

Carol Mersereau interviewed by Barbara Clausen and Kristin Poor, September 10, 2020

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<http://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/JJKB/carol-mersereau-interview-september-2020/>

Kristin Poor: Today is September 10th, 2020. I'm Kristin Poor and I'm here with Barbara Clausen and Carol Mersereau. Carol, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

Carol Mersereau: You're welcome.

Kristin Poor: I was hoping we could start with having you tell us about how you met Joan.

Carol Mersereau: When I moved to New York in 1970, I had a loft with my partner at the time down in Tribeca, and Richard Serra had a loft above us, and so he told us about this performance, *Choreomania*. And so we went as, not participants, but as the audience, and I took my camera. And so I took a couple of pictures during the performance and it was... You didn't want to take many because there was no flash or anything. But that's how I first knew who she was. And then there was another performance that you have, I don't know the name of, the one that was downtown on the lower West Side. Outside.

Kristin Poor: *Delay Delay*.

Carol Mersereau: Yeah. And so I also took pictures of that because it was right across from our loft. And I think I had a friend who also introduced me to Joan, who was in that performance. And so, again, I took pictures, not as something that Joan had asked me to do, but that's really how I got to know her. I took pictures and she saw the pictures and that's how we got to know each other.

Kristin Poor: And how did you start working with her? Was there a moment where she said, "oh, great, Carol, can you come and take photographs" as opposed to being an audience member taking them?

Carol Mersereau: That was the one at Castelli. I mean, she asked me to come and take photographs and to do the rehearsal in her studio. So it was very casual. I mean, it wasn't like I was a professional photographer who was looking for clients or anything. It just evolved, which is how things happened in the early seventies in downtown.

- Kristin Poor: So can you describe briefly that downtown context that you were in when you met Joan?
- Carol Mersereau: Well, it's sort of...the two lofts that I lived in, in that time period, were in Tribeca before...I mean, nobody lived in Tribeca then. I mean, there were a few artists who lived down there, so it was casual, but you met people at performances or art openings and it was a totally different scene, obviously. Castelli was that building at, I think, 420 was the first of the art galleries in SoHo. I mean, I have friends, at that time when I moved to New York, who were living in SoHo and who had bought floors in SoHo for probably \$4,000. It was a time to get into the real estate market.
- Kristin Poor: A very different moment than we're in now.
- Carol Mersereau: Nobody had \$4,000, though.
- Kristin Poor: Of these early performances of Joan's that you saw, was there anything that struck you as particular about them at the time that you remember?
- Carol Mersereau: Very unusual, is what really struck me. Not like anything I had ever seen...not like anything I had ever seen, but really sparked my imagination is what I would say. And I liked Joan. I instantly had a lot of respect for her work, even though I wouldn't say, at the time, I knew... I'm glad the interview wasn't then, I certainly didn't know ...
- Barbara Clausen: Carol, did you ever perform in Joan's work?
- Carol Mersereau: You know, I didn't, but I had friends who did. I don't think Gwenn [Thomas] did, but I had a friend who consistently performed in her work until a certain period. And that's maybe how I always knew when the performances were.
- Kristin Poor: And which friend was that?
- Carol Mersereau: Linda Patton.
- Kristin Poor: Okay.
- Carol Mersereau: Yeah.
- Barbara Clausen: Was Linda Patton also the person who was working on the camera earlier on before Babette Mangolte? Do you remember?

Carol Mersereau: Maybe. I saw some pictures when I [did] my slight dig up in my crawlspace. I saw some old pictures of Linda and they look more theatrical than I would have taken of her. And I do think she probably did do the camera. She was also in performances like Richard Foreman's performances and there was this, I don't know, interchange or a smaller pool of people that were in some of the performances. And some of them were dancers. I mean, some of the people who performed early in Joan's work, the one downtown, outside. They were dancers, as I remember.

Barbara Clausen: Do you remember, Carol, when you saw *Organic Honey*? Also, just as a viewer, what was your impression on Joan's use of media? Of projection, of tv monitors? Do you remember what you thought? How was that? What kind of impression that this give to you?

Carol Mersereau: I would say primarily just very unusual, is what I would say. I mean, putting together pieces in a very unusual manner, combining...she did drawings and it was a combination of things, which I thought was, I would say very unusual.

Barbara Clausen: Was this something that also influenced the way you photographed her work? Was this, was this something that attracted you to it? Was this something that made you consider certain angles?

Carol Mersereau: Well, there's nothing about me photographing her performances that had any—what would I say—did I think about beforehand. It was all very of the moment. 'Oh, that's great.' And when it's the actual performance, you're more limited because of an audience. You can't scoot about in front of an audience so easily. And I'm a fairly shy person so I was very aware of not intruding on a performance. And I was young, I was in my twenties. I was not exactly a seasoned photographer.

Barbara Clausen: But the sense of improvisation that you just addressed, taking the picture on the go. I was wondering, because you mentioned, did you see rehearsals before of some of these performances of *Organic Honey*? Were you able to watch the rehearsal before, or maybe take some pictures during the rehearsal, take some during the performance and what were the differences?

Carol Mersereau: Well, I wonder if the picture that you have, this one. I wonder if that wasn't a rehearsal because I don't remember...I mean, I certainly went to the performance, but that was a well-rehearsed piece. So I would imagine that that might've been a rehearsal there. But I can't say for sure.

- Kristin Poor: We're looking at an image that Carol took at Leo Castelli Gallery.
- Barbara Clausen: And do you remember Joan giving you any instructions? Especially when you took photographs during rehearsals? Did she ask you something? Maybe not instructions, but, I hope to do this or that. Direction.
- Carol Mersereau: Actually, none. I don't think that was her. She left that to me.
- Kristin Poor: I'm very curious to hear about the photographs that you took of Joan dressed as *Organic Honey* in her loft. What were the circumstances of that?
- Carol Mersereau: The rehearsal in her loft?
- Kristin Poor: Mm-hmm.
- Carol Mersereau: Well, it happened, obviously, before the performance and maybe if the photograph I just showed you at Castelli—because for sure that's Castelli—was an actual rehearsal, then this was taking photographs in her loft as she was getting ready. I mean another rehearsal, a more casual rehearsal. Or, at the time, actually, I was taking pictures of what I would call strong women artists. And she was certainly one of those. And so it may have been more a part of that, like arranging to come to her studio to photograph.
- Kristin Poor: That's interesting. When we spoke on the phone earlier, you mentioned that you always appreciated Joan's feminism. Is that part of this project of photographing strong women for you as well?
- Carol Mersereau: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.
- Kristin Poor: And how, to you--
- Carol Mersereau: Strong, independent, creative women are always very impressive.
- Kristin Poor: And how did Joan's feminism show up in her work, or her way of working, in your opinion?
- Carol Mersereau: Oh boy, in a lot of her imagery. I don't know, this may have come from you or... The one where she...I don't know if this was *Organic Honey*, but where she was naked.
- Kristin Poor: Yes, there's part of *Organic Honey* where she holds a mirror--

- Barbara Clausen: And look, Carol, I'm showing you some of the photographs that we're talking about right now. For our listeners, you can also go and see them on the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base so you can look at these. So I think some of these here, again, there's *Mirror Check*, which was the beginning of *Organic Honey*.
- Carol Mersereau: *Mirror Check*, right, right, right. Yeah, I didn't know whether that was part of it. I don't remember. When I saw these pictures and her drawing during that time. And I just saw Peter Moore's credit. He was a professional at the time. He did a lot of really nice work in the art world, the downtown art world. But he was much more professional than I. I mean he had a business card is what I say. Oh, there's some.
- Barbara Clausen: Yeah, there's some. Yeah. And there's also some here where you really see you're in the studio.
- Carol Mersereau: Yeah. Yeah. And the top, that's Linda in the top there.
- Kristin Poor: This is the contact sheet she shot during the *Organic Honey* rehearsal in Joan's studio, for our listeners. And so that's Linda Patton at the top, Carol?
- Carol Mersereau: Right.
- Kristin Poor: Okay. How did you select the images afterwards? Would you come to Joan with the contact print and look at it together? Or would you suggest ones that you thought were the best or how did the process work?
- Carol Mersereau: No, I would just give her the contact sheet, and she'd pick anything that she wanted. And then I must have printed ones that I liked, or I wouldn't have these, the ones that I showed you.
- Barbara Clausen: Mm-hmm. Absolutely. Maybe we can move to the question of archives, because we're also interested in how photographers and chroniclers who photographed Joan's work over the years. What did they do with these images and how do they see the afterlife of these images? Some of your photos have been reproduced. Some of them you have in your own private possession. Can you tell us, in hindsight, what these photographs or what photographing performances by Joan, for example, may mean for you today, looking back?
- Carol Mersereau: What was that last part?

Barbara Clausen: What does this mean? How do you see this, looking back, today?

Carol Mersereau: Oh, looking back.

Barbara Clausen: Yeah, looking back.

Carol Mersereau: So I have just retired from my... I practice Chinese medicine and I have just retired from practicing for 35 years. So this was the profession that preceded that, so I don't do a lot of thinking about my former profession. But in talking with Gwenn, she said, "well, Carol, you really should get your negatives and your photographs or contact sheets and give them to either Joan's archive" or...I mean, Joan's not the only person who I took photographs of. But a lot of these people have, like Phil Glass was a friend and I did a lot of work for Phil, and they all have archives now. I mean, they all have some way of perpetuating--

Kristin Poor: And you also photographed Richard Foreman performances?

Carol Mersereau: And Richard Foreman and who else that I can remember? Well, I did a lot of, also just artwork. And I don't think that's so important. I mean, people have good histories of those. Performances are a little different because everybody has a different eye when they photograph them. But I think it's time I go through that and if Joan...is her official archive at NYU or doesn't she have one? No, no. What are her plans?

Barbara Clausen: I think that's a question that many artists ask themselves. I mean, this project, the JKB, is really an academic project that tries to look at all this from that side. And I think we're, of course, in very close contact with Joan and we're talking with her and she was very generous with letting us into her archive and using all the images that she has on these two works, specifically *Organic Honey* and *Mirage*. And so I think it's a process to think about what you do with these archives and how they're used and what their value is and how the value of these photographs, these documentary photographs, changes over the years. Suddenly they become artworks of their own.

Barbara Clausen: I mean, Gwenn's work is a great example for that as well. There's really something that's shifting and that's moving and I think that's what we're trying to capture in this project. And I think it's probably also, or I hope it's also given, really, Joan, an impetus to think about what to do with her archive. Because now she lives with it and she works with it and it's really in her studio and it's a really active part of her practice. So that's also interesting, of course.

- Carol Mersereau: Right, right. Well, I'll have to ask her what she wants me to do with it. I think Gwenn was the one that mentioned, because maybe Gwenn has given some... I don't know what NYU does with artists' archives but it's stuck in my memory.
- Barbara Clausen: Yeah. Yeah.
- Carol Mersereau: But I don't think they should sit in my storage space because when I go, nobody's going to know what these things are.
- Kristin Poor: I think you have a good instinct to send them to the people whose performances they're of.
- Carol Mersereau: A little bit of downtown New York art history.
- Kristin Poor: Yes. And NYU does have, Fales Library does have a great collection of different individuals' archives and institutional archives dealing with the downtown New York scene, especially from this period. So that makes sense that you would think of NYU.
- Kristin Poor: So Carol, based on your memories and experiences, are there any other people that you would recommend that we interview about Joan's work of this period and around these questions of archiving and documenting her work?
- Carol Mersereau: Well, you've interviewed Gwenn, Gwenn would be the...I mean, Gwenn and I would often be doing the same, maybe the same, not so much the same performance, but she did a lot of video work for Castelli. Gwenn did. I didn't do any video work, or no, photographing video work. I've done some. Linda Patton was...but I wouldn't know how to get a hold of her.
- Barbara Clausen: Yeah. We're trying to find different performers. This is a long term project. I mean, we're trying to launch at some point now, but it should be an ongoing project, so we're also really asking... This is also a real resource tool for younger researchers and for conservators and curators, so if you're listening to this and you're thinking, "what other photographers should we interview?" There's probably names you can look up and try to find them. It's good to add these different voices because, especially interdisciplinary artworks obviously were such collaborative processes as well.
- Carol Mersereau: Linda would be interesting because she did perform a lot with Joan until a certain period.

- Barbara Clausen: Absolutely.
- Carol Mersereau: She was never photographing, except she did use, they had the video camera in some of the performances. But she was an unusual looking woman and she had a theatrical look to her. So she was, I mean...she performed in Richard Foreman's and in Joan's. I don't know of any others.
- Kristin Poor: Well, that's great. Were there any other performances of Joan's that you photographed? Because you left New York, I believe you told me last time we spoke, in 1975, was that right?
- Carol Mersereau: Yeah, in the Fall of 1975. I mean, the ones I remember were *Organic Honey*, and then the two that preceded the one...the *Choreomania* and the one that was downtown [*Delay Delay*]. The one that was downtown was very unusual because it was when they were removing all those buildings, from Greenwich Street to the river, there was a huge...it used to be a big market that moved up to the Bronx. And so there were all these old, really funky old buildings, and they were... On the weekends, they'd blow them up, they'd destroy them. And so that piece of hers was, after they had destroyed a good many of them, there was rough earth out there. And that's where that, I guess it was 1972, I looked at your notes. The first two performances, I would say, stuck in my mind.
- Kristin Poor: Well, great. Thank you. Is there anything that we missed that you wanted to talk about with us?
- Carol Mersereau: No, it's provocative.
- Barbara Clausen: Wow. Wow. Thank you so much.
- Carol Mersereau: A recapitulation of one's life, and how utterly haphazard it is.
- Barbara Clausen: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's true. How timely. Yeah. Well thank you so much for taking the time and being so generous, and yes, do share more if you have more of these wonderful images.
- Carol Mersereau: Yes and I'll get in touch with you about sending you these images. I mean, you're doing images also? I mean, this is an online archive, so you want images.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes. Well, thank you so much. I'm going to stop the recording now, we can keep on talking right after.
- Carol Mersereau: Okay, great.

This transcript is intended to provide an accessible form of interview audio content. It has been edited for factual accuracy and clarity. Any alterations are noted with brackets.