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critical correspondence

Peggy Jarrell Kaplan in conversation with Juliette Mapp

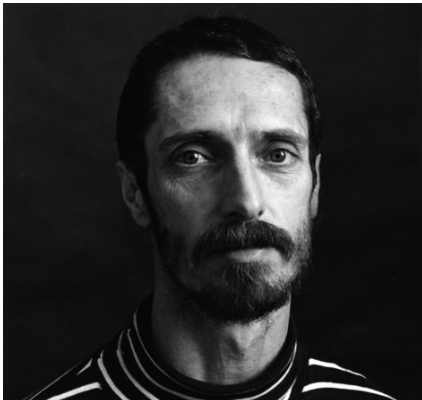
Choreographer [Juliette Mapp](#) talks with [Peggy Jarrell Kaplan](#), a photographer who has been making portraits of choreographers in New York and Europe for over thirty years. Her recent series of New York women choreographers is currently on display at the [Center for Performance Research](#), with a reception taking place on January 8 from 6-10pm.

Interview date: September 27, 2010

Peggy Jarrell Kaplan: Knowing that you were going to ask me questions, I started thinking of how much I love going to dance in New York. I love the community. I love seeing the same faces even though I'm apart from everything that's going on.

Juliette Mapp: That goes straight to something I was curious about: You say that you're "apart." You're on the outside, but you document in a way that is important to the community. I'm wondering if you can speak more to that.

Peggy: I've never studied dance. I feel it's both a strength and a weakness that I don't really get inside what's happening.



Steve Paxton, 1984 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan

By the way, in general I don't photograph anyone else other than choreographers. I started photographing performance visual artists whom I came to know in the 70's, like Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Hannah Wilke, Charlotte Moorman. Judson Church had been floating around in my mind. I wanted to track them down, and I wanted to track down the people who had performed *Einstein On The Beach*. [That piece] didn't change my life, it changed my mind. ... [Then my work] very clearly became [focused on] choreographers.

Juliette: There's a sense of the outside eye [in your work]. How did you cultivate that role as opposed to seeing yourself inside the community?

Peggy: This whole process, in my mind, is the process of being able to see someone's work and then to [photograph them].

It's wonderful when the choreographer is also the dancer. It makes me think, "How would I make a portrait? What is it about this work? What would I do?" It's very important to me that I can see the work first.

You know, Sidi Larbi [Cherkaoui] said that the dancer or choreographer, as compared to the visual artist, is both the draftsman and the pencil. This is what I've felt. It's an immediate way of creativity, somehow related more to what that person is than painting with a canvas.

Juliette: That's an incredible quote. I have to say I've been looking for something like that myself.

Peggy: I've always seen [live performance] as something that's on the way to disappear. Nothing lasts after the dance. This made me think of all sorts of metaphorical, existential things. [My work is] an homage, really. I don't understand people who can devote their life to the body in that way and where their intelligence comes from. It's a group that's really outside of the norm in a way.

Juliette: There is that sense of honoring people in the way you care for them in the images. There's such a specific tenderness with each photograph. I don't know how you make that happen between the performer and you, the photographer. I'm interested in that process and that intimacy in the studio. Is it always at your home?

Peggy: Yeah. Except for... [Pina Bausch] didn't come to my home. [both laugh]

Juliette: I was looking at your archives and there's that one of [Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker] standing against a brick wall. I love that photograph so much. And that's one where I can really say, "Well, that wasn't at her house." I'm really really curious about that.

Peggy: Well, I'm afraid of that a little bit, because I don't want to think of it as an homage and I don't want to think of it as sentimental. I don't want to think of making myths. The real tool of photography is to see. It's not to make something. But what I do is... make something. There's a problem for me.

But, I guess in some sense the choreographer is a form, a still life. And this sounds so wrong in terms of no deconstruction... I don't even really think I'm going to say it.

Juliette: [laughs] You can shoot from the hip. It's fine.

Peggy: It's the sense that the choreographers are pretty tough, and they don't seem to be invested in how they look. There's a certain freedom in that.

You were photographed! Do you remember what that felt like?

Juliette: Absolutely. I absolutely did. I remember John Jasperse had his photo taken previous to me and he said "I'm not sure she got what she wanted." He had this anxiety about how the shoot went. And I remember going and feeling instantly really comfortable. Like, "Oh well, I'm just here in her house." I met your husband and your son and there was a conversation about *Madison as I Imagine It*. Then, when we went into your studio, it just felt like a continuation of what had happened outside. It didn't feel like there was an agenda that you were presenting me with, and that, I think, is what I'm so curious about. What is your intention in [your studio] environment? What are you communicating with the performers or choreographers?

Peggy: There have been shifts in my interests, but the process has been the same, because it feels slightly improvised... well, very much improvised.



Lucinda Childs, 1984 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan

The first portraits were very much focusing on expression and concentrating on the face and the position of the head. It also seemed like the first people I was photographing, the Judson Church group, had something inside that was very intense and thoughtful.

Then I started to introduce things like... I'd start making a table. People could lean on it, it seemed like it was easier somehow to establish something different. I started using some objects from around my home, and once I exhausted ideas related to the object, I could get rid of it.

I guess at a certain period I must have been fascinated with hands on the face, and I must say they were really awful. [laughs]

But for my latest photographs, I decided to have more of a plan. I'd been photographing so many people from Europe, and there was a predominance of men... I decided, wouldn't it be great to photograph eleven New York-based women? So then it was like, well, I'll see who's performing in the summer and that's what [this next series of photographs] will be. Summer seemed a time to loosen up, to try new things, so I asked

each subject to bring a costume or something that related to the work.

Juliette: What attracts you to a particular performer? What is it that you feel sparks your imagination?

Peggy: I don't have a critical judgment. I like people that are far out there.

I have to mention something that Olivier Dubois said: "Maybe you photograph choreographers because you're trying to steal something." He said it with a French accent. It was such an original thought, a great beautiful thought. What does "stealing" mean? What is it influencing?

Juliette: I've seen your photographs since I was a young dancer, ones of Bill T. Jones or Mark Morris or the Judson group. There was the possibility, as a young dancer, to project a lot onto those portraits. They invited my creative imagination into who these choreographers were. As I've gotten older, and I know a lot of the choreographers you've taken pictures of, there does seem to be to me, an actual resonance in the photographs and their work.

Peggy: Well, I have always felt that with a portrait, meaning an image of a face, there is always a resonance. When I first started, there weren't a lot of portraits of this group of people. So in that sense, it seemed interesting to do that. I feel that it's frustrating to capture movement. How can you? How can you in a photograph? It's so difficult.

Juliette: That's what's so interesting [about] what you do. There's something that stays with you, brings you back to who that individual is as an artist, not just as an object of a portrait.

Peggy: I made a timeline of all the New York dance [that I've photographed].

Juliette: I want to read some of these names. I'll just read 1987: Trisha Brown, Martha Clarke, Steven Petronio, John Kelly, Lance Gries. That's 1987—just one year, you know?

Peggy: [My work] seemed to go in waves too, when exciting things were happening. All of a sudden, there would be this group of people that I was photographing. I was taking the temperature of what's going on.



Maria Hasabi, 2003 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan

Juliette: I'm so glad you mentioned that, because you've seen such a spectrum of dance over many decades. This is something I'm curious about in my own work: how generations are connected. What do you think is a defining characteristic of this moment?



John Kelly, 1987 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan

Peggy: Of this moment over the summer? Well, it was interesting that there were so many women performing in the summer.

Juliette: But [the focus on women] was an idea of yours beforehand?

Peggy: Yes, so I was thinking it's in the air. I find—now [the artists I photographed] may disagree about this—but everything felt lighter and less tortured to me. There are two people making the portrait: me and the person.

Juliette: You're seeing a bunch of work that corresponds to the individual.

Peggy: Yes, but I can't speak about the work, because I don't really respond critically. It's a very emotional response. So much [about being] in the audience depends on your mood or what you feel like. Sometimes you just have to give yourself over to it.

That feeling of Paige Martin's piece [*Panorama*]. That was such an extraordinary experience for me. I don't know, I just loved it. The hot weather and the dark, dusk, and going out to the beautiful park that I hadn't been to, waiting in line, seeing the faces of so many I had photographed, and then not knowing what was going to happen. Then, I was just hysterical after thinking, "Why is this line going so slow?" and discovering that you squeeze through [the entry doorway] as a quote [from] MoMA's show [Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*]. And then you enter this brightly lit room and they give you champagne and there are these crazy things lying around and you don't know what's going on and you talk. It was just special. I could go on and on.

Juliette: I'm really happy to hear you describe your individual experiences, because I really appreciate that you bring yourself to each moment uniquely, as opposed to looking for some sort of zeitgeist at the moment that you're trying to capture.

Peggy: Well, sometimes I can be a little harsh and not going along with it. This summer was very special. Robbinschilds did an improvisation event that was very smart. But again, you had to give it time. They're subject #11 [for the CPR installation]. The audience was encouraged to submit a request. I usually don't participate, but I had such a strong feeling to ask them to "do" a portrait. Well, I'll tell you, their portrait was devastating and very funny. It was the most posed and artificial possible, so much the danger of what portraits are. Then one of them said, "Okay, make a tableau." They went on to make a larger tableau. Then one of them said, "Now animate it." So they all were still touching each other and still moving like some kind of creaking large toy. I got

away from something.

Juliette: This is helping me understand.

Peggy: This is one thing, and I don't think this fits at all. I always feel whenever I talk about it... And now I'm going to disappoint you...

Juliette: [laughs] You could never disappoint me.

Peggy: My sister led a troubled life, and we were estranged. She came to San Francisco the same time I came to New York in the 60's. In a sense, we were both product of our times, because I had my eye on New York and she had her eye on San Francisco for a freer life. She was very much taken with the love generation. She was very artistic and now there would probably be terms for her condition, but not back then. I guess she suffered from depression. She died from undiagnosed diabetes when she was 53 in 2003, and it turned out she kept journals since her late adolescence. Starting in the 70's, she began to make a drawing each day that illustrated herself.

Juliette: Everyday?

Peggy: Everyday. They were to show her moods and what she was feeling that day. I was thinking—I have a collection, and she had a collection. Hers were self-portraits for herself, and I'm making portraits of others as my own obsession. So I've had some plans to somehow exhibit both, but the whole thing is very risky. What does "portrait" mean to my sister and me?

Once I went to a photography gallery and showed my portraits, and was told, "Well we don't show portraits at all." What is a portrait? It doesn't seem like a photograph. It seems like something else. I don't even think of myself as a photographer because I'm not really that technical and I'm not experimenting. With a portrait, since it is a face, there is always something that works. If half the shots don't come out it doesn't matter.



Paige Martin, 2010 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan



Layla Childs & Sonya Robbins, 2010 #2 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan

Juliette: One of my questions was where and how you picked the set pieces that are in more recent portraits you've been doing. I've been wondering for a while, "Where did that pole come from?" or "Where's that little bird from?" Now to know that they're actually things that you have a relationship to and in some sort of unconscious way choose to plant and manipulate... it's very interesting because it shows that there's this other level of connection to the moment, to the subject.

Peggy: I was grasping for a way to not only have a face.

Juliette: So you were trying to change the way in which you were working?

Peggy: I was, unconsciously or not. That's why I was interested in double portraits. It's interesting why I wanted to photograph you because at that time, you weren't a choreographer.

I actually have photographed dancers who I really like. I followed the Pina Bausch dancers and Rosas dancers and Sasha Waltz's dancers and [William Forsythe's] dancers and John Jasperse' dancers... I photographed you.



Juliette Mapp, 1999 © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan

I was so struck by your face. I had the feeling that your face would be on a Roman coin. That's why the photograph always meant a lot to me. I had a concept first and felt that I had achieved it, and that was a nice moment.

Juliette: It was a great experience for me as well. Did you feel in the moment when you were taking the photograph that you achieved it?

Peggy: It's funny that you mentioned [John Jasperse] thinking after the session that [he wasn't sure if I got what I wanted]. I also feel like [that]. When I'm talking to someone after we have closed down shop... I notice new expressions, and I think "Maybe the portrait should be every time I *don't* click the shot."

Juliette: [laughs] That would really be a performance. So while you're taking it, you never have an idea like, "This is what I want. This is working."

Peggy: I do have that feeling sometimes, but it's not necessarily accurate.

Juliette: I see. Just like a performance. [both laugh]