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Reflections on Peggy

Gallery John A. Schweitzer, Montreal. September 19 to October 6, 1991

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REFLECTIONS ON PEGGY JARREL KAPLAN

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Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, *Mark Kostabi*, 1987.

Whether Peggy Jarrell Kaplan is a photographer who fastens her vision to the study of people, or a portraitist who has chosen the medium of photography as most suited to her purposes, or both, are questions worthy of consideration. Both roles, for Kaplan, serve not only as revelatory mechanisms but inherently carry within them their own aesthetic proposals and solutions.

Her portraits are all of artists; in her most recent exhibition at Galerie John A. Schweitzer, choreographers of the international avant-garde arts community predominate. Also included are portraits of Brodsky, Utkin and Ilya Kabakov, three pivotal figures in the second wave of contemporary Russian visual artists. The passive/active presence of the artist as subject gives greater dimensionality to the original configuration, which is at once inspired in its vision and confident in its method.

In a recent guest-curated exhibition at the Louvre, Jacques Derrida hypothesises about self-portraiture and drawing. He explains that during the act of drawing the

artist "has seen" and "will see" but presently does not see. He refers to the difference between the thing drawn and the drawn line or drawing. Portraiture is compromised by the "apperception of the graphic art" or the process of drawing.

If Kaplan chooses photography over drawing, she circumvents this obstacle of process, yet photography comes with its own attendant indeterminacies. She handles all decisively and characteristically.

Diane Arbus claims of photography that "the more it tells you, the less you know". Kaplan effortlessly accepts the inevitability of this cardinal law and is consciously discriminatory in what she attempts to achieve and the means she uses to achieve it. She approaches her craft with an almost classic economy of means. The usual dependence on contextual and physiognomic signs is diminished.

Facial expression and pose are not formal concerns, and an overall calm prevails. Sometimes a hand will be used gesturally, or a personally significant object in-



Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, *Robert Wilson*, 1985.

cluded. The anecdotal is kept to a minimum. A soft diffused natural light is preferred to the expressive scope of *chiaroscuro*. This austerity, this paring down, gives us less information about the drama of character; at the same time it leads us to the first intimations of the transcendent nature of the work.

Two mechanisms she does allow herself are the static frontal head and shoulder and the dark backdrop, which creates an evocative figure and ground.

Richard Avedon's statement, "There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth", is only indirectly addressed in Kaplan's work. Kaplan's accuracy and truth are defined by her singular purpose; the inspiration that resides within the artist, the alluding to this symbolic status of his own *œuvre*.

Derrida has also conjectured about the metaphorical link of self-portraiture and blindness, which leads to an impossible reflexivity: "Put simply, it is necessary to know, to see clearly that the performative fiction that involves the spectator in the work's signature can be viewed only through the blindness it produces as truth. Even if we were certain that (the artist) was drawing himself drawing himself, we can never know solely by looking at the work if he is depicting himself drawing or drawing something else - or even himself as something else."

Inasmuch as it would be assumed that the self-portrait would most closely approach the locus of the creative spirit, we are often left with only a dizzying mirroring. The division of labour, into subject and object, photographer and sitter, absolves the image of a taint of self-surveillance. Each may enter a symbiotic, if not sympathetic, relationship. Often this relationship becomes antagonistic when interpretations and expectations are imposed by subject/photographer and suffered

by object/sitter. The junction becomes either a place of dull ambiguity or a battleground of human will against imagination.

Kaplan uses great discretion in approaching her subject, as Jean-Marc Adolphe relates in his foreword to a collection of Kaplan prints, "At the death of Kideyuki Yano, an influential Japanese choreographer, Daniel Dobbells recollects one of his favourite exercises, 'To move and speak with one's face hidden behind a dark and very thin veil without allowing one's breath to disturb the neutrality and stillness of the cloth.' In looking at the portraits of choreographers of Peggy Jarrell Kaplan, one can feel that same quality of barely touching."

Subject and object, both artists, have the same function and operate reciprocally. Kaplan is deferential to her objects and in turn the objects (the photographed artists) exude a lucid passivity.

Kaplan forgoes the contemporary practice of disassociation of subject and object by manipulative techniques. The complicit embrace of her subject and object has locked within it many of the eternal questions about the representation of objective reality.

In a recent interview, choreographer Edouard Lock says, "quelque part, même si on a le désir d'être désorienté, il y a aussi le désir contraire de ne pas perdre l'orientation, le sens. Ces deux réalités se contrebalancent dans l'expérience de la chorégraphie moderne."

Mostly, we are left with allusions to the spirituality of the creative act and the possibility of transcending earthbound realities.

MELANIE REINBLATT

EDITOR'S NOTE

Initiated and circulated by Gallery John A. Schweitzer, Montréal, the exhibit will be travelling until July 1992. It is presently at Stadsschouwburg, in Holland, and will be going to Sommersze, Austria and Galerie Frédéric Bazille, France.