

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Tori Lawrence

**On being in the presence of Deborah Hay, and the history of events surrounding that experience in the studio.**

**by Annie Wilson**

Editor's note: In this long form lyric essay, Annie Wilson interrogates just what it means to practice dance as if it were/as if it is central to the practice of a waking life. She records a workshop with Deborah Hay in conversation with circumstances personal (two deaths--her grandmother's and a friend's), social (the election which coincided with the workshop), and philosophical (thoughts spurred by Hay's workshop, writing, and their influence on Wilson's experiential world). This essay is multi-modal and multi-valent, acknowledging the multiple voices that persist in our communities and in ourselves. -K. Kaschock

**On being in the presence of Deborah Hay, and the history of events surrounding that experience in the studio.**

I first experienced the Tower of Babel/babble, a term appropriated from the biblical story by Deborah Hay, at my grandmother's grave. It was a sunny summer day, the weather as it had been the day we buried her to the bagpipes' arching strains of "Amazing Grace." I stood at her grave, and wept. I searched for the source of my tears—for the thought I could hold up and say, "I am *sad*. And this is *why*." But just as quickly as a thought would present itself, it would slip back into the murky depths.

*I miss her I miss her I miss her I rarely saw her the last few years I miss everyone I've ever known I miss everyone I know who's died I miss friends who are alive but gone, lost through distance or fights or time. I'm afraid to die.*

*One day this will be me. My bones my bones bones bones bones  
Alex's bones, Mom's bones bones bones bones  
I don't want to bury her, one day  
my granddaughter will stand above my bones.*

When the breeze blew I could feel myself blowing away, already a pile of ashes, nothing but a skeleton remaining.

*Everyone I love will die and be buried  
in the only place left that is quiet shhhhh where time  
passes glacially decomposing  
takes longer than death itself*

*I watched her die with my own eyes she cleaved away from her body and it was already becoming dirt*

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In *My Body the Buddhist*, Deborah Hay describes the Tower of Babel/tower of babble in the chapter titled “my body commits to practice.” In it she says: “I feel like a tower of babble. Millions of voices speak from my body at once—no one voice more dominant—a deliberate exercise to outwit the need to encapsulate... The Tower of Babel is a metaphor for performance. Tower is the attention. Babble is each moment of movement. This Tower of Babel is a constantly shattering, nondiminishing tower. Perceived as inseparable, tower/babble creates a self-induced continuum of attention.”

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I officially enter the tower of babble when Mascher Space Cooperative and University of the Arts bring Hay to Philadelphia for a week-long workshop with Mascher members and UArts dance seniors. Our first day is November 6<sup>th</sup>, the day of the 2012 Presidential Election.

We begin in a circle on the uneven wooden floor of Mascher. Hay explains that when she dances, she works with questions. This keeps the practice light. Questions are arousing. She flicks her wrists several times and lifts her shoulders and eyebrows, asking us: “What if? What *if*? Every one of my 300-plus trillion cells have the capacity? To be served (shrug)? By how I am seeing? Get moving and call it.” And so we go, diving into a wall of confusion.

*Uhhhh. What? um um um um. Okay a hand here, this way, oh this way. Elbow knee, head swing neck crunch throat open see the ceiling. Looks like it's lined with trash bags. Kneecap-to-wood shoulder down, back spreading on the floor, knees bend soles-to-wood, see across the room. Fingers swing up and back, face the wall—very dirty.*

I notice the movement of familiar neuromuscular patterns. The neuromuscular patterns my body follows and the Mascher space are familiar but my experience of them is new. New-ish. A sharp pain in my left hip socket appears. *Whoa. Ow.* Hay talks us through the practice, periodically offering koan-like phrases. “What if learning is without thinking?” And specific instructions. “Begin to include the other people in the room, the room itself.”

*Ahhhh!* Greg Holt and I collide, laughing hysterically (*why??*). We hold each other's faces, shoulder, occipital joint (*what the fuck (I LOVE THIS!!!!!!) is happening?*), we press our foreheads together (*hahahahaha, ah alright!*), gasping in what the other is exhaling. Snap.

Shiffff.

Laughter dissolves and I find myself not knowing what to do. In a mild panic, I outline the exquisite arches of his left foot, Vanna White for an invisible audience. “Get what you need or think you need.” *I need to get out of here!* A flicker catches my peripheral vision. I slither towards the window. My internal critic pipes up. *Oh Annie, always making things awkward. Really, tracing the outline of his foot? That's the best you've got?* Hay's voice catches us again: “*Here and gone, here and gone, here and gone.*” Slip... slip... fuzzy radio-station tuning dial. Anxiety slips away like a

[glacier calving](#) and underneath is the vibrating joy of all my cells refreshed by laughing so hard with another set of cells, as if they had just emerged from a waterfall, tingling shivering smiling cellular faces turned up to the sun—**JOY JOY JOY JOY JOY**. Who knew it was right under there the whole time? The feeling is so pleasurable I go blind. I'm looking out the window, ostensibly. If anyone was watching me, they might think I was Taking Practice Seriously. In reality I'm trying my damndest to capture the monstrous feeling of JOY and trap it, archive it, in order to pull out later, it just feels so damn good.

“Turn your fucking head.”

The shock of hearing the word “fuck” emerge from the woman who reminds me of my soft-spoken grandmother pulls me back into the room. I turn my fucking head. The mental cage lifts, and my trillions of cells are nourished now by the sensation of the *feeling* of joy leaving my cells, supplanted by the less seductive but more realistic question: “What if all my cells are served by how I am seeing, in *this* moment, which will never be repeated?”

It's an unanswerable query. Early on, Hay had instructed us: “Don't burden yourself with whether you're doing it right.” She's been practicing for 45 years and can't do it. And as impossible as it is to answer it in our trillions of cells, it's that much harder to describe in words.

A simplistic explanation is that we are outrunning the mind's ability to build a conceptual framework of what we perceive. By playing with *how* we see, we remain in a state of not knowing. Our brain works *so hard* to figure out *what's going on*. That's its job. It's the best at it. But what a glorious mystery: the feeling of soft, clammy flesh pressing against your shoulder, those few moments before your brain says, “Aha! A bare foot!” and displays a series of choices of what to do with this information (trace its outline with your hands, perhaps?). This unknown territory, beyond our understanding, is where new possibilities lie. It is the space where we can forge a new relationship with anything we come into contact with.

We stop and talk. One dancer observes her reluctance to “turn her fucking head,” to leave the thing she is looking at behind. Hay responds—“Ah, but what if? *What if?* When you turn your head you are not leaving something behind but receiving something new?”

After lunch we discuss the election. Hay bemoans the thought of a Romney win: “What will we do?!” Later, she states that the studio is the one place she can practice living without the trappings of race, gender, class, and cultural conditioning. And if she can't be totally free of it, she can try for it. Greg Holt notes that, whatever the result of the election, “*This* is what we do.” The studio is where we practice freedom.

At the end of the day, we leave.

We go vote.

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In *My Body the Buddhist*, Hay asks herself, “Why isn't a requirement for every four-year dance student to dance uninterrupted for 40 minutes a day?” But *what if? What if?*

*What if every single US citizen, all 312 million people, young and old, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, practiced dancing nonstop for 40 minutes every day? What if, as a nation, we practiced, daily, listening to our whole body at once, the teacher?*

*What if as American citizens, we acknowledge that all politics take place on the locus of our bodies? That in order to be free we can practice freedom first on ourselves, without coercion or permission from a higher authority? What if dancers, as citizens, can remind us of that fact? And what if? What if? As citizens, we supported our dancers to investigate politics through their own corporeal form?*

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That night, my partner Alex and I go to an election party. I am still on a spaceship, watching human affairs. I can't get back into the known territory where social convention exists. Only the most rudimentary tools are at my disposal: smiling, hugging, nodding, laughing, short responses when spoken to. I spend the evening on the couch, legs tucked up, hip aching, next to Alex and our friend Reuben. I am amazed by their rapport: quick

jokes at each other's expense, rapid-fire impersonation of celebrities. How are they able to communicate with words?

We stare at the TV, watching the numbers scroll horizontally across the screen, always the same, until they change. We drink wine to calm our nerves and eat chili to steel our stomachs. The election is called for Obama. The room breathes a collective sigh of relief, the brick sitting on our sternums flies away. Reuben runs out the door, stands on the South Philly stoop and screams "OBAMA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" We high-five **the shit** out of each other. The impact travels through my bones—the heel of my hand, forearm, humerus, scapula, down my spine—and swings around my sides before radiating from my entire ribcage **JOY JOY JOY RELIEF JOY JOY.**

After midnight, Obama comes onstage/screen to give his victory speech. Millions of people's cheering coalesces into one roar. I know off screen there are millions of other people grumbling, crying, heads in hands. My whole body, at once, starts speaking.

*My hip hurts.*

*Obama looks so old.*

*What if my hip is never gets better, as long as I live?*

*I love sitting on this couch*

*Why am I crying?*

*Is Alex crying?*

*I love America*

*I love America?!?! War crimes! Human rights violations! Corporate plutocracy!*

*And Philadelphia, and Maine, and my grandparents, and my brother*

*Why why why why is Carson in Afghanistan, flying drones, for this country why why why*

*my sister, and fourth of July, and Alex, and 24-hour diners and unmarked streets in Kensington and [The Dirty Projectors and this video](#) and Deborah Hay and long road trips over state borders and Camelback mountain and cold lake swimming and and and and and my dad*

*I miss my Dad*

*I wish Obama was my dad*

*Oh, there's a group of political advisers just high-fiving **the shit** out of each other right now, knowing you just thought that*

*What kind of dad will Alex be?*

*My hip is getting old I am getting old old*

Then Obama invokes **HOPE**:

*Yes! Yes! Hope! I believe in Hope! Hope is our only Hope!*

*This is not the same Hope as four years ago. Remember the luster on that Hope? This is not the same. He's just saying it because it's what you want to hear.*

**YES. I DO WANT TO HEAR THIS.**

*I mourn the death of that Hope*

*delusional hope*

Faith and doubt press upward in me with equal pressure. God bless anyone (*ow my hip*) that can maintain their convictions with any consistency. God bless (*I don't believe in god*) anyone who can stand by one point of view. God bless anyone who believes in the continuity of their singularity.

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*What if? What if? What if in the next president's election night victory speech, when they name the great professions that a child could grow up to be in America, she or he included dancer on that list? And if dancer is too specific how about performer? Or simply, artist?*

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Back in the studio, we practice. I am my own head of state, my body the body politic of the kingdom of *Annie Wilson*. My hip! Fucking hurts! I must take it easy. I must go slow. I stay in one place for a long time. Hay says, "Notice yourself in relationship with the other bodies, with the room. The relationships exist. You don't need to create them. You don't need to devise them. Just notice them."

[Nicole Bindler](#) picks me up. She carries me across the room. I pick her up. Throbbing pain shoots through my hip socket. We collapse to the floor. For a long time we lie together. Very still. Thick slabs of frustration float to the surface and cleave away, *here and gone and here and gone*, like a butcher cutting fat off a cow. My occiput falls against her bicep. My face rests so that I see City Hall, and the American flag flapping in front of the Union League. The voice of frustration distracts me away from what I think my cells might be doing:

*Motherfucking Christ fuck fuck fuck fuck my hip is disintegrating in its own fucking socket I'll never walk again I don't get it I'll never get it Nicole gets it fuck this fuck this fuck this... I feel like I'm snuggling with Alex only he smells like Nicole I wonder if she feels like she's snuggling with Curt or if she is Actually Doing Whatever We Are Supposed To Be Doing Which Probably Doesn't Include Wishing To Actually Be in Bed*

"Don't let yourself get seduced."

I was really on a roll there. Shhhhhhhh... Shiiiiiiiiiiii. I reluctantly ask the prescribed questions again and am awash with sensation: the tightness of my throat that throbs in a millisecond delay of my hip. The spreading of my upper palate as I smell Nicole's hair. The twisting and knotting of my guts as they experience the frustration of not thinking about frustration. All those sensations coalescing into a sensorial roar. I realize I really enjoy the feeling of coming back to my senses, and realizing they were there *the whole time*. It feels like a more mature, complex game of peek-a-boo: wandering down a train of thought, coming back to the senses, wandering down a train of thought, coming back to the senses.

Perhaps the practice is practicing how long you can keep your eyes open, keep yourself and the world visible before you forget and your eyes get heavy and you drift off to sleep, only to open them again and be completely enthralled by the world before you-- entirely familiar and entirely new. Perhaps the drifting off is part of the practice, something to push away from. Perhaps even when your eyes are closed you can still see the backs of your lids, a deep pulsating red.

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*What if the value of a physical body is remembered not just in the moments when one of those bodies are buried underground? Would it allow us to live more fully? Would it make it harder to abstract bodies in order to oppress or kill them through terrible food, poisoned water, lack of medical care, or Bushmaster semiautomatic rifles? Can tragedy, instead of being antithetical to life, be a reminder to those still living to keep our eyes the fuck open?*

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Hay says, "What you see is the subject of your experience, which includes what you can't see and what you imagine." I see the setting sun illuminating Greg Holt's calf hairs from across the room, as he is moving his jaw in a mysterious fashion, as I see my hand reach across the floor.

Is the sun the subject of my experience?

Greg's calf hair?

My enchantment with his calf hair?

Is my hand the subject of my experience?

The floor around my hand?

Are my pupils contracting in reaction to the orange light the subject?

Are the other people scattered across the room, invisibly affecting where I choose to dance and look the subject?

Is my memory recording its impression of this moment the subject?

My desire to be as small as a calf hair or as big as the sun?

Boundaries dissolve. I cannot discern where Annie ends and where not-Annie begins. I feel the universe streaming into the very specific spot where my sense organs exist in time and space.

If this sounds like a mushroom trip from college, that's not far off. Drugs affect our brain's ability to discern the boundary of self by [dampening brain activity](#) around perception. It takes more effort to close off our senses than to keep them open. Turns out dance can do the same thing the drugs can, with no hangover.

I look around the studio. I see a dozen people executing completely unrecognizable actions. "Same experiment, different experience."

*We look crazy. This is madness. Who knew it was right under there the whole time?*

Hay reminds us to pay attention to this moment, because it will never exist in this configuration, with these bodies, in this space, ever again. We practice the art of dying, watching each moment pass as the cells in our body cleave apart and slough away. In her chapter titled "my body seeks more than one view of itself," she says: "Dying has become a vital component in my performance practice. Attracted to the ephemeral, I have explored dying for years. So I wasn't surprised when praying surfaced... Is praying, like dying, relevant to my human as well as dance vocabulary?"

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We finish, we talk. We discuss the boundaries of the practice. Hay insists that in order to practice, we must "disattach" from our personal experience. She insists that this dance doesn't belong on the street, or there would be madness. Bindler rebuts that maybe the streets could use a little more madness. I see Hay's point: to use the practice to work through grief or personal drama is to be seduced by your personal drama. And to bring the practice outside the walls of the time and space set aside for it is to invite the madness into your personal life.

However, I sense a twinkle in Hay's eye when she's talking, and her voice echoes in my head for days and weeks beyond our time together. I hear her whispering during particularly sensual daily experiences, prompting my own riffs on her initial questions:

Showering— *What if? All my cells have the potential to be served? By the water on my skin?* During sex— *What if? All my cells are served? By the penis inside me?* Eating—*What if? All my cells? Are served by the food I am eating?*

One week after Obama is re-elected, two days after the workshop ends, her voice is still with me, loud and clear. It is the morning I learn Reuben died the night before in a motorcycle accident—

*here and gone and here and gone and*

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I walk to Alex's school to pick him up, Hay's voice softly chanting with each footfall "*here and gone and here and gone and here and gone.*" When we get home, I pull Alex into bed. I make coffee. I buy pastries. I can do these things; it's muscle memory. My body knows the best way to cradle my love's head, my trillions of cells know the configuration with his trillions of cells that maximizes comfort. I don't have to think about it.

*What if? What if? Comforting is without thinking?*

We sip coffee together in silence. Jaws slack. Eyes glassy.

the weight of the mug in my fingers  
the smooth ceramic, steam  
hitting the tip of my nose, the taste of  
coffee as it travels past my tongue  
the sensation of swallowing, the warmth  
in my belly, the warmth of Alex's  
body next to mine, the sight of his fingernail  
the feel of his carpals on my  
shoulders, the mew of my cat as she  
jumps on the bed, the weight of her  
lumpy form as she lies across  
our knees—pawing the air  
—the sensation of weeping

Each of these physical experiences becomes precious. They are fluorescent billboards that I am still alive, that Alex and my cat are—in fact—alive, even though Reuben isn't.

Memories of him come floating into my awareness. They are purely physical. The feeling of his powerful hug. The memory of the sight of his face, infinitely and inextricably tied to the feeling that accompanied recognizing his face: **JOY JOY JOY**. I lean my ear against Alex's chest.

His heart pumps! He is alive! It is proof!

I cannot hear it breaking. It beats as firmly and as strongly as it did the day before. The body moves grief through it. If I write a book it would be titled *My Body, the Mother*, or *My Body, the Grandmother*. These trillions of cells would say: *Lie this way, eat this pastry, there we go. Here, take a nap. I think we need to cry some here. OK. Yes, let's just cry while you try to reconstruct an image of the world without Reuben in it.*

*It might take a while. I'll be here.*

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In the days that follow, Alex and friends and I eat together, and drink tea together, and huddle however many can fit on a couch, legs tucked up under our sitz bones. We tell banal stories. We make each other laugh. We use mundane conversation like a pathetic dam against an ineluctable ocean. Eventually our language crumbles under the weight of grief and we get bone-quiet. We reach our hands for another human form, any body. There is not a whole lot of thought, only the weight of bodies pressing against each other so hard the skeletons feel it.

As my wet cheek brushes against a foreign wet cheek, I am grateful there are other bodies to be with, as my cells *nom nom nom nom* their way through existence. I think, "Why does it take a tragedy to be with other people like this?" But probably it doesn't. I had spent the past week doing just this-- being with other bodies in the wake of death. I had held Greg's head and laid on Nicole's bicep, practicing the difference between life and death (a fine distinction). It doesn't take extreme grief or joy to (*peekaboo!*) wake you up to being alive. You can choose to practice it.

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Sometimes I resign myself to the belief that contemporary, experimental dance may be the embodied version of [wool sculpting](#). A fun hobby that only matters to other people who do it. It's a nice myth—sometimes it allows me to explore my own fetishes. But the convergence of the week with Hay, the election, and Reuben's death reaffirmed some important points:

1. Our bodies are all we have. Life continues without needle wool sculpting, but not without a body.
2. Everything I love, including my body, will one day leave me, either by fading as time plods, or ripped violently away in an instant. Wiki: [impermanence](#).
3. Life isn't worth it if there isn't time and space to be alone with our bodies, and to be (*here and gone and here and*) with other bodies.
4. Dance is the most defiantly ephemeral art form. As such, it is uniquely positioned to investigate a truth that lies at the heart of human existence.

*What if? What if every one of the 312 million citizens in the US (and beyond)? Has the potential? To be served? By dance? And moreover, has the potential? To be served? By experimental dance? And if that is the case, dancers!*

*What if? What if we held ourselves more accountable to our responsibility to these questions? And what if we—dancers, artists, and “non-artists” alike—advocate for the role of the art form in our society as fervently as other citizens advocated for animal rights, the environment, or gun rights? Are dancers not the perfect people to remind others that there is more than one voice, or two, but hundreds of millions in the national conversation? That the body is inherently political? It was millions of bodies who voted Obama in. Millions of bodies who ache, grieve, age. Millions bathed in joy.*

*That week in November keeps arising and rippling out of me. The questions—aftershocks--keep coming. The holy babble continues, even if the experience is gone.*

*and here and...*

By Annie Wilson

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