

BARBARA DILLEY and CONTEMPLATIVE DANCE PRACTICE

Barbara Dilley developed this stand-alone structure as a way of ‘synchronising body and mind’ (Caldwell, 2024) at the time she was teaching and later directing Naropa University in Colorado, USA. Naropa was established with the intention to teach ‘art in everyday life’ named Dharma Art, by Tibetan Buddhist Chöyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Dilley originally trained in classical ballet. In a later interview (Caldwell, 2023) she heralds a delight in holding a physical point view within a discipline like the fixed concept of ballet. However her life’s work and curiosity rests in exploring the fluid relation, the ‘continuous figure eight’ (Caldwell, 2023), between fixed and open concepts. She calls her method of working *Open / Structures* which combines the notions of a fixed dance structure with an open one (Dilley, 2020, 2023, 2024). Elsewhere the concept of ‘Open/Structures’ is referred to more generally as ‘enabling constraints’ for example Dance Studies, Education, Architecture and Systems Theory. If we follow Dilley’s life history we see how she mingled the fixed and unfixed structures of movement in the furnace of her practice over time. From 1963-1968 she performed in Merce Cunningham Dance Company, in 1970 she claimed Yvonne Rainer as her mentor (Caldwell, 2023) and in 1970-1976 performed in the radical avant-garde Grand Union Collective that improvised in New York lofts and unconventional venues. The Grand Union was described by Wendy Perron as ‘accidental anarchists’ of Downtown Dance in her book of the same title (Perron, 2020). Dilley worked closely with Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Trisha Brown and others who similarly went on to develop their own approaches to dance improvisation amidst a vibrant set of artists, like John Cage and Philip Glass, who were disrupting conventions in dance and the arts in influential ways. Dilley sums up this stage of her dancing life commenting that ‘Merce and John’ were her art fathers and Grand Union her art mother (Dilley, 2020, 2023). It is also important to note how the work of somatic practitioners, especially the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen in the approach of Body Mind Centering (Cohen, 1993), influenced her ‘mingling’ of the meditational and contemplative traditions of Buddhism with dance practice. Body Mind Centering brings mind awareness to movement impulses and transitions at the cusp of awareness which both helps to notice movement impulses arising while improvising and to discern which of those are arising from a ‘thought about something’ (Caldwell, 2023).

Tibetan Buddhism is Dilley’s only practice now in her retirement and though it is fundamental to Contemplative Dance Practice (Dilley 2024), it was important for her not to

make Contemplative Dance Practice exclusive through the use of either religious or dance terminology (Tzakou, 2016). As a community dance artist I value her foresight and care as it is accessible, non hierarchical and inclusive. The structure of Contemplative Dance Practice is shown in the insert below, as presented in Contact Quarterly (Winter/Spring 2017). This Practice as Research focuses on the Open Space segment, which involves the roles of Mover and a Witness.

Contemplative Dance Practice

Original Form

1. Introduction

Sitting together in a circle. Share names and then introduce the practice.

2. Sitting Meditation Practice

3. Personal Awareness Practice

Exploring individually how to bring meditation awareness into movement—stretching and moving out into the room. Time for self-care, research, and courting the unexpected. Kinesthetic delight is the touchstone.

4. Open Space

Beginning with a short sit, then people enter the space and exit as they choose. It is an open time, an invitation to host this body-mind moment as a guest and to play with others who also enter. Ending with a short period of sitting meditation.

5. Closing Circle and Conversation/Discussion

There are many variations of the CDP form. Some versions have no discussion before or after, and the lengths of time given for the whole practice vary.

[Excerpted from Barbara's book, This Very Moment]