

Eulogy for Mary Overlie

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Postmodern art practice has lost one of its most ardent proponents. Mary Overlie is dead at the age of 74.

It is fitting that a picture of her life and work will slowly come into focus through multiple viewpoints, as colleagues, students, and friends reveal glimpses of her giant contribution to contemporary performing arts. I offer my perspective here as a former student of Mary, her friend for twenty years, and an ongoing practitioner of the six viewpoints.

The precise meaning of “viewpoints practitioner” is what I want to address in this short eulogy. Despite the global reach of the viewpoints, I suggest it is not a phrase that many people understand in the same way that Mary understood it. The anarchic horizontality of Mary’s teaching, which, while rigorous, caring, thorough, and artful, always resisted systematization and the rigid boundaries of rational coherence. To practice the viewpoints, for Mary, had less to do with composing works for theatre or dance and more to do with living life as art. Mary’s six viewpoints *could* be used to create experimental theatre and postmodern dance pieces, but that was merely one of its uses. More broadly, the six viewpoints was a breathing theoretical organism, a certain kind of performance philosophy that was equally available to welders, bridge painters, landscape architects, and casual pedestrians as it was to BFA and MFA artists. Bogart’s popularization of Mary’s work and Mary’s own presence as a teacher within one of the United States’s most innovative theatre conservatory programs may have given the viewpoints a semblance of knowability. But I don’t think anyone apart from Mary actually knew what it was and is. Our work, I believe, is to live in her teaching of the viewpoints so as to internalize the by-now all-too-familiar, yet deceptively deep, phrase “the performance of everyday life.” If we do that, then I think we become viewpoints practitioners.

Nowhere was the living aspect of Mary’s viewpoints more palpable to me than in the late stages of her dying. Even after a *grand mal* seizure stunned her speech

capacity, a panoply of medications coursed through her veins, a fatigued immune system had grown dim from a prolonged entanglement with cancer, and the contours of her own finitude began to show their seams, Mary's herculean strength permitted her to speak on the phone with the same liquid perspicacity that I had always known. A couple of weeks before her exit, I participated in a kind of duet with her that was not unlike an exercise in the Shape viewpoint. She presented various shapes in the form of thoughts and recollections to which I responded with my own shapes. She pondered, "Why am I still alive?" I asked, "Does it sound like Ornette Coleman?" She recalled of the jazz virtuoso, "He understood shape." "The shape of jazz to come." "Creativity." "In pain?" "No pain." "What would Barry Lopez say about it?" "The Arctic and Montana."

We went on like this for a while, touching on motherhood, the inside of time, dizziness, silence, crying, and other such textures. It was a completely normal conversation with Mary. But this time I was struck by her commitment to her own teaching. This was the viewpoints of dying.

There she was, "standing in space," aware of the fact that everything is moving, attuned to the Cunningham-like expression of the Cageian silence that buttresses all the buzzing, sensing the decay of her *dura mater* at a cellular level, calmly discursing with a friend on creativity and the shape of things as the end of her life settled into view. The structures of Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story were at play here in the grain of her voice and the correspondence between thoughts. I thought to myself: you don't teach this. You learn this by going where you have to go. The viewpoints are a system for artfully going where we have to go, which is to say, going through life and through the door called death.

Mary's students will all have memories of times when the full molecular complexity of the universe became sensible during her classes. Two of my own memories stand out to me now. The first recalls a spontaneous trip to the MET Museum. The class had decided to compose a viewpoints improvisation on the steps of the museum. We wanted to alert visitors and passersby to the particular temporal dimension of entering a museum. It came to pass that all of us lined up on the stairs leading to the front door, each person behind the other, creating something like a huge gnomon. The light from the sun cast our shadows onto the steps as we slowly, nearly imperceptibly, moved out of the line formation. That was it. The class felt straight away that something important had happened, though we couldn't put it into words. We all sat down and fell into thought. More than a handful of pedestrians came up to ask us what that was. Were we artists? What were we making? Our only answer was, "a kind of time."

The other outing was also unplanned. It arose from an exercise on space. We wondered about the geometry of conversational distance and were curious to discover if such a thing was quantifiable, meaning could we, in fact, measure them all and then do something with the data? We departed the second-floor NYU classroom of 721 Broadway, grabbed some hard hats, reflective vests, and measuring tapes from a tech storeroom in the building, and went outside. We stopped at every couple or group engaged in conversation between NYU Tisch and Washington Square Park. We measured the distance between people. When we got to the fountain in the park, we climbed inside it and noticed that construction workers from a nearby building were waving at us from a distance of a few hundred yards away. Somebody asked out loud, "Is this a conversation?" And then somebody else: "What counts as a conversation?" That question blew our minds and we realized that our measuring equipment was not calibrated to the task. We returned to the classroom and made dances built around the question, "What's [the space of] a conversation?"

These two memories reveal the subtle and deceptive depth of Mary's work. Both classes were part of "advanced" viewpoints training, which meant that everyone in the class had dedicated the requisite forty-plus hours to exploring each of the six viewpoints and were comfortable creating improvisations with those materials. Yet here we were engaged in rudimentary explorations of Time and Space. What appears so clearly to me now is that there is no such thing as advanced viewpoints because the irreducible complexity of the universe is present in the very first viewpoints class you ever take from Mary or from one of her students. Mary folded her life's realizations into her work such that any encounter with the primary materials of the viewpoints launched the student-practitioner into the quantum realm of reality.

Her teaching was so cunning that she was able to accumulate mystery and awe, two of the key ingredients in pedagogical charisma. Her teaching was so smart that she could guide students effortlessly from walking around the room to probing the temporalities of their inner lifecosystems in one snap of the fingers. Her teaching kept her alive, and I think her teaching is what we all must strive to understand as we continue on.

Within the practical work of the six viewpoints is a largely unexplored intellectual world that, if mapped, could change the way we teach the arts in primary, secondary, and higher education, not to mention the way we integrate the arts into other (seemingly) non-artistic fields. This intellectual component is under-explored, but certainly not a secret, as the first sentence of Moisés Kaufman's jacket blurb to *Standing in Space* makes clear: "Mary Overlie is one of the greatest thinkers of the American Theatre." A dancer? Yes. An institute builder who helped

launch the Experimental Theatre Wing at ETW, co-founded Movement Research, the Danspace at St. Mark's Church, and other international organizations? Definitely. But Mary was also a thinker, a theorist, and an intellectual, and that side of her work is something we must endeavor to understand in much greater detail.

The second way in which I hope we pursue Mary's legacy is through group experimentation. While words and language in the shapes of books and articles on her ideas are much needed, there is a bodily knowledge and movement-based thinking without which the viewpoints makes no sense at all. All students of the work understand what this means, but I wonder if we overlook the significance of experimenting with this kind of knowledge. To experiment in this sense means to engage in the work without a clear idea of what may come out of it. We ought to do this collectively, in classes, in-person, through Zoom, and in whatever way "collectivity" is possible. This is especially important to do now at a time when the meaning of "to gather" is changing greatly and when the instrumental use of education to obtain practical ends seems to predominate in all types of schooling. The viewpoints could become a method for teaching and learning *generally* and for showcasing the ways in which movement is itself a form of thought, one as deserving of attention as the critical capacity of individual "genius."

The timing of Mary's biological death is, in other words, something for us to ponder. Occurring in such close proximity to the deaths of Kristin Linklater and Sally Banes, Mary's death is a reminder that important work is frequently obscured by the shadows of "the great ones," those who, for whatever series of reasons, have achieved legibility within the complex field of cultural production. Let us work harder to shine light on the work being done in those shadows. Next, given the tide change in education that is taking place now in the midst of the pandemic, we ought to consider seriously what place we are willing to make for the type of non-traditional pedagogy that Mary has created. How can experimentation continue to thrive in the arts education of the future? And, finally, what uncharted territories still remain within the phrase "the performance of everyday life?" Despite having had its heyday in the academy, this phrase continues to remind us that art and living are constantly entangled, which is also to say that art and dying are likewise entwined. Mary's death can urge us to keep the borders of academic disciplines not only open to each other but also to the horizons of life and death in order to ensure that the work we do in the classroom speaks directly to the lives we lead on the streets.

Finally, I'd like to relate one of Mary's thoughts that she shared with me in her last weeks. Despite her medical condition, Mary undertook a multi-week teaching tour through Europe and then a residency in Shanghai. During those trips, she earnestly discussed creating a bricks-and-mortar school for the study of the

viewpoints, understood in all the senses (and more) that I've touched on here. Fascinatingly, her plan was to name this school something like, The Institute of Horizontality, a move that would have marked a profound letting go of the name "viewpoints" in order to grapple more directly with the non-hierarchical mode of living and thinking that she prized so much. I see in this act of letting go a model for how to continually deepen one's engagement with art and also a challenge for all of us committed to the viewpoints. Each time we practice this work, which is to say, with each breath we take, we can sense the greater whole in which we all participate. To work through Mary's viewpoints is to increase our aptitude of this participation. In this sense, it is possible to see death as more than the finite terminus of life's long arc and, thus, to continue our work with Mary even if she is no longer here on this Earth to guide us.

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