

Review: Maya Deren: Incomplete Control

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**Maya Deren: Incomplete Control by Sarah Keller. 2015.
New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press.
296 pp, 26 b&w images. \$30.00 paperback. ISBN:
9780231162210.**

Karen Wood, Coventry University

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In *Maya Deren: Incomplete control*, Sarah Keller presents a thought-provoking view of Deren's work that is framed by the notion of incompleteness. While providing some important historical information about Deren, the main body of this book discusses Deren's work as fragmented and unfinished, which was Deren's chosen artistic process. Keller's thinking is centrally focused on liberating Deren's artistic work as an indication of "an aesthetic that respects a rejection of closure and completion,"¹ rather than failure to complete the many projects once begun. Maintaining a close relationship with Deren's archives, Keller gives this avant-garde filmmaker the respect and sensitivity that she and her work thoroughly deserve.

Keller has sifted through archival boxes of notes from incomplete projects that are entwined with her analyses of Deren's published films, books, and music. Placing as much importance on Deren's unfinished work as her (so-called) finished work, Keller nuances the tense spaces between binaries of absence and presence explored by Deren, who did not try to bring these concepts together, but rather, tried to keep them apart in order to exaggerate the tension. An important influence in Deren's work was her time spent in Haiti and her study of rituals. Her search for the spirituality and awareness of otherness inspired her later work in which she embraced the incomplete as an aesthetic. This strategy of Deren's to produce work considering "absence and presence,"² "fragments," and "plans abandoned"³ led to the openness that Keller eloquently illuminates.

Chapter One comprises of an in-depth analysis of one of Deren's most canonical works, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Although this work is the subject of much study and is considered to be complete, finished, and closed, one finds pleasure peering into a filmic structure of incompleteness "through the non-ending forms of recursion,

reflection, and circles.”⁴ Deren’s mix of interest in poetry, dance, and photography is evident in her films, and Keller draws close attention to Deren’s interdisciplinary curiosities regarding “artistic and intellectual”⁵ subjects. In the second part of this chapter, Keller discusses *Witches Cradle* (1943), a solo endeavor by Deren with minimal input from her then filmmaker-husband Alexander Hammid. *Witches Cradle* is an example of Deren’s various interests combining and producing a binary of “openness and closure, expressed in several different ways.”⁶

The following chapter explores three of Deren’s six completed works, namely: *At Land* (1944), *A study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). Providing textual analysis of these films combined with archival notes about the planning process, Keller articulates Deren’s growing interest in the use of the camera to explore reality and ritual. Deren’s trip to Haiti, funded by the Guggenheim Foundation, was to explore Voudoun rituals. This project was never actually fulfilled; it was “unfinished labor.”⁷ However, the time spent in Haiti broadened Deren’s creative reach as she produced a nonfiction book, a music album, plans for a six-album compilation, a photographic series, and lectures all inspired by Haitian people and ritual. The book’s final chapter follows Deren’s work in the last decade and a half of her life (1943 to 1961) and reports on the continued influences of Haiti in Deren’s finished and unfinished work.

What is missing in the book is a thorough theoretical engagement with notions of the affective turn and kinesthetic empathy whilst viewing Deren’s films.⁸ Keller points towards this possibility in another article, when discussing Deren’s work as “aesthetic, cinematic dance ... most immediate and capable of conveying ideas, emotions, and rhythms with directness and force.”⁹ For example, using Deren’s later work, grounded in her interest in Haitian Voudoun ritual, gives an insight into Deren’s curiosities with dancefilm and affect and would have provided a good ground for theoretical analysis. One could suggest that Keller’s book is also ‘incomplete’ and ‘fragmentary’. However, Keller does provide a rich account of Deren’s history and her incomplete filmmaking practice.

What I enjoy most about Keller’s book is the refreshingly different perspective she provides regarding Deren’s artistic process, and further, how she shows that incompleteness, in the form of allowing binaries to exist rather than trying to fix them, can be a fruitful, creative, and imaginative lens through which to consider Deren’s avant-garde work. This book will be of interest to students, academics, and artists interested in studying film, and particularly screendance, as a means to get an understanding of an early, exemplary pioneer of experimental film.

Biography

Karen Wood is currently a dance practitioner/ researcher/ educator. She works at the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University as a Research Assistant and for the University of Wolverhampton as a Dance Lecturer. Karen is also working on artistic projects, supported by Arts Council England, collaborating with other art forms, such as neuroscience, fine art, lighting design and music where she creates and performs in dance works, incorporating film, for traditional and non-traditional spaces.

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Notes

¹ Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control*, 2.

² *Idem.*, 85.

³ *Idem.*, 10.

⁴ *Idem.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Idem.*, 60.

⁷ *Idem.*, 135.

⁸ For an example of a productive incorporation of theoretical frameworks in the study of screendance, see Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 2011.

⁹ Keller, "Pas de deux," 56.

References

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