

On September 2, 2006, choreographer Jill Sigman and composer Kristin Norderval recorded a conversation about their working methods in an apartment in Oslo located between a mosque and a prison. They began by talking about an earlier collaboration, *Pulling the Wool: An American Landscape of Truth and Deception* [2004] and then went on to discuss their then current project, *RUPTURE*, which eventually premiered in February 2007 at Danspace Project in New York City. Some excerpts about mixing media, improvisation, musical composition, and other themes follow.

KN: When I was talking to these other Norwegian artists about your work, I was trying to describe *Pulling the Wool*. I told them it had this kind of carnival atmosphere and many different elements to the work. There was the video that you had done and the instructions that you'd given the audience, and all the dancers portraying fake newscasters, and you on crutches, and the element in the middle with the surgery stuff...

JS: There were also the fortune tellers...

KN: Right, the fortune tellers.

JS: And the bar.

KN: Well, I didn't say the bar... It was too hard to describe. What was so amazing to me was that you used all these elements, and I had seen you go through this process over, a year and a half was it?

JS: Actually that was only one year, that process. We started at Swarthmore—

KN: That's right. I was so inspired. I kept telling them the thing that was inspiring was that you were fearless.

JS: What do you mean?

KN: Well, there were so many different elements, but each one of them had been worked with in a detailed and specific way. That's what I mean by fearless. There were two things that stood out to me. One, it's enormous to use all those elements, and two, you were fearless about going into the different kinds of media. I mean, I might have images for some video, but I haven't done that yet. I'm staying with my sound thing, and my performance thing. To really tackle all those elements was astounding. I think it opens up the possibility to say, 'yes, you can put a lot of different things here'. There's still a through line to the problem or the theme you've taken on--whether you are addressing it in the way you are dancing or in the way that you've set up the "Hope Booth" or the "Eggshell Booth".

JS: See for me, I hope I'm not just putting all of these elements together in the attic like storage for a little bit of this and a little bit of that—

KN: Well, what if you are? I mean if you're putting things together in the attic, the attic is your concept, it's your head, your way of looking at the world...

JS: Right, and I feel like at this point in my choreographic process, I want more than that. It's true, I can make a collage of all found objects and the interconnections between them can be coherent enough and interesting enough to sustain that work. But, I want to be doing more than that right now. What I was doing in that piece was working each bit of it-- especially movementwise. Even if people could never see that, I worked the piece enough that it wasn't just a found object. I wasn't just telling the dancers, 'OK, well, you do whatever, just be a newscaster, pretend you are a newscaster'. It's the symbol of newscasterness that speaks in connection with the rest of the stuff. But I worked for six months with them on getting them to be able to sit a certain way, and getting them to be able to speak with no volume and then getting them to be able to do that in fast forward, and you know, these really, really fine grained things that, I was very, very demanding about.

KN: Which gave it a really creepy feel-- that kind of virtuosity in their faces and in their bodies.

JS: Right, but I feel like that's what matters. That precision and subtlety is important to me from a movement point of view and, in terms of making a much more specific or more powerful symbol that I can then put into a larger whole. And it wouldn't have been the same for me to just throw these things together without training those people. We did so many exercises that we didn't use in any obvious way in the piece. I'm thinking about that a lot now because, with the dancers I'm starting to work with, I keep wanting to take short cuts... I think in part because I'm a little bored with the idea of training people.

...

JS: I was just saying that the dancers look like found objects because they don't necessarily show technique in the ways that people recognize technique, but they're actually very crafted...

KN: Because you're using a different kind of movement vocabulary?

JS: Or maybe things that people don't even recognize as a movement vocabulary. What I'm realizing now is how much this kind of training of creating shared and repeated experiences was really crucial to layering or deepening those objects that I then juxtaposed in the work. It wasn't enough to just find people who looked good and tell them, 'be newscasters,' and dress them up nicely. I wanted them to have this experience of improvising outdoors, hearing sound, then hearing no sound, working with their eyes closed, all these different experiences they lived through during the process of making the piece...

KN: Well, sure. Especially because when there was an audience they had to be able to respond very directly by creating the fake news... and also sometimes not so directly. The performers never knew what the audience would do.

JS: Yes... some people touched the dancers while they were sleeping!



JS: There was a lot of openness in that structure [for *Pulling the Wool*]. But now, I want the pendulum to swing back. You know, I want to say, 'good, we did that, and it was an interesting experiment.' It was valuable. People found it interesting. But, how can I take what I learned from that and now try to infuse a more choreographed context with that level of responsiveness and improvisation? It's like the next step. It looks like going back to a proscenium way but, it doesn't feel like it. It feels like a really hard thing. How do I take that level of improv and put it into something more crafted?

KN: Yeah, it's tricky because even if you are using the improvisatory stuff to find certain bits of material, how do you remember what the hell you did...?

JS: But you don't try, right? You don't try. That's not what the goal is—to remember what you did—because you're not trying to repeat what you did.

KN: Right, but if you're wanting to make it into a more fixed arc, a set piece, and you're using the improvisatory work to find material, then how to choose from that?--- you almost have to be kind of split at the time, and be editing while you're improvising, which is really not a good situation at all. Or, you have to record everything and then go back and look and make your choices.

JS: Or, you do what I was talking about earlier, you just live through enough that the entire landscape of all those different times and experiences creates a certain facility. And then you give yourself...

KN: You say 'OK, now I'm going to do it'...

JS: Yes. Like 'I'm going to do this thing and I know that it's got to move through a specific trajectory of material and I know that I have to end up at point B, and I know that Kristin's music takes about 6 minutes to get there. I have to kind of find a way to be that thing, movementwise, in that time.' That's what I feel like I've been doing and I realize I'm having to train the dancers in that way, and not just make steps for them, because it's about hovering over this material, circling over it, over and over and over.

KN: So that they are so in sync with it—it's been so internalized in them-- that they can also make those choices?

JS: Ideally.

KN: That's the question.

JS: Yeah, that's the goal. And if I can't do it, at a certain point, then I'll bail and I'll set stuff and I'll try to find ways to outsmart that problem. But, for now, I'm still 6 months out and I want to try to give them that.

KN: The freedom of going from A to B, within a set time, using a certain kind of material that they are going through. I would say that in itself can be a score too—I mean there are notated scores that have that freedom...

JS: Right.

KN: But you know, it occurs to me—maybe there is a confusion in calling it improvisation-based. Maybe it's more accurate to say task-based.

JS: Which thing is task-based?

KN: Well, now you have this task to go from A to B using this particular kind of material. You're given the motives and that's the task. And the freedom is in the way you choose to do the phrasing or the timing. The other thing I just got the image of now, is that you're interested in game structures. You're intrigued by the kinds of situations you can set up by giving instructions, whether it's to an audience, or to people before the performance for example, to call in and get clues to something. So, you're setting up a situation and your choreographic end result has an aspect of that in it as well. Because within these tasks, you set up 'when such and such happens do this, when the next such and such happens, do that'. So the work's a complex combination of tasks, games, particular movements that you've rehearsed, and how they're put together with other...

JS: Yeah, I think that's very accurate. It's like this parcel of some of all of those things.



JS: What if anything—maybe nothing—what do you find exciting about it?

KN: About *RUPTURE*?

JS: About what we're doing so far? About either what we've made, or what we are making, or anything.

KN: I think the most exciting parts are the parts where you're willing to go to a very intense level of distress.

JS: That sounds very melodramatic! [laughter]

KN: It *does* sound melodramatic! And it might be—it might look melodramatic if it wasn't so actually—well, it *is* a little distressing. I mean, when you are doing the section walking into the wall? There is a part of me that says, 'stop, don't do that'. It's not comfortable to watch. But that is also the part of me that has the emotional response, of 'yeah, this is taking on a theme that is pretty intense and we don't have a way to stop all of these ruptures that are going on around the world'. I don't know, I mean maybe we do and we just haven't figured it out yet. But it is that level of distress. There is something in the willingness to take a particular thing on, a kind of durational excess. Like in the wailing or the long walk. Yeah, a willingness to go to that extreme emotional place.



JS: How do you decide what to pair with what, musically? I mean I know that we talk, but there's still so much that you're doing beyond what we talk about.

KN: I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that out. It's tricky. I mean in some places—

JS: You mean tricky for this piece, or tricky as a practice?

KN: Well, I was thinking in this piece.

JS: Well, for example the walking into the wall. We started with this kind of transformed gypsy music, which I had been working with in a different way, and I kind of brought that to you. So, you were given a starting point. But then it morphed and it kind of ends up being these things that—what is it? It's Hemant's heel?

KN: Uh huh. It's the feet. It's the dance steps—

JS: So, it's really my Kathak teacher's feet?

KN: It's really your Kathak teacher's feet.

JS: But, it sounds to me like explosions or something.

KN: Because it's so slowed down. And the resonance of the feet against the marble—was it marble?-- is quite extreme, so you're hitting the wall at the same time, and you have this parallel of body hitting stone.

JS: Ah, that's interesting. But, did you think of it that way or did that just happen?

KN: No, I think that particular thing... well, I play with things—I ask, at what speed? At what pitch shift? And if I'm going to stretch it timewise at the same pitch that's one

thing, but if I'm going to stretch it by playing it at a much much slower speed then it shifts the pitch as well, which is why it ends up having those kind of explosive sounds. But, I think I always retain some kind of connection to things—I mean, there *is* an organic connection to the original sound. And I think even when it's distorted to that degree, somehow the original sound is still internalized.



KN: When we did the draft version of *RUPTURE* in *Osijek* [July 2006], the thing that really struck me, at the very beginning of the performance, that I hadn't thought about when we were rehearsing, was that by setting up the eggshells in a big oval, the audience really had to change how they entered the space to avoid the eggshells. It was really interesting to watch this. It was a small physical thing, but it made a very big physical change in how they moved together as a group. If one was slower it sort of bunched up the others but they could see they had to be careful so they couldn't rush by each other and they couldn't elbow out. It was a lot of people to put in the space, and it made me a little nervous to watch them, you know, like 'like how are they going to do it?' They did it well, like only one eggshell broke, you know [laughs]. And so in that—just the entry into the space was already...

JS: A physical experience?

KN: Uh, huh.