



When Rules Lead to Process: A Conversation with Hope Mohr | By Marie Tollon

In 1965, Yvonne Rainer choreographed *Parts of Some Sextets*, a 43-minute dance for 10 people and 12 mattresses. The piece embodied the renunciation of modern dance conventions by the Judson Church artists and the creation of new rules for dance making. Shortly after, Rainer wrote an essay about *Parts of Some Sextets* that contained a paragraph in which she listed a series of artistic refusals (“No to spectacle/no to virtuosity/ ...). Although intended as a provocation that originated in this particular piece of work and not meant to be prescriptive, this paragraph has been since singled out to become the *No Manifesto*, an iconic postmodern document that has been influencing the following generations of art makers.

Rainer’s *No Manifesto* is one of the artist manifestos that Hope Mohr is quoting in *Manifesting*, which will premiere this week at ODC Theater. In preparation for the piece, Mohr researched manifestos and explored the rules that artists set up within their creative process. Mohr and I spoke over the phone last week.

Marie Tollon: What qualities were you looking for when choosing dancers for *Manifesting*?

Hope Mohr: I looked for people who could move, sing and act. It’s hard to find people who can do all three well, but I was looking for dancers who were comfortable mobilizing their voices.



Hope Mohr Dance
in “Manifesting”
Photo by Andrew Weeks

MT: During a lecture at Stanford last October, you listed a set of productive rules for art making. While creating *Manifesting*, did you come up with additional rules? And was there one that dominated?

HM: I have followed those rules and I still think that they are all productive. For me, the biggest rule has been to come into the room and work with what’s in front of me. I came into the process with a script, so I toggled back and forth between that language and my commitment to responding to

what's in the room. I distilled the text over many months prior to the rehearsal process. But the choreography, direction and collaboration can't happen ahead of time. They have to happen in the room. I honored the script and the concepts that gave rise to it, but I also trusted the process.

MT: You have written text for previous works, including *Failure of the Sign is The Sign*. Is the script you wrote for *Manifesting* different from anything you have done before in terms of writing in preparation for a piece?

HM: All of the script is in the form of a dialogue, which is different for me. The text in *Failure* was in the form of voice-over—an omniscient narrator. I have two performers in *Manifesting* who function as narrators, but they are in conversation with each other. I waited as long as I could to give the performers the script because I didn't want the process to feel too script-driven. The process has been similar to a devised theater process. I had a bank of language, but I let the physical collaborative process drive the structure of the piece. I brought the language in to seed the action.

MT: Did the movements push the text in a different direction?

HM: Definitely. Some of the text dropped away because in some cases I felt that a physical image delivered content better than words.

MT: What manifestos did you research and choose to quote in the text? Why those in particular?

HM: Famous manifestos quoted in the work include those by Yvonne Rainer, Antonin Artaud, Tristan Tzara, Jiro Yoshihara (for the Gutai group), and the Guerilla Girls. The language spoke to me. And their place in the art canon. Works that also heavily influenced my process were *Mao 2* by Don DeLillo, Martin Puchner's *Poetry of the Revolution*, and *Crimes of Art and Terror* by Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe.

MT: Yvonne Rainer's iconic *No Manifesto* is among the manifestos you quote in the piece. Did that manifesto have a specific impact on your personal artistic development?

HM: That manifesto, and all of Judson Church, has influenced every choreographer since, whether they know it or not. It's part of the air we breathe. In sitting with Rainer's manifesto, it's a lot harder to know what you are saying yes to than no. Part of what the piece is about is how paralyzing it can be to internalize 'shoulds.' Part of my interest in lineage and in articulating voice in relationship to influence is about listening inside to find what you want to say yes to as opposed to be driven by "I can't do this... I can't do that... that's been done..." I think Yvonne Rainer's *No Manifesto* is iconic for a reason, because it was a clear renunciation of the modern dance master narrative. It's the quintessential postmodern document and so it's part of my DNA, part of my aesthetic skeleton. But that is true for anyone making work right now.

MT: Do you see anything in the dance field today that would resemble a manifesto – not necessarily in the form of one, but as a movement reacting to what came before?

HM: People are still asking what's next after Judson. I see trends but not a movement per se. I see a lot of people going back to formalism, to structure, to unison. What is formalism in the absence of a master (Merce, Pina)? I also see a lot of people interested in territory that is in between: in between genres, genders, modes, identities. That is a by-product of both the post modern sampling culture and the mainstreaming of queer wisdom. Manifestos and in between-ness are arguably incompatible. It's hard to write a manifesto in which both form and content embrace ambiguity.

MT: Can you talk about *Stay* and *Manifesting* being presented in the same evening?

HM: There is no language in *Stay*. It's more dancey—the movement is more technical. It's more about composing the body in space and time [than *Manifesting* is]. I think it's interesting to see the two pieces side by side because *Manifesting* is language-heavy and concept-driven and *Stay* is much more about pure aesthetics. But conceptually, both pieces embrace the principle that desire and pleasure are the ultimate 'shoulds' for me as an artist. That is the thru line.



bway3153 on June 12, 2016 at 7:57 am said:

This is wonderful! Thank you both. Desire and pleasure— divine!

Brenda way

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