

The Diversity of Authorship: In Conversation with Hope Mohr

This word response is an important distinction here. *Stay* is not really inspired by nor is it a representation of Bacon's paintings; it is Mohr's response to Bacon's work. Having said that, there are specific aspects of Bacon's paintings that come into play, particularly in David Szlasa's set, video and lighting design. "In Bacon's paintings, figures are sometime isolated in a box or set on the side observing the action; in *Stay*, a series of saturated blue flats and live feed cameras (embedded in the walls) create a sense of being in a room and watching at the same time. Bacon also used arrows for emphasis and large hand-held arrows are present in *Stay* to direct the viewer's gaze," relays Mohr.



Photo by Margo Moritz

The second world premiere on Hope Mohr Dance's Spring program is Mohr and Burns' *The Material of Attention*. Being a collaborative, improvised dance makes *The Material of Attention* about as different as you can get, authorship-wise, from *Stay*.

The Material of Attention has a long history behind it. About three years ago, Mohr and Burns began meeting in the studio, once a week, with the sole purpose of improvising and working together in process. Mohr shares that over this lengthy period of exploration, the two have built their own improvisation practice that values "specificity in choices, commitment to actions, clarity and awareness" and questions "how does process become performance; how does a studio practice become performance?" As the practice continued to develop and their collaboration deepened, Mohr and Burns became interested in how they might step outside and articulate the practice to a group of dancers. And with that inquiry, they set out to devise a performed improvised piece, what is now called *The Material of Attention*.

The Material of Attention is a bold artistic experiment with two interrelated parts. First is the translation piece. Before even thinking about performance, Mohr and Burns had to figure out how to communicate their improvisation practice to other dancers, "we really focused on sharing the [practice's] driving values of being very clear and responsive when you move, so that the group could understand what improvisation success feels like." To that end, rehearsals for *The Material of Attention* begin with an hour-long warm-up where each participant can tune in—to their own bodies, to the group, to the space. Mohr goes on to say that these rehearsals feel more like training sessions that "go back and forth between moving and talking about moving, which has forced me to articulate in language something that is ineffable and mysterious."

Simultaneously, Mohr and Burns had to balance the improvisation practice with their performance goals,

“we want to create a work that considers the audience, has the live quality of something being made in the moment, and feels as intentional and skillful as composed work.” A mix of spontaneity, care, rigor and being present in the moment. That is a tall order calling for both courage and commitment. And the entire team was on board. Mohr is thrilled with how all the artists involved in *The Material of Attention* have been leaning and living into this experience: “improvising in front of people is risky and vulnerable, and these dancers are doing it and bringing everyone else along for the ride.”

Collaboration with Burns has given Mohr the chance to dive into a new kind of authorship: “with an improvised work, the nature of authorship is different: you’re not setting the steps; instead, you are laying the groundwork for action.” Mohr and Burns have offered the dancers some of their own physical vocabulary to utilize during improvisation. But this shared physicality is intended as a resource, not a command. Authorship in an improvisational environment requires embracing of the unknown and relinquishing control. Because of its collaborative, improvised nature, *The Material of Attention* truly has eight authors—Mohr, Burns and the six dancers in the piece.

With one improvised work and one work containing uncomfortable images, Mohr knows that this program will challenge audiences: “I hope to create a space where it’s ok for audiences not to know what the dance means; to give audiences permission to surrender to ambiguity; to trust themselves even when there are no narrative signposts.”

So, the next time someone asks you who your favorite author is, take a moment to think differently about the question. Maybe your favorite author is from the literary field—an essayist, a novelist, a poet. But maybe they are from a different discipline— a playwright, a screenwriter, a sculptor or maybe a choreographer.

[Hope Mohr Dance’s 8th Sprin Season: *Stay* and *The Material of Attention*, May 28-30, ODC Theater, SF](#)