

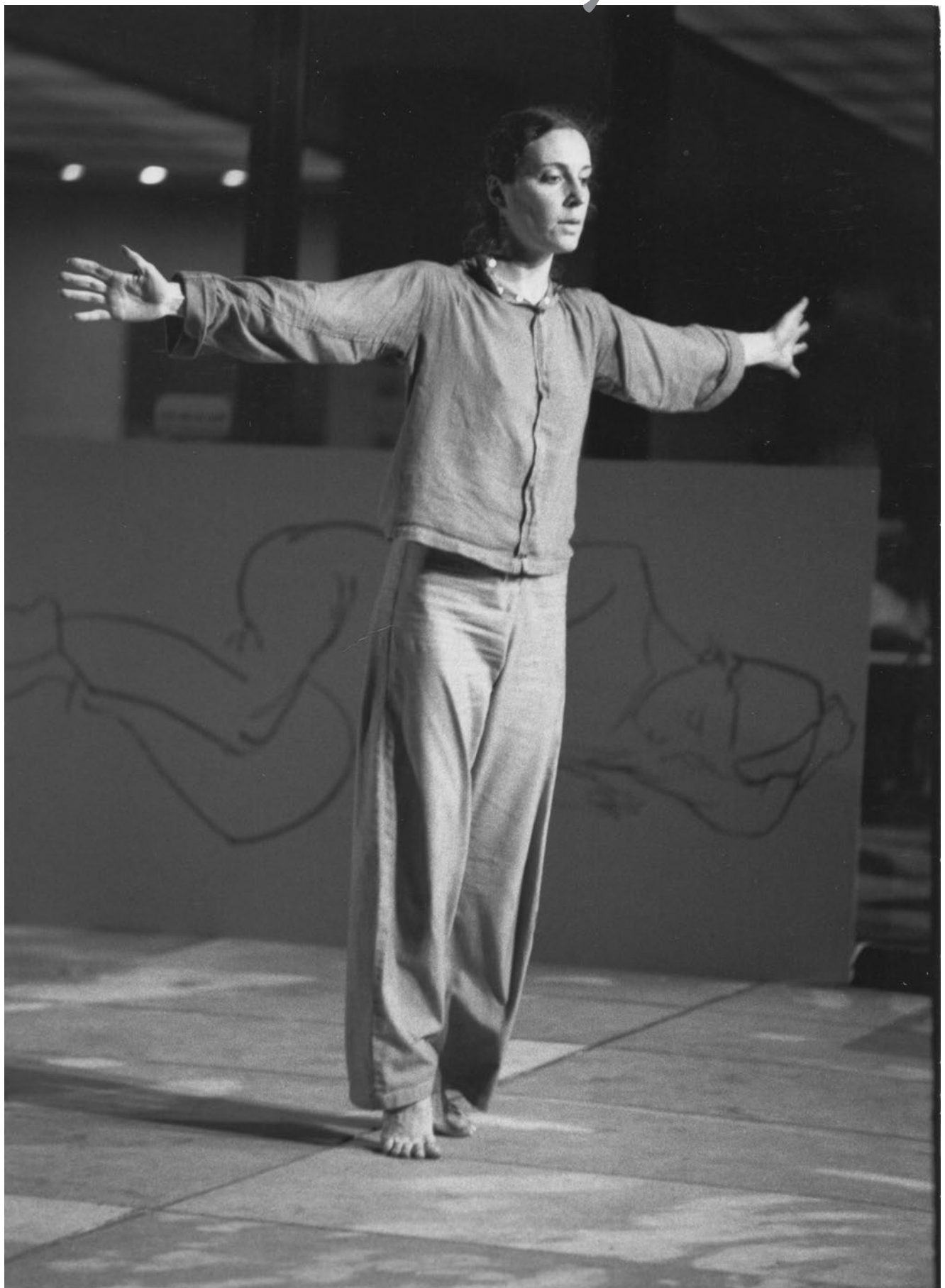
WHAT

MY

ATOMS

ARE

Mary Overlie



Mary Overlie performing *The Figure* (1977) at the inaugural Summergarden Dance series at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Robert Alexander.

# DOING

interviewed  
by

Sylvère  
Lotringer

edited by  
Tony  
Perucci

When Movement Research co-founder Mary Overlie was interviewed by Columbia University philosophy professor Sylvère Lotringer in 1977, she had only recently begun her work as a choreographer. She had not yet formed the Mary Overlie Dance Company, nor had she articulated her transformational approach to performance: The Six Viewpoints. Mary moved to New York to perform in Barbara Dilley's *The Natural History of the American Dancer: Lesser-Known Species*, Vol. 12–24, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, but was already enmeshed in numerous collective enterprises: performing with Grand Union, the Judy Padow Dance Company, and the improvisation-based collective Dilley founded with dancers from her Whitney project; choreographing works by JoAnne Akalaitis and Lee Breuer for Mabou Mines; and co-founding Danspace Project. As Lotringer sought out SoHo artists to be interviewed for his journal *Semiotext(e)*, he was led to this iconoclastic artist, who had recently staged *Glassed Imaginations*, the first of three works presented in the storefront windows of the Holly Solomon Gallery.

In the “Schizo-Culture” issue of *Semiotext(e)*, for which this interview was intended, Lotringer famously investigates a confluence of ideas that seemed to connect the radical Left social movements of the 1970s, the writings of French post-structuralist theorists (like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), and the work of Cage/Cunningham-influenced SoHo artists. He situates Mary Overlie among artists such as Douglas Dunn, Richard Foreman, Philip Glass, and Robert Wilson—who were staging a “breakthrough,” a radical “deterritorialization of their senses that offered perceptions until then inconceivable.”<sup>1</sup> In his interview with Mary, Lotringer proclaims her unique integration of conceptual, painterly and sensorial practice—her *perceptual art*—as having “far-reaching effects.” Before Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on the radical potential of “molecular” versus “molar” formations had been translated into English (and before French theoretical terminology was adopted by American artists as if it contained “some kind of [career-enhancing] magic power”<sup>2</sup>), Mary describes her aesthetics of the “molecular structure” and the dance of “atoms moving in accord with each other.” She would continue to research performance materials through what she would later term “particalization,” which was fundamental to the practice and pedagogy of The Six Viewpoints. Nearly three decades after this interview, Mary published her book, *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice*, the fundamental principles of which were already evident in her conversation with Lotringer.

Unfortunately, Mary’s interview did not appear in the “Schizo-Culture” issue, where it was slated to be followed (appropriately) by Marcel Duchamp’s *Musical Sculpture*. It was later published (in translation) as “Was meine Atome machen” [What My Atoms Are Doing] in *New Yorker Gespräche* (1983), a German-language collection of Lotringer’s interviews. Her interview appears in the exact middle of that book, fittingly between interviews with William S. Burroughs and Steve Reich. While Mary didn’t seek out center stage, her unceasing curiosity and atomic brilliance meant that she was somehow always in the middle of everything.

— Tony Perucci

*Mary Overlie died in June 2020 at her home in Bozeman, Montana.*

1 Sylvère Lotringer, “Notes on the Schizo-Culture Issue,” in S. Lotringer (ed.), *Schizo-Culture: The Book* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), xiv.

2 *Ibid.*, xi.



Sylvère Lotringer: Your dance seems to be closely associated with the visual arts. How did you come to establish such a connection?

Mary Overlie: I was raised among painters, and though I was dancing from age ten on, I never saw a dance performance until I was seventeen. I studied dance in a painting studio, and it was always covered with paintings new and old. The class was a combination of classical ballet and improvisation, and I used to draw on the paintings for ideas. I was always listening to artists discuss the newest problems they were facing with a particular canvas. I just naturally thought of my work in the vocabulary that I was surrounded by, which was painting. So, I approach performance space much like a three-dimensional canvas. I automatically begin the work in the shape of the space, edges against the middle, focal points of energy and line, field intensity of gesture are all automatic considerations for me. I equate time and intensity with images on a canvas. Many evenly timed movements that cover the entire space read as a field or ground to me. I may work in one area only to get a clear Japanese feeling, or balance that with one other strong movement area. There are always the ideas of the balance of the space and the statement of the space.

Lotringer: Did you draw your inspiration from any other source?

Overlie: There's a lot in my dance that has to do with my experience of transcendental meditation, which I learned to do in California. Meditation became, at a certain point, the central thing in my life. Then I had to think about whether I was only going to be a meditator and teach meditation. The answer for myself was no. I can't do that. I'd still have to be involved in creating dances for some reason or another. So, there was a problem about how to integrate that knowledge into the dancing. And I never got an answer to it, but I sought an answer for a long time. I continued to study dance techniques, but through a meditation perspective. I do my pliés every day, but the way I approach doing the plié is through awareness—release of stress and purifying the nervous system so that maximum quality of intelligence and contact with myself is achieved in the plié, which is an entirely different kind of concentration than other dancers have usually when they do a plié. It's totally the subject of my dance training and then it also became the subject of the dance I produced.

Once, I was meditating and the phone rang. Usually I don't answer the phone, but for some reason I did, and the person on the line said, "We want you to do this concert, but we need a statement about what your work is about." I was still really in my meditation and said, "Well, my work is about manifesting awareness." About three weeks later, I read this little thing in the program, "Mary Overlie's work is about manifesting awareness." Oh, so that's what my work is about. And from that time on, I began to really study how to do that, what the technique was to do that, what that meant. That's why improvisation is the form I use—the discipline. It allows for that instantaneous contact of awareness of an idea or a creative thought and the manifestation of it. There's this total fulfillment of creativity on the level of awareness, and it's being produced so that it's physically manifested for the audience.

Lotringer: Merce Cunningham and John Cage don't like the idea of improvisation. It comes too much from the ego. You seem, though, to have taken care of that problem through meditation so that you don't have to be diffident of any improvisation. It apparently comes from the right place.

Overlie: Yeah, there's very little ego involved in it. It's totally unsuccessful when the ego is there. I focus on something different than they did.

Lotringer: Can you define a little bit the difference? Did you work with Cunningham when you arrived in New York?

Overlie: No, I studied his technique; I haven't worked with him.

Lotringer: How do you relate to Cage and Cunningham? How would you define Cunningham's technique?

Overlie: Most modern dancers' techniques are [a way] to teach students so that they dance for them the way they want them to. Their technique is about their own aesthetics. There are so many different ways to do a brush or a plié etc., and [Cunningham] chose one way that he liked, and that's his technique. So, it's very personal. Ballet is very different too. One way I relate to them is to study modern dance technique and ballet technique. I mean, I'm using something from Merce...

Lotringer: Let's get more systematic. Do you have the feeling that Cunningham starts with an idea of how the body should function and tries to apply the body to this idea?

Overlie: I don't know, but I don't think Cunningham starts with an idea of how the body should function. I think he starts with an aesthetic of how he would like people to look when they're dancing, I mean, how he likes to see dance—his own creative aesthetic—and then trains people to look like that.

Lotringer: But he does come from a certain conception, not from the body itself. That's why he doesn't improvise.

Overlie: Well, I'm sure it comes from his own body—and his own personality. What causes him to like flat and angular movement is his particular body, his body feedback. He's no doubt improvising by himself in his studio. But then, he formalizes it. My aesthetic is built on theory just as his is, but my theory is less about...

Lotringer: Cunningham seems to have conceived the body as something limited and limiting, especially as it is used in classical ballet. We're talking about [a] body politics [that] implied a whole conception of society—the universe—the way you operate with your body. Cunningham deliberately tried to impose new patterns on the body. That's why he probably had to start from a certain abstraction. He wanted to rebuild the body, to open it to other possibilities—very much as Cage used the *I Ching* to let a lot happen that would otherwise be excluded or repressed.

Overlie: I think he opened not the body, but the idea of dance, the product, because he thought the free organization of dance would always fall into that repressed line anyway.

Lotringer: In Cage and Cunningham there's the idea that spontaneity is done for from the beginning because it involves falling into preconceived ideas, forms, etc.

Overlie: So, he built movement aesthetics. But that's where I differed from you in saying he opened up the body itself. I don't think he went that deeply. He was more a philosopher than a scientist of the body.

Lotringer: You're interested also in the flow of energy. Your approach seems more direct and not exclusive of any tradition.

Overlie: If Merce broke with codes, put dances together at random, that's an investigation of movement. To go further on that level, you have to investigate the mover, then the artist. In doing that, I found that I didn't have to exclude anything—including classical dance forms. It all became material for this new artist and this new body. Merce built new movements for his dancers. But that's not the point for me. The point for me is how the molecular structure of the body is functioning. If the molecular structure is running smoothly, that's my statement. I can do a plié and that's my dance. I look upon movement not as a pattern in space and not as a sculptural pose and not progress across a surface. The level I think of dance on is atoms moving in accord with each other—out—or they rise or expand. They cause movements. Every plié is different—there's no way on the level I'm thinking about it that they can be the same. Maybe upon subtle command, you could reproduce the exact plié. Merce has an arabesque with fingers pointing down. I have an arabesque where atoms start squeezing at the toe—with transfers of pressure in the body.

Lotringer: So, you feel you're really opening up the body when you break it down to a molecular level. The new body is made up of a multiplicity of atoms, molecules, particles that don't need to be reincorporated into any distinct movement or "molar" structure. This is quite a breakthrough, and it has far-reaching effects. The deeper, it seems, you get into the body, into its minute components, the more "abstract" it becomes. There is a point at which the highest degree of abstraction in dance brings about the most direct flow of energy.

Overlie: Yes, then everything in the world is leveled into one level. The shift of weight as I tilt my head is on the same level as all the spatial concepts I've gotten from watching Merce dancing—or all the data I've gotten from studying paintings [or] Dostoevsky's moods in his novels—it's all one monotone field.

Lotringer: When you've achieved this degree of abstraction you have a total connection with things other than dance itself. We're not abstract enough. This ties to society. If you're not as abstract as the stock exchange, you're totally disconnected. In a sense, to be really creative now, one probably should be *at least* on level with the increasing miniaturization and abstraction of our society. When this degree of abstraction is achieved you actually establish a total connection with things other than dance itself...

Overlie: And just by moving a few fingers you can bring out cattle in Uruguay. I can levitate for practical purposes. I don't have to lift off the ground. I can just think, now I'm going to go up. I give to those people who are watching the experience that things can change minutely and completely. And yet, nothing has happened—the experience of floating over something that's so delicate. I grew up among artists and think of dance in a painterly way—as covering a canvas.

Lotringer: So, you incorporate the audience, as in the painterly conception.

Overlie: It's an easy analogy for me to think of movement in terms of color. There are so many different shades

of coloration of movement. I don't work in terms of emotional color—just shading. The form—the [dance] vocabulary—are not as important as perception. Perception changes form. Others may use form, but I connect directly into (through) reality, a process of connecting up to.

Lotringer: The problem's not to break away from structures. They're not to be directly confronted but can be incorporated.

Overlie: Philip [Glass], too, is dealing in connections rather than championing forms. Philip therefore can use everything that exists in the world.

Lotringer: Cunningham tried to confront structures of the body as the radicals did in society. But on the contrary, the idea's not to manipulate on a macro level, but to change the edifice by manipulation of the micro level. If we're talking about the body as politics, it's impossible to change the structure of the body. Similarly, you can affect the whole body politic only by changing it in small ways. That's what you've been doing with meditation. There was a time when you (one) thought you could confront structures—that of the body (Cunningham) and of society (radicals of the 60s), but direct confrontation on the level of structures is too inefficient. Structures are much too powerful and cooptative. But working on the level in relation to the macro level, not in order to be reintegrated by it, but on the contrary, by manipulation on the small level. By changing things on a small level, you can affect the unity of the structure. And then you can reincorporate them because they'll be unrecognizable.

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Lotringer: What are your thoughts on the narrativity of dance? Why dance if it's just there to illustrate something else?

Overlie: Narrative's great for its level of liveliness. Adopting it as a form is too gross a level because then no one has to join in and march along because it's all known in advance. But in my manifesting awareness, I'm telling you a story only about what you see, not boy meets girl. The audience waits to see what the next step is and hangs on it. They know they're taken on your line, but don't know what's going to happen until after it's happened.

Lotringer: Philip Glass has a notion of centering in narrative—a dramatic structure. Narrative structure, with its centering, has the linguistic equivalent of sentences with their syntax—subjects seeking objects, etc. The logic of narrative is the logic of linguistic structure. People like Joyce, Burroughs, etc. put into question the nature of narrative. They question the order of language because the order of language and of society is very close—to desire, love, etc.—a carry-over from language to society.

Overlie: Proper sentence structure has nothing to do with expressivity. In a writer like Simone Forti, for example, words fall on the page with their own reality. Simone is an incredible scientist... with movement.

First came the breakdown of forms. Then came the political movement to the country. Then came the move to consciousness. But there hasn't been the move to the completion of the circle. This is what Steve [Paxton]'s doing [with contact improvisation].



It's an attempt to take art and dance techniques out of an exclusive situation—so everyone can dance, be in contact with momentum, space, lines of energy of the body. It's a rigid form in some ways, as ballet is. It has set structures, is based on anatomical realities. Contact improvisation is a process art. If you follow the form, the process becomes the art. No performance as such, but everything becomes performance. You're engaged in the activity for its own sake. It's similar to martial arts. It's instant choreography—no difference between living and creating.

Lotringer: The question is: can life absorb art?

Overlie: The answer is yes, and very fast. Contact is self-destructive art.

Lotringer: You mean it doesn't leave any trace. Like conceptual art—doesn't produce an object but materializes an idea.

Overlie: So, every time it produces itself, there's no art. It transcends body discipline—opens incredible pathways with your bones and muscles. It's forever unpredictable, forever engaged. It's performance on the level of watching a sunset—because that's what you're watching... you're watching nature, not an artist... It makes me quake. Because maybe it has made a full circle.

Lotringer: So basically, art leads to life, contrary to the idea of art as a refuge from life.

Overlie: When it works, it becomes both—life and art. When it doesn't work it either becomes life, or when it becomes art, it dies from the other end. Form doesn't work because you start choosing. I am dealing in connections rather than championing forms. Therefore, I can use everything that exists in the world. My dance is more like science than philosophy. It's built as a process of experimentation—from within, not like philosophy, imposed from without. I have no philosophical desire for experiments to produce anything in particular—just observe what results from experiments and have each new result give birth to new experiments.

Lotringer: Not only form, but it's an awareness that what you're doing is art. Like conceptual art—you frame a crack in the wall and call it art, so the division between art and life is not only a formal awareness of production, but also a way of defining what you're doing—of perceiving something as artistic. Small shifts affected within a classical vocabulary can make it utterly unrecognizable. Your small shift has regenerated them, has put them in a new perspective—if you can borrow them, it's because you stole them, i.e. you found them again from another point of view, with another perception. They're renewed. You recolor the classic vocabulary. They can regenerate it by simply putting it in a new perspective. Actually, you don't borrow elements of that code, you steal them! You find them again, but from another point of view, with another perception.

Overlie: I have a fantasy of regenerating ballet so it's the same thing but perceived differently—of how to perform it more subtly and communicatively. Thus they're renewed.

*Excerpted from Tony Perucci, On the Horizontal: Mary Overlie and the Viewpoints, forthcoming from University of Michigan Press.*

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Mary Overlie was a co-founder of Movement Research and an American choreographer, dancer, theater artist, professor, author, the originator of the Six Viewpoints technique for theater and dance, and the author of *Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory and Practice* (2016). Overlie was the co-founder of several long-lasting art institutions such as Danspace Project, the Studies Project, and the Experimental Theater Wing. Her choreography has toured extensively through Europe and has been performed in New York at the Holly Solomon Gallery, The Kitchen, Danspace, Dance Theater Workshop, The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum, The Public Theater, and numerous lofts in New York.

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Sylvère Lotringer is Jean Baudrillard Chair at the European Graduate School, Switzerland, and Professor Emeritus of French literature and philosophy at Columbia University. He is the founder and editor of Semiotext(e), the influential publishing house instrumental in introducing much of French poststructuralist and contemporary theory to an American audience and bringing together French theory and contemporary American art, as well as co-authoring a number of books with Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard.

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Tony Perucci is Associate Professor of Performance Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Short-Term Research Fellow at the New York Public Library. He is the author of the books *On the Horizontal: Mary Overlie and The Viewpoints* (forthcoming) and *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*. Perucci performed in *Brain to Brain: A Celebration of the Life and Work of Mary Overlie* (Movement Research/Danspace Project, 2019) and is a co-founder (with Deborah Black, Nicolas Noreña and Sophia Treanor) of the Mary Overlie Legacy Project ([sixviewpoints.com](http://sixviewpoints.com)).