRIBE

recent issues

November 2010
October 2010
September 2010
Summer 2010
May 2010
April 2010
March 2010
[Archive to 1998](#)



visit **FILM**

FEBRUARY 2010

Reaction Time

URSULA EAGLY ON DEBORAH HAY



Deborah Hay, *If I Sing to You*, 2008. Rehearsal view, Huis aan de Werf, Utrecht, the Netherlands, April 15, 2008. From left: Juliette Mapp, Amelia Reeber, Michelle Boulé, and Jeanine Durning. Photo: Anna van Kooij for Springdance.

THE AMERICAN CHOREOGRAPHER Deborah Hay has minimal interest in movement. She'll tell you herself: She is not interested in athletic movement, or in abstract movement, or in movement that comes naturally. After nearly fifty years of experimentation—beginning as a dancer for Merce Cunningham and as a member of Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s—Hay has arrived at an understanding of dance that relies not on pedestrian tasks or set phrases but rather on radical shifts of awareness.

Hay's approach elicits remarkable performances in which movement is akin to a side effect—as in *If I Sing to You*, 2008, which had its US premiere this past November at the Baryshnikov Arts Center as part of Performa 09 in New York. Six women wiggled, loped, and hesitated on a bare stage. They shifted into tight line formations like iron filaments drawn by a magnet, then scattered out across the space. Solos erupted in bursts of shrieking or barking. Each dancer quivered with alertness. A heightened sense of theatricality set this piece apart from previous Hay works: Some of the women dancers were dressed as men—a decision that each made independently every night—complete with naturalistic facial hair. Abstract movement intersected with moments of mime, most notably a manic, caricatured fellatio-fest. Faint strains of recorded music were sporadically heard in addition to the sounds of the dancers' own footfalls, muttering, or lines of song.

These absurd actions and relationships are the product of a complex dual structure in Hay's work. First, there are her exacting, poemlike dance scores. These diverge from event scores and much choreographic direction in that the lines do not dictate actions to be taken. They are more like riddles to be embodied. For example, one line from the score for *If I Sing to You* is "String on fire." It is interpreted differently by each performer, but it tends to be very kinetic and is largely enacted in the lower body. Just to be clear, however, "String on fire" never looks like a mimetic interpretation of burning twine. The next line in the score is "Forget string on fire (as best you can)."

Then, for each dance, Hay writes koanlike questions for the performers to continually address, both mentally and bodily, throughout the piece. For example, one of Hay's recent questions is: "What if every cell in the body at once has the potential to perceive the uniqueness and originality of time?"

Hay's choreography is performed by attempting simultaneously to interpret the score and to ask the questions. Dancers strive to juggle the two elements; their efforts may or may not result in motion. Their virtuosity is based not in athleticism but in the refinement of their attention, of their constant navigating of the score and the questions. Although the work is physically kinetic, then, Hay's real medium is perception. For dancers, the choreography is impossible. But Hay privileges this experience; she is a dancer's choreographer.

Arriving at this point entailed a circuitous, singular trajectory. Hay began working against traditional forms of virtuosity in the 1960s. In the '70s, she made a series of dances for untrained performers and no audience, followed by large-scale group pieces that she created over the course of annual four-month-long workshops. "I was scraped clean of any sense of hierarchy of movement by watching untrained performers day after day perform the same movement differently every single day," Hay says. "Everything was possible."

In the '90s, her work became increasingly subtle and based on fine shifts of the performers' attention. It also became less and less interesting to untrained dancers. "They weren't getting an aerobic workout; they weren't so-called dancing; they weren't feeling pretty," Hay says. She was deeply discouraged by the waning attendance at her workshops and considered retirement.

At that time, the Australian dancer Ros Warby traveled to study with Hay in Austin, Texas; Hay was so impressed by her work that she decided to make one last piece, now with trained dancers like Warby. She also enlisted the exceptional performers Wally Cardona, Mark Lorimer, and Chrysa Parkinson and made *The Match*, which premiered at New York's Danspace Project in 2004. It was a watershed. Houses were packed. "People were able to see my choreography in a way that they had never seen it before," Hay says.

[ARTGUIDE](#) | [DIARY](#) | [PICKS](#) | [NEWS](#) | [IN PRINT](#) | [FILM](#) | [500 WORDS](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [PREVIEWS](#) | [TALKBACK](#) | [A & E](#) | [BOOKFORUM](#) | [中文版](#)

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY

