

Bonnie Marranca of PAJ Publications

PAJ Founder interviewed in Germantown, New York

Artist Organized Art Interviews **Bonnie Marranca**, Founder, Publisher and Editor of PAJ Publications/*PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. The interview occurred in August of 2008 in Germantown, N.Y.



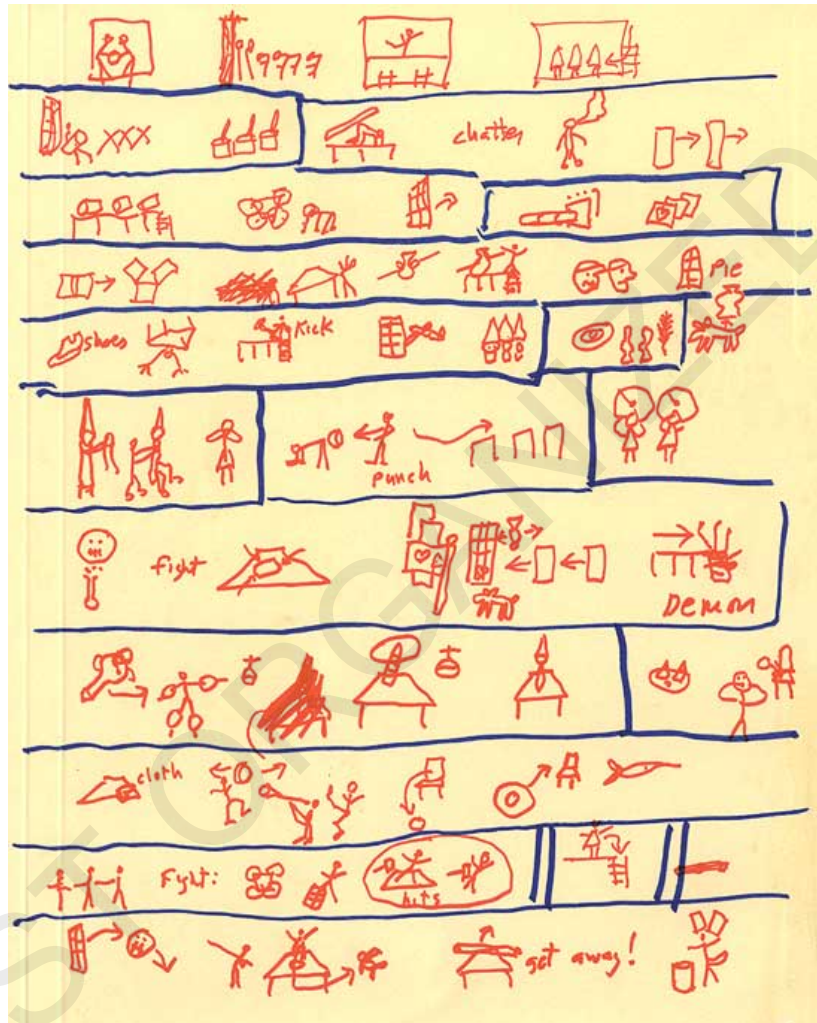
Bonnie Marranca, with **Robert Wilson** drawing behind her, Berlin, 2009

interview by **Joshua Selman**

JS: How did you start PAJ logistically and why did you start it?

BM: PAJ (www.mitpressjournals.org/paj) was conceived in 1975 by Gautam Dasgupta and me while we were studying in the doctoral program at CUNY-the Graduate Center, in New York. We were also critics for the *SoHo Weekly News* at that time. We had the academic background, but this very lively time in the 70s was a great period for video art, the beginnings of performance art, experimental theatre—such as the work of **Robert Wilson**, **Richard Foreman**, **Mabou Mines**. There were many so things going on . . . **Meredith Monk's** work, **Philip Glass**, new playwrights. We were seeing all of this work, while at the same time having a very traditional theatre background in graduate school. In effect, we had both the traditional grounding and the new aesthetics that we were grappling with as critics. So you could say that we were studying the history of theatre and the repertoire at the same time that the new work was offering its critique.

It also gave us the possibility of having, at our fingertips, the scholars and translators who were really knowledgeable about the dramatic repertoire and the history of theatre. At the same time we came to be friends with several generations of artists in so many different fields. We were not happy with the criticism that was in the major theatre journal of the time, *The Drama Review*, because it was very descriptive and not analytical. The coverage in *The New York Times* and comparable magazines and newspapers wasn't very challenging. There were new art forms, and new ways of making theatre that were really not sufficiently understood or addressed.



Drawing of his play *Maria del Bosco*, by **Richard Foreman** from PAJ's Performance Drawings portfolio series.

We had a different vision of theatre and of criticism at that time. We thought we could make a journal that could become involved with new forms of writing and could deal with the new performance aesthetics as well as having the commitment to dramatic literature. Between the two of us, Gautam and I found a printer, learned editing, production, and worked on marketing, sales, and distribution. We quickly had our own typesetting equipment and did everything in-house. So, from the start we were pretty self-sufficient. We began to hand out flyers at theatres, and worked on getting mailing lists and subscriptions in the universities and in libraries. That's essentially how we started. The publishing house was never part of any university or organization that provided money or staff.

JS: Can you describe the development of PAJ, and its later involvement with Johns Hopkins University Press and MIT Press?

BM: We began to publish the journal and set up a non-profit 501(c)3, by the time we had published the first issue, in May 1976. Then, three years later, we began publishing books, and called the publishing house [PAJ Publications](#). The journal was then known as *Performing Arts Journal* (the name was changed in 1998 to *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*) We went along this way for quite a while and continued to publish books of plays and books of essays; the journal featured international coverage in essays, interviews and dialogues, new writing, performance reviews and festival reports. There was simply so much material and so many interesting things to cover that we felt we couldn't contain it in a journal three times a year. So, we started on books and we had many of the same authors move from the journal to books as well.

About ten years later, in the late-eighties, we made an agreement with *Farrar, Straus and Giroux*, the very highly regarded literary publishers, to distribute our books. That lasted for three years. One of the reasons we went to them was that we wanted to start publishing fiction. We tended to do fiction of the playwrights we knew, like **Ken Bernard** and **Harry Kondoleon**. The late-eighties was a period of great difficulty, with the so called "culture wars" and funding controversies. The tide had turned against heavy support for experimental theatre and the downtown scene, so we knew we had to figure out a way to safeguard the press.



PAJ publisher with the playwright
Maria Irene Fornes, 2009

Eventually we made an agreement with *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, around 1991, and PAJ became an imprint of Johns Hopkins. They distributed our backlist as well, which was about eighty-five titles by this time. PAJ Books became a series under this imprint, and JHUP financed the new titles. We commissioned forty books, including the Art+Performance series for performance and new media (with [volumes on Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, Bruce Nauman, Gary Hill](#) and others. The journal was published in their journals division, but we always maintained control of our name and always owned the journal. That agreement lasted for about ten years. Then we went to *MIT Press*, around 2001. That's where we remain, though MIT Press has no involvement with the books. PAJ went back into financing and publishing its own books in 2006. We have about sixty titles now in print, distributed by *Theatre Communications Group* (www.tcg.org)

JS: What is the editorial premise of PAJ?

BM: PAJ Publications was founded to publish, promote, and support new work, lost or forgotten works of the past, and to develop a very rigorous idea of criticism. By that I don't mean theory, but criticism and fine critical writing—that's what I think PAJ has been known for. In addition, there is the publication of new American drama and works of translation.

Looking back over three decades of books and journals, by now we've published over one thousand plays and performance texts, translated from twenty languages. We've published about one hundred and forty books and ninety journals so far. PAJ Publications is one of the major play publishers in the English-speaking world. We've always held the line when so much of academia and the world of the arts moved strongly toward theory. I believe very much in the primacy of the

artwork, and the experience of the writer or critic, so I am not interested in applied theory. I don't consider *PAJ* an academic journal. I believe it should be a kind of fine literary writing grounded in knowledge of the field and the experience of individual works. That's been true for most of the history of the journal. Our format has been a combination of essays, interviews and dialogues, plays or performance texts, festival reports, reviews of performance.



At JFK Airport with German playwright **Heiner Müller**.

When *Performing Arts Journal* changed its name a decade ago to *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, it was because I wanted to have theatre and visual arts move closer together in the journal. The art world was continuing to do more performance, there were installations, video, media, photography, and all kinds of things that could be looked at in terms of performance and spectatorship. We were already covering, theatre, dance, and music.

When we started the journal, what constituted theatre or performance was rather a small world considering where the notion of performance went in thirty years. Dramatic literature is no longer the center of study in theatre. People don't have the same interest in playwriting, but are more interested in performance. In the twentieth century, there are two histories of performance, one from the theatre world, and one from the art world, so that if you are in an art department, you study a history of performance that's entirely different from what you would study in a theatre department. I'm trying to bring them closer together within the journal. A larger, more comprehensive history of performance ideas, that's my main goal, and it has been for the last ten years.



In London, 2009, at a PAJ event featuring **Meredith Monk**.

JS: What is the release schedule of the journal?

BM: It comes out three times a year: January, May, and September. Each issue is about 128 pages, or up to 144 for one issue, and there are forty to fifty images. The journal is in color online at the MIT Press Website (<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/paj>). I've also been trying to attach video clips to some of the pieces about performance or film.

JS: How is the print and online subscription model structured?

BM: The way subscriptions work is changing, because in the last dozen years, with the advent of *Project Muse*, hosted by Johns Hopkins University Press (with a great deal of funding from the *NEH* and *Carnegie-Mellon*), many of the journals in this country began to be digitized and available online, starting around 1996. Universities could go to Johns Hopkins University Press and subscribe to ten, or fifty, or three hundred journals. Some of them were owned by Johns Hopkins, others are subscribed to through their system and hosted there. Individual subscriptions are beginning to fall nationwide because journals are now more available online on these large databases. Individuals in any university or institution that subscribes to the journal don't have to pay for it themselves. All of the MIT Press journals are also hosted through *Project Muse*, as well as on its own site. There are some journals, like *PAJ*, whose back issues have been entirely digitized by *JSTOR*, another non-profit database. We're not really directly dealing as much with an individual subscriber, though of course people can still subscribe to the print version. Most people now are reading and downloading on the Web.



Living Theatre artistic directors, **Judith Malina** and **Hanon Resnikov** with the PAJ publisher at her New York City apartment.

JS: How do you find writers and how do you acquire readers?

BM: It is hard to say with the readers whether we get them or they get us. If you are a student or professor, after a certain while, you have to have some of our books or articles if you are working in contemporary performance. So you find us as a solid part of scholarship in a bibliography. I am always searching for writers. Sometimes I will contact people if I see their work in another publication. Wherever I go, I am talking to people about doing something for the journal, either trying to get artists to document their work or thinking what would make interesting interviews, or discussions. Sometimes I put certain artists together for an interesting dialogue. I talk to a lot of people in terms of helping them work through ideas for the journal.

What is difficult is that in the training of people in different art forms we're not really training them to work and write about several different fields, so I'm forced to have dance critics, film critics, theatre critics, video critics. It's very hard to be looking for these people and juggling them all the time. It is increasingly difficult to get people to commit to writing an essay. Years ago, when we started out, there were many people writing about current theatre. One of the things I think is really missing now is that no new young journalistic critics, outside of academia, have emerged to shape the theatre discussion or to outline certain tendencies or trends in a really original and influential way. Audiences don't really know why anything is important. Audiences need to understand in a deep way what is at stake, what the issues are, and what that signifies in terms of current directions in the arts. Of course, one of the chief problems is the difficulty of finding good writers nowadays.

What's happening at *PAJ* is that more people from abroad are sending me articles from Australia, Canada and England, but also Turkey and Belgium. We're reaching a larger international audience and an expanded art audience as well. In the thirty-two years or so since we started,

American performance and performance history has become a much larger field in the European universities, and even in Asia, so that we now have a larger audience and readership. At one time mainly American critics' books were used as the reference points. Now, I'm seeing that it might be an Australian or a British writer, or a German writer in translation who is part of the discussion. So the bibliography and vocabulary in the field itself have expanded through scholarship, international conferences, and the interest in performance in the last fifteen years or so.



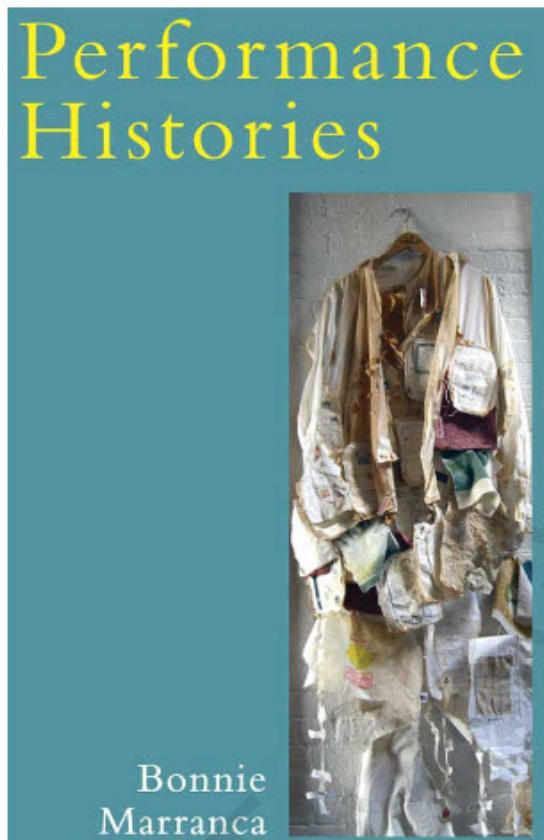
PAJ publishers, **Bonnie Marranca** and **Gautam Dasgupta**, visiting French author **Marguerite Yourcenar** at her home in Maine, a few years before her death in 1987.

To answer your question, “how do we acquire readers?”—now our readers find *PAJ* on the Web mostly. But we have been in libraries and bookstores for more than three decades. Our more recent figures for one year show over 100,000 pages downloaded, by more than 50,000 individuals. However, the print version is decreasing because of large databases that the individual no longer has to subscribe to, nor may want to because the journal is available for free through university-wide password access, Project Muse, and (the entire backlist) through JSTOR. Besides, the journal is in color online, and black and white in the print version. The books are distributed nationwide through Consortium and widely available online.

JS: How would you classify an early period, a current period, and what do you see as a future period of PAJ?

BM: When I look back at the early issues of PAJ, in a single issue we had writing by Ionesco, Artaud, and Susan Sontag as well as a big survey on a special drama topic, with several well-known playwrights contributing their responses. Over the years there have been contributions by Adorno, Robert J. Lifton, Edward Said. We have always tried to reach out to the larger intellectual worlds, but the readership was very different then. If one looks back over the theatre publications years ago—TDR, Theater, Performance, as well as the early issues of PAJ—there

was a much richer, non-institutionalized, intellectual life in journals, in general. There were lots of people writing from different points of view on politics, culture and literary issues. There were more intellectuals from outside academic life. The theatre world then was largely based on rethinking the text, and new productions. But by the eighties what happened to many journals was that their works were inflected by theories, which began to dominate in the universities. The audience also became more diffuse. There came to be fewer and fewer independent critics. The earlier period was characterized by helping to define, sometimes in manifesto-like articles, the vocabulary of the newer works. There were plenty of critics around who were eager to write about theatre productions and experimental theatre and the drama.



Cover of *Performance Histories* (2008), featuring **Alison Knowles** performance sculpture, Book Jacket.

In the middle period we were often dealing with deconstruction, interculturalism and performance, ethnic issues, or gay theatre. Throughout the nineties and now, the journal turned more toward visual arts, integrating performance and art. *PAJ* has always had interviews and dialogues with artists. Many artists have written for *PAJ*, and others have been interviewed in extensive dialogues. We have also published translators who worked on texts from Polish, French, German, Russian, bringing this material to the theatre public. We have always been very Europe-oriented, but now as much as I can, I try to have work from other cultures. There is more of a sense of global reach now but that's because there are writers dispersed everywhere who can write for an American journal and who are part of an international discourse on performance. In recent issues we have been able to have coverage of the Middle East. We had a special section on the *Lysistrata Project* with Middle Eastern and Southern Mediterranean writers reimagining *Lysistrata* against the context of the Iraq War. The journal recently published the work of a major Iraqi playwright, **Jawad al-Assadi**, called *Baghdadi Bath*. We didn't have that coverage thirty years ago. One of the other things I've started in the journal is a focus on cities. We had an entire issue on Berlin, right after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There have also

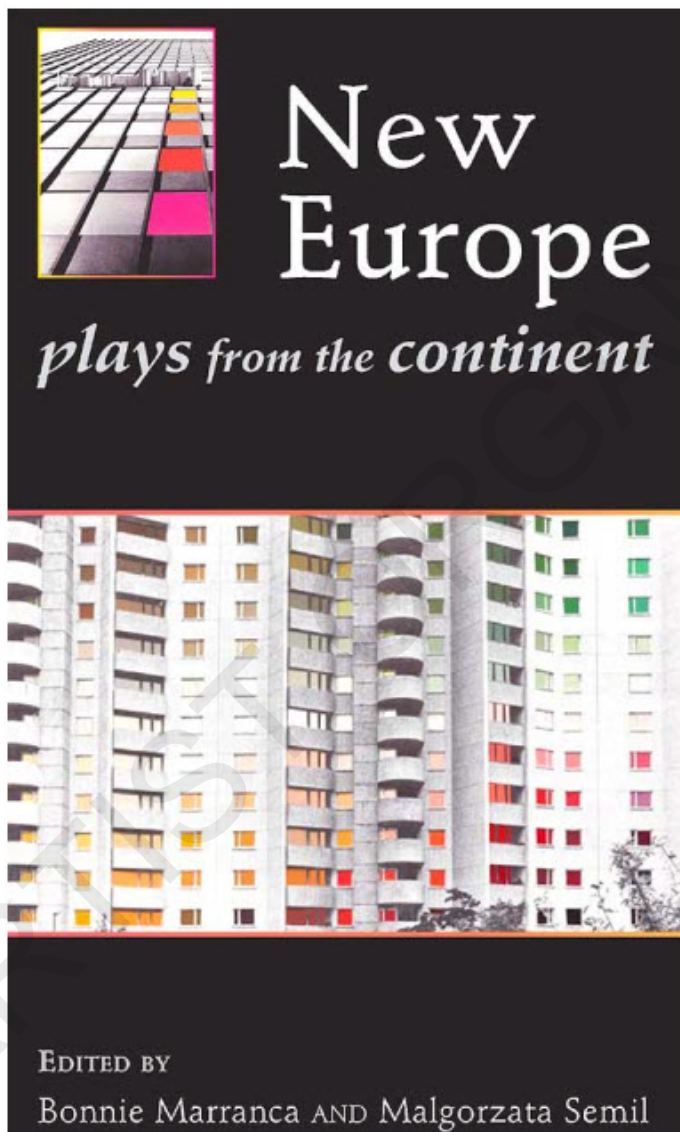
been special sections on London, Barcelona, Istanbul, and Athens.

Today *PAJ*, which I now run myself, is characterized by broad coverage of work from other cultures, and also the translation of works from those areas—plays, reports on festivals and performances around the world, travel and cultural commentaries. New media is also a major focus. That wasn't something that was central to the journal thirty years ago. All these areas require new vocabularies, and they require writers with extensive knowledge and travel. The whole field has changed because people work on different continents now. Critics didn't necessarily go to as many international conferences or do as much teaching and lecturing abroad when we started *PAJ*. The whole world has changed.

In the future I hope to focus more on artistic process and documentation of contemporary work. Recently, I inaugurated the *Performance Drawings* portfolio series, and I asked **Bob Wilson** to be the first person to contribute to this. He gave us drawings from *The Threepenny Opera*, his new production at the *Berliner Ensemble*. I also asked **Trisha Brown**, who offered drawings. We had

another portfolio by **Richard Foreman** who has storyboards and charts that show an entire visual picture of how he works. I plan to have more drawings, scores, storyboards, charts—artists' ways of notating their work process. This is an area that interests me very much.

There are certain special topics that *PAJ* can introduce, such as themes that have not been covered in recent journals. For example, a few issues back, there was a special section on performance and science. In our book division we are publishing a groundbreaking work of scholarship called *Performance, Technology, and Science*, by **Johannes Birringer**. So there is some going back and forth between the books and the journals. We had a special section in January on "[Art and the Spiritual](#)" that featured pieces on performance and visual art. A couple of years ago I started a series called "Art, Spirituality and Religion" simply because I felt that the left and progressive forces were not addressing these issues enough, and yet, over the entire century, in many different art forms, in many generations, the spiritual has been deeply affecting in the work of artists and writers.



Cover of *New Europe: plays from the continent* (2009), featuring artwork by German artist **Bernd Trasberger**.

For the future I see *PAJ*—the journal and the book division—articulating issues and themes that we do not see highlighted in other venues, covering important contemporary work in all the arts, on several continents, and translating texts especially from the new European Union and post-communist world. That's connected to a new *PAJ* anthology of plays called *New Europe*, which I co-edited it with a colleague in Warsaw, and includes seven plays from European countries.

The geographical range and number of art forms that one must be responsive to in the contemporary world of publishing makes editing very challenging. I am carefully monitoring the impact of the Web on journals in hard copy and investigating new technologies for book publication. The most important issues remain the evolving nature of criticism under the influence of blogs and the change in reading habits that impacts both books and journals.

Bonnie Marranca (www.bonniemarranca.com) is publisher and editor of the Obie Award-winning PAJ Publications and *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* (originally called *Performing Arts Journal*), which she co-founded in 1976. She has written three collections of criticism: *Performance Histories*, *Ecologies of Theatre*, and *Theatrewritings*, the recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism. Among the many anthologies she has edited are: *Plays for the End of the Century*; *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*; and *The Theatre of Images*, one of the seminal books of contemporary theatre. Her writings have been translated into fifteen languages. She is a Guggenheim Fellow and Fulbright Senior Scholar who has taught in many universities here and abroad, including Columbia University, Princeton University, NYU, Duke University, the University of California-San Diego, Free University (Berlin), and Autonomous University/Institute for Theatre (Barcelona). She is Professor of Theatre at The New School/Eugene Lang College for Liberal Arts.

PAJ (www.mitpressjournals.org/paj) is admired internationally for its independent critical thought and cutting-edge explorations. PAJ charts new directions in performance, video, drama, dance, installations, media, film, and music, integrating theater and the visual arts. Artists' writings, critical commentary, interviews, and a special review section for performances and gallery shows are highlighted along with plays and performance texts from around the world. New features include Performance Drawings portfolios and the Art, Spirituality, and Religion ongoing series. In 2009, the journal celebrates its 33rd year of publishing.



Bonnie Marranca standing in a **Richard Serra** sculpture.