

*Stories Project. ACC 54.*  
*Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.*

Stephen Petronio is the founder of the Stephen Petronio Company. He danced for the Trisha Brown Dancy Company in the late 1970s, a time when Rauschenberg was collaborating with Brown on sets and costumes.

Transcription of a phone interview with Stephen Petronio conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation on July 14, 2022. Reviewed and edited by the speakers September 2, 2022.

David White [DW]: I'm David White, speaking with Stephen Petronio and it is July 14th, 2022.

Stephen Petronio [SP]: Hey there, I'm Stephen Petronio. I am the artistic director of the Stephen Petronio Company [New York], which is almost forty years old. I grew up in New Jersey in a suburb of Newark, and I went to Hampshire College in [Amherst,] Massachusetts as a pre-med student. There, I discovered dance. I met Steve Paxton very early on, who was teaching a workshop, and I began to improvise as a kind of sideline to my medical studies. And I was totally swept off my feet, literally, by Paxton and the work he was doing. I began studying dance more seriously and Steve introduced me to Trisha Brown, who was one of the co-founders of the Judson Dance Theater [New York], along with Steve. And I became her first male dancer. So, I was really only dancing for a few years when I met her. And very early on—

DW: What year was that?

SP: What year? So, I went to school, I went to Hampshire from '74 to '79 and I met Trisha. I got into Trisha's company in 1979, so I was only dancing for four years. Yeah, I met Steve in 1974 and I met Trisha in 1978, '79. And I became her first male dancer and, Trisha, up until then, she was only working with women. And it was quite an amazing experience.

I was the first man in her company, and we hit it off in a friendly way as well. After rehearsal one day, she said, "Well, I'm going to go to Bob's house. Do you want to come over to meet Bob?" And I was like, "Well, Bob who?" And she said, "Well, [Robert] Bob Rauschenberg." And I famously said, "Well, who's Bob Rauschenberg?" Because I was very young and naive. And I didn't really know much about the art world, which in many ways—I think—was an advantage. After that dinner I had to go to library to rectify my lack of awareness. This was pre-Google.

So, I went with Trisha as her guest to dinner at Bob's. I think we had some kind of soup. And I didn't know enough to be in awe of Bob because I didn't know who he was. I just really liked him. I think part of the reason Bob and I became friends is I just treated him like he was a really nice, interesting person and he treated me as a real person. I must have been nineteen. No, I must have been twenty-one. So, he treated me with equal respect, and we became very friendly. And, as we know, Bob has famously collaborated with Trisha and that's how I met Bob.

DW: Oh, wonderful story. That's nice to hear. And so then, when Bob and Trisha were working on pieces, did that take place with all the dancers around? Were you there for their discussion?

SP: Trisha was living on 541 Broadway [New York] at the time. A lot of her living space was behind the studio. You had to walk through a door, the studio was out front facing Broadway, and her living space was facing Mercer Street. So, a lot of stuff happened behind closed doors, I will say. But they were so social, and Trisha often included me and one or two of the other dancers in whatever social thing was going on, because that's just the way she was. I got to see them interact and their conversations were the funniest, wittiest—sensual and witty. And, as a young Podunk guy from New Jersey, it was quite a revelation to watch them interacting. And it was obvious that there was an incredible affection between them. That was my introduction to the art world and to the world of collaboration. I just thought that was normal. I knew it was special, but I didn't realize that I was watching history unfold—

DW: And that you were starting at the top.

SP: Yeah, exactly. Well, I went from not knowing anything about dance to being at the pinnacle of artistic collaboration. But a lot of it happened behind closed doors. Occasionally Trisha would pull out a notebook and show us a drawing. It was actually several years before I saw Bob pick up a pencil. One day we were at his house for dinner. I think we were in the middle of making *Set and Reset* [1983], which is a seminal collaboration between them [the set and costumes are by Rauschenberg], with [music by] Laurie Anderson. And up until that time, I hadn't seen . . . I knew a little bit about how he worked, but I'd never seen him really draw anything.

And so, he picked up a pencil at dinner and drew the decor, the work *Shiner*. It was called *Shiner* [*Elastic Carrier (Shiner)*, 1983], which was a sculpture that held projected film images that hung over the dance. He picked up a pencil and drew it very quickly. And my jaw dropped open because I had only seen his collages, but it was really fun to see him actually pick up a pencil. So, I know that sounds a little weird, but to me it was a very big deal.



Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Set and Reset* (1983) with set, costumes, and lighting design by Robert Rauschenberg, 1983. Photo: Beatriz Schiller. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

DW: Probably very few people have seen him do that. So that's really a wonderful experience.

SP: Well, it was amazing. And it was . . . obviously it was on kind of a napkin or whatever was at hand. It wasn't like any official drawing, but he was trying to explain to us what he was thinking, and it was pretty spectacular.

DW: Indeed. Also, that's an incredible set and costumes and dance.

SP: The dance was a life changing one for me. I had been in the company for probably six or seven years at that point. I'm going to tell you one of the things Bob said to me that I've . . . it's one of the most important things in my life. Because you know, I was the first man; there were no men doing Trisha's movement, so I had no example of a male body doing it. I was just feeling my way and trying to not offend anybody along the way. I always felt I was too sweaty and too hairy and too whatever, too male. But one day Bob turned to me, and he said, "When you come on stage, nobody knows what the hell you're doing, but we can't stop watching you." And that was the most beautiful thing that anyone's ever said to me. And of course, I always felt like I got the steps completely wrong, but that he was interested in watching my mistakes was very, very exciting.

DW: Oh, that's a fantastic remark.

SP: Yeah.

DW: What's interesting, because I remember hearing a remark about a Martha Graham dance where apparently, she comes on stage and then very quickly sits behind a big rock. And it's said you couldn't help but stare at the rock for the rest of the dance.

SP: Yeah, well that was Trisha for sure. As the young novice male in the company all the work was for women before I got there. So, there were things that I couldn't do, but I could watch. And I have to say that I spent a lot of time during performances in those first years sitting in the wings, just watching Trisha do her formidable solo, *Talking Accumulation with Water Motor* [*Accumulation* (1971) with *Talking* (1973) Plus *Watermotor* (1977)]. Just watching her that close was probably the best education I ever got. And yeah, rubbing up against Bob and Trisha in that very social way and in that very intimate, artistic way really was life changing for me.

DW: And then how soon were there additional male dancers added to the company?

SP: I think I was on my own for about two years.

DW: Wow.

SP: Well, there was another male that came in at the same time as me, but he only lasted a few months. It just didn't work out. So, I was on my own for about two years and then Randy Warshaw came in, who actually I went to college with. Diane [Madden] and Randy were in a couple of classes behind me at Hampshire College. I was determined to introduce Trisha to Diane. I actually staged a performance with Diane and invited Trisha to it and that's how she met Diane. I was hoping it would all tumble that way and so it did.

DW: It sure did.

SP: Yeah. Yeah.

DW: So, then Trisha choreographed dances that were women and one male dancer being you, then that got performed and . . .

SP: Yeah, well the first piece was . . . I first replaced a woman in a piece called *Line Up* [1976]. And so that was my first experience. But the first piece that I actually made with Trisha was called *Opal Loop* [*Opal Loop / Cloud Installation #72503*, 1980] with Fujiko Nakaya, as the visual artist. And we did it in a loft on Crosby Street and I think the first collaboration that I was in with Bob was *Set and Reset*. But by that time, I had been dancing in the company for quite a while and Bob was around through all the other collaborations. Bob was there because he was a great supporter of Trisha, and we were having dinner at Bob's a lot. And the typical night at Bob's was some kind of crazy homemade soup and really amazing stories.

A lot of vodka, a lot of drinking. I was drinking with the best of them at that moment. And then it would often end with, go down to the studio and pick out something that you liked to take home. And I mean, that's just the way he was with Trisha and her dancers. He was incredibly generous. When we were making *Set and Reset* it was a moment where I was really feeling totally empowered as an artist. And Trisha was having so much fun and gave us very specific directions and then set us free to make this piece. And in *Set and Reset*, she began employing the kind of physical contact that I was trained to do with Steve Paxton and contact improvisation.

DW: Oh.

SP: So up until then there was not so much touching in the work. And so, in *Set and Reset*, she really asked us to put the pedal down on that kind of physical contact. I often describe making that work as being in a fever. I was going to work every day where the impossible was going to happen and Bob Rauschenberg was going to be watching you. And it was extremely exciting.

DW: Wow.

SP: Pretty exciting moment in my life.

DW: But I think, everybody must have inspired everybody else, because it certainly ended up being the most incredible piece in every way.

SP: Well, there's a lot to that. And I've heard this amongst artists, many times that, the power of someone that you respect watching you propels you to do something. And we sensed we were making something exciting when we were making it. Because we were all so engaged, and we were all kind of egging each other on. And I often describe this to Trisha, when it was happening that we were kind of in a fever state. But I do think that we all sensed that we were making something that was exciting. How significant it was going to become, we didn't know, I'm sure. And then of course Laurie Anderson did the music and she had just peaked at number one in the

British charts with the song “Oh Superman” [1982] and, it was just an amazing moment culturally.

DW: For sure. Now is that the piece where then Bob ended up making specific, very personal artworks for each of the dancers?

SP: Yes. When the process was winding to a conclusion, he invited us over for dinner. Often, you’d go to Bob’s house with Trisha and two or three other people. But this time he invited the entire company. And when we arrived, there was a series of framed works on paper leaning against the wall, one for each of the dancers. And he took us by the hand and put us in front of the piece that he made for each of us. And it was, I mean, a jaw dropping moment. As the night wore on, Bob was such a great joker, and we were just . . . It was a lot of laughing, a lot of drinking, a lot of talking, and he took me over to my piece and he began to talk to me a little bit about some of the imagery in it. I had never had that kind of conversation with him before.

And it was extremely special. There was a clump of grass. At the time I had very spiky hair cut short on the sides and there was a clump of grass that was reminiscent of that in the piece. And he pointed that out. And then there was . . . He used this image of the back of a chair, wrought iron chair in a heart shape. It runs through some of his pieces. And that was next to the clump and then he caught himself and he was like, “I’m not going to tell you anymore, just look at it.” So, they were personal pieces. And the collaged fabric in those works is the same fabric that he used for the costuming for *Set and Reset*. So, there was a great deal of emotion. They were extremely meaningful works.



Robert Rauschenberg  
Untitled, 1985  
Acrylic and collage on fabric-laminated paper  
24 x 24 inches (61 x 61 cm)  
Private collection  
RRF 85.048

DW: For sure.

SP: And also, as a young dancer, to get something of that value and that import was unheard of.

DW: That's a constant thing I hear from everyone that I speak with is, Bob's generosity of actual physical . . . of giving things and then just also, generosity of encouragement in every way. So, you're confirming this . . . in a wonderful story.

SP: Well, not only has he given me works personally, but he's also given works to my company, to support my company, when my company was growing. And the last work that I sold was Bodies by, I think, oh God, *Bodies by Ford* [the work is titled: *Bodies By Fischer (Anagram)*, 1995]. Does that ring a bell to you? I think that's what it is. It's a guy lying on a dock and the back of a sedan in the picture in the softest colors and it was just a beautiful piece. I sold it and it was very hard to let go, but he gave it to me to raise money and it helped me to make the down payment for the retreat that the Petronio company now owns [Petronio Residency Center, Hudson Valley, New York]. And, along with other works by Anish Kapoor and Cindy Sherman and many others. And Bob always said, "these works are meant . . . Enjoy them and then sell them because they'll always be more." I knew he'd be very happy that it was being turned into a residency center for artists.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Bodies By Fischer (Anagram)*, 1995  
Inkjet dye transfer on paper  
30 1/2 x 20 inches (77.5 x 50.8 cm)  
Private collection  
RRF 95.D031

DW: That's obviously what he wanted. So I'm not sure which piece that is. I don't understand. You said "body by the—"

SP: It's either "a body—"

DW: It's a photograph or a print or a drawing, or do you know what—

SP: It's a [painting]. And so, it's a guy lying on a dock and there's also a car in the . . . A sedan is in . . . I'm going to find the name. I'm embarrassed that I can't remember the name right now.

DW: Don't be embarrassed, but it would be nice just because we can add an image of it to the—

SP: I think it's "Body by Ford" or something like that.

DW: Okay.

SP: Because there was a body and there was also a car in there . . .

DW: I didn't have any other specific things to ask. Because I thought you would have such good stories, which of course you do. So, I think this is exactly the kind of thing that we like to add to the overall history. So, I'm very, very pleased.

SP: I think one other thing I wouldn't mind mentioning is that, when Bob went to China [National Art Museum of China, Beijing, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI CHINA*, Nov. 18–Dec. 8, 1985], when he was doing the mile long paintings [Rauschenberg's *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, 1981–98], one of the pieces that he took to China was Trisha Brown's *Glacial Decoy* [1979]. And so, we got to go to China with Trisha's company and Bob. And there's so much I remember about that trip, but one of the things I will say is we walked into the museum in Beijing, I guess it was the modern art museum, the main museum where he was showing, which was several stories. And there were people everywhere, spray painting. Were you on that trip?

DW: No, I was not.

SP: Yeah. So, I remember walking into the museum as his show was being hung and it was opening the next day. And there were all these men all over on scaffolding painting the walls. And I was like, "Why is this being painted right now?" And he said, "Well, it was the wrong color white." So, that was the stroke of Bob, of Bob Rauschenberg. If it had to be changed that night, it had to be changed that night. A great lesson as a young artist to see his audacious creativity.

DW: There seemed to be both a casualness about certain things, but then a complete rigorousness about other things as well.

SP: Well, that was the beauty really, that he was real and casual and funny, but extremely exacting.

DW: Yeah. Interesting quality. Now, did you go with Trisha's troop to Moscow when the ROCI tour was there [on the occasion of *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI USSR*, Central House of Artists, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Feb. 2–March 5, 1989]?

SP: I don't think I was in Moscow with Trisha. No, I think I was gone at that point, but . . . I do have a very quick story. You know, *Glacial Decoy*, one of the great works between Bob and Trisha and we got there and there's four screens at the upstage. And, actually, my company remounted it for my *Bloodlines* project [2016], not so long ago. But there are four screens

upstage of equal size, kind of a wall and photographic images travel from stage right to stage left in a sequence.



Set, costumes, and lighting by Rauschenberg for Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Glacial Decoy* (1979). Pictured: Trisha Brown, Nina Lundborg, and Lisa Kraus. Photo: Babette Mangolte.

DW: Right.

SP: One of the most profound pieces, the piece that they were doing when I joined the company, which was only for women, so I got to watch it a million times. When we got there, it was rear screen projection. And, for that moment, it was pretty sophisticated. The theater in Beijing could not . . . The electricity wasn't able to operate the slides automatically for some reason. So, everybody who was not in the piece, including me, Trisha, and two other members had to stand on chairs behind the projectors, pressing Bob's slides manually in sequence for the twenty-five minutes of the piece. And—

DW: Wow.

SP: That performance, that was the best performance, one of the best performances I've ever been part of.

DW: Oh, I'd never heard that. So, the things were in a carousel—

SP: Yeah. So, behind each screen, there was a mounted carousel.

DW: Right.

SP: And they would normally work automatically, but in this case, they worked by four people pressing the buttons, including Trisha and me.

DW: That's so wonderful.



SP: Yeah.

DW: All that stuff you don't realize when you're sitting in the audience while watching something.

SP: It was pretty amazing. Well, oh, I did want to tell that story and the other last thing I wanted to say is Trisha used to bring Bob down to see my early work. So, Trisha rented me the basement. She had 541 to 547 Broadway. And she was on the top floor. And then of course Lucinda Childs was underneath her and then David Gordon and Valda Setterfield and then Douglas Dunn and then there was a shoe shop or a dress / party shop. And the basement was unused. And Trisha rented me a five-thousand-square-foot, raw space where my career really took off. And I began making installations down there and she would often bring Bob Rauschenberg down to see my twenty-one, twenty-two-year-old attempt at my first visual collaborations and dance collaborations.

I can't tell you what it meant to a young artist who was trying to find—I'm trying to find my sea legs as an artist and—it was really very, very powerful. And I just loved Bob. He was just so generous. And so funny and so smart. And I carry that with me.

DW: Funny and smart. There's two perfect words, but it's interesting that Trisha's generosity seems equal. Just the fact that she rented that space for you and made sure Bob came over.

SP: Well, and rented it means—I mean, the price was like a hundred dollars a month, something ridiculous, but her generosity was not lost. And it's part of why I've started the Petronio Residency Center. I mean, she made the beginning possible for me. And so, if I could do that for young artists, it's a testament to their generosity that was shown to me as the young artist.

DW: No, that sounds like you're passing it along to the next generation. So that's wonderful.

SP: Yeah. Well, I learned it very well from those two.

DW: Well, Stephen, I thank you very, very much for taking the time and coming up with these really fascinating stories about how it all came about. And, as far as I'm concerned, this is lovely. So, if you're happy, I'll say goodbye and many, many thanks and I look forward to seeing you.