

Kathy Westwater
in conversation with Ursula Eagly

Ursula Eagly: I am dying to ask you about the process that happens outside of the time that we spend together in the studio. I have this feeling that there's a lot that goes on. Also, and I think this is perhaps related; your work is both deeply somatic and deeply political. It's very unusual for those two qualities to coexist, and I wonder how your process plays into that.

Kathy Westwater: I feel that anything is available to me. I don't set out with any particular piece that I make with an agenda that it's going to be political or it's not going to be political or it's going to be somatic. At this point, I'm not surprised if it's either of those things, but I never know what something's going to be until I do it. Also so much of my work, particularly now, comes out of the people who I'm working with. I never know how people are going to respond to the work that I'm doing until I'm working with them. My work has become much more collaborative through the years. And I like that. I like that I can't anticipate as much.

But the first piece that you made with me, *Macho*, I did have some very specific ideas by the time you and I were working together. I was trying to deal with information that was coming up in my body. Issues surrounding illness and war were coming up for me. And a sub-category of war was torture. I was preoccupied with torture around the time that I was finishing up *twisted, tack, broken*. It was around the time that the information was starting to come out publicly about what was happening in Iraq with detainees.

Through the somatic work that I do, I tap into what I experience as a whole. That doesn't preclude or exclude the external world. I don't see them as separate. Somatic work is a way for me to access information. I access information through my own body. We all do. We apprehend the world through our senses. And through our bodies. I have a very specific practice of exploring that, and it happens to be an aesthetic one.

Ursula: How did illness and war come up in your somatic work? Can you talk a bit about that?

Kathy: Yes, although I don't find it easy to talk about. I find it preferable to communicate in my medium. Illness and war were two issues that were preoccupying me over a long period of time. I couldn't ignore that we were at war, that our country was at war, but it was the kind of war that was easy to ignore. It remains that type of war. I had to give attention to it and I felt that I could do that through my work.

Also, there were different forms of illness that were present in my life. My own illness, an injury, and my father's terminal illness. He died around this time last year. It was a big part of my life at that time, dealing with chronic, long-term illnesses. Illness has come up again in the work that I'm doing now. This piece, *PARK*, is preoccupied with land and landscape and the relationship between the body and the landscape. Certain landscapes are toxic, and that reality is a source of illness for a lot of people. The concept of pain became critical for me as a way of understanding how illness and war related to one another. For a long time, I didn't understand that, even when I was working with you and other artists in the studio. I knew that I was preoccupied with these issues, and I knew that they were interrelated. But I couldn't conceptually understand that until I was introduced to Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain*. She related illness and war through the phenomena of pain.

Ursula: After you read *The Body in Pain*, what changed in your approach to the work in the studio?

Kathy: That piece, *Macho*, took three years to make. I was exploring in multiple ways. I was exploring in formal choreographic ways. I was also exploring this content, trying to understand it, as it existed in my body. And once I started working with the book, I was trying to work with that

information. It was conceptual and philosophical, but it was also grounded in real things, the phenomena of war and illness. I was trying to understand how to use literary content in a movement context. I didn't want to be diagrammatic or illustrative; I didn't want to translate the text into a different medium. I was trying to understand what I was going to do with what I'd already been doing in the studio, but in relationship to this new textually based information. In a way, that investigation set me up for the project that I am working on now, *PARK*, which integrates text directly into the performance—Jen Scappettone's *Exit 43*, that she calls “an archaeology of Superfund sites interrupted by pop-up choruses”.

But in answer to your first question, what happens outside of our time in the studio, I also watch a lot of TV. And movies. And my husband is an architect. So a lot of visual information is in play in my house all the time.

Ursula: What about your time alone in the studio? What are you doing while you're there alone, literally? There are so many ways to talk about dance, and I'm very interested in articulating it in the most literal way.

Kathy: It's very difficult to do that, as you know, I'm sure. Dance functions on so many different levels. It's the human body. And much of what occurs in the human body is seemingly formless. We have these debates about what comatose people are able to apprehend or not apprehend . . .

Ursula: I've certainly spent a lot of time alone in the studio comatose.

Kathy: I practice receptivity to information from different directions, from the internal to the external. I have different practices that come from codified ones, like Feldenkrais. And I come from a strong improvisational background. I studied improvisation with people like Simone Forti and Dana Reitz. I've done a lot of Authentic Movement. All of that work is very present for me. It's all synthesized at this point, because I have accessed it for almost twenty years now in different respects, from performative ones to non-performative ones. A lot of the work that I do, my solo work in the studio, I probably would not characterize in a performative vein. It can be, I don't rule that out, but it hasn't so much tended to be in the recent past. It does many things. It prepares me for all of my creative work.

Ursula: How does it do that?

Kathy: I'm able to access something that then I can share. As opposed to inviting people to come into the studio to work with me, accessing whatever I can out of their experience, and making work out of that. When I have my own studio time, I'm able to connect to whatever is somatically or conceptually relevant to me at that period of time. It's available to me to then enter into a dialogue with the other artists involved in my work. I trust that it's available, because of all these practices that I've engaged in over the years. How the practices all synthesize or relate to one another moment to moment is quite challenging. I don't know if I can articulate that.

Honestly, I do this because it's something that I enjoy. I like to do it. That's first and foremost what's happening. I usually don't walk in the door with any rules other than “do something that you want to do” or “do something that you'd like to do” or “you don't have to do anything that you don't want to do.” That's it. I walk in the room, and that's all that I have to do. If I want to fall asleep, I can fall asleep. If I want to do nothing, I can do nothing. If I want to draw, I can draw. If I want to move, I can move. I almost can't do anything if I don't give myself the ability to do whatever I want to do. From there, I don't try to apply my training, but I try to trust that my training will support whatever I do, whatever happens.

Ursula: What about your process with Jen Scappettone, the poet who is collaborating with you on *PARK*? I'm curious what your process together has been like outside of what I've been a part of.

Kathy: I'm in awe of Jen and her work. I'm very excited to be working with her. Her work encapsulates the deeply wrought and wildly ranging experience a human can have on the planet. She doesn't limit herself to describing an aesthetic experience. It's been interesting to see how her work relates to what you and I are doing with the body in rehearsals together. The ideas that I have about the body being fractured and non-linear have found a good partnership in her use of language.

Ursula: I also wanted to ask about the use of your pelvis technique in *PARK*. I remember starting work with Macho, and we did a lab once a week to just focus on this technique. It's still a part of this process, but it feels that there's less of an emphasis on it, with new dancers coming in and having different relationships to it.

Kathy: The work that I've done that I describe as the pelvis work is sort of an operative way of arriving at a certain sensibility and articulation in the whole body. I've always felt that people could have the relationship they have with it. For somebody like you, for example, it's something you've explored for a long time, four years. I think that it's something I don't have to direct in you at this point anymore. Similarly with Abby Block. For Rebecca Davis, she's been observing it for many years, as has Kazu Nakamura. They have a certain relationship to it that I didn't, which is seeing it from the outside and apprehending it before doing it. The pelvis technique is still very present in the work. I'm very satisfied with where it's going and the way that different people do express it differently. That's very exciting for me right now. Also, the pelvis technique is not what defines my work . . . and I hope you don't ask me what defines my work.

Ursula: I thought of it, but we don't have that much time left. One last question. People use Studio Series for so many different types of presentations, and I thought it might be interesting to talk about what you are inviting an audience to see.

Kathy: I've been working in the studio in a particular way for a number of years. I was introduced to the idea of doing studio work when I was getting my MFA at Sarah Lawrence, and Sara Rudner told me about studio-based artists, who focus their work in the studio. I was intrigued by that, that one could make that type of a choice, to locate one's work in the studio. It remained present for me, and I've tried to make the studio a live space for the people who are in it, myself included. Also, I've always been intrigued by the visual art practice of studio visits. So for several years now, I've regularly invited people into the studio to look at my work. I invite them to witness what is happening here, in this place, with the people who choose to be here on a really regular basis working with me. I am extending this idea to the Studio Series.

Through the Studio Series residency, I've also been able to also explore a relationship between movement and text in the collaboration with the poet Jennifer Scappetone. There's been a nagging question for me in my work about the relationship between movement and language. Is movement a language or not? Is the movement that I am working on, that comes out of these different practices, is it a language? Or is it a practice? This has been preoccupying me for years. It precedes this period in time, but in working with verbal language and text through the collaboration with Jen, I have activated that inquiry on another level. I've never worked before with spoken text. That's something that has come out of the residency that's unprecedented in my work.