

**Carolee Schneemann Oral History Interview: Deborah Hay**

Deborah Hay is a dancer, choreographer, and writer based in Austin, Texas. Hay was a founding member of Judson Dance Theater where she collaborated with Schneemann in the performances *Newspaper Event* (1963), *Chromelodeon (Fourth Concretion)* (1963), and *Lateral Splay* (1963). After moving to Austin, Texas in 1976, Hay developed the choreographic method *playing awake*, which she documented in her book *Lamb at the Altar: The Story of a Dance* (1994) and performed in solo dances like “Music” (2001), “Beauty” (2002), and “The Ridge” (2004). Hay was the recipient of the 1981 Guggenheim Fellowship as well as the 2012 Doris Duke Artist Award. She has notably collaborated with Robert Rauschenberg (“Map Room II,” 1965, “Spring Training,” 1965), Mikhail Baryshnikov (“Single Duet,” 2001), and Laurie Anderson (“Figure a Sea,” 2015).

**Interview conducted by Lotte Johnson****October 25, 2023****Digital platform**

Lotte Johnson: Thank you so much for making time to speak with me.

Deborah Hay: Tell me what your relationship is, firstly, with Carolee.

LJ: Absolutely. Well, I have a strange relationship because I actually never met her in person. I curated a major retrospective of her work that took place last year in London at the Barbican in 2022 called *Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics*, but I started working on that show probably about three years before that, before the pandemic, basically in the months leading up to Carolee’s death. We were sort of passing ships in terms of my relationship to her work.

So I spent the three years after her death really immersed in her archive, speaking to lots of her friends, former lovers, collaborators, and getting to know her through her work and through the words of other people. This is a kind of continuation; this project is kind of me getting to know her.

DH: I can’t remember exactly. When was it that she died?

LJ: In 2019, in March.

DH: 2019. Oh, wow, okay.

LJ: So I’ve had a strange experience in some ways because everyone that I’ve spoken to obviously has such vivid memories of her and often working with her directly, and I’ve had to get to know her through those memories, which has been a privilege.

DH: Wow, wonderful experience. Because I’m sure there are a lot of stories about Carolee.

LJ: Absolutely, there are.

DH: Just fantastic stories about Carolee.

LJ: Yeah, amazing. You know, emotional, joyful, hilarious, like every spectrum of emotion, absolutely. But you are such an important part of this story, and that's why the [Carolee Schneemann] Foundation, as part of this oral history project, really wanted for me to speak with you about your memories and your collaboration and participation in Schneemann's works and vice versa, her in yours, maybe sometimes at Judson [Dance Theater]. And so I thought maybe we could just start with a very simple question, which I would love to know, just when you first met Carolee, and how did that happen? Was it at Judson? Was it beforehand?

DH: It must have been in those workshops that we did with Robert Dunn, based on John Cage's theories of music composition. And really, my memory going that far back is quite questionable. But I remember she was part of that workshop setting, so that when somebody was working on a piece and needed dancers, or needed performers to be in their piece, it was very easy to just ask the assembled crew "Who would like to be in my piece?" etc. I think I was in all of Carolee's pieces in the early Judson days. And, you know, I was very innocent. I was very, very naive at that time. I didn't have an aesthetic of my own developed at all. I was just in the right place at the right time. And getting to meet all these artists and, you know, choreographers and composers and painters and sculptors and that.

Carolee was just colorful and very different from the aesthetics that were really prioritized, which [were] quite unsensual. And not particularly, you know, not emotional, not sensual. ... I mean, Rauschenberg was involved, too, at that time, and he was very colorful and playful. But it didn't have the kind of sensuality of Carolee's pieces. And boy did I appreciate that, and did I love that. There was very little place in the art world at that time for that kind of inclusion and that kind of honoring and that kind of validation. And so, I just loved to be in her pieces. I had an opportunity to touch other dancers or be touched by other artists. And that did not happen otherwise, unless it was utilitarian touching, like moving a person from here to there or carrying them.

LJ: It's interesting. Deborah, I was just going to pick up on that and ask you, because one of the things that I wanted to talk about a little bit was the aesthetics and the approach of Judson in general, and all of you collectively coming together over this shared interest in ordinary movement of sorts, or everyday gestures, and allowing an environment and the people present to determine the work. And I think what you're just talking about, this kind of playfulness, was present in a lot of the Judson dancers' work, but you're talking about this kind of added element that Schneemann brought to it, this sensuality, this kind of emotive touch. And maybe you can talk a bit more about that.

DH: Well, just that. It was absent. It was part of, you know, we're very playful, aesthetically, playing with this, aesthetics, playing with ideas, playing with a form. It was fantastic in that way, very rich, but it wasn't sensual. It wasn't terribly physical, and it wasn't messy either. It was very organized and clean.

And so, in retrospect, I think we were very influenced by a kind of male-dominated aesthetic in the art world at that time. And conceptual art, the flourishing or the beauty of it, the beauty of Cage, the beauty of Merce Cunningham—and Carolee was another riot of just a different planet. And I know that ... she was not accepted well, I [don't] think, by her peers at that time.

LJ: No, absolutely. And she had to work, like so many women artists of those decades—and unfortunately, this continues—but she had to work very hard to secure her own legacy. But maybe I'm interested about how that played out at Judson itself, because I know you had

these weekly meetings and rehearsals where you would get together and kind of decide on what to create together or separately. And was that evident in those meetings? Schneemann's kind of distinctness or difference of approach? Did that come out in those sorts of conversations and discussions? Can you remember?

DH: No, it never was talked about. I mean, if Carolee wanted to do a piece, she was included on the program, just like if I wanted to do a piece, I was included on the program. Carolee, at that point, had quite a strong aesthetic already in motion. I did not, but I was still accepted, included in the program. So if you had work and you wanted to show it, you got to show it. It was really, really egalitarian. And amazing. Very, very special in that way.

LJ: That is extraordinary. You mentioned your own involvement with Merce Cunningham and your training. I've read a lot about your work, of course, as well, and how you were kind of working to change your learned habits, your techniques, relinquish these habits, I think you've talked about [that] before. And just touching upon what you started to talk about before, how did this grow and develop, especially through your collaboration or work with non-dancers? I know that Cunningham's approach was very much about relearning or unlearning or changing learned habits. But I guess working with non-dancers must have opened up that to a whole new spectrum, and people like Carolee Schneemann. I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about that, the kind of exchange of movement knowledge between yourself as a trained dancer and choreographer, and those who weren't trained by Carolee.

DH: Yeah. I just love Carolee, and I love being in her pieces. But I feel like it really wasn't until I started looking at works that brought in the untrained dancer, or I would say the inexperienced, but non-untrained performatively dancers, that I was just so fascinated by seeing them in the context of a dance stage.

I was much more interested in seeing them in the context of dance. It's like you're looking at humanity. You're not looking at a dance, and that was very important. That was a transformative moment for me, in terms of how I wanted to work.

LJ: Amazing. And could you see that play out for example, with Schneemann's performances? Could you see that play out in the way that she organized and directed performers as well as the way that she moved herself? Or whether she used props or?

DH: I didn't see it. I couldn't see it in Carolee's work. I couldn't see it. What I saw in Carolee's work was just this playful joy, sensual buzz of activity. Whereas in the work of other artists who are choreographing with non-dancers—I hate to say non-dancers, but just for the sake of time—I could see it more clearly. So, I have to say, I wasn't drawn to Carolee's aesthetic. I was drawn to Carolee's spirit and heart and the richness of her work at that time.

LJ: Amazing. ... Before we talk about some specific performances that you took part in, and I can share some images with you so we can look at them together, they might be helpful prompts to remember. Before we move on to that, stepping back and thinking about how the kind of collective organizing of Judson worked, I'm curious about, including Schneemann's work, but kind of more broadly, how all of you work together. When someone decided to stage a piece or perform something, and I'm sure it was different for different artists, how were these concepts introduced to the other performers? Was the choreography collaborative? Did you receive written scores and instructions from whoever was directing and producing a piece, or did it vary from artist to artist?

DH: Oh, it varied. It was very different for each artist. Some didn't have rehearsals at all. Others had rehearsals for their pieces. I always had rehearsals, pretty much, because I loved getting together with my friends and playing. We all worked very differently. Some people just had written scores.

LJ: Do you remember how Schneemann approached her performances? Through her archive—it's quite incredible—there is this huge wealth of information and material. She wrote very specific instructions and scores and thought about timing and lighting and costumes. I'm just wondering if that was then shared with the performers, or if that was kind of her process behind the scenes.

DH: I remember rehearsals with Carolee. But they were usually... they weren't full-out rehearsals with costumes and lighting and anything like that. It was more what she wanted out of the dancers within the context of something larger. And a lot of the time, I had no idea what the larger was. It was just the interaction on the feet on the ground, or body on the ground, that I was involved in.

LJ: One of the things that I have been struck by was often the critical reception of Schneemann's work does describe her work as these messy, chaotic happenings. But when you start to unravel, unpeel the layers of her process and go through the archive, there is this kind of interestingly, meticulously planned and orchestrated process behind the work, which speaks to, maybe she was absorbing some of the process that Judson dancers were employing, the other Judson collective members were employing. That kind of rigor and scoring and instruction-based work actually seems to be at the heart of her practice.

DH: Yes, yes.

LJ: But with room for improvisation, of course. So I thought maybe we could speak about some specific work. So I'm going to share my screen and we can look at some photos and remember specific performances together. I thought we'd start with *Newspaper Event* [1963]. So this is just one of the programs for the *Concert of Dance Number Three and Four*. So of course, you're listed here, along with lots of other collaborators from Judson. I know that you performed as part of Yvonne Rainer's *We Shall Run*, as well as, of course, Schneemann's *Newspaper Event*. So, yeah, I just thought we'd have some images up on screen to remember that, as you were saying, the kind of vitality and amazing spirit of these works.

*Newspaper Event* was sort of building on ideas of improvisational and physical contact that Schneemann was really interested in. And she wanted to kind of embrace elements of risk and uncertainty. And I don't know if you remember anything about how you were instructed to take part in this work, because I was looking over Schneemann's notes and instructions for this piece and she had assigned each participant with the characters of a body part or body parts, plural. And I think you were assigned the character of shoulder slash arms. And so each individual was generated, each individual's movement was generated by these instructions and by this kind of cue to become a body part. And apparently no one knew what the other performer had been instructed to act like. So there was this kind of surprise element. Do you remember, do you recall that kind of process or those instructions at all?

DH: No, no. I remember John. It's nice to see the name of John Worden [performer in *Newspaper Event*]. He was a very sweet guy. But I have to say I don't remember anything about it.

LJ: That's totally fine. ... Maybe just for fun, I'll read you the instructions that you were given by Carolee, which were kind of scrawled on a little piece of paper. She said, "You have a refrain to use in any way." And then in quotes, there's this refrain, "I'll huff and I'll puff," or "huff and puff." And then she says, "Walk around, crawl a bit, follow someone. It's getting lonely. Huff and puff. Follow someone. Do as they do. Be a nuisance. Crowd them. If you see someone trying to fly, assist them. You can be helpful. Sometimes you run a bit." So that was your instruction for the performance.

DH: Wonderful, wonderful.

LJ: But I think as you were saying, this appeal of her work to you being all about touch and contact, improvisation, which was so crucial to her thinking around performance, I think really comes to the fore with *Newspaper Event*. Of course, this was her first group performance at Judson. I think it manifests those principles that you were talking about so beautifully. And she talked about this idea of self and group being completely meshed and mutually evolving. And that spirit seems to be here in those photographs. It looks like a lot of fun.

DH: Yeah, it was.

LJ: Here are some more photos. It's interesting because there seem to be moments of coincidental synchronicity in this photograph on the left. There are two performers. I don't know if one of them might be you, actually, you know, with their legs and hands in the air, making these parallel lines with their bodies, which presumably was sort of coincidental. But there are these moments captured in the photographs of great almost choreography within the non-choreography of the work.

DH: Well, if that's Ruth Emerson on top, and I think that would be me in the bottom, who is supposed to help her fly. I mean, that direction. ... Looks like my hand. I recognize the hand.

LJ: Your gesture.

DH: Well, the actual hand.

LJ: Yeah, there's a sense of kind of wild abandon in this work, at least in the photographs of the work. The next performance was *Chromelodeon*, which took place as part of *Concert of Dance Number Seven* in June, 1963. And actually, maybe we can just pause here and look at the program for this concert, because I know that Alex Hay [then Deborah's husband] designed the program. And I wondered actually how Alex knew Carolee. Was it also only through Judson? Because, of course, he was a visual artist as well. Did they know each other before?

DH: No.

LJ: OK, so they met through Judson.

DH: Yeah.

LJ: He designed this program flyer with this amazing fried egg in the middle, which I think is just fantastic.

DH: He did a painting. One of his paintings is a fried egg painting, which is amazing.

LJ: So, *Chromelodeon*: I was going to show you a few photographs of this performance. ... I think you played a very crucial role in this performance. Schneemann was thinking about the structure of this performance from a series of movement sequences based on drawings of crisscross patterns, which she coordinated to layers of different sound and lighting. But it was actually a script-based work. So performers were assigned quite gendered roles within this dramatic episode that played out. And the set was strewn with colorful clothing. And one of the things that was given as a cue to the participants was the movement of a toy top and using that as thinking about the body's potential in relation to a balanced central axis. So this idea of spinning and leaping and pushing and whirling. There were lots of dressing and undressing gestures, carrying each other across the stage. But there was one particular moment where the participants or the performers were instructed to take on these sort of melodramatic, gendered characters from old films. So there was a pursuit of a woman by a wolf played out on stage. And I think you perhaps were playing the role of the woman and it was Carol Summers who was chasing you across the stage. I don't know if you remember that.

DH: I remembered partnering with Carol Summers in a number of pieces. I don't remember that explicitly.

LJ: But maybe this kind of performance, I think, reflects many of the things that you were saying that you were drawn to Carolee's work for. Especially the sense of sensuousness and interaction between men and women. And actually, that brings up something that I wanted to ask you, this idea of gender dynamics played out in Schneemann's work at Judson, not only in her work separate to Judson, but also at Judson itself. And I wondered if you could comment on that kind of dynamic in Judson in general, whether this was something that was discussed between the women in Judson?

DH: Never came up.

LJ: Wow.

DH: No, never came up.

LJ: That's so interesting. So I guess maybe some of these dynamics were played out through the performances, but not explicitly through ...

DH: You know, we were very ... I think our politics was dealing with the Vietnam War. What was happening in front of our nose was not what we were noticing at that time. It was a very male-dominated behavioral system going on there, which was fine. I'm looking at these pieces, and to be quite honest, I'm thinking to myself, "Boy, I wish I was there." Because I didn't see them.

LJ: Yeah.

DH: I don't think I was even able to see them at the time that I was in them or watching. I don't think I could see that. I was very influenced by the guys in my life at that time.

LJ: It's interesting that you say that, the idea of not being able to see the work, because you were so involved, you were playing your part, you were part of the performance. You weren't able to step back from the situation.

DH: But I was also not being able to see it, just the aesthetics of it. I was unable to see what Carolee ... Now certainly, since then, I've been able to see Carolee's work, but at the time, I was not. I was too, my head too directed by the Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg aesthetic, and Robert Morris, and the whole conceptual art. I was too influenced by it.

LJ: It's interesting that in Judson, a lot of the women did have these sort of leading roles, though. So maybe there were some dynamics being played out subtly within that group.

DH: If there was, I'm not sure I recognized it. I mean, I know, I did not recognize it at the time. I can say that we were just working, we just played. And as I said, anybody could do work, who wanted to do work.

LJ: And I thought I'd turn to this, this photograph, because I think this might be you and Carol Summers. Is that right?

DH: Yeah, it's definitely me. And I guess it's Carol, I can't tell.

LJ: I [wonder] if you had any memories of *Concert of Dance No. 16*, which also took place in April, 1964, and your work *Three Here* was performed in the first half, and then in the second half, Carolee took part in Robert Morris' performance *Site* where she took on the role of Manet's *Olympia*.

DH: I remember that. I remember that.

LJ: I wondered if you could speak about your memories of that, and what you thought of that.

DH: No, it's just a very beautiful piece is what I remember, and completely opaque at the same time. So it was wonderful. I know that because it was so still, and a simple form.

LJ: Yeah, with Morris kind of revealing, very slowly revealing Schneemann's presence. It's interesting, because I think Schneemann perhaps felt differently about that work in retrospect, looking back on that work, perhaps going back to your recollections that you couldn't see the work necessarily, or the aesthetics of the work at the time you were in it. I think perhaps that's relevant for Schneemann and her participation in *Site*, because she expressed discomfort with how she was framed in that work later on, reflecting back on it, I guess, and being framed as the sex worker in Manet's *Olympia*, and very much being the object on stage.

One interesting reflection or recollection that Schneemann had in relationship to collaborating or working with you, in 2018, looking back on Judson, Schneemann was interviewed for *Artforum*, and she said, "I directed sequences for Deborah Hay as if she were my alter ego," which I thought was very interesting. She obviously saw, she felt an affinity with you, and was thinking about you as a kind of character, or a player, or a signifier for herself. I don't know if that's something that you had discussed together, or if you felt that in her work?

DH: I was only made aware of it when I saw it in print. It wasn't something I knew, but I feel like what I have to contribute to this whole thing is, she was always there for me, but I left New York in 1970. I left the art world in my mind in 1970. I was going to go live off the land. And when I came back to reality in 1976, I would perform from time to time in New York, and Carolee would always, almost always be there for me. Show up for me in a way that none of my other peers really did.

LJ: Amazing.

DH: I received, I think it was 2015, a Chevalier des Arts et Lettres from France, a ceremony that was at the French consulate or embassy in New York, across the street from the Metropolitan Museum. Carolee showed up. She didn't tell me, she showed up.

I'm sitting here with a letter from Carolee, from October 2nd, 1992. She sent it from New Paltz, New York, a letter about her experience in watching a piece of mine called *Lamb at the Altar* performed at Danspace in New York, the most beautiful piece of writing about my work. I don't know if I could ... You can't really see it. And I sent this letter to a friend of mine here in Austin. I don't know, have you heard of Annette Carlozzi?

LJ: No.

DH: She is a retired curator of contemporary art, and she lives in Austin, and she did a show of Carolee's in San Antonio [*After Carolee: Tender and Fierce*. Artpace, 2021]. She's done a lot of research.

LJ: Oh, yes.

DH: Yeah. And she's doing a book on artists' letters to other artists. She told me she was thinking of doing this book, so I said, "I've got to send you a copy of [the letter from Carolee]." I had forgotten about this letter. My archive is now at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin and the person who has been creating my archive found this letter and sent it to me ... with all cross outs, and all of Carolee's checking her own writing, her own typewriting, because it was an unwritten letter. Anyway, to me, this is just one of the most beautiful honorings of me and my work, and how it impacts her is so full and rich.

LJ: I would absolutely love to read that ... because, I mean, Schneemann's writing, as you are so articulately saying it, her writing is so beautiful. I think in her very voluminous correspondence, you can see that she really understood other artists. But I'm sure there's a copy in her archive as well, because she often made carbon copies of the letters that she sent.

DH: Yeah, I'm sure she must have this.

LJ: But actually, I haven't read that myself, and I have spent a lot of time with her archive, and there's this wonderful book of Schneemann's own letters called *Correspondence Course*, and I don't think this letter is in that book. ... So it seems like you kept in touch then throughout the decades, and did you ever visit her in New Paltz?

DH: I visited her once in New Paltz. I moved to Vermont from New York, and then I've been in Austin since 1976. So I didn't see her much, except when I was performing or doing something, there would pretty much always be Carolee there.

LJ: It seems like she had an incredibly fierce loyalty to her friends, even though she wasn't—and many women artists weren't necessarily—part of a distinct movement or collective, per se, she formed very strong friendships and felt very supportive of other women artists in her life, and men as well, not just women. Do you recall the last time that you saw her? Do you remember when that might have been?

DH: I think the last time I saw her was in 2015.



LJ: At the ceremony [for Chevalier des Arts et Lettres]?

DH: At that ceremony. Amazing.

LJ: And I know, obviously, that she, I don't know if you spoke with her about her fight, her struggle with her own illness, as she was nearing the end of her life with breast cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I don't know if that was something that you spoke to each other about in correspondence, or?

DH: We did. I knew she was suffering, but I didn't know the details. I didn't know the details of it. Was it hereditary? Was it in her family?

LJ: I'm not sure. Going back in time a little bit more, alongside Schneemann's work at Judson, she was also obviously making other work as a visual artist, making physical constructions, these box constructions and paintings and assemblages, in those early years of the 1960s. And this was very much in dialogue with her performance work. Often, these boxes included shattered fragments of glass and mirrors, so they refracted the reflection of you as a viewer. And I wondered if you were aware of her practice as a visual artist alongside her participation in Judson. Did you see the works that she was making? Because from what I understand, quite a lot of people didn't know that she was making that work.

DH: Well, I saw work in her studio on 29th Street. And I've seen shows of hers in New York that I've loved since then. So that's about the extent.

LJ: So you did spend time in her studio at the time in the '60s?

DH: Oh yeah, we would, definitely.

LJ: I just had one more question, which is quite specific, but just in case you might recall, in this book *Correspondence Course* that I just mentioned before, which is [a] collection of correspondence that Schneemann sent to her friends and collaborators, there's a letter. She was great friends with Joseph Cornell, the artist, and there's a letter where it seems that Joseph Cornell may have spoken to you on the phone, thanks to an introduction from Carolee Schneemann. I don't know if you recall that at all.

DH: I don't, I don't think, I don't remember speaking to him on the phone, but I did go visit his studio.

LJ: Oh you did, okay.

DH: Yeah, I went and that's all I remember. I went to visit his studio with, I think it was [art dealer] Heiner Friedrich. He had a gallery in New York, where he was one of the people behind the Dia Art Foundation. I think I went with him to visit Joseph Cornell. Why? I have no idea. What happened there? I have no idea. Maybe we drank tea, possibly, but I have no memory of him other than that.

LJ: Well, what an amazing thing to have done. It seems that from the letters that Schneemann and Cornell were sending each other, it seems like Schneemann maybe thought that Cornell would really appreciate you as a person, but she felt that maybe you had some affinity, I don't know, it's unclear in the letter. But that's great to know that you did end up visiting him.

DH: Yeah.

LJ: Thank you so much, Deborah, for being so generous with your time. Your work is so rich and took over your life and practice, so, you know, recalling being part of these early performances in the '60s must be quite strange in some ways.