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Sep 28 · 6 min read

Investigating the Lyric I: An Interview with Hope Mohr

Hope Mohr Dance . Photo by Margo Moritz

> We do see Sappho begin to turn toward it, toward this unreachable end. We see her senses empty themselves, we see her Being thrown outside its own center where it stands observing her as if she were grass or dead.

-Anne Carson, *Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God*

Running parallel to explorations of power, desire, or identity, an ongoing investigation has characterized the work of Bay Area choreographer Hope Mohr these past few years. Whether in her practice of improvisation or in her questioning of the nature of collaboration, Mohr's work has been prodding at the negotiation between one's agency and one's ability to relinquish control. Commenting about her improvisation practice, Mohr wrote: "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." In her blog post

"Balancing authorship and dancers' agency," Mohr shared the questions that rose as she attempted to craft a piece which honored the spirit of true collaboration, with each voices honored equally, as opposed to one's voice -traditionally the choreographer's- rising above the others—a process requiring for the artist to let go of some control in the shaping of the work.

In *extreme lyric I*, presented at ODC next week, Mohr continues this exploration by questioning whether it is possible to experience and perform the loss of the self. She uses the work of the Greek poet Sappho, translated by author Anne Carson and revisited by writer Maxe Crandall, as a vehicle to look at whether one can transcend the self through ecstasy. What does it mean to lose one's self in performance? How does a performer, whose training has fashioned an acute sense of kinetic and spatial control, perform loss? How does that translate to an audience?

Mohr and I met to talk about the making of *extreme lyric I*. Below is an edited version of our conversation.

Marie Tollon: Why Sappho?

Hope Mohr: I co-directed Anne Carson's *Antigonick* with Mark Jackson in 2015 and I wanted to do something again in conversation with her work. I had read her translations of Sappho a few years ago and loved them. I asked Carson if she would be OK with me using them and she said yes. I'm also intrigued by the fragment as a compositional idea and almost all of Sapphos' poetry now only exists in fragmentary form.

MT: Does working with fragments feel familiar because of your postmodern lineage?

HM: Yes, postmodern dance is already the realm of the fragment. But I have tried to shed postmodernism with this work and investigate the lyric. Many credit Sappho with inventing the "lyric I," which is poetic expression in the first person. Her poems deal a lot with pleasure, desire, and losing yourself through ecstasy. I've been considering how to explore ecstasy through a post-modern lens. Anne Carson says that for Sappho, ecstasy is a means to an end. So it's not just that her poetry is about ecstasy -which it is- but she uses ecstasy to transcend her self. Sappho invented first person to expand expression, but she did so to transcend it. It's almost as if she invented the idea of the self to transcend

the self. So I am asking the dancers to use form -and that could mean shape or structure or idea or organization- to transcend form.

MT: You have been exploring the negotiation between asserting authorship and letting go of control, whether in your improvisation practice or in investigating the nature of collaboration. Does the exploration of the loss of the self represent a new chapter in this investigation? And how did you pursue this exploration with the dancers?

HM: Yes, I think it's a continuing exploration of these ideas through Sappho. Fragments are like the anti-manifesto. Manifestos assert a set of commands. If fragment is the opposite of that, what should the dance look like? If things get too chaotic, I can't handle it aesthetically. But ecstasy propels a person into chaos.

I wanted there to be voices in the piece that were not mine and not Sappho's. When I was first thinking of the piece, I thought there was going to be a lecture on Sappho and then there would be a dance because I very much like hybrid forms like the lecture-demonstration. So I asked the playwright/poet Max Crandall to write some material. It became a conversation. So we co-wrote the performance text and we're performing it together. It's a contemporary conversation with Sappho.

MT: Has the text existed separately from the dancers or has it informed the making of the dance?

HM: Even though the movement is abstract, each chunk of the dance is anchored in a particular fragment. The rhythms of the poem became the rhythms of the movement, and the content has informed the movement.

MT: You have talked about your work as "feminist dance theater." How would you define feminist dance theater and how does it function for you?

HM: I don't know how to define it. All I know is that I'm putting a priority on exploring, articulating and centering non-male voices. Part of the reason I was interested in having a contemporary conversation with Sappho is because I think ideas of gender now are much more complex than they used to be. It's not just about male-female anymore. I think

part of losing yourself is letting go of those binary, non-fluid ideas about gender.

MT: Did residues of the conversations that happened during last year's Bridge Project around issues of gender and politics in performance informed the work in any way? And if so, how?

HM: I definitely feel that as identity is getting more fluid, performance needs to be less binary. Performance needs to evolve to the point where the forms that we see on stage reflect contemporary identities. So I continue to be really interested in hybrid forms where there is language and movement. Neurologically, weaving those two modes of being together feels radical for me. It's also hard to execute well.

MT: You have studied and practiced Eastern philosophies. Western culture, notably through psychology, emphasizes the need to build and cultivate the self (we talk about self esteem, self worth). In Eastern philosophies and practices, the self is very fluid and must be transcended. Did those earlier influences show up in this exploration?

HM: Obliterating the self can sound pretty great, but I don't want to get into a self-hating place. Anne Carson has an essay called "Decreation" where she looks at Sappho, Simone Weil and Marguerite Porete as three examples of women who use the self to get beyond the self. All three "decreate" the self through creating, which I think is fascinating. We can say "Oh, I want to get beyond the self!" but if you are an artist or a writer you have to create, and in order to create you need to assert the self. It's a paradox.

MT: Recalling that antique Greece was a group-oriented society, some scholars have questioned the assumption that Sappho's poetry marked the beginning of the lyric I, and that it was the Western lens, through translation, that created that assumption.

HM: For me there's no question that she was speaking in the first person. Her poems would make no sense otherwise. She is talking about bodily sensation and emotional states. But it's true that there are many different theories about Sappho, simply because so little is known for certain. Some say she was a schoolteacher, others that she was a prostitute, a mother, a lover… In fact the piece begins with a litany of

possible Sapphic identities and states of being: ‘Sappho’s body is breaking, Sappho’s body is leaking.’ Because she could be anything. That in itself is interesting.

MT: You have worked with Anne Carson’s texts before. How was this different?

HM: *Antigonick* is a story. It’s narrative tragedy. Sappho’s text is poetry. It’s abstract and it’s in fragment form. It’s totally elusive. But the austerity and restraint of Carson’s style is present in both works. You see it in all of the white space on the page and in Carson’s use of brackets. [Writer] Maggie Nelson said that [Carson] has a fetish for brackets. And they are all over the place in *If Not, Winter*(Carson’s translations of Sappho), indicating all the places that the papyrus has been lost. Not only are Sappho’s poems about absence because we’ve lost most of them, but also even her content is a lot about absence. She’s always talking about things she used to have that she doesn’t have anymore- lost innocence, lost virginity, lost youth. In *Antigonick,* Carson writes about Mrs. Ramsay dying in a bracket. So the theme of female erasure and self-erasure is present in both *Antigonick* and *If Not, Winter*.