

# The Cognitive Dynamics of Performance Generating Systems: Deborah Hay through Christopher House

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**Abstract.** Performance generating systems are rule- and task-based dramaturgies that systematically set in motion a self-organizing process of dance or theatre creation. The resulting performance is not generated from the performers' impulses or choices, as in the case of improvisation, but rather from the ways in which a system directs, limits, and adapts the performers' conscious attention, perceptions, and interactions. At present we are unable to archive and remount these systems. The reason is that a valid blueprint needs to capture the dramaturgical and cognitive principles through which the systems generate performance instead of recording the actual performance that is danced or acted.

*Performance Generating Systems* (an international research project hosted by the University of Calgary) seeks to develop a tool for dramaturgical analysis and notation based on Dynamical Systems Theory; a tool that enables dramaturgs and scholars to script the most relevant components of performance generating systems and the dynamics of interaction and perceptual manipulation they generate. This paper will outline the project and present its first case study, the DST analysis and notation of Christopher House's (Toronto Dance Theatre) adaptations of Deborah Hay's solo performance scores.

Expressed in cognitive terms, Hay's scores and praxis challenge the performer to continuously and consciously register a larger and less selective amount of perceptual stimuli than normative cognitive processing involves. Otherwise implicit reliance on memory in the present is inhibited and replaced with attempts to avoid accumulation, patterning, sequencing, anticipation, and other forms of recycled movement responses to stimuli. The task is impossible; self-organizing movement patterns are attracted over time, yet the attempt results in a differently earned presence.

Hay articulates her praxis as a belief system. Thus one of my main challenges when applying DST to the work of Hay and House is to honour both their vocabulary and my observations of the embodied cognition of this praxis, while using DST to distill principles of performance generation that can be transferred between artists over time. In other words, I am negotiating the interdisciplinary positions of specificity versus generalization in search of an operational, and dramaturgically productive, compromise.

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