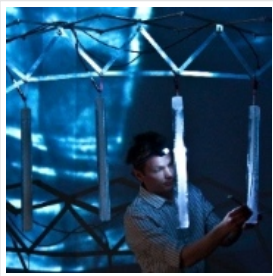


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Karen Bernard in conversation with Michael Helland

Curator and Choreographer [Karen Bernard](#) speaks with dancer and choreographer [Michael Helland](#). Karen discusses the [Performance Mix Festival](#), which takes place at [Dixon Place](#) April 26-May 1, 2011.

Interview date: April 4, 2011

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Michael Helland: We were just chatting about how you're having a lot of issues today with visas and traveling. I know you have a lot of visiting artists for the Performance Mix Festival this year. How has that been, in addition to the frustrations you've been having? If you could talk about some of the artists you're bringing in and where they're coming from...

Karen Bernard: The artists that I can actually [name] would be Alexis O'Hara from Montreal who's a composer and performer and Owen Chapman who is a composer and performer. [Alexis] will also be hosting our Exchange/Echange, which is our exchange with Studio 303 in Montreal along with our New York host, Zero Boy.

The reason we set this up is to just have this dialog, a *fun* dialog between people from different countries. It's interesting. They're humor is different. Of course the artists themselves, too, represent emerging artists from Montreal and New York City. I can't name the names of the ones coming from Studio 303.

Michael: Why? Is it a secret?

Karen: Because they don't have *visas*!

Michael: You need a visa to come from Canada?

Karen: Yes, you do. I mean, in the past it wasn't as strict. People would just come over. After all, we're just showing a short piece in one performance but they make it very difficult. Alexis is known quite a bit internationally so [I] definitely wanted to support her and get a visa. Owen is a theater professor at Concordia [University], so he certainly wasn't going to come without a visa. He's doing a really interesting installation. He has created a metal frame which he hangs ice tubes from with filament in them that are played electronically. It's been a challenge. We've had to get a freezer for him so that he could keep his icicles. Actually, if it was in Montreal and it was really cold, he could just keep his icicles outside [laughs].

I've had a relationship with him for quite some time. He's done some compositions for me. He's worked with the choreographer, George Stamos up in Montreal. I love the continuity of the relationships with artists. That's so great.

In terms of the Balkan Express, we've received a grant from the Trust of Mutual Understanding to create this event. I had seen the work of Ivo Dimchev in Ljubljana, Slovenia and I was just blown away.

Michael: Which work of his did you see?

Karen: It was *Som Faves*

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Photo courtesy of Ivo Dimchev

Michael: I saw that the summer I was in Vienna. When I saw that you were bringing Ivo to New York, I was really glad because he definitely seemed like the kind of artist who would be well received there.

Karen: Oh yeah. He just performed at another festival at La Mama and he got wonderful press and a wonderful response from the audience. That was another piece called...

Michael: *Lili Handel*

Karen: Yeah! So now, people have a chance to see the second work. Also, I made a relation with this choreographer, Iskara Sukarova from Macedonia at the time. I was meeting with people who were part of this Nomad Dance Academy and that was a residency for artists who were selected to be in a residency for four months and travel to different Balkan countries. Each time they went to a Balkan country, they would be hosted, have workshops and see performances. Along the way, they were creating their own work and using each other as performers.

By the time they got to Ljubljana, within this festival that Ivo was in called Short Cuts, I saw this piece by a very young choreographer, Viktorija Ilioska. She was 19 at the time. I thought [her piece] was really fascinating. It challenges the audience and objectifies the audience rather than the audience objectifying the performer. My idea is to bring her here, work with New York artists over a period of a week to recreate the piece, giving her free rehearsal time and so forth, and then showing it. She'll show it in our Breakfast Mix on [April] 29th which is 10am, where we have many of these artists coming together [with] people in the field from the Balkans who will talk about the strategies of exchange with each other. Viktorija's going to do a test-run and then she will actually show it in the exchange that evening.

You know, it is our 25th anniversary!

Michael: That's amazing!

Karen: Our last night [of the festival], we have invited 25 artists to do three-minute solos who have been in the Mix over the years. The music has been commissioned and it's actually Alexis O'Hara who's done the music for it. We're really excited. It'll be a celebratory night and we'll have a great party after.

Michael: You're doing it at Dixon Place this year?

Karen: Yes. Traditionally, we have been doing it at Dia Center for the Arts. That building was designated by the city to be for dance, if you can believe that. So it had to be bought by a dance organization. The Joyce Foundation bought it. There was some transitional time when we weren't able to do our festival there. I just decided to do it at Dixon Place this year.

Michael: Well that's exciting because [Dixon Place has] their new building. I think it would be nice to have the social space of the cabaret and the bars as part of the Performance Mix.

Karen: Yeah. I felt a little more curatorial freedom [this year] because I really like to push the boundaries of what dance is about and how it crosses over into text and video. Also, recognizable forms of contact and different approaches to experimental work so that you can see where it's coming from, where it's going, how they work together. As you know, I really like to make it a *mix* geographically [with people] coming from different places, to culturally, to types of dance and performance and having serious work but also humorous work. I find that humor can be so poignant and so I really like to play around with that as well.

Michael: That's really cool that the Mix is a mix in a lot of different ways like you said. I know from [having been involved] in the past and also volunteering, that it is a lot of different kinds of performance. It's cool that you're able to present those all within the frame of one festival. Also, that it's a mix socially with the Breakfast Mix and the conversations and social environments like a mixer surrounding the performance events.

Karen: Yeah. For example, the composer we're bringing Owen Chapman, there's no dance involved at all. We're presenting a composer/performer. The reason for that is it all crosses over. I met him through a choreographer. Other choreographers are going to see him. This way, people get to meet new artists.

I've also begun to show more dance films.

Michael: Is that what you [meant by saying] you had more curatorial freedom this year? You mean to present more stuff like dance films and more music? What did you mean by that?



video still from *Walking The Plastic* by Kai Lssgott, Mduuzi Nyembe, Bandile Gumbi

Karen: I'm not as worried if it can't be labeled as "dance". I don't really have a definition of it. Ivo's work is really physical. He doesn't necessarily do a movement you could recognize and say "Oh that's what *that* is." You know?

Michael: It's weird being in Europe. I don't even think about that so much anymore because almost everything I'm seeing is so hybrid. If you ask me when the last time I saw a "dance" was, I wouldn't really have an answer for that.

The "mix" in Performance Mix illuminates that kind of hybridization. Not only can you see different genres and forms of works side-by-side, but even the work itself is mixed. I was looking at your website today. Is Isabel Lewis also coming out?

Karen: Yes, she is. [laughs] It was difficult because it's an expensive thing for her to come and I'm trying to give her as much support as I can. I'm very excited about her work. Regina Rocke is our associate producer and she's been great in opening me up to new artists that I'm not familiar with. Isabel was one of them. I actually really respect her opinions as well, as we work together to create the festival.

We do invite past Performance Mix artists to be on an advisory panel. That's our way of opening up. We have an open application. It's going to be [due] June 1st. We try to put our fingers out to artists we're not aware of. It's interesting to hear the dialog between advisory panel members. They get to be on the other side of the coin. They're usually sending in their applications.

Michael: You said it's your 25th anniversary. That's quite an accomplishment. This is your first year at Dixon Place so you moved the venue around. What other ways has the festival evolved over time? What was it like in the beginning?

Karen: As you know, I have a loft and I work out of here, which keeps my overhead lower than paying for office rental. I also have a rehearsal space. It was over 30 years ago that we moved here. Originally, we did have some informal performance in this space but I couldn't continue to do it.

Michael: What happened?

Karen: The landlord didn't want the public coming in. It just wasn't working. I'm very fortunate that I've been able to use this as a space for artists to have rehearsals. That's been okay with our landlord. I had the first [festival] at Henry Street Settlement. I called it Performance Mix. Then I learned about Dia Center for the Arts and began to do it there. I started out by doing it once a month. It was actually at Joyce Soho where they encouraged me to do it all in one week. We tried a two-week run but it was really costly.

Michael: So it started in your home and you're still there today. That's your place in Tribeca?

Karen: Yeah. I grew up in a house with a studio. We had a barn. It was in a suburban area but originally it was a farmhouse. My father changed it into a dance studio. He was a dance teacher. When he got out of the Navy, they had money to go to school so he went to the dance conservatory in Boston. He thought he'd take a ballroom class and meet some women. He got into the wrong class. He got into a modern dance class and he loved it. Then he met my mother. They married in a couple weeks and they moved to New York City with no money. He started dancing with Charles Weidman but it was too hard for them so they moved back to the Boston area and my father opened up a traditional dance studio. The only reason he got this wonderful home in this wonderful area, Marblehead, Massachusetts, was because of the money from the war. My mother would make all the costumes every year. They would rent the theater in the school. I loved the smell of the stairs and everything behind the theater. I'll never forget that.

Michael: So you grew up with dance in your life.

Karen: Oh yeah. I did. Now, it's just very natural that I have a studio in my home.



Photo courtesy of Karen Bernard

Michael: It's a beautiful space and I've always loved rehearsing there. I remember last week when we were talking, there were crazy people screaming in the background and I just knew that that's people being creative on the other side of the wall. What is it like to have that kind of connection where you actually are welcoming people into your home?

Karen: I don't rent in the evenings or weekends because that is family time. It's a little limited in that but it is fully booked from 9am to 6pm Monday through Friday. I enjoy it because I work here and I don't feel so isolated. It keeps me on task. I stay connected to people. More and more, I give free space to the Performance Mix artists. They can have it through the year.

I'm just about to do a residency. I'm including myself in my own work. We have a date at Dixon on June 16th. A week before then, we'll all come together. I've given the studio over to the other artists, which are Jill Guyon, Joanna Meyers, and Dana Michel.

Michael: Is this part of the *Three Femmes* thing?

Karen: Well, it used to be *Three Femmes*. Now we're just *Femmes* because it will be more open to having different combinations, depending on what we want to do. It's really just to show work in progress and to make connections and have a social interaction and make it more meaningful.

Michael: What are you working on now? I know you were supposed to do a Judson the other day but you broke your arm?

Karen: Well, I trust I will be getting another date either this season or at the top of the fall. Over the last few years, I've just been working on one piece, which keeps growing. It uses video. I have a cart that I can move around and a really sexy, small projector that is great for traveling. I can project onto any area so I can make my habitat. It's inspired by a movie, *The Swimming Pool*. It's about a woman who is elderly, who travels to write a book. It's kind of like her own little residency in the South of France and it becomes very erotic and mysterious, like a thriller. So I've likened myself to the fantasy of this whole idea of what was going on. I borrow some of the film images but a lot of images are from my traveling experiences at various residencies. I will get to do a full 40 minutes out in Portland, Oregon in the end of May at Performance Works Northwest. I'm excited about that.

Michael: What's the title of the solo?

Karen: *Ouette*

Michael: I remember when we were on Artward Bound together many years ago you were making another solo. That one was more family-based.

Karen: You might say that all of my work has been autobiographical, dealing with family issues, independent woman issues, and being an artist, and all of these things to go forward. Some of it was about the children leaving because they were going off to college. It sounds really like, "oh, it's a story." But the construction is really interesting. It doesn't necessarily have a beginning or end.



Photo by Ella Veres

Now I feel like I've gone beyond that. I feel like this piece is just *me*. I've kind of left my family behind because the kids are growing up. We do things together but we do things independently. You always have ghosts and the ghost of my father is extremely strong in all my work. He just carries right through. [I'm also wondering about] what's going on as you get older and the limitations of your body. Why can't a person keep performing as they get older?

Michael: There's some realness around that. What else can you do except use what you have to work with? I think that's cool that your work can reflect what's actually happening in your life. Do you ever perform your own work in the Performance Mix?

Karen: I have, but I really don't enjoy it because there's so much involved with the production and administration of the whole thing. I prefer not to.

Michael: So you wear a lot of hats, but maybe not all at the same time. I could understand that. In the last few minutes here, I'm curious to pull back to the festival. I know you're doing a lot of traveling in exchange this year. What other tricks do you have up your sleeve? What do you hope for in the future? What's next for Performance Mix?

Karen: Funding has been very difficult and we have lost a major funder so I am concerned about the future of the Mix.

Michael: Do you mean of it surviving?

Karen: Of having to modify or cut back. Which is disheartening because as I've been doing this, I've been getting more experience and I've gotten a lot more opportunities to see different work in different places so if I had the funds, I could really continue to grow this and make it very rich.

Michael: Right. Now you feel like you're arriving towards your curatorial view and you've gotten to know more artists but you're also at a moment where finances are more difficult than they've ever been before.

Karen: Right and artists need to be paid. It's important. I really don't know what it's going to be like unless there's a miracle that takes place.

Michael: Well, you've made it 25 years, so I'm sure there have been many miracles along the way. Has there ever been a time that felt similar to this? Has it been a linear growth over the years or have there been times when it feels more circular?

Karen: I feel like it has been a linear growth. One year we didn't get New York State Arts Council support but then something else came in its place. But it would have been really nice to get that support so that you could really grow as opposed to staying the same. All around it's difficult. I don't know. Did that answer your question?

Michael: Yeah. I think it's interesting because the festival is homegrown in a way. Literally, it came from your home. If there were just more resources then the sky would be the limit. For better or worse, the challenges that come up for artists and administrators, particularly in New York, funding is an extreme crunch. If anything, I could look at someone like you with a history like yours and feel at least optimistic about the resourcefulness and the way that you've managed to be creative about making things happen over the years. Even though funds might be a limiting factor, there's a lot of creative energy in the organization. Even if you're not able to do something as big as you're doing this year, it could in a way, be just as exciting.

Karen: Thank you, Michael.

Michael: Thank you, Karen.



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Movement Research Office (not all studios)
55 Avenue C
New York, NY 10009
phone: (212)598-0551
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