

CRAFT IN CONTEXT

Lineage, Mentorship and the work of Hope Mohr

By Emily Hite

“Is this me? Or is this my training?” — Hope Mohr

“POSTMODERN DANCE SUFFERS FROM HISTORICAL AMNESIA, as each subsequent generation breaks with tradition and wants to forge uncharted aesthetic paths.” John Killacky’s argument in his article “Anna’s Postmodern Children” (*In Dance*, September 2009) continues: “Too many artists erase mentors and influences, as though the perceived connection mitigates their creativity.” Killacky recognizes Yvonne Rainer’s 1965 “No Manifesto,” a seminal statement of intent for postmodern dance, as a telling example of forgotten history that keeps new work from moving forward. (The manifesto described a new kind of theater by stating what it was not: bound by the conventions of its past.) Presenting and reading forms of contemporary dance within their historical contexts and with respect to choreographic lineage deepens engagement with the art. Mentors offer knowledge from experience. They provide a body of work from which mentees can define their own paths—or radically depart in an informed way. In an interview about her company’s upcoming performances, choreographer Hope Mohr cited the importance of Killacky’s argument; she related it to the sense of responsibility she feels to preserve legacies of the postmodern dance pioneers formerly affiliated with New York’s Judson Dance Theater (1962-1964) and Grand Union (1970-1976). Having worked with several of them as a dancer, she wishes to give these choreographers credit in terms of her own work. Mohr listed Rainer’s ideology and her own working relationship with Choreographers in Mentorship Exchange (CHIME) mentor Molissa Fenley among the influences that both support her individual artistic point of view and challenge her habits of training. In this context, creativity flourishes.

Hope Mohr Dance’s third home season, running March 4-6 at Theater Artaud, accordingly presents Mohr’s premiere *Far from Perfect* in conversation with the work of those affecting figures. Rainer’s *Trio A* (1966), performed by Mohr and Robbie Cook once in unison and once in a version called *Trio A Pressured* (1999), and Fenley’s solo *Mass Balance* (2009), performed by the choreographer, complete an intergenerational, conceptually- and aesthetically-varied program. *Perfect* studies the act of forgiveness, the creative process, and the mystery of perfection. Mohr found inspiration and structure in a series of meticulously constructed, grid-like compositions by Canadian-American painter Agnes Martin (1912-2004). Text by poet Brenda Hillman, music by William Duckworth, and design by David Szlasa contribute layers of meaning to the choreography. As one of the five dancers in *Perfect*, I write from the perspective of participating in some of Mohr and Fenley’s CHIME experiments through HMD’s journey with the piece, and with the history of having worked with Mohr since 2004.

Mohr came to *Perfect* knowing she wanted to make a dance about forgiveness. She began working in the studio on emotionally-based movement explorations more than two years ago and read widely on the subject. With characteristic thoroughness, she attended a workshop by Dr. Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project. The choreographer writes, “Tendency to hold a grudge is a character flaw that must be released to free up the creative voice. Just as with physical habits of tension, I also aim to release emotional rigidity that impedes expression.” She adds, “The piece is not a self-improvement project, however; I’m interested in the implications and applications of these themes as they extend beyond my own life.” Mohr’s aesthetic preferences with regard to movement vocabulary and performance quality, both best illustrated by her dancing, can be described as a translucent body: clear in form, but empty of unnecessary tension. The translucent body, a container of knowledge, memory, and emotion, responds to interior states and exterior environments; it sees and invites being seen; it adapts while remaining composed. Judson alumna Deborah Hay introduced Mohr to the premise “invite being seen” in a workshop.

Fenley introduced Mohr to Martin’s paintings, believing the sincerity and intellectual rigor that had inspired her life might also appeal to her mentee. Rather than the impossible pursuit of perfection, “there’s a belief in the intuitive life and a belief in nature” driving Martin’s paintings, Fenley says. An associate professor of dance at Mills College on faculty since 1999, she spends each spring in Oakland teaching. Her course offerings include two choreography classes and a graduate seminar called Ideas about Space. Fenley says, “I enjoy very much watching other people’s work and helping them find what they’re doing.” Mohr aims to develop her own distinctive movement signature, as Fenley has. As part of their experience with CHIME, a program of the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company that offers free studio space and cash to support self-selected pairs of artists awarded the grant for one year, Mohr traveled to New York, where Fenley lives and runs her company, Molissa Fenley and

Dancers. In helping Mohr distill her work, Fenley watched her dance and identified moments that worked, and moments that appeared derivative. Mohr found satisfaction in the stringent editing process. By continually asking herself, “Is this me? Or is this my training?” she decided whether the movement carried her voice. Fenley particularly inspected Mohr’s habits of release technique. On this subject, mentor and mentee found they had different viewpoints on the aesthetic value of the form. Mohr performed with the Trisha Brown Dance Company for four years and trained in Brown’s austere form of release technique. Fenley, who developed her movement signature near the start of her career while training in athletics and early forms of modern dance, does not find release technique to be functional in her own work. Still, Mohr evaluated each moment that read as derivative to determine whether the release elements were necessary; in her words, “Mimicry is not strength,” and not useful. Fenley says that through mentorship, she hopes to impart Agnes Martin’s approach to painting: “She found the most natural way for her hand to move for her mind and body to be involved in the painting.”

The CHIME partners explored how to mine visual art for choreographic structures. The painting Mohr consistently returned to in making *Far From Perfect*—Martin’s *Trumpet* (1967)—also served as a touchstone for discussions with Fenley. Grounded by a network of rectangles drawn in pencil, infused with neutral-toned paint applied with a brush that seems to blow air and sound at various strengths across the horizontal bars, *Trumpet* dynamically synthesizes intellect and emotion to stimulate imagination. One critic pictured the work as a storm viewed through a window, powerful as seen from a safe distance.¹ Fenley, whom Mohr introduced to her dancers as “the queen of space,” asked what the grid structure could accomplish beyond tracing precise patterns onstage. Could Mohr “somehow imbue that space with a more mythic idea behind it,” perhaps a mapped world wherein regions of the space evoked particular physical textures? How could Mohr organize space as a manifestation of feeling? What could mere placement of the body on stage evoke? One possibility Fenley mentioned in terms of visual art: downstage, closest to the audience, could be like a portrait; midstage, like a still life; upstage, like a landscape.



In her thirty-five years of choreographing in New York, Fenley has worked closely with contemporary visual artists. Her solo *Mass Balance* comes first in a series of five prop dances in which she commissions artists to create something she can carry or wear. Artist Todd Richmond offered a ten-foot painted wooden dowel. Fenley challenged herself to deal with whatever she was given, and so *Mass Balance* “resides within and around this pole.” *The New York Times* describes Fenley’s many evocations through her manipulation of the prop, concluding, “It is a ruthless geometry Ms. Fenley is after, in which even lushly curving hands adhere to strict rules. Yet what possibilities bloom in that hushed, concentrated space. The imagination rushes in.”² Asked about her influences as a choreographer, Fenley describes “an intellectual lineage that would come from loving the work of Balanchine, loving the work of Cunningham, being very involved in the visual arts over the years and looking at methodology from contemporary visual art makers.” One favorite element of the CHIME experience being paired with Mohr, Fenley says: “I enjoyed the fact that she is also so intellectually driven.”

In addition to being driven to graduate from Columbia Law School while dancing professionally in New York, Mohr is drawn to text. Her comprehensive vocabulary includes Latin phrases, English words only the dictionary knows, and plain-spoken, articulate prose. While her commitment to living inside her body led her to choose dancing over law, she also believes body and brain supply complementary information. She quotes French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), “the unconscious is structured like a language.’ And I’m really interested in how language, just like the body, carries our unconscious.” In her new work, Mohr uses text to explore the unconscious processes behind perfectionism and holding a grudge.

Mohr’s desire to connect emotionally with others through movement comes across securely in her multiform work. Some facets of her choreographic lineage come from dancing in the company of Judson Dance Theater alumna Lucinda Childs, including a formalist approach to the placement of dance vocabulary in space, and a rigorous minimalism about her choices in doing so. (Mohr also praised Fenley’s “rigorous formalist approach”; Fenley clarifies that she is not so much a formalist as “a very formal thinker, and the rigor of it is what is interesting to me.”) Mohr shares these values for the containing structure of her work, creating a fertile tension with its weighted subject matter. “I don’t like chaos or clutter onstage. I like things to be coherent and clean....But emotionally I’m not a minimalist. I really want to move people.” She adds that she’s still working out how to present loaded content within a spare aesthetic.

Other methods of abstract composition of space she carried forward from Trisha Brown, who is a noted visual artist, one of the foremost postmodern choreographers, and a former Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union member. Brown, whom Mohr calls an “improv master,” also informed certain methods Mohr uses for setting up improvisation scores, recording them using video, and culling them for movement phrases. Fenley, who memorizes her own improvisation, writes it down and does not use video except to record a finished piece, was fascinated by Mohr’s process. Fenley was also impressed by Mohr’s exhaustive lists of objectives and the level of organization she brought to each rehearsal. Mohr’s asking her dancers to improvise and craft phrases from verbal tasks also differed from Fenley’s approach, which is to choreograph phrases herself since she finds her dancers’ interpretations within the structure to be its own improvisation.

Dance historian Sally Banes writes in the introduction to her book *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, “The history of modern dance is rapidly cyclical: revolution and institution; revolution and institution. The choices for each generation have been either to enter the new academy (but, inevitably, to dilute and trivialize it in doing so), or to create a new establishment. In this system, the importance of the choreographer over the dancer is obvious. The ‘tradition of the new’ demands that every dancer be a potential choreographer.”

Mohr fulfils her destiny by making her own work. But the element not to be missed in her soon-approaching program is Mohr dancing *Trio A*. Rainer’s famous continuous, uninflected movement phrase that said “no” to everything her manifesto proclaimed it would—in part by wearing sneakers and averting eye contact with the audience but also by its unadorned vocabulary—cannot avoid being beautiful. Each movement segment takes its own time: small, quick rotations of the arms in the shoulder sockets are juxtaposed with a held, extended leg in the dancer’s back space while the standing leg slowly turns. Though progressing without interruption, *Trio A* defies having no inflection. Performed in silence, the dance’s component textures create imagined sounds through a visual rhythm. Mohr’s uncomplicated carriage melts clearly to the floor and resolves to standing just as easily. *Trio A* contains a postmodern world in five minutes.

The first time I witnessed Mohr’s dancing, she was creating her first of four commissions at Stanford University while still performing with the Trisha Brown company. I saw the translucent one who not-paradoxically stole the show at Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall, and found a new favorite dancer. Five years and two babies later, Mohr hasn’t missed a step; she just focuses in new places. Looking at *Trumpet*, she writes of inspiration from “the combination of geometric precision and organic wash of color, of nuanced marks within a highly disciplined framework, of subtle and delicate variation within a template of extreme devotion and repetition. It speaks to me of the unending practice of being a dancer, and why I love it, and why I keep doing it. The richness of dance as a form. The infinite textures of the moving body and the wisdom contained therein.”

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SOURCES:

1 Cotter, Holland. “ART IN REVIEW; Agnes Martin—‘Five Decades.’” *New York Times*, April 4, 2003.

2 La Rocco, Claudia. “Her Ruthless Geometries.” *New York Times*, September 20, 2009.

Emily Hite has contributed to the *Dancing Times*, *Stanford* magazine, *Stanford Lively Arts* magazine, *Dance Magazine*, *Voice of Dance.com*, and Mindy Aloff’s book *Dance Anecdotes: Stories from the Worlds of Ballet, Broadway, the Ballroom, and Modern Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2006). In 2008 she interviewed Yvonne Mounsey for the George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive film of *Prodigal Son*. She joined Hope Mohr Dance in 2007.

Pictured: Laura Blakely, Tegan Schwab and Emily Hite, photo by Austin Forbord.