

**BACK
TO
NEW YORK
CITY**

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— Judy Hussie-Taylor and Juliette Mapp

*“The line between art and life
should be kept as fluid, and
perhaps indistinct, as possible.”*

— Allan Kaprow

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introduction

BY JUDY HUSSIE-TAYLOR

Executive Director, Danspace Project

Back to New York City, curated by Juliette Mapp, marks the second of Danspace Project's new series of guest-curated platforms. These platforms are part of Danspace's Choreographic Center Without Walls, a research and development project made possible with major support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This project was conceived to deepen Danspace's support for artists through commissions and residencies and to explore new ideas around the presentation of contemporary dance work, including this series of guest-curated platforms.

Danspace Project was founded by movement artist Barbara Dilley and poet Larry Fagin as New York City approached bankruptcy in 1974.

Danspace represents New York at its best, with artists and audiences making art happen when, where, and however they can. Rooted in the experimental, demotic, DIY ethos that helped to make the U.S. a leader in the arts after World War II, Danspace Project has supported artists who make work under any and all circumstances and challenge the rules of engagement. Find a space, work where you live, don't wait to be discovered, write/perform/invent your own history.

As I was beginning to develop the Choreographic Center Without Walls platform concept in mid-2008, the global economy nearly collapsed. There was a palpable social anxiety, and I was concerned about how many artists in New York were going to struggle

to get by, and how many might not be able to continue to make and perform new work here, especially dancers and choreographers. Two things occurred to me. On the one hand, it was clearly going to get much worse for artists; on the other hand, it was already so difficult for so many dancers that they were perhaps better suited to meet the challenges of the radically altered world than were ordinary citizens. Maybe they had something to teach us about how to get by not only with less, but also with creativity, smarts, and integrity. It was at that time that I invited Juliette Mapp to curate a New York-centric platform.

Her approach to my proposal has been characteristically thoughtful, provocative, and subtly subversive. She has brought to the fore issues that are discussed privately but constantly by dance artists working in New York City today. No money, no space, no time, no health insurance. These pressures also bring up the flip side—there is no place more intense or energized, more fierce or fertile than our city. There lies the rub. We can't romanticize poverty. We can't accept marginalization. Juliette Mapp's platform asks us to consider alternative possibilities through the work and lives of the artists presented here.



links

BY URSULA EAGLY

Time and space. These fundamental elements of dance are the focus of the *Back to New York* platform—not only in terms of choreography, but in terms of their role in artists' lives. The writings in these pages are responses to questions that curator Juliette Mapp posed to the platform artists about geography and generations, histories and processes. In some cases, Mapp's questions are still included. In others, they have dissolved into the text.

The biographies that result hew closely to the lived experience of making dances. Where traditional program bios tell artists' stories through landmarks, these texts tell the stories that surround those landmarks. They describe factors

of geography, economics, and other circumstances that have framed each artist's life and work. They describe artistic curiosities that drive creative endeavors outside of dance and bind relationships between mentors, peers, and students. Even these non-traditional biographies may, as Shelley Senter writes, conceal more than they reveal. But we hope that they will illuminate the work of these choreographers, as well as the hidden struggles and rewards of being a dance artist.

Each artist's story is radically different, reflecting their singular trajectory through a life in dance. Yet, when read together like this, the texts start speaking to one another. Challenges

in one artist's life reappear, decades later, in another's. Names appear and reappear, crisscrossing through different artists' stories. Artists move to New York, leave, and return. The stories are linked.

These links—between individuals and in geography—are profoundly important in dance. Even in this technological age, most information in this field is conveyed directly from one body to another body. The physical location of bodies in space is as significant in artists' lives as it is in a performance.

The illustration that accompanies this catalogue is a visual representation of the links—between people, with New

York City, and through generations—that are described in the artists' texts. It portrays the ways in which each artist's story becomes a part of a larger one.

This is your story, too. Get out a pen. Plot your own relationships on this map, cut it apart, collage it together. Make your own links and trajectories and histories through the material. There is no single path in dance in New York—only points of departure.



curatorial statement

BY JULIETTE MAPP

"I'm going back to New York City, I do believe I've had enough." –Bob Dylan

When Dylan sings those final lines in "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," some of us that call New York City home understand what he means. And therein lies the mystery: Because really, why keep coming back to New York City at all? I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that when I am out of town I miss it, and when I return I am comforted by it (at least for a time). But even for those of us who love New York, it seems almost counter-intuitive to bother with a city that offers diminishing job prospects, ever increasing cost-of-living expenses, and spiraling housing prices. So why do

young dance makers continue to come to New York City? How do mid-career artists maintain their commitment to making work here? How do older artists survive in a city that is increasingly unfriendly not only to its artists, but to its elders?

I have invited the choreographers Deborah Hay, Paige Martin, Katy Pyle, Jen Rosenblit, Shelley Senter, Elaine Summers and David Thomson to not only to perform, but to consider their lives as artists in New York. Here they describe their histories, their processes, and their work. My curatorial interest lies in the intersection between these generations and in illuminating the common struggles that have long

defined making dance in New York. And yet, despite enduring difficulties, dance artists have come here to forge their paths ever since the birth of “modern” dance and they continue to do so.

Since the beginning of the last century, dance companies in New York have come together and fallen apart. The artists on this platform have not pursued a typical “company” model, an approach that is becoming increasingly untenable. Working outside this model, these artists do not use a stable group of dancers or cultivate consistent funding sources. Instead, each of them makes work specific to their circumstances and have found innovative ways to manifest their choreography. For example, Deborah Hay, who was born in Brooklyn and lived in New York before eventually settling in Austin, Texas, supports her work through her innovative Solo Performance Commissioning Project. Despite the fact that she does not currently live in New York she continues to return here to perform and inspire. Elaine Summers has developed her own movement technique, Kinetic Awareness, which she has taught since the 1960s. Like Deborah and Elaine, the other artists on this platform have adapted their lives to the ever-changing conditions of dance-making.

These artists share a rebelliousness that stems from their need to re-invent reasons to dance, both as they change and as contemporary dance becomes increasingly marginalized in our culture and sometimes even from other art forms. Paige Martin, who moved here from Houston Texas in 1986, writes, “It just feels strange to spend my life involved in something that is so isolated from everything else.” Perhaps as a way to reconcile contemporary dance’s distance from mainstream culture, these choreographers’ also connect to people beyond performance—through writing, teaching, cutting hair, film making, knitting, and practicing body work. Elaine Summers and Deborah Hay have also developed their own movement techniques, which they have taught to students around the world. The experience of making art from the body manifests in these different forms; it re-enforces the fact that dance, although ephemeral, does give birth to much material that remains. These creations are artifacts of bodily experience.

The artists presented here come from three distinct generations, yet the tenacity they share is striking. I find it inspiring that the struggles I experience are not new, nor are they particularly interesting compared to those of the

artists who have come before me or are younger than me. The more I know about the past, about who was making work, how they were doing so and why, the more I understand my own history. I am not only thinking about making dances, I am thinking about what keeps each of us looking for connections with each other and the world through dancing. Just knowing that so many others have found ways to make dances can give us inspiration to continue on, if we look to that history.

In 2008, I spent nine months outside of New York City, either on residencies, teaching, or performing. This was the only way I could make a living in dance, although it kept me away from home almost constantly. When I was on tour with Deborah Hay, our technical director, a Belgian, pointed out that in his home country the taxes are high, but its citizens receive health insurance, unemployment benefits, paid parental leave, and guaranteed housing. I commented that in the United States our taxes buy us wars—the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have cost more than 900 billion to date. Closer to home, deregulation and gentrification in New York has catered to business interests rather than New Yorker’s core needs: affordable housing, jobs,

and a functioning infrastructure. Our resources are being continually channeled away from those who need them most. These policies have had the same deleterious effect on artists as they have on the broader community. One need only look at the recent evictions of long-time institutions such as The Paul Taylor Dance Company, Jonas Mekas’s film archives, or the experimental music venue Tonic for proof.

Paradoxically, it is in just such dire times that New York City can serve as a muse. Although it provides plenty of stress and fatigue, it also offers a resilient creative community (Mekas and Taylor have thankfully found new homes), a tradition of artistic and intellectual rigor, and a population of seekers from across the country and around the world. In more ways than one, this city pushes us beyond what we might think we are capable of. Maybe that’s what keeps us coming back.