

A sepia-toned photograph of a dense forest. Tall, slender trees with rough bark stand vertically, creating a sense of height and depth. In the foreground, a large, fallen log lies horizontally across the frame. The ground is covered in dry leaves, twigs, and some small plants. The lighting is soft, filtering through the canopy, creating a warm and somewhat somber atmosphere. The overall texture is grainy, typical of older photographic prints.

# Steve Paxton: Drafting Interior Techniques

edited by  
Romain Bigé



**Steve Paxton:  
Drafting Interior  
Techniques**







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Culturgest  
Lisboa, 2019

The head in this work is a limb. It has mass.



*This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition Steve Paxton:  
Drafting Interior Techniques, curated by Romain Bigé and João Fiadeiro,  
presented at Culturgest, Lisboa, from March 8 to July 14, 2019.*



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# preludes







"How do you know you aren't improvising?"







An exhibition on Steve Paxton is a contradiction in terms. Exhibitions were born in museums, they developed in academic salons and were reconfigured with the transformations of art in the twentieth century; their focus is inevitably on visuality in relation to objects, images or documents. Often, exhibitions of performance focus on the presentation of documentation, in search of the essence, or of a sign of the action, often reifying it.

This was precisely the opposite of what was required for an exhibition of the work of Steve Paxton, a dancer and choreographer who transformed the world of dance, opening it to other practices and imbuing it with a profound investigation on the body and movement and on the consciousness, knowledge and release thereof. His work also—and this is key—built new forms of relationality based on haptics, touch and collective forms of decision.

Any exhibition about Paxton, curated by a choreographer in collaboration with a dancer and academic, would necessarily be conceived, above all, as a shared practice. The project that João Fiadeiro and Romain Bigé have conceived corresponds to this understanding of communal sharing. Indeed, they have not so much conceived an exhibition as created the conditions for the viewer’s self-exhibition, transforming, as they themselves say, the gallery into a studio for movement.

Thus, the need for this exhibition was obvious: in a space such as Culturgest, in which the search for the exploratory paths in art is so often exercised by looking through the rear-view mirror, an exploration of Steve Paxton’s work was essential. Not only does the refusal of the expressiveness inherent in minimalism and conceptualism find itself embodied in his work, but the paths of reflection on the hierarchies of the world (and, necessarily, of art) find in his



practice an enormous power, and also touch and interpersonal and intercorporeal relationships anticipate many of the key questions raised by performativity in general over the past forty years. Relations with Cunningham, Cage, Rauschenberg, Robert Morris, among many others, place him at the centre of the most vibrant transformative processes in the art of the second half of the twentieth century; but all this is subsumed by the enormous vital energy of his work and by the political consequences of his emphasis on decision-making, as implied in the process of collective improvisation.

However, it is in the phenomenology of gesture and its perception that the notion of the micro-event and the intensity in Paxton's practice allow us to find future pathways for the relationship between conceptual determination, attention, perception, rigour and improvisation, elements which constitute necessary points of exploration for art today.

Gottlob Frege referred to functions (which include concepts) as *unsaturated* entities, as opposed to objects that, because they are complete, are *saturated*. We can thus think of *Drafting Interior Techniques* as an unsaturated exhibition because it is a process that corresponds to a function, or to several functions: seeing, moving, touching, knowing, deciding, or even sleeping. The exhibition constitutes a reflection on the processes of representation of these unsaturated functions, perhaps one of the most interesting questions for contemporary curatorial reflection.

Thanks is due to João Fiadeiro and Romain Bigé for the enormous generosity they have shown in this project which, with its set of workshops, collaborations with dance schools, classes, conferences and jam sessions, became much more than just an exhibition.

And most of all, thanks is due to Steve Paxton, for teaching us how to feel, as he himself put it in 1987, what Isaac Newton himself could never explain: what it feels like to be the apple.



To create a museum exhibition dedicated to a dancer presented us with a paradox. Not, as one might expect, because Steve Paxton's work was mostly ephemeral, not made to last, created to disappear upon performance. This is probably partially true, but if traces were unable to conjure up presence, the words you are currently reading would not be able to make sense. No, the problem was more the museums' apparatuses of capture that transform life-living practices into commodities: we were to exhibit the life of an improviser who had quite efficiently resisted—as much as we could grasp—the potential recuperations of his work by the art market, and we were now faced with the risk of commodifying his practices. This quandary added several layers to the question: can we exhibit the remains of dance without instantly fetishizing them? Is it possible to transmit them for what they are and were, invitations to further inquiries, rather than as products to consume?

Scores, photographs, videos, interviews are the classical remains of dance. In the case of Steve Paxton, some exist, but, interestingly, almost none of them were made or even kept by the artist himself. In the 1960s, as he was making dance pieces by the dozen, he made the conscious decision that his "job was to make work, not keep [his] own history." (Paxton, private correspondence). The consequence is that none of the works (videos, audio recordings, books, installations) that were shown in the exhibition were 'of' Steve Paxton: they were all made and conserved by others, who recorded his life



and work on tape as he was living and addressing them to live audiences, students, or friends.<sup>1</sup>

This meant we, as curators, had an opportunity: since we could not focus on the works themselves, we had the luxury of being able to put the light on the periphery—on what, secretly or subterraneously, had remained from his dancing life. This is one of the reasons why we focused on Steve Paxton’s “interior techniques”, that is: not the visible, exterior forms that were produced by him, but the felt and the sensed, the mindfulness of his unique way of inhabiting movement.

Two months before the opening of the exhibition, we asked Steve Paxton how he would have done it, if he had been hired to do a retrospective exhibition of his work. “I don’t know”, he responded, “but probably none of it would have involved anything major. To live a life is different from representing it. The moments that counted were moments on the sides of the work, like the feeling that came with my first cartwheel as a child, or that camping trip we took after a Contact Improvisation concert in Rome, recycling the canvas we had just danced on into an improvised picnic tablecloth, or traveling with the Merce Cunningham company through the US in John Cage’s VW campervan. That would be a retrospective look taken at my life: nothing much to do with what a museum could hold.”

We could not reproduce the feeling of Steve Paxton’s first cartwheel, nor organize a picnic in the mountains of Italy, nor offer a road trip through the US with John Cage. But we remained with this idea of putting our attention on the minor, rather than the major, on the anarchic part of his

1 Their generosity is more than commendable: the time (and most of the time: the free labour) they offered us, when we were trying to gather the scattered remains of Steve Paxton’s work, was an incredible gift—and a testament to their dedication to this artist and his work. Bojana Cvejić, Cathy Weis, Florence Corin and Baptiste Andrien (Contredanse), Ixiar Rozas, Kaaiteater, Lennart Laberenz, Lisa Nelson (VideoDa), Myriam van Imschoot and Tom Engels (Sarma.be), Nancy Stark Smith (Contact Quarterly), Patricia Kuypers, Paul Wong, Penny Ward, Rui Xavier, Sofia Neuparth, Steve Christiansen, the Trisha Brown Archive, Yvonne Rainer, the Walker Art Center, Walter Verdin and the Western Front Archives—all were precious allies in the sharing and unconvincing of their material for the exhibition.



work, rather than on the already organized and already finished aspects of it. We focused on what we called *studies*—taking seriously the idea that exhibiting dance in the museum would not only alter dance, it would also alter the museum: into a sort of dance *studio*.

During the four months of the exhibition, *Drafting Interior Techniques* thus aimed at transforming the gallery spaces of Culturgest into temporary dance studios, where visitors, dancers and students were invited to inquire about their own movements. We carved changing rooms into the hollow walls of the museum, we placed gym mats on the ground to allow for people to roll on the ground, we created beds for people to lie down and study their own way of letting go of their weight. Showcasing video archives of performances, interviews, and original installations, the exhibition was first and foremost a place to crawl, to sit, to dance-standing, to nap... In short: to reflect upon movement with a dancing bodymind.

This book intends to replicate this displacement of focus from dance-as-performance to dance-as-practice. In the same way the exhibition was to be as much of a place for seeing dance archives as it was to be a place for dancing, this book intends to speak from and with dance, rather than of or about it.







For sixty years, North American dancer, choreographer and improviser Steve Paxton has been developing an art of tricking himself, his own and his partners' bodyminds into inventing new forms of moving, relating and thinking about movement. Conceiving of dance as "a laboratory to explore the human body", he sought to uncover "what was ancient in our human experience." (Paxton 1972 & 2003) This led him to look at walking, standing, touching—seeing those ancestral gestures as opportunities to uncover fundamental features of what it means to be a member of our species on Earth, and to move from it.

This introduction is an attempt at looking at Steve Paxton's work and legacy as that of an applied, obsessed, relentless student, and at the same time, as that of a professional fugitive, who evolved an art of staying off the paths of his own culture and habits. An attempt at looking at his life as a life of fugitive studies.

Steve Paxton's art of diving into systematic studies led him on decade-long investigations: of pedestrian movements in the 1960s (how do we walk, stand, sit, wait, eat, love, dress, undress?); of contact and gravity in the 1970s (what happens if we jump and touch and fall together with other bodies?); of the music of J.S. Bach in the 1980s, and of the minute sensations around the spine in the 1990s; and of many more others weaving in and out of those decades. Some of his inquiries stayed around long enough to become techniques, now practiced and taught everywhere in the dancing world: Contact Improvisation and Material for the Spine. Others overlapped, intersected, were forgotten and found again over the years, developed into installations, choreographic pieces, collective adventures, texts, drawings.



These quests and their results followed the rhythms of different encounters with other masters of art, dance and improvisation: investigating collage and found movement through a relation with Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham and John Cage, questioning the possibility of anarchist collectives with the Judson Dance Theater, Grand Union (Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Douglas Dunn, Barbara Dilley...) and Contact Improvisation, inventing ways of teaching movement to the visually impaired with Touchdown Dance, testing the possibility of renewing one's encounter with his lifetime partner, Lisa Nelson... Throughout these sundry adventures, one constant remained: the patience to observe phenomena. The best summary of that unique sense of time was given by Robert Ellis Dunn, the music composer who instigated the Judson Dance Theater:

*"[Steve Paxton's] pieces were just so wide open and so slow and they did not take any standard psychological form. I can just feel the effect on my nerves. They were wide open and unencompassable. Dances where Steve just very solidly and sturdily did a few things just the way they were. And there was a non-psychological or anti-psychological atmosphere surrounding these things, and I don't know whether it was so much their provocation or lack of provocation that made you feel anxious as much as the fact that they couldn't be encompassed by the recipe. You had to look at what was happening, the basic elements of dance, of theater, of light, of space, of sound. There was nothing very much to grasp onto. You just had to undergo them."*  
(Dunn 1970)

Steve Paxton's time is a studious time: a time for letting things, people, relations appear—not to force them.

Thus, the first performances of Contact Improvisation, held in a gallery space in New York City, lasted several hours: they were visible for passers-by and fast drop-ins, available also for those who would want to take the time to observe people—dancers and gymnasts—figuring out in real-time what



happened when they jumped at each other. This durational quality was the essence of the proposition: “come and we’ll show you what we do” (which was the name of another performance of Contact Improvisation); come, and we’ll take the time together to see what we do when we are masses meeting in the air. Similarly, another iconic piece, *Satisfyin Lover*, had 42 people walk across the space, unhurriedly (pedestrianly): the mass effect of those 42 people, one by one, passing by, offered just enough time for the attention to grasp what was presented—or, as dance critic Jill Johnston put it,

*“the fat, the skinny, the medium, the slouched and slumped, the straight and tall, the bow legged and knock-kneed, the awkward the elegant the coarse the delicate the pregnant the virginal the you name it [...] that’s you and me in all our ordinary everyday who-cares postural splendor”* (Johnston 1968).

But Steve Paxton is not only a patient student: he is also a sort of professional fugitive<sup>2</sup>. In 1970, at the peak of a prolific career in New York City as a member of the Judson Dance Theater, he decided to retire from the dance world to live on an artists and farmers commune in Northern Vermont. From then on, although he (luckily for us) kept being invited to teach and perform, he remained attached to his unique way of fugitively planning his life: never applying for grants, only going wherever he was invited, and always always making new works. He sought to remain what he had always conceived of himself: a barbarian (coming from the desert of Arizona) at the gates of culture.

To remain outside of culture didn’t mean to negate the past. It simply meant doing what his master, Merce Cunningham, had apparently done, and that is: not what Cunningham’s master, Martha Graham, had herself done, which was again, different from what her master, Ruth St Denis had done, which was again,

2 The concept of “fugitive” comes from Deleuze and Guattari and was recently reinvested by Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, in their *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, to describe lives that are lived at the borders of culture as its ungovernable, anarchic share. I am indebted to Paula Caspão for suggesting this description of Steve Paxton’s work.



different from what her master, Isadora Duncan, had done. Belonging to that lineage of modern dancers, Steve Paxton conceives of those masters' legacy as an authorization to differ: "because what artists do for each other primarily is permissions," permissions to invent anew, permissions to be mutants, permissions to "restructure the whole thing." (Paxton 2015)

Although Paxton was part of a generation who decided to "never trust anybody over 30", he also had great defiance against himself and his own embedded tendencies. Being a fugitive, he thus became a professional tracker not only of the tired habits and traditional pathways of culture, but of the tired habits and congealed patterns of his own bodymind. "Why bother invent old things?," he responded to someone interrogating him about his tendency to always be where he wasn't quite expected. And indeed, this seems to be one of the recurring gifts he sought to give to himself and others: creating frames for seeing the new in the old and for giving oneself the necessary attention to renew the joy of staying in the present moment as a moment of incessant eventfulness.

One of the most recurring questions he asked to himself and others was: "what is my body doing when I am not conscious of it?" (Paxton 2018) Dance was the name of the field of investigation of the question: how can I remain present, even when in all appearance, my consciousness goes away? Many disciplines served this purpose: from Cunningham technique to Aikido, from Yoga to meditation, from Contact Improvisation to Material for the Spine, the game seemed to have remained pretty much the same—what can you learn from yourself? How can you let the dance be the teacher?

As a fugitive student, he also sought to renew his studies rather than capitalize on them.<sup>3</sup> Improvisation became one of the major tools Steve Paxton used in that endeavor to

<sup>3</sup> The story is well known about Contact Improvisation: in 1975, the possibility was contemplated of patenting the form. Refusing to envisage themselves as the "Contact cops" of the world, Steve Paxton and other founders such as Nancy Stark Smith, Curt Siddall and Nita Little, made the decision to let the form live its life, and instead Nancy Stark Smith founded a newsletter for people to exchange information about their practice—this became *Contact Quarterly*, a pioneering magazine for dancers made by dancers that is still active to this day.



incessantly question his conceptions of movement. The reason improvisation was so precious, he explains, is that

*“To study something like improvisation, which is defined as you go, everything you assume is going to affect the result. I tried to be aware of what the assumptions were. [...] This guidance caused us to consider all sorts of things, such as communication, emotion, psychology, sex, education, childhood development, culture, taboos, space, time, and the self. It is all very well to say that one takes responsibility for one’s self in improvisation, but it is indeed a staggering job in its details. An improviser’s job is never done. All this to explore the ability of the consciousness to cleave to the body’s moment and remain there as the moment changes.”* (Paxton 1993)

The notion of “interior techniques” gives an account of this effort by the improviser to place consciousness where it tends to disappear. Interior techniques are momentary answers (drafts of answers) to the question: what do I do when I improvise?

This is one of the core questions that are at work in the book you are currently holding in your hands—a weaving of dance history and dance practice, of testimonies and philosophical readings of Steve Paxton’s work. Dancers and dance theorists, philosophers, anthropologists and historians contributed to this volume, articulating Steve Paxton’s studies and their potential for opening our ideas of what movement can be and how to refine our sensitivity to our own experience of it.

Each chapter focuses on one of Steve’s obsessions (pedestrian movements, anarchy, touch, gravity, stillness, disorientation, soloing and being in relation), considering them not so much as themes that could describe his performances, but rather as tools that he used, throughout his sixty-year-long dancing life, to remain on the edge of what he knew—in short: as interior techniques for improvising a life.

Each chapter can be read in just that way: as a pocket manual for self-hacking.



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# chapter i

## A STUDY IN PEDESTRIAN MOVEMENTS

25







"... Occasionally, I would remember walking,  
while walking, and try to continue just  
as I was before I remembered to watch.  
I was spying on myself. Self-hacking."



Our bodies  
are not  
ready-mades

The Ordinary  
in Steve Paxton's  
Dance Pieces  
from the 1960s

*Julie Perrin*



*Charismatic in every respect, on and off stage, muscular and broad shouldered with a long neck and small chiseled head, [Paxton] looked like a Saltimbanque just jumped out of a Picasso painting.*

Yvonne Rainer (2006: 241)

In the beginning of 1964, Steve Paxton presented a solo in New York entitled *Flat*. The title hinted that the nature of the choreography would be dull, monotone, without a striking quality, and not glossy. This piece, as Sally Banes describes it,

*used an episodic structure to defamiliarize the everyday action of getting undressed. [...] Paxton repeatedly walked in circle, removed his shoes, jacket, shirt and pants, and hung his clothing on hooks taped to his body. All these actions were interrupted by freezes, as well as by Paxton's assuming emblematic masculine poses taken from sports and classical sculpture.* (Banes 2003: 6)<sup>1</sup>

*Flat*, like many other pieces at that time made by Anna Halprin, Merce Cunningham or Judson Dance Theater choreographers, questions the notion of "ordinary movement." Not only is the temporality of everyday gesture modified (it is either regular and unaccentuated or artificially stopped in its development), but it also seems that nothing motivates the succession of these actions. When I watch the 1964 film recording, it seems to me that the strictly circular trajectory, insistent in its geometric character, confers a markedly choreographic quality to the walking. Then, the simplicity of the repeated pattern leads one to forget the walking itself, which becomes no more than a pretext for the stops that punctuate it, as freeze-frame images announcing quotations (see Lambert-Beatty 2008: 48).

The soloist that could embody a businessman in a suit, an upper middle-class white male,<sup>2</sup> progressively transforms into a coat hanger sculpture which complicates the idea that

<sup>1</sup> In this text, Banes relies on the concept of defamiliarization (or making things strange) found in the essay by the Russian formalist, Victor Shklovsky: "Art as Technique" (1929). A detailed analysis of the 1980s version of *Flat* can be found in Banes 1994: 227-239.

<sup>2</sup> A lawyer, an accountant or an advertising man (Banes 1994: 235).



it could be an objective portrayal of ordinary movements. The most remarkable element concerning the ordinary is most certainly the way in which Paxton gives equal attention to the pose-quotations and the moments where he takes off his shoes, pulling slowly with concentration on his sock. There is a de-hierarchization of the cultural values assigned to the different categories of gestures present: those magnified by classical sculpture, those praised in the field of sports, and those made invisible in our everyday lives. In the middle of this, the coat hanger man is a sort of Dada figure or a *Combine* à la Rauschenberg.<sup>3</sup>

In 2000, Paxton recalled:

*I showed up dressed in a suit. I watched a few other works, and when asked if anyone else had something to show, I walked into the space with my chair. It was clearly the early middle of my ten-years obsession with ordinary movement. It is difficult to reasonable justify this obsession [...] Yet I and several of my colleagues were enamored of the concept; and although we spoke of it, I cannot recall any conversation where we managed to really pin down the allure of the ordinary.*

*Having written that, it seems obvious that ordinary movement would have no allure. Allure was embedded in the mirrored techniques classes, the accepted glamour of the dance world of the times. Ordinary movement was barely noticed activity embedded in one's environment [...].*

*My inquiry was not so much about escaping the legacy of dance as discovering the source of it. Where was something pre-legacy, pre-cultural, pre-artistic? Where was ancient movement? This was the fascinating question for me of those days, and it remains my interest. The answer of course was right under my nose. I placed the chair in the space and began to stand. (Paxton 2003: 206)*

<sup>3</sup> This is what Robert Rauschenberg names the assembly of elements taken from everyday reality to bridge the gap between painting and sculpture. He became Steve Paxton's partner in 1961. We can find similarities between the coat hanger man and Lucinda Childs' tragicomic figure in *Carnation* (1966), a salad shaker on her head and sponges between her lips.



Steve Paxton's pieces from the 1960s present a varied range of understanding of the ordinary. They were made at a time when many different forms of distancing from modern dance, ballet, and the Cunningham virtuosity appeared in the United States. Indeed, after training in gymnastics and performing modern dance, Steve Paxton came to New York in 1958 to study with Cunningham (who hired him in the company in 1961), for whom all movement, no matter how mundane, was potentially a dance movement—a concept the choreographer had borrowed from his partner, music composer John Cage, for whom all sound was potentially music. Paxton meant to put this theoretical position into practice<sup>4</sup>—and went on creating dance pieces entirely made up of everyday gestures, such as sitting, standing, smiling, or walking.

#### FOUR FACETS OF THE ORDINARY ONSTAGE

What is this “concept” of the ordinary Steve Paxton mentioned above? The expression “ordinary movement” became part of critical debates in the 1960s. The phrase has persisted until today to designate aesthetics as varied as those of Pina Bausch, Odile Duboc and Jérôme Bel, among others. In fact, it is an unstable aesthetic category. Behind the term “ordinary” or “mundane,” we conceal varied forms, actions, and ways of engaging movement. When speaking of the ordinary in dance as if it was one thing, we deprive ourselves of a more subtle reflection on the aesthetics of the everyday as it evolved throughout the history of dance.

There exist different forms of fabricating the theatrical every day; or, different choreographic codifications of the ordinary. Each signals a specific relation both to reality and its (re)presentation. Indeed, the ordinary onstage is not the simple transposition of observing contemporary society: it results from a specific *mise-en-scène* of bodies and situations that dialogue as much with (the current) reality as they do with the theatrical codes and dominant dance techniques

<sup>4</sup> Paxton lamented the fact that most of the time Cunningham preferred to choreograph ostentatious virtuosity (Paxton 1975: 27).



belonging to the times. The so called “everyday” therefore designates first an attempt to comment on the gestures and problems that make up the state of any given society, second it gives distance from the aesthetic, stylistic, and technical conventions of the choreographic arts. In the first case, the choreographed everyday attempts to take ordinary gesture out of the realm of invisibility it inherently belongs to: “The ordinary is in a sense invisible, because it’s ordinary,” recalls Steve Paxton (Baryshnykov 2001). Choreography can therefore have an anthropological or documentary dimension, and by this, it reveals the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of societal behavior and corporeality (that is, the sum of postures and gestures of which we are made).

In the second case, the everyday is defined by opposition to virtuosity and to mainstream technique. It then constructs its own gestural codes (as well as new virtuosities, perceived as non-ostentatious) that depend on the choreographic eras, the individual styles and the artworks considered.

If we look at the theoretical and artistic debates over the concept of the ordinary in the 1960s, four categories emerge.

First, if we review the vocabulary employed by the artists and critics of the time, starting with Jill Johnston in *The Village Voice*, or the historians (Sally Banes in particular),<sup>5</sup> we discover the important nuances of the term “ordinary.” Mundane, casual, prosaic, humdrum, banal, everyday movements are adjectives that paint a large and wide constellation of possible gestures that can constitute our day-to-day lives, even as these lives call for a diversity of situations and therefore a variety of gestures: expressive, unconscious, automated, or even extremely technical and specialized.

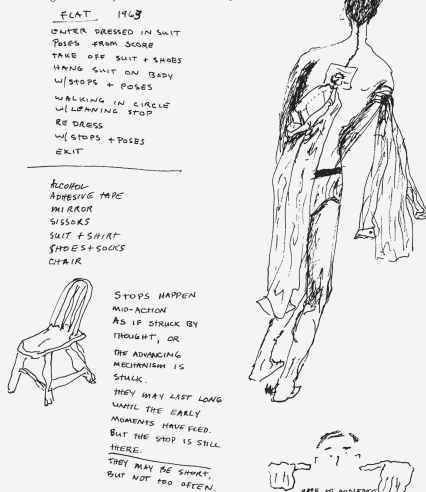
A second possible constellation of uses restricts the understanding of the word “ordinary” to a category of gestures

<sup>5</sup> A specialist in post-modern dance and Judson Dance Theater, Banes work consists of a detailed descriptive approach of the period on which a number of later analyses will base their research due to a lack of existing archival documentation (see Banes 1980). She in addition lays out an indispensable analysis of the aesthetics of the period in a number of her works.



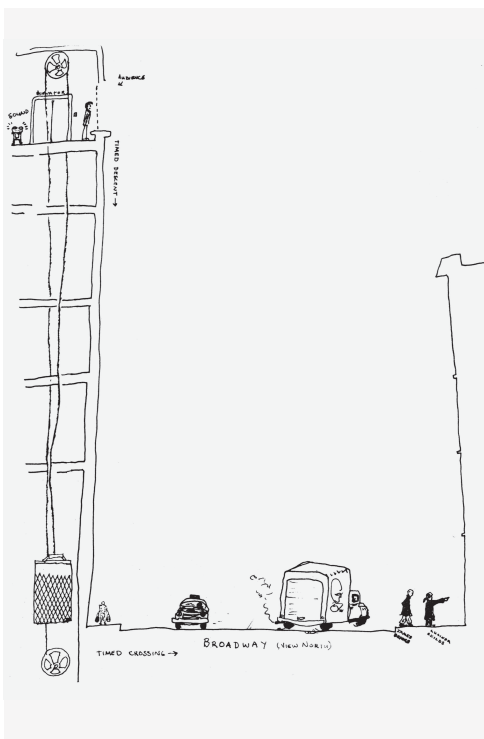
In this short piece the performer enters dressed in a suit which he proceeds to take off, hanging the discarded garments on hooks which have been taped to his body. The sequence of events is halted from time to time at unexpected points in the action. The effect is of a series of small surprises – the suit, the undressing, the pauses, and the hooks on the body. These ironic displacements of the familiar are reminiscent of a Magritte painting.

Drawings and notes by Steve Paxton made on request, 1988



Drawings by Steve Paxton representing his piece *Flat*.  
A page from Miranda Tufnell and Chris Circkmay's  
*Body Space Image*, London: Dance Books Ltd, 1990.





Drawing by Steve Paxton representing Lucinda Childs's piece *Street Dance* (1964). Reproduced from *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 14(1), Winter 1989.

In 1964, during a European tour with some of the Judson Dance Theater choreographers, Paxton wrote a postcard to Lucinda Childs: "Yvonne [Rainer] tells us you have made a new work, the one detailing architectural signs whilst performing pedestrianly on the street. Just want to express admiration at this—I was moved by the description of its simplicity." Later on, he came to consider *Street Dance* to be one of the greatest achievements of the pedestrian movement investigations of the 1960s, since it was one of the rare works to actually "include pedestrians in the composition, pedestrians who were not conscious of being in the composition, which is the requisite way of getting the most ordinary kind of pedestrian performance." (Paxton, quoted in *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 9(3), Fall 1984)





*Jag vill gärna telefonera (I Would Like To Make A Phone Call),*  
by Steve Paxton, 1964.

Printed paper, stickers, ink, gouache collage on paper.  
116 x 61 x 11 cm framed. Collection Walker Art Center,  
Minneapolis. Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg  
Foundation, 2013.

A collage of mostly sports photographs, the score invites the  
dancers (originally: Steve Paxton and Robert Rauschenberg)  
to pause within each of those archetypal figures, and to  
transition casually between them.





Performance view of Steve Paxton's *State* at Intermedia on Beatty Street, Vancouver, March 31, 1969.  
Photo by Michael de Courcy.

The piece, first created in 1968, was presented as part of a series of workshops conducted by members of the Judson Dance Theater. L-R: Douglas Gallery employee, Teresa Bjornson, Michael Morris, Glenn Lewis, Gathie Falk, Jack Dale, Rowena Jones, Judith Schwarz, Joan Lowndes.



that accomplish an action: a “functional” gesture, or a “goal-oriented type of action” (Banes 1994b: 12).

The last constellation defines the ordinary in relation to art history in two ways. First in terms of the dancer’s investment in the gesture or the nature of interpretation. This type of investment is described as “unheroic,” “with no expressiveness,” “untheatrical,” “anti-illusionist,” “pantomiming routine activities,” (Johnston 1968: 32) or even “tasklike” (Rainer 1974: 63) dance. The term “task,” first appearing in 1957 in Anna Halprin’s workshops in California, would come to qualify the nature of this type of gesture, even as it was emptied of all functionality.<sup>6</sup> Yvonne Rainer also rejects the notion of character and embraces instead the “neutral doer” (Rainer 1974: 65). This investment in gesture is principally defined in minor mode, non-demonstrative, where expressivity is neutralized. Furthermore, this relation without affect to the action or gesture is in fact very far away from what we know from day-to-day life. We can clearly see how, in this case, the ordinary is defined as an aesthetic category that has little to do with the whole of reality—or at most only reflects one of its possible aspects. Taking this into account, dance historian Ramsay Burt prefers therefore to speak of “allegories of the ordinary” (Burt 2006: 92). We should also note that those who adhered to modern dance used everyday gesture for kinesthetic research, albeit in direct contrast as “emotional training” (Humphrey 1959: 114). With this way of thinking, Doris Humphrey explored social gesture (the handshake, the embrace...), functional gesture (combing hair, getting dressed...), and ritual gesture (in society or liturgy). Here again, we show the category of “ordinary” as unstable.

The second reference to art history (and it will be the last category) is situated in the dialogue between choreographers and artists in other fields: some had actively participated in the concerts of Judson Dance Theater from 1962 to 1964 (in particular Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris);

6 Only certain tasks would be similar to ordinary actions (getting dressed, sweeping, sitting...), whereas others would have nothing to do with functional or ordinary movement and would above all be kinesthetic experiments starting with objects or situations.



others had a determinate influence on the period, notably John Cage, but also Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Fluxus, the minimalists, and Alan Kaprow. There was much discussion dealing with the literalist movement, of “objectlike” or “found movements,” (in explicit reference to minimalism, see Rainer 1968:63), and of the “radical blurring of the boundaries between art and everyday life” (Banes 2003: 3). These expressions were the start of an unmistakable dialogue with aesthetic categories in avant-garde history in the 1960s. The way in which choreography and other arts come together, however, is not as self-evident. Visual arts and music can maintain an indexical relationship to reality through sound, film, or photographic recordings of the world. Visual artists can also borrow existing manufactured objects and present them like the readymades of Duchamp, or integrate them into a sculpture or a painting. It is a more delicate affair when one deals with gesture. The dancer is not a readymade of the contemporary world; their gestures and posture are underpinned by their life’s history and adaptation to the present situation. The dancer cannot totally abstract themselves from their physical state or how the moment affects them (the performance space, how the audience reacts, etc.). When the everyday is featured on the stage, an aptitude is necessary on the dancer’s part to undo the signs that mark them as a dancer, rather a person going about their everyday life. However, is this deconstruction really possible? And *a fortiori*, is it desirable?

Yvonne Rainer suggests a critical analysis of her own attempt to neutralize affect and social signs and gives homage to the way Paxton revealed the social and anthropological quality of the everyday:

*Utilizing references to the everyday, to athletics, to the bizarre was our way of removing ourselves from the expressive artiness of modern dance. At that point [1966], it seemed that the original expressiveness of the pioneers—Duncan, Graham, Humphrey—had degenerated, all but disappeared, and was not available to us in an acceptable form. We had to start elsewhere.*



*The problem is that in the attempt to justify and launch a movement as vital and audacious as that early '60s dance explosion, enthusiasm can easily become rhetoric. [...] For instance, the flaw in the ideal of the "neutral doer." I wrote that one can't "do" a grand jeté, one has to "dance" it. Well, neither can one "do" a walk without investing it with character. From the beginning, one of the reasons Steve Paxton's walking people were so effective was that the walk was so simply and astonishingly "expressive of self." (Rainer 1976: 144)*

#### LOOKING AT THE WALKING (AND STANDING, EATING, SMILING)

Walking is at the heart of Paxton's work in the 1960s. Deborah Hay credits him with the invention of the term "pedestrian movements" used by many other choreographers (Hay quoted in Livet 1982: 122). The adjective "pedestrian," by its polysemy, brings the ordinary to walking. In *Flat*, the considerably choreographed walk reveals the *mise-en-scène* of a character. Without film documentation, it is difficult to define the nature of the walking in *Proxy* (1961). Paxton describes it in this way: ordinary, regular, no added color, not pacing, not ambling, striding, neither strolling (Paxton 1975: 28). Each of the three performers<sup>7</sup> walks in their own way: "[Walking] was what they conceived of as their walk, with the idea behind it that everybody has a technique." (*idem*) Paxton would try to choreograph these kinesthetic and postural singularities inherent to each person, confronting the difficulty of preserving them even though the situation of the theater disturbs the unconscious habits and character of that same walk. His research on the ordinary was in fact tied to this question: "What is my body doing when I am not conscious of it?" (Paxton 2018: 18). Therefore the goal was to try to not alter the walk:

*Walking is something you can't tamper with. If you say "ordinary walking" you get a wide range of materials. And the more you tamper with it, the less it has the*

<sup>7</sup> The first cast was with Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton and Jennifer Tipton. The second Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg.



*quality of being just the thing. It starts to look like somebody with a problem [...] instead of just someone walking.* (Interview in 1975 quoted in Banes 1980: 60)

For *Satisfyin Lover* (1967), forty-two people of all ages, weight, and social classes, clothed in their normal outfits, crossed the stage, sat, or just stood according to a precise score. Johnston described the “postural splendor” of these ordinary people: “the fat, the skinny, the slouched and slumped, the straight and tall, the bowlegged and knock-kneed, the awkward, the elegant, the coarse, the delicate, the pregnant, the virginal, the you name it” (Johnston 1968: 32). I remember<sup>8</sup> high heels, feet that trailed, legs getting caught in skirts, serene and enigmatic smiles, crude and sophisticated walking, bodies that swung back and forth, chests forward, delicate rebound—the only thing missing was the Saltimbanque jumping out of the Picasso painting.

Paxton, however, was afraid that he had failed to choreograph walking: “Apparently foolproof in their simplicity, I regarded [the 42 people] as failures. I did not foresee that the instruction to ‘walk naturally’ would be impossible with the self-consciousness brought about by the instruction, let alone performing it in front of an audience. I saw the resolution of that annoying paradox in an early work by Lucinda Childs [*Street Dance*, 1964]. [...] My own failure showed me a few things. There was something about the play of consciousness/self-consciousness in front of an audience, and in an audience” (Paxton 2003: 207).

Furthermore, from the viewer’s perspective, a question arises at a different level: how to watch that which normally goes unseen? Walking is certainly a democratic (a term used by Banes), or at least egalitarian, movement that “anybody could do” (Paxton 1975: 29). However, in no way does it predict the audience’s interest in that everyday step, as Banes reminds us:

*The utopian, often politically motivated desire to make dance more accessible by installing the ordinary and by*

8 Dominique Brun, Martha Moore and Julie Salgues reenacted *Satisfyin Lover* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in December 2011.



*demystifying choreographic structure never appealed to mass audiences. It was not postmodern dance but ballet that reaped the largest mass audience [...] during the dance boom of the 1970s and 1980s. Ironically, it seems that in order to savor the prosaic in art, spectators must already be trained in artistic conventions and other aspects of connoisseurship.* (Banes 2003: 19)

Therefore, it might be important to create a framework for these ordinary gestures. In so far as it concerns walking, standing (*State*, 1968), eating (*Proxy* or *Jag Ville Görna Telefonera*, 1964), running (*Transit*, 1962), or smiling for a long duration (*Smiling*, 1969), Paxton gives form to an everyday aesthetic through spatial temporal scores for specific actions, scenography,<sup>9</sup> and lighting (the blackouts in *State*). Framing is primarily a tool to perceive what one is not in the habit of seeing. This framework works in a paradoxical manner: it allows one to highlight the interest of ordinary movement all the while bringing to light the theatrical situation, otherwise said, the invention of the ordinary onstage.

#### THE DOCUMENTARY PART OF THE EVERYDAY AESTHETIC

This last aspect invites us to highlight the documentary dimension of Paxton's work. In effect, his relationship to the ordinary in the 1960s led him to not only involve non-dancers (the forty-two people in *Satisfyin Lover* or in *State*, or the technicians in *Section of A New Unfinished Work* in 1965) but to also integrate 'reality' in the form of documents—that is, through media representations of the news or history, or through films that have their own autonomous existence but are used here as choreographic material for kinaesthetic or political purposes. In both cases—the “real people” and the documents—the externality of the ordinary world is introduced into the work of art, bringing art and life closer together. For example, in *Section of A New Unfinished Work*,

<sup>9</sup> In *Proxy*, eating a pear and drinking a glass of water occurred in a small square that had been marked off with yellow tape on the floor (Banes 1980: 59).



the televised interviews of the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings are projected; in *A.A.* (1966) the “remarks made by stewardess and captain of trans-America flight” are used as a soundtrack (Paxton 1975: 27); in *Physical Things* (1966), we hear several radio stations live but the sound is tampered with; in *Salt Lake City Death* (1969), a doctor’s autopsy report is read on tape; and finally, in *the sizes* and *Somebody Else* (1967) and *Beautiful Lecture* (1968) pornographic films are projected onstage, superimposed with other events.

In addition, the documentary character of the ordinary aesthetic takes the form of conferences given onstage, commenting on the action or in contrast with it, introducing reflexivity on art and life, such as in the lecture on walking in *Somebody Else* and *Earth Interior* (1966) or on performing in *Some Notes on Performance* (1967).

Finally, the documentary character of the work reveals itself through its relationship to time. Paxton is known for doing things in real time, for drawing out the duration rather than compressing the action like the conventions of theater call for. There are plenty of anecdotes on the subject, whether it was in Cunningham’s company or in Robert Dunn’s workshops: “It was unbearable,” Rauschenberg said about Paxton’s experiments in 1961 in one of Dunn’s workshops, “I thought he had become unconscious.” “He was extremely interesting,” continued Trisha Brown, “he just did it in his own time, which was not like anything I had ever witnessed” (quoted in Banes 1980: 21–22).<sup>10</sup> It is this anti-paroxysmal temporal quality, similar to the flow of walking, that could lead one to qualify choreography as ordinary even when its actions are not deemed to be such.<sup>11</sup>

How not to think of the filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who, several years later in *News from Home* (1977), documents the trivial through a still frame directed at passersby on a New York subway platform, with letters from her mother she read

10 On this subject, see also Trisha Brown *in* Huynh, Luccioni and Perrin 2012: 122–123.

11 On this subject, see Johnston 1998: 204–208 and Perrin 2012, chapters on Yvonne Rainer and Merce Cunningham.



over the top? The chosen frame, like the framing procedures for ordinary movements by Paxton, works like a prism towards reality, while the soundtrack superimposes other narratives. Experimental cinema in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, like Paxton's choreographies, displays the ordinary world in real or protracted time, showing ways of standing and walking, to reveal what we forgot to watch. It combines documentary and fiction. In dance, as in cinema, there is an attention to the present when dealing with the ordinary: to space and time, to its duration and the complex layers through which it is constructed. This attention witnesses the way in which each artist situates themselves in the world and what unique flavor they find and bring out in the mundane.

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# interlude

## A STUDY IN IMPROVISATION

41

You're relaxing and it's holding you up.







"In the midst of standing still  
something else is occurring  
and the name for that is the small dance."



# Extraordinarily ordinary and ordinarily extraordinary

*a performance  
review by  
Daniel Lepkoff*

*This review of Steve Paxton's Flat (1964), performed at St Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery (Danspace Project, New York City) in 1999, is an extract from a longer review of an evening that comprised Flat, Some English Suites and Ash, first published in Contact Quarterly, vol. 26(1), Winter/Spring 2001.*



[...]

FLAT (1964)

On opening night [May 20, 1999], the audience was full of familiar faces, socializing and talking; I was buzzing with anticipation. I was excited to view Steve's work again after a few years' gap. And this was a solo concert, Steve would set the tone. I was looking forward to immersing myself in this man's world.

I sat down in the only free seat I could find. Feeling too far away, I moved down to the floor and over to the side, where there was no one between me and the dance floor.

I noticed Steve enter from the dressing room in a handsome suit. It was well-fitted, a light brown color. Steve looked tall, statuesque, comfortable. He appeared as a host, and this was his house. With soft-soled shoes he quietly walked around the edge of the space mingling with the audience, engaging in casual conversation with those he knew. As he approached me, I noticed I was nervous. What to say in this formally informal setting. I said, "Nice threads, Steve." He said, "It's very old."

He continued mingling with the audience. Then he walked into the center of the space and made a brief announcement about turning off the beepers on our digital watches and cell phones. Steve looked mildly amused. I thought the idea of someone receiving a phone call in the middle of the show held some humor for him. I registered the concern to have an uninterrupted, concentrated silence for the dancing at the same time that I noticed the street noise was particularly loud, with a fire truck blaring its abrasive horn and sirens flying by.

Steve turned away from us, and as the lights faded down, shrinking to a small off-center circle which included the chair, he walked directly back towards the light and stopped still beside the chair. Profile to the audience, there he stood. We had begun. I felt myself shift internally and sensed the whole room shift as well, away from the stimulation of the social pre-show scene and into a state of observation. The shift was incredibly fast and total.



Steve's shift to profound stillness was dramatic and caught us unawares. There was both a power and a stark nakedness to this moment; in Steve, a remarkable willingness to be seen, as if a dancer might distract their audience by moving. I focused on Steve standing. There are as many qualities to stillness as there are to movement. Steve's stillness was extraordinarily complete. I looked to see if I could feel the inner landscape of this stillness.

Stillness is a state of conscious control, a choice not to act on the many passing urges. The level of control has to do with how conscious one is of one's body. I could feel Steve was being very conscious. I scanned his body—feet, spine, arms, weight, eyes, were still. The only thing moving was my watching.

Then, just as suddenly, he was walking again. I noticed that his walk had a slight side-to-side weightiness. It suggested a hint of resignation to a course of events. Circling the chair, returning to the same stillness. Here we are again. The dance proceeded as he patiently, methodically, and in a totally functional manner, took off his clothes and hung them on hooks that were taped to the skin of his chest and tops of his shoulders. He undressed down to his underwear and then, just as methodically, reversed the action, redressing himself. These evidently ordinary movements were interrupted periodically by stark moments of stillness. Together with the dimness of the lighting, this activity built in me a Kafkaesque mood. I saw an image of a New York tenement; a purgatory of undressing and dressing again and again

I became engaged in anticipating when and where Steve would stop. Each suspended moment revealed its curious identity as I had time to move my eyes over the scene and choose what to look at. He was letting us see what we wanted to see. This started to be fun. "Look at how long that sock can stretch!" "Do I take my socks off that way?" "Hey, that boot looks like a telephone!"

The clothes hanging from the front of his body warped the otherwise perfectly pedestrian flow. Unbuttoning his pants with a suit jacket hanging from his chest made him lean far



forward. Here he stopped. Looks like he's just finished taking a piss. The oddness of hanging up clothes on one's own body in such a matter-of-fact way caused me to notice the graceful intricacies of these functional movements, details I might otherwise overlook.

Several times Steve launched into poses that were not interruptions of his undress-dressing task. *Non sequiturs*. His body fulfilled these actions with a level of energy and extension that was definitely not pedestrian. Once, he placed his hand on an imaginary wall and slowly rose up on his toes as if to see over. In another, he quickly squatted down, hands together between his legs, as if crouching by a stream, fishing. Another time he sat on the floor and suddenly reached his arms above, fingers spread, embracing space in what reminded me of a classic Greek Olympiad. These imagistic poses ran counter to the plodding inevitability of the pedestrian flow and struck me as wrenchingly beautiful; a robust and energetic spirit trapped within the regime of civilized life, freed for only the briefest of moments.

How can this be? Such a simple choreography provoking such deeply felt emotions. So many dances I have seen are fraught with a desire to communicate, to say something, to mean something, and this spare choreographic schema evoked my tears for the beauty and tragedy of the human condition. This is not the first time Steve's work has done this to me.

Finally, Steve tightened the last bootlace, stood up, lifted his pants cuffs out of the socks, straightened out the sleeves of his shirt, lifted his head, and without looking back, walked out of the room as the lights faded to black. The applause came too quickly for me. The lights came up on an empty space. Steve did not take a bow.

[...]







# chapter 2

## A STUDY IN ANARCHY

49







"It is time again to attempt anarchy.  
For one, anarchy is simple: it only requires  
special conditions of communication."



# A Physical Quest for Natural Rights

*Bojana Cvejić*



*If an artist's political convictions remain the same throughout their long-span career, why does the form of this political involvement change? Are these changes historical, reflecting the transformation of the contexts which condition the artist's different operations? Or is it a matter of our myopic comprehension, which fails to see a deep-seated consistency in the purported differences?*

In 2013, Steve Paxton told me that the duty of the artist was to survive.<sup>1</sup> This statement baffled me. I couldn't help thinking of the youngest generation of artists today struggling for their fifteen minutes of visibility on the art market. Or did he mean that social and cultural circumstances no longer make possible the kind of development he believed an artist must pursue? I have only come to grasp his maxim in hindsight, considering it in light of Paxton's own journey. Through what might appear as separate periods from the 1960s to today, differentiated by forms and frames of dancing activity, there shines a consistent evolution of various principles of anarchy, tied up with a degree of aesthetic formality that renders them occasionally difficult to recognize.

Anarchism can be conceived as the rejection of all coercive authority. Anarchist thought contests stringent regulations, those imposed by state apparatuses, which hinder human potentialities and must be liberated. In liberal and pragmatist strands of anarchism, anarchist principles entail spontaneity and the immediacy of individual initiative, as well as direct action, nonviolent resistance to war, mutualism based on solidarity, processes of decentering and diffusing power, and, finally, the de-institutionalization of society in forms of community fostered in practical experiments.<sup>2</sup>

1 The conversation took place at Mad Brook Farm in summer 2013, in preparation for a video I made with Lennart Laberenz, "...in a non-wimpy way...", originally commissioned and produced by Musée de la Danse, Rennes.

2 This list includes also principles from other sources than just pragmatist theories of anarchism, ranging from William Godwin (1793) to the 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist anarchism (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 1840; Peter Kropotkin 1902) and the American pragmatist tradition of radical anarcho-individualism (Henry David Thoreau 1849).



In this essay, I will attempt to trace some of these principles of anarchism in the dance and living practices Paxton initiated in an oeuvre that spans more than half a century. It won't suffice to merely explicate the political rationale of his performances, his physical practices and everyday activity. Working from within bodily movement and gesture, we are inclined to observe how an aesthetic ideal that emerged through dance both proposes and rehearses a social order without explicitly invoking its political significance. For instance, what a fall in Contact Improvisation means and does beyond its dance-historical and technical manipulation; why Paxton's "small dance" opposes positive law in the name of something akin to natural law. Ultimately, Paxton's work brings us to one of the key questions of anarchism at stake here: where is authority situated when what is obeyed isn't a conventional, historically established instance of power? How can the givenness of experience act as an authority, providing an individual discovery of concomitant laws of physics and physicality, namely, a subjective and lived experience of gravity?

#### PERFORMING ARGUMENTS

##### IN DIRECT ACTION: 1965-1973

During the period of the Judson Dance Theater, Paxton presented numerous pieces with other Judson choreographers and dancers. Famously, his performances embraced standing, sitting and, most of all, walking, scored in a rigorous formal count of steps, as *Satisfyin Lover*, the 1967 apotheosis to this gesture, epitomizes. But how does walking work, *comment ça marche*? How does it happen that we take walking just as walking, without any other meaning than the functional quotidian action? To say 'walk' should mean that a walk is all it is, one step after another. Walking in dance appears as a pedestrian warning against aesthetic excess. A quest for de-institutionalizing our gaze and emancipating it from the norms of technical virtuosity is manifest here. Bringing all kinds of everyday bodies to attention—whether old, young, fat, skinny, slouched



and slumped, elegant, course, delicate, pregnant...—walking here exposed all idiosyncrasies and singularities of an *ad hoc* crowd of non-professional performers. A norm of correctness dissolved in multiplicity.

As walking is the most common of all pedestrian movement, we fail to see it as gesture, a gesture of another historicity older than the rupture of dance with the everyday movement in the 1960s. An enthusiastic German walker of the early nineteenth century wrote: “I consider walking to be the most noble and independent thing about a man and believe that things would work better if people walked more” (quoted in Hewitt 2005: 18). Walking as an activity is discussed and rehearsed in Germany from 1780 onwards, as an attempt by a rising middle class to develop its own lifestyle. All the *topoi* of romanticism and its anarcho-individualist quest for freedom run through this gesture: walking to escape from corrupt society, to return to nature, to commune with the people.

When Paxton’s performance of *Satisfyin Lover* was shut down at New York University in 1970 due to the nudity of forty-two red-haired performers, he reverted to a performance of what came to be known as *Intravenous Lecture*. In lecture form, he retold his experiences with sponsors and censorship—instances of economic and political authority—while a doctor walked onstage and inserted a syringe with clear saline water into his arm. Reportedly, Paxton ignored this action, carrying on with his talk (Banes 1987). The superimposition of his talk and the injection produced an argument: censorship is violent and more violent than the exposure of naked bodies, or the medical assault. Protest against censorship is usually regarded as a liberal defense of fundamental rights that a state should guarantee. The anarchist bent of Paxton’s actions lies in what he seeks to affirm: the singularity of individuals, their nature exposed in their nakedness, and when the authorities prohibit his action, his reaction is to protest against censorship.

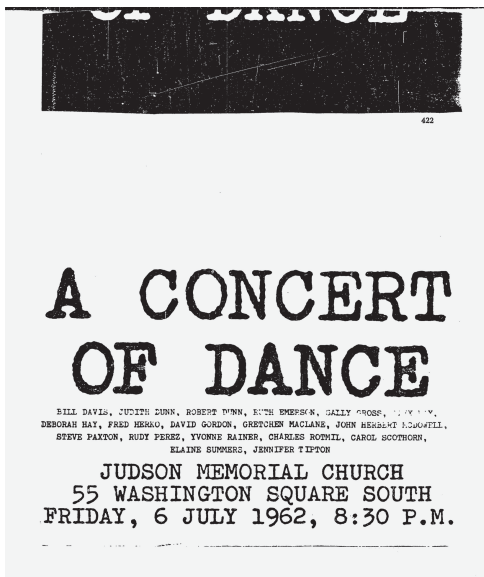
Prior to 1970, Paxton began to include materials with direct political reference into his work. *Section of a New Unfinished Work* (1965), for example, used a part of the Army-



McCarthy hearings as its soundtrack. The hearings, which were broadcast in public media in 1954, mark the beginning of the downfall of the notorious senator Joseph McCarthy, who was eventually “censured” for his witch-hunts of communists and gays. To incorporate a political document was to acknowledge its equal importance with ordinary objects and actions that make up everyday life. Much later, in 1985, Paxton dances *Improvisation to CBC radio news and interviews*. This way of making an argument by juxtaposing disparate actions is also exemplified by yet another lecture-demonstration, entitled *Beautiful Lecture* (1968). Here, two films are screened simultaneously—a performance of Bolshoi’s *Swan Lake* and a porn film—that provide a backdrop for Paxton to dance and mouth a pre-recorded lecture on sex and ballet. Critics such as Jill Johnston (1998: 204) and Sally Banes (1987: 63) read it as an exploration of an energy common to sex and ballet, or something that will be discussed later as ballet’s phallocentrism (Foster 1996). Among other things, Paxton contended that ballet could generate the “ecstasy of stretching such as experienced during certain kinds of orgasms”. But more importantly, his conclusion should leave us to ponder: “Why are we in the West so hung up on orgasm?” (Banes, 1987: 63)

Paxton’s question can be addressed with a series of comments in which Paxton expressed his anarchist contempt for ballet’s discipline as “the second oldest professional physical tradition”. What is common to his sundry observations about ballet, the army, politicians and sex, is a contempt for laws, authorities, institutional power and customs, which he regards as obscene. Bound up with its appeal as a backdrop of sexual fantasy, ballet’s power, in particular, is structured in disciplinary hierarchy, authorial dictatorship and star system, something that even Cunningham’s company wasn’t spared from. Indeed, one of the reasons why Paxton stopped dancing for Cunningham and Cage, despite their chance operations, was the fact that he saw their work as “ballet format with a different twist”. In an argument around the relationship between dance and war, Paxton wrote to me:

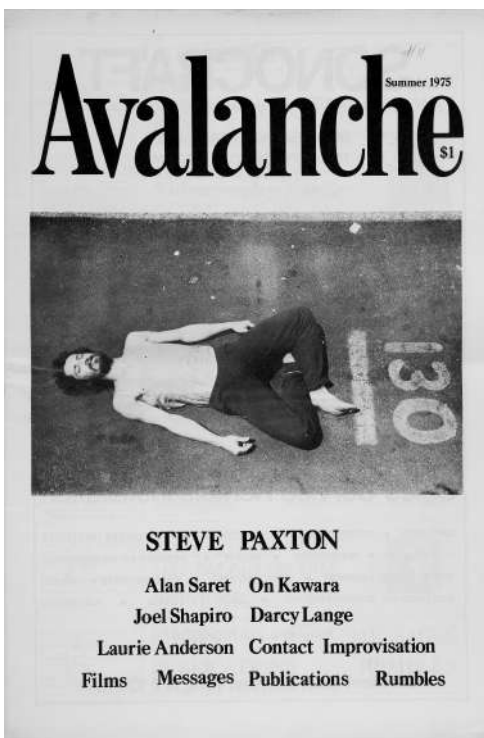




Flyer for *A Concert of Dance* [#1], performed at the Judson Memorial Church, New York City, July 6, 1962.

Designed by Steve Paxton to publicize the first concert of the Judson Dance Theatre, the flyer lists all contributors to the evening in alphabetical order—a discrete way of refusing the usual hierarchy between choreographers, dancers, light, set or costume designers.





*Avalanche Magazine, #11, Summer 1975.*

Special issue dedicated to Steve Paxton, including an interview with Liza Béar, built around a koan Paxton posed to himself in the 1960s: “Like the famous tree which was unsure whether it would be making noise should it fall to the ground in a forest without people, there is a way of looking at things which renders them performance.”

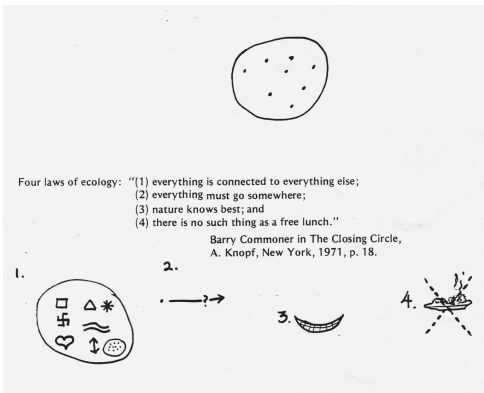




Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin Lover* (1967) by Maud Le Pladec at the Musée de la danse, Rennes, 2010.

For the inauguration of Boris Charmatz's "dancing museum", French choreographer Maud Le Pladec reenacted *Satisfyin Lover* with 8 naked women wearing red haired wigs (Myriam Vinagre, Mirabelle Le Boulicault, Marion Boutinaud, Fabrice Bouvais, Mélanie Messenger, Sandrine Dufeu, Hsinwen Liang and Carole Contant). The reenactment honored Steve Paxton's attempt in 1969 to perform the piece with 42 naked people with red hair at New York University. The piece was censored and replaced by *Intravenous Lecture*, where Paxton was injected a saline solution in real-time on stage while improvising a lecture on censorship and the arts.





Drawings by Steve Paxton illustrating biologist and socialist thinker Barry Commoner's four laws of ecology. Reproduced from *Contact Newsletter*, vol. 2(1), Fall 1976.



*I think you might be interested in noting the position of Lincoln Kirstein, of the NYC Ballet, who took pride in the militaristic structure of his school of dance and the company, and Ballet in general. Also the militaristic structure of many sports in their formal aims and training methods and overt attitude to the opponents; to the methods of educating students in the particular narratives of their nation, especially regarding the use of the desk and the schoolroom; the obvious suppression of their physicality and interaction with the natural environment in the effort to 'civilize' them, to make them into future workers in the industries of the society. (Paxton 2013)*

A broad sweep of anarchist thinking can be found here: not only through Paxton's equation of militarism with any dance technique and physical discipline that involve competition and combat, but also in his opposition to the civilizing process that suppresses children's physicality.

In *Beautiful Lecture* (1968), and its version performed after the pornography was censored, an argument is formally posed. Asked to replace the blue movie with another film, Paxton chose a documentary on Biafra, a state formed by secession of an Eastern region of Nigeria which resulted in the Nigerian Civil War. Part of the daily news cycle, the political document on Biafra, posited against *Swan Lake* and Paxton's lecture about sex and ballet, raised the topic of war, a thought that he would frequently revisit. In international machinations around Biafra's recognition of the state, politics is obscene. Something is put *in front of* a scene [ob-scene], something offensive, inauspicious and filthy, something associated with coercive and false imposition of authority; in a word, politics. The expression of the argument that politics is obscene culminated in the 1973 action, titled *Air*. The two films from *Beautiful Lecture* alternated with a live broadcast speech by Richard Nixon, in which the President denied his involvement in the Watergate scandal, stating there is "no whitewash at the White House". Nixon delivered an obscene lie. Although



this was subsequently established, it was something that Paxton and many others could by now expect, which is why the audience laughed at Nixon's pleading remarks of innocence.

The last work I would like to include here is a poignant and effective specimen of direct action engaged with the most traumatic episode of the US military history, the Vietnam War. In 1971, members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War came forward in a public investigation, referred to as "Winter Soldier", with testimonies of the atrocious crimes against Vietnamese civilians they had either committed or witnessed. The resulting documentary *Winter Soldier* (1972) was largely ignored by the mainstream media. Paxton volunteered to help the VVAW organization in New York by doing various kinds of practical chores for them, when he realized that he could extend his support to a performed action. In a performance entitled *Collaboration with Winter Soldier*, the eponymous film is hosted within the literal frame of two dancers suspended upside-down during the film screening. Paxton's minimal addition here turned the film projection into a live event by framing the image with a physically charged action. Hanging two bodies for the whole duration of the film was a radical way of drawing public attention to what he considered deserved more attention than the half-empty cinema in New York. Once again, the way to act directly was physical, by producing an extreme physical posture that points to a world in disarray.

#### CAN THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCE DE-INSTITUTIONALIZE DANCE?

Dance scholars and dance-makers have both registered Paxton's reluctance to be credited with the sole authorship of Contact Improvisation. This poses him equivocally with respect to the authority of foundation: not a leader, but one of the initiators of a longer process of emergence of what he called a "working model". The ambiguity of his position is reflected in his own words:

*I began looking for ways to initiate a dance and cause  
movement to arise among people I was interested in*



*seeing move (in other words, I was making choices all along), but without me being a figure whom they copied or who controlled them verbally or through suggestion.* (quoted in Banes 1987: 54)

Rebuffing the trademark bearing his name, unlike many bodily systems and techniques since the late 1970s (cf. Klein technique, Skinner Releasing technique, etc.), was twice anarchical. Paxton relinquished the role of governing a form and a technique as its founding-father, dance-maker or teacher, as well as the ownership of what he preferred to ‘observe:’ the growth of a collective process. Not having a standard for the judgment of a technique was “a relief from years of willful technical application” (Paxton 1981). Yet this move didn’t do away with authority altogether, it just transferred it from a person to an “it”, a movement practice in a duet form that could only be learnt through experience and research, in the course of two years at least or the oft-cited 2000 hours of “deepening, widening, furthering” (Paxton 1992).

Referring to Contact Improvisation as a “working model” has been Paxton’s way of securing a minimal definition about its emergence and development through the authority of experience. It was a process of negotiating gravity through dancing with a “generic person with positive elements” he had observed “in many students, dancers, martial artists, and children”, “a simple imaginary person with no physical, sensorial, or social inhibitions” (Paxton 1993).

When I suggested that the genealogy of Contact Improvisation must entail a historical relationship to war, and particularly, to the Vietnam War, which was in demise in the period that Contact Improvisation established its form, Paxton was generous in considering the specific roots of Aikido and athletics in shaping *Magnesium*, the 1972 performance considered as foundational for Contact Improvisation. He developed it with a class of young men at Oberlin College, not dancers, but athletes among them. In the first ten minutes, they were “like wolf puppies roughly colliding in the air and falling on a wrestling mat” (quoted in Cvejić and Laberenz 2013).



Recognizing the contingency of the event, Paxton said: “If it had been a class of women, then it would have been different”—the robust quality would not have been that prominent. Was there any deliberate or latent connection drawn between the roughness of Contact Improvisation as an art-sport in the 1970s and post-war political attitudes and moods? Comparing the first recordings from the early 1970s with the later styles of Contact Improvisation, since the 1990s onwards, stark differences arise, a shift from an inwardly focused, uncontrolled and relentless contact to a more fluid, smooth and controlled form, imbued with virtuoso brilliance or soft touchiness of contact. This change wasn’t part of Paxton’s consideration. Rather than shying away from aggression, which Contact Improvisation has been at times accused of, Paxton explained his stance in a Buddhist koan-like manner:

*If you find yourself in Contact suddenly pushing and fighting as a joke, then there is aggression in it. I had someone who said, don’t be aggressive, only be loving, but I didn’t want to do that. We couldn’t find that form unless we got rid of social uneasiness. So what do I do instead of saying don’t be aggressive, I try to say isn’t momentum interesting? (Paxton 1989)*

Paxton’s evasion into physicality is a cue for discussing the political import of Contact Improvisation’s relation to war and fighting (Cvejić 2013).<sup>3</sup> What attracted him to Aikido was the movement alone that he found “beautiful”, and only later did he realize that his interest sprang from Aikido’s counter-technique of fighting:

*It was a profound shift from dancing to go into Aikido movement and suddenly not have art be the reason you were moving the way you were, but you were moving the way you were for survival... You were responding with harmony to the violent—unbelievable!*

3 The central aesthetic notion and gesture of CI is falling. I have written extensively about it in “Dance War” 2013, as well as in “Aesthetic Obfuscations of Conflict in White Western Dance” Keynote Speech at the Dance Studies Association Annual Conference, Malta, 2018.



The myth about the birth of Aikido is fabricated through the revelations of its founder and guru, Morihei Ueshiba. The third spiritual awakening came to Ueshiba during his service in World War Two, when he had the following vision:

*The Way of the Warrior has been misunderstood. It is not a means to kill and destroy others. Those who seek to compete and better one another are making a terrible mistake. To smash, injure, or destroy is the worst thing a human being can do. The real Way of a Warrior is to prevent such slaughter—it is the Art of Peace, the power of love.* (quoted in Hyodo 2010: 81)

Apart from the utopian function of ushering another way of fighting, one that dissolves bipolar conflict by protecting the attacker from injury, Aikido for Paxton means engaging in the struggle, which, he contends, one can't be afraid to do. The aim of studying this movement is to liberate one from potentially falling victim to an attack. If you don't take a "self-inflicted position relative to aggression," or, in a word, if you don't "wimp out" in a fight, you are not an easy target: "it's much more complex for people to attack you because you're not presenting yourself as a victim" (quoted in Cvejić and Laberenz 2013). This prompted me to ask, perhaps tendentiously, if contactors could be regarded as a special kind of warrior, equipped with a technique for self-preservation of themselves and the others? The answer was an adamant denial:

*Even though I was training the dancers with martial arts and with challenges to their perceptions and their orientation and their actual strength, the point of it was that they aren't warriors. The point of it is that whatever they're doing, because it's an improvisation and because it's one which is defined in almost the most general terms of Newtonian physics, there isn't a person described in the proposal. What's absent is psychology, emotions, intellect—lots of the stuff that we know we are and have.* (Paxton 2013)

Paxton's definition of subjectivity engaged in Contact Improvisation is thoroughly negative, defying any meaning



or content in the categories which are necessary for constituting any kind of identity.

A part of Contact Improvisation training that Paxton has been doing since the 1970s is also his *Small Dance*, presented as the last five minutes in *Magnesium* where the performers just stand still. Paxton explains it as a method of “detraining”: “getting rid of the masks that we have, the social and formal masks, until the physical events occur as they will”. Detraining means to peel off the social, historical, stylistic, formalist skin-layers of the body so as to reach “masses, bones, nerves and sensations”:

*I stress that the dancers are people not in the social sense but in the animal sense in this kind of dancing, that they should not smile, should not make eye contact, should not talk, that they should just be there as animals, as bundles of nerves, as masses and bones [...] touching the other bundle and letting that be the work. (Paxton 2004)*

When Paxton reduces the authority of Contact Improvisation to physical experience alone—i.e. the physical reality of contact conditioned by gravity—, he holds to a naturalistic view on dance practice. And when he describes it, he appeals to a law of nature, rather than a positive, conventional law.

To expand this argument requires a further reflection on the relationship between rights, laws and universality. A positive law is human-made and posited by the will who made it, while natural law or natural right provides a discourse to determine which laws are in themselves right and just.<sup>4</sup> Natural rights are objective and universal, which in early modern philosophy were understood to be conferred by God, nature or reason. Legislation is historical and conventional. For a law of nature here to act as a natural law or right—that is, a ground for justice—we must consider whether succumbing to gravity as a universally binding pattern in nature is inherently good and just. If we turn gravity into something like a natural right, we claim the political

<sup>4</sup> Human rights would account for providing a natural law as a discourse and ground upon which all laws can be judged as just or unjust independently of the question whether they are legal or illegal within a given juridical framework.



and moral good of the acceptance that humans are bound and finite by gravity. We would then have to infer that there is more justice in a law of nature than in a positive, conventional law that posits a contract. Therefore, we ask: when two people improvise together, is the nature of their encounter contractual or a matter of contact? Can a relation between two or more people be based only on “natural laws” (gravity, friction, support...), without reference to “positive laws” (social conventions, gender performances, political aims...)?

Shifting to the matter of dance, we would also have to ask then: are the styles of dancing posited by choreographers to be assessed on a naturalist basis, i.e. how the bodies they in-form relate to gravity? Or should we look at them through the lens of positive and arbitrary laws given by the historical norms of a given society?<sup>5</sup> In a 2013 argument about whether the purported power of physicality in Contact Improvisation is political, Paxton told me that people who train in Contact Improvisation have a healthier spine than those who don’t practice it, which renders it as a source of natural right, given the health of the body as an inalienable right.

Despite the minimum of rules underlying Contact Improvisation as a form, it isn’t legislated like any other dance style or technique in the name of specific preferences of (or rights for) an individual or group. This is how we should understand Paxton’s long-standing opposition to any political or ideological capture that Contact Improvisation could lend itself to. In an email correspondence, Paxton wrote to me:

*How does Contact Improvisation not address sexism, racism, nationalism, ableism, militarism, aestheticism, popular Darwinism (issues of daily politics), etc.? By providing an alternative proposition in which they are irrelevant. How does one arrive at*

<sup>5</sup> It is well-known that the American pioneers of modern dance, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, sought to discredit ballet on a naturalist ground, as its discipline distorted human body. Similarly, the pedestrian movement during Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s was hailed as a revelation of “democracy’s body”, to use the words of Sally Banes. Nowadays, the somatic practices provide the discourse of justice for assessing both dance styles and everyday use of the body.



*this position? By being aware of the personal, social and national politics and asking, 'what is possible besides divisiveness?' Kropotkin. Daniel N. Stern. Jesus. Buddha. Noting that as social beings we have other social potential than conflict. (Paxton 2013)*

Inherent pacifism emanates from marrying natural law with anarcho-liberal ideology. Mind his statement from 1989:

*If, in effect, the whole of humanity is deemed present in each man, then each man should be free and all men are equal. By contrast, as soon as a collective end is adopted by several men, their liberty is limited and their equality is brought into question. (Paxton 1989)*

Hence, an aversion to particular political interests that Contact Improvisation could promulgate. Gravity acts as a measure of humans on earth. Because it focuses on contact between two (and sometimes more) bodies supporting and leaning on each other—that third thing that the two bodies are taking care of—Contact Improvisation allows for a multiplicity of singular expressions in which the potential of humanity is actualized within each one without the hubris of subjectivity.

Since its beginnings, Contact Improvisation was intended to become a grassroots social movement. Many pages of *Contact Quarterly*—a forum for a discussion rather than a newsletter—have been teeming with dissenting voices. Questions, doubts and disagreements frequently arose among the contactors who tried to align Contact Improvisation with a political agenda. For some Contact Improvisation was inherently political because of the urgency of decision-making, immediacy of action, and cooperation in survival. Or because it was vitalist in that it provided self-exploration, “nurturing,” “sharing,” “celebrating,” and life-enhancement, in line with New Age ideals of human potential (Horwitz 1987). Other contactors were worried that it served the need of the white upper-class college educated young people to “make themselves whole” (Pritchard 1980). In a jumble of self-interrogations, Paxton’s reaction remains lucidly anarchist and spiritually aloof: “Contact Improvisation cannot do anything. It is something to be done” (Paxton 1989).



Has Contact Improvisation de-institutionalized dance the way that an anarchist might hope for? The answer is affirmative, but only to a certain degree. As with all groundbreaking alternatives to aesthetic forms of governance, this one too has branched out into various factions over time: an indispensable component of contemporary dance training, a social recreational activity, or a springboard for further experimental exploration.

I picture Paxton standing now, in his studio at Mad Brook Farm, together with his long-standing partner Lisa Nelson.

Having provided a refuge for the life of a community, autonomous and isolated from the rest of the country and its cities, Mad Brook Farm in Northern Vermont could be considered as a milieu—but also an agent and an element—of the collective individuation that gave rise to Contact Improvisation and other dance practices that Paxton (and Nelson) engaged since 1970s.

For now, in conclusion of this brief piece, I would like to describe it as the place which nurtures Paxton's daily physical exploration. Its domain is no longer (only) art, but an examination of physical awareness, of sensations that shape a fluid being of consciousness. The body is the place in which "it" finally resides, an ontological and ethical quest for living with gravity as a source of natural right.

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# chapter 3

## A STUDY IN TOUCH

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"The dancer's weight is only theirs to give;  
not to possess."



# The tactile in-betweens of Contact Improvisation

*Alice Godfroy*





January 1972. Bodies, off-kilter, leap into the air, hurl themselves at each other, grasp, fall, rise, fall. This strange activity lasts fifteen minutes. Eleven young men wearing sweatpants explore the laws of gravity, on gym mats. We are at Oberlin College. The piece is entitled *Magnesium*. An elemental metal capable of producing a brief, brilliant glow. Clashing of bodies.

June 1972. Collisions, frictions, clashes, rolls. The exploration continues, still on mats, still guided by Steve Paxton. Seventeen dancers, women and men, settle into New York City's John Weber Gallery. The piece is called *Contact Improvisations* and lasts five days, offering itself as a practice to be witnessed. Here one sees clashing give way to improvisation duets, simple falling give way to playful weight exchanges. Tactile dyads.

For the past fifty years, in studios around the world, bodies have been rolling on each other. Entwining, lifting, supporting each other, losing their definite sense of top and bottom. Dancers arrive—often as strangers to each other—to the address of the nearest *jam*—a space for experimentation in which no one leads and everyone dances. These ‘contacters’ sometimes know the name of Steve Paxton, who initiated this great wave and phrased questions that continue to carry them: How to dialogue through touch alone? How to dance without losing contact with another? Contact Improvisation (CI) is the name of the practice, borne of these early 1972 experiments aiming to “[base] movement exploration upon intimate communication (rather than aesthetic dictates).”

*A friend described a newly discovered personal symbol. [...] And what, she asked, was my self-symbol? I hadn't one but thought awhile and felt a sense of vibration. A sine wave. Waves brought an image of the ocean and that was almost it... The completion came when I saw the ocean as two fluid bodies in interface—a water ocean and an air ocean both going ~... So described this to her as ~ with time changing ←, usually going fast. (Paxton 1976b)*



These two waves, echoing and signing Steve Paxton's experience, create an empty in-between space that both distances and brings into relationship 'two fluid bodies'. And offers a poetic key, imbued with myriad enigmas surrounding what might go two by two: wanting to touch, to become one, skin to skin, to which Contact Improvisation offers an audacious form.

## STUDY

The study begins with suspending assumptions. It becomes radical when we accept calling into question the ground of our experience and its self-evident qualities: most notably, the behavior of our body in action. Steve Paxton is the inexhaustible learner who declared "dance—one laboratory for exploring the human body" (Paxton 1972), this falsely self-evident body, *medium princeps* of all artistic endeavors.

In order to study itself, Steve Paxton's body seizes one tool: attention. Applied as an "active instrument [...], being used as a lens to focus on certain perceptions" (Paxton 1977), this attentional tool is wielded in order to pinpoint that which usually escapes us: the birth of gesture, the detail of sensations. On the one hand, "dancers must hack their basic movement programs in order to adapt to new movements." (Paxton 2018). On the other, they strengthen a sensitive capacity, developing nuance indicators, pegging markers in order to create differentiation within the hazy mass of what is sensed, allowing for "developing discrimination in sensing the body" (Paxton 2018). Indeed, this is the only way to become an experimental body, such as others had already established in the studios of the choreographic avant-garde. Exploring one's own self. Paxton agrees, adding: with another.

This is his genius. The revolutionary gesture with which Paxton opens a whole field of research, generating findings that transform thousands of bodies worldwide. The students and colleagues who accompany him in his early explorations soon become researchers themselves, helping to promote the practice. The study is as inherently built for duets as it is for collective practice. For example, Nancy Stark Smith, who founded *Contact Quarterly*, Lisa Nelson and Steve Christiansen, who film and document the



practice, Danny Lepkoff, Nita Little and countless others, who teach and perform it worldwide. This teamwork multiplies and plants seeds all over the world, all thanks to this slight shift, this step from *one to two*, renewing our perspective on the ruins of our individual containers, displacing the study's center of gravity to our trans-individual mysteries. Fundamentally, it suggests that we investigate human movement in the very place it has always spoken: the in-between.

Even further, to inquire into the relational space that a body *is* from the smallest in-between possible, the finest infra-line, tenuous as the horizon joining and disjoining ocean and sky: the place of contact between two surfaces of skin touching. To study the body by being a body, yes, but as a detour: through another body.

### THE KEY TO CONTACT

From its inception, the laboratory of Contact Improvisation bore fruit from the elegance, the very simplicity of its experimental proposition: two bodies (reduced to their quality as masses) come into contact (through a touch stripped of its usual cultural attributes) and let themselves be moved with no preconceived movements (they improvise). Their interactions are governed by a single rule consisting of—and this is easier said than done—staying in contact, even as everything would make them lose it: speed of movement, play of weight transfers, disorientation of bodies having lost their usual gravitational coordinates. Apart from this rule, Steve Paxton and his team establish only contours, deciding that the sole inductions would come from the frame of experimentation itself, from this playground devoid of expectations, with no prescribed movement, no imposed figures, no complicity with a pre-established aesthetic and care taken to hold back from saying what should be done. Such an empty frame, so full of potential, obliges us towards a research practice, an endless learning: we are cornered, must learn how to learn. How to move?

The minimalism of this experimental protocol offers a symmetrical counterpart to the complexity of the questions it raises. However, in the studio-laboratory, bodies may seem to be going all over the place, but they are actually not just moving any which way. The proposition of CI is simple, spare and



somewhat naked, and yet it is animated by a core inquiry into the possibility of new experiences for bodies in movement, whereby “the student moves from the motivations of reflex and intuition” (Paxton 1981). This is where touch enters the scene powerfully, the key to the practice, as a way to answer its fundamental question. How to allow movement to emerge from intuition and reflex?

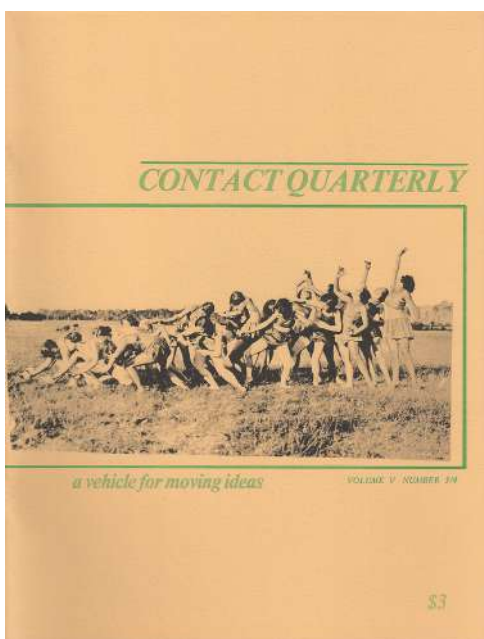
Contacters turn the key, open the door to a new way of improvising and, very quickly, enter a double-sided game in which one cannot study touch without, in turn, being studied by it. The tactile revolution is twofold: contact makes (a new kind of) dance possible, the dance in return transforms (known forms of) contact. Here is the question I would like to raise in this chapter, referring to Steve Paxton’s written work, to the phenomenological analysis of Contact Improvisation and our experience of the practice: what has CI done to touch?

#### THE INFANCY OF TOUCH

Understanding our surroundings with our hands, grasping a branch or an arm, hanging from it, being carried, being enveloped in other people’s skin, communicating through pressure, compression, variations in tone, caresses... these ways of meeting the world through touch continue to mean something to us, even if vaguely. Paxton: “I think that, when I was making it, the first thing I remembered was children playing with adults, and how adults treat the bodies of children: swinging them around, or cuddling them; and the children chasing the adults, trying to get some interaction.” (Paxton 2015) Touch is here, well-hidden in the folds of an archaic memory, planted in the heart of our early childhood, the master communicator among other senses, all of which rely on it.

What happened? A pulling-back, due to our human process of individuation completing itself as we enter into adulthood. Also: a near disappearing, within our Western societies where touch has been relegated to intimate spheres—a local, sporadic use, poorly stretched between the objectifying intimacy of the medical office to the more subjectifying lovers’ bedroom. It is a fact: living as post-modern subjects, we have lost the use of physical contact to understand each other.





Cover of *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 5(3), Spring/Summer 1980.

The magazine, founded by Nancy Stark Smith in 1975 as a newsletter for Contact Improvisation practitioners, soon evolved into an international journal of dance, improvisation, performance, and contemporary movement arts, still active today.





Original invitation postcard to the first performances of *Contact Improvisations* at the John Weber Gallery in New York, June 1972. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.

Parachute Jump, an amusement park attraction in Brooklyn, NY, is used to portray the physical explorations of contacters, creating a bridge to the passion of children—and some adults that go with them—for experimenting with disorientation.



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PARACHUTE JUMP, Steeplechase Park,  
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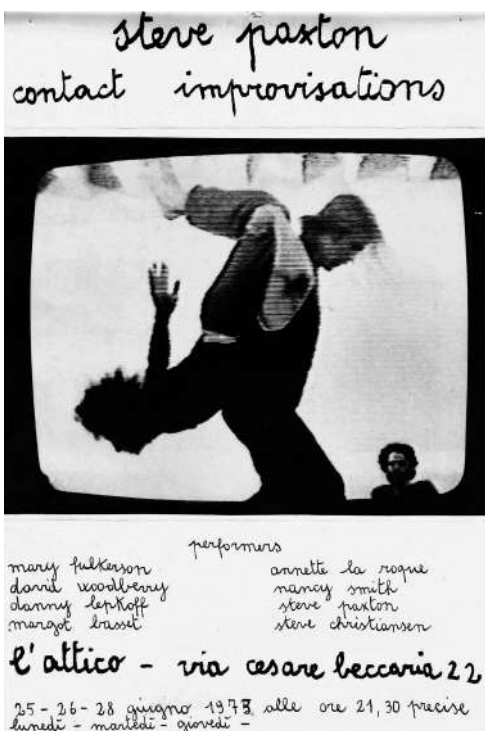
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Poster of the 1973 European premiere of *Contact Improvisations* at Fabio Sargentini's Galleria L'Attico in Rome. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.





Poster of the 1983 celebration of *Contact Improvisation's 11th Anniversary* at Danspace (St Mark's Church) in New York City. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.





Contact sheet of a ReUnion performance of Contact Improvisation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976. Photos by Uldis Ohaks. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.



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**IMPROVISATION IN S.F.**  
**AND BERKELEY FEB.**  
**14-19**

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
SL	FM	12:00-3:00 Cider for the lover & Co. 320 E. Van Ness San Francisco	FM	SS	am pm
CP	CP		CP SL 6:30-9:30		

\$4 each      \$5 per day      \$15 for 5  
SL Skylight Studio 2547 8th St. Berkeley  
CP Cat's Paw Palace 2547a 8th St. Berkeley  
JL Jenny Lind Hall 2267 Telegraph Oakland  
FM Fillmore Studio 3142 Fillmore S.F.  
SS Shooting Star Studio 578 Folsom S.F.  
morning classes 9:30-12  
afternoon classes 1-4  
information 843-2199 eves

Photo: Ted Pushinsky



Poster of a series of classes of Contact Improvisation held by the ReUnion collective in San Francisco and Berkeley, California, in 1976 (with a photo by Ted Pushinsky). Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith and Kathy Katz.





*Spring/Summer 80*



CI does not attempt to counter this reduction by somehow reminding us of the body we've inescapably lost. No one can return to their infant-body. We can, however, still observe the degree of the loss. And so, contacters are not so much trying to awaken their infant touch as they are exploring anew the childhood of all touch: touch made transparent, cleared of the constraints that confined it to narrow, normative use. Not only scoured of social and cultural codifications, but also relieved of intentional habits, and, in line with the etymology of infant, *infans*, a touch that 'does not yet speak', fully alive within the silent adventure of the world's physicality. This effort in depotentializing, in clearing touch to its most simple apparatus, transforms it and brings it into its most potent experimental potential. Here, before individuation, beneath language, its powerful qualities come to the surface, opening new modes of relating—to an other, to space, to one's self.

#### DOUBLE-SIDED TACTILITY

One specific quality of touch, so banal that we barely notice it unless we exert some effort of concentration, is its reflexive structure, that is: the fact that its execution holds a double dynamic between an 'active' gesture (I am touching) and a simultaneous 'passive' gesture (I am touched). I cannot touch without being touched in return. This twin condition suffers from what Hubert Godard has called a "neurosis of the senses" (Godard 2005) by which our perception no longer recognizes that we are touched when we touch, so guided are we by our need to grasp reality, to exercise our objectifying habits. The sensory attunement, or tuning, which we accomplish as we practice CI is an act of resistance against this neurotic perception. We aim to rebalance our senses, notably by revivifying the subjectifying pole of any contact. The experience is surprising. For as soon as I emphasize the gesture of being touched—of being affected by what I touch—I begin to listen. My palpation necessarily slows down, questions, becomes vulnerable, open.

*Dancing in physical contact with a partner is like putting your ear to a wall and having a conversation with someone on the other side of it. Like the sounds in the next room, your movements and your partner's are*



*amplified by the contact, and very little goes unregistered, even if unconsciously. In Contact, skin to skin, weight to weight, you're moved by your partner's movements and in this way able to feel their reflexes, the rush and pause of their time, first hand. (Stark Smith, 1986)*

Partners in contact irresistibly begin to move, without one person guiding the other. Yet they do nothing more than listen through their skin. Listen to what? There needs to be some play for a door to swing on its hinges; here it is no longer about knowing whether or not I am touching. The play is happening inside the touch itself. There, I perceive varying degrees, nuances, a growing capacity for modulation. A whole spectrum appears when I journey from the 'active' shore (oriented towards you) to the 'passive' shore (affected by you). I tweak this cursor, playing with varying distance in our relationship. Creating differentials, which invite us to fall into movement.

Contacters work to refine the degrees of the tactile scale. To be tactful, truly, and capable of adapting to the movements of an other they neither know nor are able to predict. Furthermore, they seek to perceive and expand this alterity, this part of otherness alive in each touch, offering its unique perspective. Deepening the in-between space within the relationship, from which inappropriable, mutual movement can arise. This indicates, perhaps counter-intuitively, that touch would be the sense of intimate distances, and that Contact Improvisation be a Distance Improvisation, flourishing only as it carves space within the tangency of bodies.

#### SPHERICAL SPACE

*The martial arts are the arts of war. They have each been forged in the heat of life or death, and have matured through a lineage of survivors. Aikido is of particular interest due to breadth of vision of the situation of war. It does not stress the vs. but the non-polar 'we'. The intense realization which death brings to activity has graced the martial arts including Aikido with efficiency. This elegance of means is based on profound (because essential) informa-*



*tion of body mechanics, training procedures, and physical possibilities. Here is information embodied in a seamless flow. The concentration which cannot bend. The accommodating winning maneuver. Contact Improvisation is not a martial art. It is perhaps an art sport if it is defined by the context in which it currently operates. The means of teaching are not those of life or death confrontation but life to life confrontation. (Paxton 1976a)*

The influence of Aikido infused by Paxton into the nascent form of Contact Improvisation stems from similar necessity in terms of spatial perception. In order to survive in a potentially dangerous space, bodies must develop a vigilance branching out in all directions. One never knows when the next attack—or, in dance, the next contact—might come from. Contacters learn to be ready, to receive and read their partner's movement with their head, shoulders, belly, back, thighs or the soles of their feet. Steve Paxton shares:

*In Contact Improvisation, I find I am hanging by my skin. And relying on its information to protect me, to warn me, to feed back to me the data to which I am responding. (Paxton 1982)*

Unlike an eye, which flips the world around through its pupil's tiny hole and can only meet the world facing forward, our skin is a special organ, spread around us, made semi-permeable by an infinite amount of pores equipped with sensory captors able to offer us the world with no preferred orientation. Skin opens up another kind of spatiality, never separating us from the world but rather including us in it, as it envelops us.

In order to access the most of its multidirectional potential, it must become equally sensitive all around and not only on the tactile mapping that has made the soles of our feet, our lips, our tongue and, above all, the palms of our hands so hypersensitive with their palpatory capacities. Contacters redistribute the situation, transferring the incredible tact of a hand to the whole surface of their skin, becoming a hand-body capable of touching space with its tiniest folds. Making their bodies equi-touching, establishing a spherical space open to 360 degrees.



In return, this spherical space seems to envelop all partners within a single skin. By overturning visible space and its common structuring of living forms into areas that are more or less welcoming, more or less hostile according to a desired goal, duets enter this non-polarized tactile space, round and inclusive, leading them to feel as though they shared a single body. That they feel *with* another's body, the way a blind person feels with their cane, that they extend into the other, expanding their kinesphere in doing so. This is the other teaching that Paxton maintained from Aikido: being constantly confronted to danger leads to a higher degree of presence: efficient, stripped of excess, unaffected. And even more so, it leads to moving beyond fear and into what one can rightly call love. The adversary becomes a partner, an ally in movement with whom to work rather than fight, and one absorbs the other the way a toreador absorbs his bull. An interesting lesson in mutual anthropophagy, where 'I' and 'you' conjugate none other than 'we'.

*What is interesting to me, about [...] Contact Improvisation relative to social structures, whatever they may be called, is that it's a game in which your opponent is yourself and it takes two people to win. As opposed to your opponent being the other and one person wins. (Rainer and Paxton 1997)*

#### A COMMON BODY

*CI falls between the social constructs. Haha. It may be a lever which lets us shift the social understanding we receive. It is an activity couched in the terms defined in movements between a parent and infant, i.e. supportive, reflexive, mutual, developmental. In this way, it is fundamentally life-like, at least in the basic moments of emerging life, and maybe we can question why life continues development into individuation, separation, competition, aggression, and so forth into war and atrocity. (Paxton 2015b)*

CI proposes novel types of relational space, doing away with notions of social intersubjectivity to the degree that it exists before its emergence, in the inter-corporeal ruction that precedes it. It shows bodies being expropriated, decentered, delocalizing their



centers of gravity to the periphery of their skin: a transit-place for shared gravity. Bodies full of emptiness and pathways, becoming pure interfaces along the lines of the Chinese calligrapher's 'empty hand' as described by poet Henri Michaux: animated only by the desire to not obstruct what moves through it. Bare bodies giving only that which they do not possess: the weight that binds them to the earth. Masses moving around a common cause in mutual agreement, based on reciprocal trust, not based in ideology but rather on knowledge harvested within the very potential of tact.

The ultimate know-how may be this one: by touching what is most physical, most tangible (another body) we may be giving each other the possibility to touch—together—the untouchable within impersonal life, freed of struggle and face-offs. CI will have created an experimental frame in which 'two fluid bodies' work to make their dermic boundaries porous, to the point of potentially dissolving the part of selfhood within us. Robert Ellis Dunn, who helped establish the Judson Dance Theater by opening a class in choreographic composition based on the principles of John Cage, called this phenomenon *the unicorn*. Indeed like this miraculous creature, one never perceives it for more than an instant. Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton refer to it as a *third entity*: a third, neither you nor me, emerges between us, in our dancing, and dances with us.

*There is a feeling of a non-dualism coming up, where it isn't me dancing with Steve, Steve dancing with me, but we are in an environment together, and we both condition that environment. (...) The response to that activity, that third thing, is really important too, it seems. It's not that it's dancing you: it's like an equal. (Stark Smith 1983)*

This union, this peculiar osmosis we experience in moments of grace offered by Contact Improvisation arrives with a phenomenon of our own core melting, as if it were momentarily vaporized, a cloud in the in-between. In those brief instants, dancers are not even "subjects" enough to be in dialogue: they can only espouse the shared shapes of their common body. In doing so, CI renews possibilities regarding what we might call proto-social life, and fiercely criticizes all philosophies of



identity and alterity. Turning the key of touch operates a radical change of plan, from intersubjectivity to intercorporeality, from the parliament of subjects to a conspiracy of bodies.

Contact Improvisation is a dance of communication through touch: a testing-ground for weight, forces and identities. Within this communication, it can for brief flashes open into moments of communion. This is perhaps also what Paxton's digraph, the two-waved symbol, unveils: a promise to suspend adversarial subjectivities. A Tao for dancing. A different way of living.



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interlude

# A STUDY IN IMPROVISATION

81







"The mind is kept empty of preconceptions  
and memories; it is in the present moments  
only, meditating on the potentials..."



# Notably not where you expect

## *Nancy Stark Smith*

*The title of this interlude (composed of two editor's notes from 1987 and 2018 that Nancy Stark Smith contributed to Contact Quarterly, a magazine which she founded in 1975) comes from the speech Nancy Stark Smith delivered at the NY Bessie Awards in 2015, to present Steve with a Lifetime Achievement Award. She pointed out that "Steve very often doesn't finish a train of thought quite where I expect it to land. He is notably NOT where you expect, or might even want, him to be. But this tripping up inevitably causes a new pathway of mind, or body, or both, to appear. And that has made all the difference—in my life, certainly, and in the lives of, I would venture to say, all of us in this room."*



### TAKING NO FOR AN ANSWER

Today is my birthday and I'm sitting in my car, parked, with the engine running, outside our building, watching the shadow of the building rise on a high pile of snow as the sun goes down behind the building. Maybe sitting here facing this blank page is the closest I'll be able to get in writing to the feeling of improvising. Because how can you describe something that isn't there yet? I want to be able to write from inside the movements of an improvisation and tell from there how things look, how they feel, how they're going. But I keep finding myself back here walking the line, on the page, trying to make pens pirouette, words walk and ideas bounce and split open, like dancing can do. I'm impressed and informed by all the efforts evident in this issue of people putting a finger on what isn't there. It's like talking about a hole. [...]

In the early '70s, when I was first getting immersed in the world of practicing and performing dance improvisation, I spent a lot of time watching the Grand Union<sup>1</sup> perform. For hours, I would see material surface on shaky ground, get nourished, worked, referred to, developed, and I'd see it begin to strengthen, come into its own, and become the ground for what would happen next. I saw material be given life or death (which in itself could become the next material), and I learned that there was, in practice, no inherent hierarchy of material. Every move had equal potential to unify, clarify, destroy, or transform what was going on. It was not just the material itself but how and when it was delivered that gave it depth and power.

Where you are when you don't know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else. I call this place the Gap. The more I improvise, the more I'm convinced that it is through the medium of these gaps—this momentary suspension of reference point—that comes the unexpected and much sought after 'original' material.

<sup>1</sup> A Dance Theater improvisation group including Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Barbara (Lloyd) Dilley, Nancy (Green) Lewis, and Douglas Dunn.



It's 'original' because its origin is in the current moment and because it comes from outside our usual frame of reference.

When Katie Duck teaches improvisation, as she has many times as a guest teacher at the Theaterschool in Amsterdam, she often tells people not to use their first impulse, but instead to wait for maybe the second or third before taking action. This ability to wait and not follow the impulse is a lot like learning how to break a habit. Holding the moment open a few seconds longer widens the gap where the old behavior/idea/movement/thought/feeling would have gone. And maybe you have nothing to put in its stead. So you put in nothing.

On January 28th, it was a year since I stopped smoking (and, coincidentally, a year since the space shuttle Challenger exploded). I never stopped before and the change feels enormous. Every time I want a cigarette and don't have one I'm creating a gap. Moments that once were easily and automatically filled, have become uneasily and consciously unfilled. By leaving them unfilled, I'm not only breaking a 'momentum of being', a pattern of behavior, but I'm bringing attention and charge to a moment that would have passed without remark. One of the things that improvising and stopping smoking have in common is that they both require an appetite for learning. Both have the capacity to take you to new ground. Both are about unconscious pulls and conscious choices, about reckoning with habitual perspectives and behaviors.

Being in a gap is like being in a fall before you touch bottom. You're suspended—in time as well as space—and you don't really know how long it'll take to get 'back'. And then, when you *do* finally get back, no one even noticed you were gone.

\*

#### "CAUSING IT ONLY A LITTLE?"

This title phrase comes from the last lines of text in Steve Paxton's narration for the historical Contact Improvisation video *Chute* (1979): "I feel transparent in the action; causing it only a little<sup>2</sup>, and holding no residuals."

2 This phrase was recently [in 2018] revisited in a Contact Improvisation-based performance by Karen Nelson in Seattle, and then by Chris Aiken as the title for a performance of CI in Northampton, MA.



Rarely a workshop goes by that I don't, at some point, intentionally impersonate Steve, usually during a practice of the Small Dance of standing. In a dry, matter-of-fact tone of voice, I/he suggest(s) to the standers:

*"With your left arm, in the direction that it's already hanging, make the smallest stretch that you can feel... Can you feel less?"*

OR

*"Imagine—but don't do it—that you're about to step forward with your right foot."*

Within this atmosphere of calm, patient focusing on the tiny, specific physical phenomena of our pre-dancing body-minds, a world of nuance and wonder is revealed. This experience came to me repeatedly through Steve's pointings during the first decade of Contact Improvisation (CI), when we worked together most closely. For me, it's one of the golden seeds of the work. "Being Steve" has been one of the most efficient ways I, as well as others, have found to transmit this experience of attending to the minutia and magnitude of the physical forces and my body's reflexive and deliberate interplay with them.

Of course, I'll never really get it right—to bring Steve, as he knows himself or as others experience him, into the room. But actually, it's less about Steve and more about this focused, physical/mental state of attention while moving and being moved that's being evoked—noticing the sensation in the diaphragm when the lungs inflate with air; the feeling of flying and disorientation inside the standing "still" body as the reflexes balance me.

Steve's influence on me was sly, so much so that it wasn't until several decades later, when we weren't actively dancing or teaching together anymore, that I realized he had been—and still was—one of my most significant teachers. Maybe that's because the model was less "I tell you" and more "We find out" (Mike Vargas). Steve's way of teaching and influencing was, at least with me, by assuming a co-pilot position. From the very beginning of working together, he insisted on an attitude of "this is not a help-Steve position." In fact, very early on he left me completely alone one day, with no warning, to



teach the large summer festival class (at American University, Washington, DC, 1975). Welcome to... Contact Improvisation?

I joke about the power of Steve's "disappearances" often—in a grateful, delighted, and still mystified way. "Mr. Neutral," he'd call himself. It's not that he didn't care about things, but often, when called on for support, authority, an opinion or answer, he would either deftly "disappear" the question entirely or just not engage with it—certainly not provide any answers.

These disappearances, in combination with my own nature, caused me to: learn how to fall; enjoy having the rug pulled out from under me (especially, but not only, physically); not depend on Steve (or others) for approval or direct support in moving forward with my own interests—whether within a given dance or the form that we were sharing.

"Sharing the dance"<sup>3</sup> never meant owning, deciding, assuming, or determining for anyone else what was true or right about the dance form.

In my conversation with Steve last year—see our interview in *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 43(1)—, we ended up talking a lot about what he referred to as "the politics of mutuality," a significant element of his initial proposition of Contact Improvisation in 1972. This mutuality was, to my recollection, never articulated or agreed upon as such but has influenced the ethos and development of CI for over four decades.

The void created by the absence of Steve's exercise of authority over the developing work of CI—other than to practice, teach, write about, and perform it as he himself found interesting—has been one of the most generative aspects of the form. Its influence on what has transpired over these last 45 years is incalculable, invaluable, and a vast and compelling study in itself.

Certainly Steve expressed his opinions freely (and still does), but he never spoke for the work. Contact Improvisation was quickly and already speaking for itself daily in studios and parks around the world.

Causing it only a little? A little goes a long way.

A deep bow to you, Steve.

3 Title from Cynthia Cohen's classic book on Contact Improvisation.



# chapter 4

## A STUDY IN GRAVITY

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“Even standing,  
you execute a continual fall.”



# Moving-moved

## *Hubert Godard and Romain Bigé*

*This chapter is a result of an interview with Hubert Godard by Romain Bigé that turned into a conversation. It is written as a single voice, mingling the ideas that were exchanged. It is sometimes difficult to disentangle thoughts.*



*The Earth is bigger than you. You might as well  
coordinate with it.*

Nancy Stark Smith

Earthlings, we are earthbound.

Our external form, our movements, our rhythms are shaped by gravity more than by any other force. From the point of view of gravity, we are not so different from large rocks, other large mammals or plants: thrown into the air, a human body will ineluctably follow the same and simple ballistic laws, and describe a parabolic trajectory. There is something heavily reassuring in this permanence: wherever we go on the surface of this planet we are inhabited by a force that will not let us go astray for long.

How does the relationship to the Earth effect our movements? This chapter examines Steve Paxton's interior techniques dedicated to the experience of gravity. Gathering information from neurophysiology and somatic practices, we consider the philosophical implications of this study. We ask: what kind of subjectivity is invented through the study of gravity? What relations does it invite us to construct with our surroundings? In short: what can we, earthlings, learn about ourselves when we are taught ways to interact with the Earth?

#### STANDING: THE TONIC FUNCTION

In the 1960s and 1970s, Steve Paxton developed a practice in stillness—known as the Stand, but also as the Small Dance. A standing meditation, the Small Dance rests on a simple activity of observation: standing, relaxing their bodies into the upright posture, the dancers observe the minute movements that appear when they suspend voluntary action. Erect whilst minimizing any unnecessary tensions, dancers observe the micro-movements of their postural adjusting. The simple practice of standing thus reveals, under the habits of movement, a symphony of reflexes that maintain human beings as upright without the need for conscious intention.



Apparently, the Stand is an invitation to a solipsistic exploration: the eyes are often closed, and the internal focus tracks the invisible events that occur in the body on the micrological level.<sup>1</sup> But really, through this very internal experience, what is discovered is something else than solipsism: constantly bathed in gravity, we discover that we are streaming movements that are not ours; movements through which the Earth moves us (gravity's pull) and movements through which we respond (our anti-gravitational reflexes); "our mass and the Earth's mass attracting each other..." (Paxton 1986). The micro-movements of the Small Dance are thus the signs of a force we are constantly in dialogue with, and yet we keep forgetting (or repressing) in our everyday experience.

We lack the words to describe our sensorial relationship to gravity. Proprioception? An unfortunate word: as if we could perceive our "selves" (*proprio*) without referring them to the exteriority.

And yet, we might be curious: *where* in the body is the sense of gravity? We might even want to name the organs that perceive gravity: the vestibular system, the viscera, the eyes, the feet... But there are no "organs of gravity": there are only perceptual systems, always involving the different parts of our body, in dialogue (Gibson 1966). Ordinarily, the main systems involved in gravitational stability are, on one side, the feet in relation to the *substatrum* (radical gravity) and, on the other, the eyes and the vestibular system inside the inner ear to orient the head (subjective gravity). This multiplicity is essential: we need at least two grounds to be able to move. Moving, indeed, is momentarily abandoning

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Stark Smith recalls taking Steve Paxton's Small Dance "soft class" in 1972 at Oberlin College: "We would come into a beautiful old wooden men's gymnasium, and there would be a chair at the door with a box of Kleenex and a little plate of cut-up fruit. You took a tissue and a piece of fruit and came into the gym. Steve led us in standing still, the small dance, while we kind of fell asleep and woke up, and also did some yoga-like breathing exercises. Then you'd blow your nose and eat the fruit, and after an hour, the sun came up and that was the end of the class. My mind was definitely opening, I had no idea what we were doing, but I was very moved" (Stark Smith 2006).



one's ground—leaving one place to inhabit another—living in nomadic dwellings.<sup>2</sup>

American ecological psychologist James Jerome Gibson, an important influence on Steve Paxton's understanding of the senses (Paxton 1981), spoke of kinesis and haptics, rather than proprioception. By that, he meant that our acquaintance with the environment happens through ways of moving (kinesis) and ways of touching (hapticity) that immediately entangle the subject with the world. In other words, I cannot feel the world without moving in it, and I cannot move in the world without moving it in return. Furthermore, I cannot touch the world without being touched by it, and I cannot touch the world without being changed by it. This is true of our sense of gravity: sensing gravity *is* fine-tuning our movements to it, sometimes riding, sometimes counteracting its pull.

Now *what* do we sense, exactly, when we experience the small oscillations of the Stand? Paxton describes them as a “background movement static—you know—that you blot out with your more interesting activities” (Paxton 1986). What is this ‘background’ and where does it come from? One response could be that they consist in a very ancient (ontogenetically speaking) set of reflex activities that neurophysiologists call the “tonic function” (Wallon 1941). The tonic function is structured in infancy, through the affective-motor relationship that binds the infant with their primary-caretakers: before speech, before even the possibility of locomotion, there are variations of muscle tones that the infant uses to communicate their state to their parents, in what Julian de

2 When we perceive ourselves in danger, when our ground is threatened, we momentarily lose this ability to inhabit nomadic dwellings: we narrow down our panoramic view, which in turn inhibits the vestibular system, and thus causes us to lose the internal reference to gravity for the head. The ultimate consequence of this chain of events is that, in danger, we start to depend mainly on the verticals perceived with the eyes in the environment to know where our head is: this gives an impression of visual gripping—known as the “weapon focus” (Schmitz et al. 2009). An antidote to visual gripping seems to be the awakening of what the Japanese call *ma*, the interval space, the space in between me and the visual edges of my surroundings. In the martial arts, it is the kind of presence that is sought after: a presence that suspends the vis-à-vis, and that is maximally panoramic—an interior technique to invite gravitational peace.



Ajuriaguerra has dubbed the “tonic dialogue” (Ajuriaguerra 1962). It is these variations that are made graspable again in the Small Dance.<sup>3</sup>

The Small Dance, in this sense, puts us in contact with a primordial tonic dialogue: it puts us in dialogue with the Earth and reminds us, through it, of another ancient dialogue we began with our affective environment.

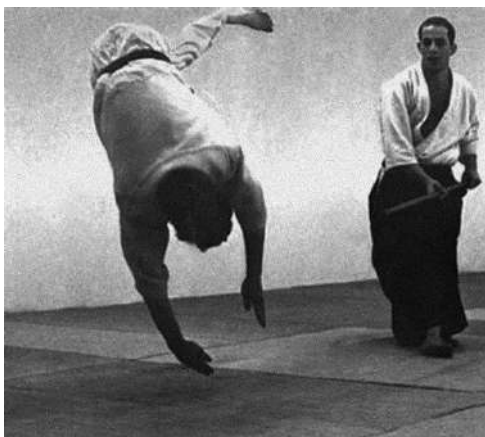
#### CONTACT IMPROVISATION: A PARIETAL DANCE

Steve Paxton gave the following “definition” of Contact Improvisation, a duet dance form he contributed to initiate in 1972: “Solo dancing does not exist: the dancer dances with the floor: add another dancer, you will have a quartet: each dancer with each other, and each with their own floor” (Paxton 1973). We can gloss this: dancers do not simply dance *on* the ground; through them, grounds communicate. Meeting with you, giving you my weight or inviting you to give me yours, I allow for this communication to occur: through me, there is a parcel of Earth that becomes perceivable to you, that you can occupy with me—you can support yourself on my body, or rather, through my body, on “my” ground.

In Contact Improvisation, the encounter between two dancers constitutes a shared nomadic territory: a territory that we inhabit only transitionally, and where we invite others to dwell. Here’s the strange paradox of Contact Improvisation: we create a territory in the sole purpose of letting it be occupied by others. What is happening in Contact Improvisation? Paxton says: in Contact Improvisation “the dancer’s weight is only [theirs] to give: not to possess” (Paxton 1973). You take my weight, I take your weight, but we constantly give it back to

3 Steve Paxton was well informed of these phenomena. In the 1970s, he met American psychologist Daniel N. Stern, a specialist of the “interpersonal world of infants” (Stern 1985): through high speed cameras and slow motion, Stern systematically studied the gestures, sounds, tone variations that support the dialogues between infants and prime caretakers—events that happen at such a speed that they remain invisible to the unaided human eye. Paxton felt enough kinship with this research to invite Stern to present his work in a studio in Soho to a group of dancers and artists he worked with (for a testimony on this meeting, see Stern 1973).





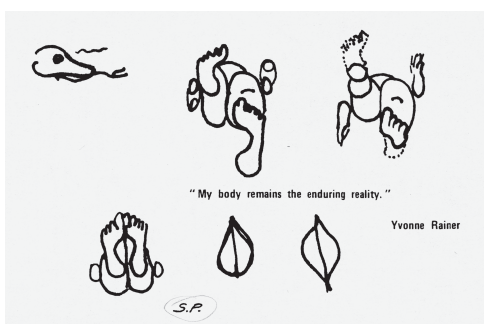
Greg Brodsky demonstrating Aikido with uke (training partner) Steve Paxton, New York Aikikai, circa 1964. Photographer unknown. Source: *Aikido Journal*.





Charlie Morrissey in *Material for the Spine* (2008), created by Steve Paxton, Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin for Contredanse in Brussels. Image still from [materialforthespine.com](http://materialforthespine.com)





Doodles by Steve Paxton. Reproduced from *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 2(2), Winter 1976.

Thirty-two years before Contredanse realized *Material for the Spine*, these doodles anticipate the investigations on standing and walking that form the core of Paxton's latest somatic technique.





An image from *Gravity* by Steve Paxton, edited by Steve Paxton, Florence Corin, Baptiste Andrien and Lisa Nelson, published by Contredanse éditions, Brussels, 2018.  
Photo by Willy Thuan.

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each other. What happens to me in the simplest of walks, by letting parts of my body take the weight of others, enabling joint-travel, what has been called a phoric relation (Godard 2013), is extended to the partners. I yield to you as you yield to me, at the same time. There is no longer a *vis-à-vis*, an opposition between subject and object, but the constitution of a third entity: neither you, neither me, neither us, but at the interstice between these three pronouns, a third-included.

How is it possible to widen one's territory in that way? How can my sense of my own body come to include others? When we write and think about the body in motion, we need to distinguish between two planes: the body-as-agent and the body-as-territory. As a body-as-agent, the body is egocentered and instrumental: it is one with my potential of action. As a body-as-territory, the body is a bundle of affects and perceptions: it corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1945), which is my body's ability to prolong itself in space through perception.

It is as a territory that I can meet and mingle with the other. As a territory, I can grow or shrink: I can include or exclude you. For instance, when I listen to you, I can listen to what you are saying, to the meaning of what you are saying, through the aerial transmission of the sound to my ears—in that case, you are kept at a certain distance, which allows me to approach your ideas through reasoning. But I can also listen to the vibrato of your voice, through the reverberations of your voice into my bones and viscera: in that case, I allow you into my territory, I let myself be affected not only by what you are saying, but also by how you are saying it (Sacks 1985).

The body-as-territory, we can call it the 'visceral body' or, even better, the 'parietal body'—it is defined by walls or linings, and by the ability to expand these walls to the inclusion or exclusion of others. Allowing for the parietal-territorial body means making room for being-affected. As long as I consider myself as an agent, I move, you move, we move, and yet, there is hardly any room for this reciprocal hospitality that seems to define Contact Improvisation. At best, we share a space,



we inhabit the same studio, but nothing of this symbiotic relationship seems to appear in some Contact Improvisation duets, what Paxton describes as a “state of being or mind permitting mutual freedom with mutual dependence” (Paxton 1973), a state of radical solidarity, where I am free but through that which binds me to the other.

Our becoming-territory, our becoming-parietal, relies on our ability to accept that things, others, circulate in us and out of us. And we can think of all the resistance mechanisms that we need to overcome in order to access this parietal state: mechanisms through which we close ourselves in order to prevent others from coming in, and mechanisms through which we spill over ourselves and invade others, rather than giving them a chance to visit us.

From that point of view, Contact Improvisation is potentially one of the most political practices one can imagine. Why? Because it is a practice where we have the opportunity of losing ground, a practice of stepping down from our identity pedestal. It is a political space because the condition for politics is that subjectivity is not the result of subjection or subjugation (Butler 1997), and this is what is experimented with through Contact Improvisation: radically, a space without subjects.

#### PEDESTRIAN MOVEMENTS:

##### THE GRAVITATIONAL MATRIX

What is an a-subjective space and what does it have to do with gravity? We can here return to what was mentioned before: the fact that the muscular and neurological apparatus that allows us to “handle” gravity has originally (in each of our individual histories) an entirely different function—that of allowing us to communicate with others. In other words, expressivity is the first function of our anti-gravitational apparatus, and all the control (conscious or unconscious) we exert on our postures has been trained in the first affective attunements with our prime caretakers. When we speak of an a-subjective space, we do not seek to get rid of the subject, but rather imagine that we can strive to recall, in our adult bodies, this pre-individual



realm where our subjective styles of inhabiting the world are still in the process of being invented, where instead of assuming gravity and ways of handling it, we are discovering its constitutive influence on us.

In our everyday behavior, there are two repetitive gestures that form our relationship to gravity, and consequently most of our kinetic melodies: walking and breathing. Whatever I do, whatever I learn, if there is no modification of the way I breathe or the way I walk, my movements will not fundamentally change. There is a simple reason for this: I inhale and exhale twenty thousand times a day, and I move fifty thousand kilograms of leg every day. When Steve Paxton, in the 1960s, began his inquiry into walking and other ordinary gestures, it was precisely these repetitions that he questioned. What are the gestures that dispose me to do something in spite of myself? What are the gravitational propensities that are created by the gestures we repeat unconsciously every day? These are some of the questions that the pedestrian dances raised.<sup>4</sup>

With gravity, we immediately face an ethical question: how to get out of the same patterns (and make room for the other)? How can we avoid unnecessary repetitions and tired habits? One possible answer: to step out of the same, we cannot limit ourselves to avoiding certain gestures; to step out of the same, we need to question the ground on which those gestures have been built. Indeed, in what does our *habitus* consist? What is predisposing us to prefer certain gestures over others? Social sciences have widely researched *habitus* as the tendency to hold one's body in a certain way (Bourdieu 1977), but they have seldom questioned the embodiment of *habitus*: where are our tendencies, our potentials of action, "stored"? It is in the field of (eco)

4 Steve Paxton offers a striking eco-social interpretation of the birth of his interest for pedestrian movement: "When I began to consider serious study of dance, I moved from Arizona to New York City. On the island of Manhattan, I walked far more than I had in Arizona, where the automobile was already ascendant. So perhaps it was the combination of all that New York walking along with my first deep physical training that produced a simple question. I was spending many hours a day in dance classes, trying to understand my body's movement. But when I walked out of the studio, I forgot to be conscious of it. What is my body doing when I am not conscious of it?" (Paxton 2018: 17).



somatic practices and theories<sup>5</sup> that an answer has been given to this thorny issue: our core *habitus* lies in our relationship to gravity; it is a certain quality or attitude that is inseparably a physical posture and an ethical stance (Bull 1968; Newton 1998).

What are pedestrian dances? They are dances that manifest the postural ground from which our gestures detach themselves. Staying there, on the plane of the gravitational matrix, Steve Paxton has created dances that genuinely make room for the accidental, that is for the bifurcations that are not produced by the will of the subject. As long as dance does not question the ground, as long as dance remains at the level of gestures and figures, accidents remain impossible or almost invisible: at best, dancers can make mistakes, they might face difficulties and from time to time manifest “awkwardness in movement”, as Merce Cunningham said of his choreography (Cunningham 1985), but there is seldom room for actual singularities. On the contrary, when one is offered the opportunity to witness people walking, people standing, people breathing, one may get to grasp this very ordinary miracle: that there are no two ways of breathing, walking, or standing that are identical. Each time, in these most simple gestures, it is an entire world that manifests. It is the special gift of pieces like *State* (1967) and *Satisfyin Lover* (1968) to precisely give nothing to see, nothing else than the unique way every person is a variation, a subtle accent added to the human way of being bipedal.

#### AIKIDO: NOT-DOING

To witness gravity at work, the rational mind is too slow. If I use a focal gaze, if I start to think in terms of causes and deductions, I will miss the most important part of the anti-gravitational

5 Somatics can be defined as a “field which studies the soma: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception” (Hanna 1986). Somatic practices and theories reject the body-mind split, and further, integrate the person in their context and environment into an eco-somatic continuum (Clavel et Ginet 2015). In (eco)somatic theories, the body-mind-environment is a unit, and the practices aim at the integration of those three components of the self. Steve Paxton approached the somatics through various encounters: with Yoga, first, and further in his relations with two long-term collaborators and friends, Mary Fulkerson (teacher in Release Technique) and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (founder of Body-Mind Centering).



style of those I am seeing. On the contrary, in order to have sensitivity to gravity (and this is something that somatic practitioners as well as aikidokas and other martial artists know quite well, Doganis 2012), I have to relinquish the centralized rational mode of sensing. I have also to accept to be in a peripheral attitude and I have to accept not be the (only) center of my experience. Stated radically, I need to ‘incorporate the person’. Through a very concrete kind of anthropophagy (Godard 2005), through a practice of self-alteration, I have to accept to become the other in order to sense what is happening in them.

Peripheral witnessing blurs the distinction subject/object: we enter into a relationship of intercorporation, where the will is momentarily suspended in favor of a state of being in which the landscape around us, with its sensible and imaginary valences, gives birth to movement. It is as if I was imagining a river in order to let myself be moved by its current.

This points to one of the cornerstones of Steve Paxton’s work: the notion of not-doing. A classical example of not-doing is suggested in *Zen and the Art of Archery* (Herrigel 1953), where the archer lets the target grow until it becomes so large that aiming becomes obvious. At some point, the target fills the field of perception to such an extent that there is nowhere else to shoot. Conversely, as long as I keep the target at its objective distance, as long as I refuse to let myself be affected by it, I have no hope of reaching it. This is a core aspect of not-doing: accepting momentarily to be invaded by the very world I intended, a second earlier, to act upon. I can thus move without giving myself the instruction of movement, but the condition is that I let my imagination or affects build a world in such a manner that I no longer have to move, where the only thing I need, is to let myself be moved. In that case, I am being born to the movements that I do and that move me in return.

Of course, such a sensitivity to affects and imagination can be trained. Yet, it remains a rare practice in our pedagogical tradition. As Paxton noticed: “I have seen willful students straining their muscles in an attempt to improve their dancing, but I have yet to observe them strain their senses” (Paxton 1981).



It probably hasn't been said enough, how much the martial art of Aikido—together with Tai Chi Chuan, both of which he encountered in the 1960s (Paxton 1976; Paxton 1993b; Yeh 2001)—shaped Paxton's understanding of movement. Through Aikido in particular, Paxton discovered Qi: "a concept, he says, that refers to both the quality and potential of connections. Applied to our bodies, it is about relationships between parts, and then flows onward into relationships with the environment" (Paxton 2018: 64). Learning to recognize this omnipresent force is to learn not-doing: a form of humility-in-the-act, that invites the forces that be to manifest instead of covering them with our activities. Morihei Ueshiba says he discovered Aikido when he realized that he had to love his opponent. Aikido is unique in the martial arts in that sense: it is not an art of waging war—a martial art—, it is the art of suspending it—an "art of peace" (Ueshiba 1992). At its core, Aikido isn't supposed to teach the ability to defeat your adversaries, it is supposed to teach the ability to defeat adversity altogether. At the same time, there is a territorial clarity, and constantly the willingness to abandon one's ground in favor of the other (in the rare videos we have from Ueshiba, we can almost always see him *making room* for his attackers, seldom resisting them).

This "martial art of peace" implies a radical decentering which rests on the discipline of Qi. It postulates, once again, that it is not I who move, but the universe or the environment (including my opponent). The only thing I can do is to let this movement happen and welcome it with love. This approach is absent in the vast majority of the (martial or not) arts of movement, where pedagogy is more frequently ego-centered, and based on the teaching of gestures, but seldom looking for the matrix of movements. This is the lesson Steve Paxton has extracted from Aikido: a curiosity for another master than the ego.

Gravity, much like the Earth itself in our ecocidal societies, is repressed in most human cultures. Paxton remarked: "Oddly missing in our pantheons, which in antiquity included sun



gods, harvest goddesses, storm gods, and other deities of the natural events, there is apparently no God of Gravity” (Paxton 2018: 8). We are often presented with an image of humanity as distinct from other species precisely based on this exception from gravity: standing on their two feet, far from the ground, human beings are supposed to have erected themselves against the Earth’s pull—and this is supposed to be the secret of their superiority. It seems that humans like to forget that they have a weight. Along the vertical axis, down is generally associated with evil, and falling is rarely considered an enviable activity—except, of course, when we fall in love. Don Hanlon Johnson has suggested that instead of that monodirectional morality that negates weight, we need a “multidirectional spirituality” (Johnson 1994), we need to multiply the axes of relation in our experience.

The study of gravity suggests a sensorial basis for this alternative ethic. An ethic where instead of erecting ourselves against the ground, constituting our subjectivities against the Earth, we learn to recognize our movements are never more than inflections of preexisting forces that move us before we start moving.

Moving-moved, our bodies stream gravity.

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# chapter 5

## A STUDY IN STILLNESS

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"... time moves as quickly  
as the dancers move."



# Still: On the Vibratile Microscopy of Dance

*André Lepecki*

*This chapter is a series of extracts from a longer article, "Still: On the Vibratile Microscopy of Dance", first published in Gabrielle Brandstetter and Hortensia Völckers (eds.), ReMembering the Body, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2000.*



*In the body in repose, there are a thousand hidden directions, an entire system of lines that incline it towards dance.*  
Jacques Rivière (1913: 65)

Jacques Rivière's sentence above is a landmark in the perceptual landscape of the modern history of dance. Written under the effects of the blasting power of Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography for Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), the sentence repositions the question of the still body in unprecedented manners. The still body, for Rivière, is dance in potential—it stands in a position radically different from the one it had been cast in until then by ballet, and most notably by the ideologies of the Romantic ballet. It is precisely because of the relationship of Nijinsky choreography to stillness that, I would argue, Rivière can state forcefully that *Le Sacre du printemps* “no longer has any ties whatsoever to the classical ballet.” (Rivière 1913/1975: 64) For Rivière, the choreography is much more revolutionary than Stravinsky's score. Such a judgment can only be sustained under the scrutiny of the radical effect of stillness, when no longer an accursed element of dance, but another device of dance's corporeality. In the rendition of *Le Sacre du printemps* that Jacques Rivière gives us, stillness emerges in Nijinsky's treatment of the body as temporally fragmented. The dancing body derives expressivity from a tension between still figure and moving image. Such a deep choreographic change, where stillness moves from the background to the foreground of perception, launches dance into new ontological grounds. On this new ground, the still body is perceived not as something to be repressed, but as generative of the dance. Transfixed by the potency of Nijinsky's reconfiguration of motion and arrest, Rivière can claim “the body in repose” as full of hidden possibilities for “inclining” the body “towards dance”.

[...] Stillness is potential dancing, it is perhaps even the primal source for dancing, but it is not quite dancing. Isadora Duncan, in her narration of how her “new dance” came into being, evokes stillness in a similar manner. The passage in her memoir is well known: “For hours I would stand quite still; my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus [...] I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement.” (Duncan 1927: 75)

Only after stillness, silence, and deep inner auscultation could movement and dance take over Duncan's body. As with



Nijinsky, stillness was not dance, but it was no longer a threat to dance. Its power was metaphysical, even transcendental, but not choreographic. At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when dance leaps into modernism, either by reformulating the ballet tradition, or by creating the tradition of what Schwartz called the “new kinaesthetic”, stillness takes on the role of dance’s invisible, generative matrix. However, as much as it propels, it still does not perform—stillness remains as a blank note defining the initial steps of a perceptual transformation.

*Only that which was once capable of dissimulating itself  
can make itself apparent.*

Georges Didi-Huberman (1998: 15)

In the early 1970s, Steve Paxton, while developing the technique that became known as Contact Improvisation, finally embraced the blank notes that the moderns had unveiled and timidly utilized, and promoted them to full compositional and technical devices. Paxton brought stillness into full phenomenological and ontological status as dance (and not just “potential to dance”, or dance’s “origin”, background or other). Paxton describes an exercise he used for his piece *Magnesium*—an exercise he calls, appropriately, “stand” or “the small dance”—as follows:

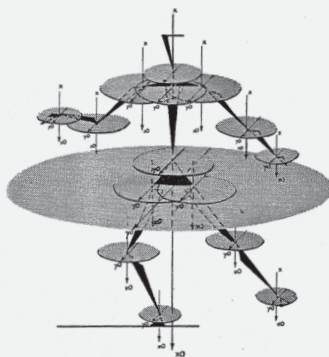
*Well, first of all, it's a fairly easy perception: all you have to do is stand up and then relax—you know—and at a certain point you realize that you've relaxed everything that you can relax but you're still standing and in that standing is quite a lot of minute movement [...] the skeleton holding you upright even though you're mentally relaxing [...]. Call it the “small dance” [...]. It was a name chosen largely because it's quite descriptive of the situation and because while you're doing the stand and feeling the “small dance” you're aware that you're not “doing” it, so in a way, you're watching yourself perform; watching your body perform its function. And your mind is not figuring anything out and not searching for any answers or being used as an active instrument but is being used as a lens to focus on certain perceptions. (Paxton 1977, my emphasis)*



self conscious movement influences subsequent quiet. Normal movement influences subsequent quiet.

When quiet, I am contrasting experiences or modes of experience and may be able to see the *avisi*ble and the *visi*ble.

What comes before influences what comes later.  
The quality of the vision will influence  
the available and the visible to come.



14. *The Main and Private Systems of Reference* \* \*  
From Movement Notation by NOA ESSAÏN, Abraham Wechsman. illus. with John Harries

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A poem by Steve Paxton with an illustration by John Harries from Noa Eshkol and Abraham Wachman's *Movement Notation*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1958. Reproduced from *Contact Newsletter*, vol. 2(1), Summer 1976.

## A MODEL FOR FORMULAE

*normal tends to be unnoticed (available)  
quiet may be contrasted with normal  
movement or self-conscious movement*

*self conscious movement influences subsequent quiet. Normal movement influences subsequent quiet.*

*When quiet, I am contrasting  
experiences or modes of experience and  
may be able to see the avisible and the visible.*

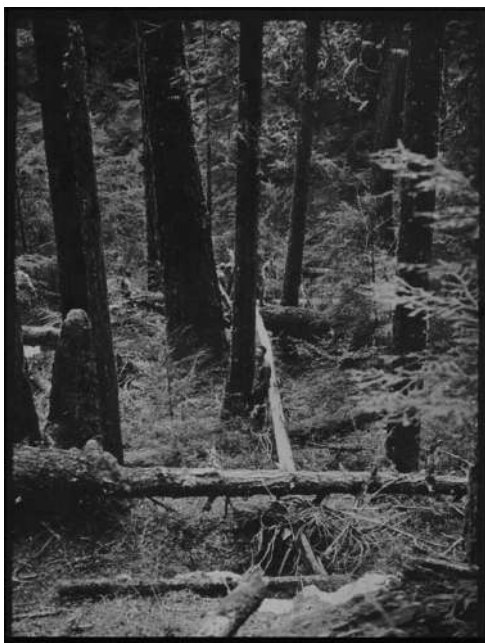
*What comes before influences what comes later.  
The quality of the vision will influence  
the avisible and the visible to come.*





Steve Paxton's dance studio at Mad Brook Farm,  
Vermont, 1999. Photo by Daniel Lepkoff.





Steve Paxton in the Villamette National Forest,  
Oregon (1986). Photo by Bill Arnold.



I  
TACET

II  
TACET

III  
TACET

NOTE: The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4' 33" and the three parts were 33", 2' 40", and 1' 20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by an instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.

FOR IRWIN KREMER

JOHN CAGE.

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New York, N.Y. 10016, U.S.A.

Score for 4'33" by John Cage.  
© Henmar Press Inc., 1960.

The story is well known: Cage, curious to know what it would mean to "listen to silence", enters in an anechoic ("deaf") chamber to cut himself off from exterior sounds. The result, to his surprise, was the contrary of silence: his bloodstream kept beating to his ears, the sound of his nervous system wiring was still there, unavoidable. For Cage, this is where everything begins: when we stop and discover that nothing has stopped nonetheless. Above, the score of 4'33" (1952) is a testament of this experience: a piece in three acts which only reads *tacet* (literally: "keep quiet"), and where the musician, not playing their instrument, invites the stupefied audience to listen to the sound of silence.



In this quote we can identify Paxton's ongoing concerns, since the early 1960s with a "democratization" of dance and of the dancing body, such as it had been practiced and explored by him and others at the Judson Church in New York. Also manifest is the clear articulation of certain aesthetic affinities between Paxton's ideas on the dancing body with earlier Cagean experiments on musical composition, most notably to John Cage's uses of silence. The Cagean revolution does not derive from the introduction of silence into composition, but from the radical affirmation of silence as composition, silence as music. Remember the manifest intentions of *4'33"*: the silenced piano, rather than performing a negation of the sensorial, generates intensification of the aural; the audience is asked to perceive that silence is actually full of small sounds. The implication is that there is indeed no silence, but thresholds of sensorial perceptions that can be intensified by the means of microscopy. Similarly, Paxton's revolution derives from his claiming of stillness as dance—ultimately, as he writes in the quote, there is no stillness, but only layers of minuscule motions. At the still point of the body, we are to find neither ascent nor descent, but also not fixity. Stillness is full of microscopic moves.

Paxton's embrace of stillness as a form of dancing necessitates, implicates, produces a radical rearrangement of the subject's perceptual field. At this perceptual threshold a sensorial rearrangement takes place on the level of the microscopic, of what Paxton calls "minute movements", and stillness reveals its many layers of vibratile intensities. What Paxton's stillness-as-dance evokes (puts into motion, brings to the foreground of perception) is dance's moving away from concerns to create a "new kinaesthetic", and towards increasing concerns to create a "new sensorial" by the means of intensification of perceptual thresholds.

*We are continuously surrounded by imperceptible metaphenomena, of which the microperceptions emerge as odd indexes. From the standpoint of the small perceptions, everything endures change—stillness becomes movement, and the stable unstable.*

José Gil (1996: 20)



Paxton's stillness, just as Cagean silence, is less a compositional strategy than an experiential rehearsal for what José Gil calls microscopy of perception, a mode of perception leading to a "meta-phenomenology". [...] As the subject stands still, listening, sensing, smelling its own bodily vibrations, adjustments, tremors streaming through, across, within the space between core subjectivity and the surface of the body, there is nothing more than the revelation of an infinite, unlocatable space for microexploration of the multiple potential for otherwise unsensed subjectivities and corporealities one harbors. The "small dance" happens in that nowhere; the dancer must explore the unlocatable *there*, between subjectivity and body-image.

[...] The problematics of the body's stance regarding the world and regarding the self, as the subject plunges into a microscopy of perception, reveals a phenomenology of interiority, that *there* where, standing in vibratile stillness, the subject attempts to meet its body<sup>1</sup>. [...] If one chooses to follow this stillness, one soon finds oneself amidst a representational reshuffling—that of the vibratile body taking over and blowing away historical dust from dulled senses. In stillness one is in uncharted territory: *there*, at the vibratile zone where the dance of the subject and the dance of history clash. Stillness is the generative threshold of dance's critique of modernity's fabrication of embodiment, subjectivity, and the sensorial, by means of a vibratile body engaged in a microscopy of perception.

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1 As this essay was being completed, I came across Suely Rolnik's extraordinary notion of "vibrating body" (*corpo vibrátil*). The concept was developed in Rolnik's 1989 book, *Cartografia Sentimental. Transformações Contemporâneas do Desejo*. In a personal communication, Rolnik explained to me how the "vibrating body" is "potential our bodies have in vibrating with the music of the world" and in this sense "our subjectivity is made out of such sensorial composition." [...]



interlude

# A STUDY IN IMPROVISATION

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"There was chicken in that chicken and..."



# Backwater: Twosome / Paxton and Moss

*Yvonne Rainer*

*This interlude reproduces an article published by Yvonne Rainer in The Soho Weekly News in 1978, where the choreographer reviews Steve Paxton's duet with percussionist David Moss at the Kitchen in New York.*



The place is packed, the audience partisan, the mode improvisatory. Steve Paxton weighs about 155 pounds. A large opaque body densely muscled that becomes unexpectedly supple in motion, in fact downright buttery.

To say he moves where he lives is to pin butter to a room.

His resources of movement and imagery are phenomenally extensive and readily tapped. In any given set, or segment, of activity his movement flow and the shapes through which his body passes may glance off of memories of Graham, Cunningham, beefcake, Paul Taylor, Rainer, St. Denis, Duncan, Nijinsky, classic and pre-classic reliefs and murals, gymnastics, you name it. Delsarte gesture. Eastern martial arts. Trisha Brown. He is a dancing encyclopedia. He makes no sound except breathing and feet, nor does he speak except to ask the audience for the time, please move your feet, intermission, etc. An average of 1½ hours of dancing dancing.

Then there is the matter of face, eyes, focus. Seemingly impassive, his face is highly expressive if one regards the piercing blue eyes that reveal a restless intellect at work. Always in focus on a part of his own body or a point in the space or keeping his head in an awkward or graphic relation to his body or unexpectedly confronting the audience his eyes give us moment by moment a privileged access to the interior of his “image bank” and the measure of his commitment. This is without a doubt one of those rare occasions: a thinking body thinking on its feet (an embodied mind sharing its knowledge)... on its knees... on its back... on one hand... before our very eyes. Watch closely. History, take note: The prime of life departs before you’ve blunk your eye. Paxton’s intelligence and faith will not be seen in these parts like this again.

Political addenda: Paxton never became stuck on New York. Some of his most interesting work has been done in far-flung places, garnering little attention from “people who count.” Insofar as history threatens to concern itself exclusively with us CAPS grant recipients, let me insert this urgent rejoinder in Paxton’s behalf: the quality of his social relations has always taken precedence for him over aesthetic and



careerist considerations. He is something of an (I won't say romantic) idealist in this respect, but one who lives according to his principles. Though I disagree with some of his ideas about freedom which smack of transcendental flight, I can only admire the way in which he lives his life. His collaboration with musician David Moss embodies his faith. Working with someone whose limitations threaten at every moment to become cloying obstructions (to me as spectator), Paxton eases gracefully out of one position into another in relation to his co-performer's antics inside the Rube Goldberg-like percussion environment that dominates the upstage-center space. Sometimes he is a neutral foil, sometimes, he mickey-mouses Moss's rhythms; then at other times it is all too clear that Paxton would not have arrived at a particularly exquisite and breathtaking series of maneuvers without the support, counterpoint, infraction—call it what you will—of Moss's music. My own well-fortified taste in the matter is at this point quite beside the point. I congratulate and thank the two of them for a most pleasurable and morally edifying event.

On the last night Moss and his apparatus were absent. Paxton danced in silence for about 40 minutes. There was also a session of contact improvisation (this by-now-lower-case entry into the public domain was originated by Paxton in 1972) called *Free Lance Dance* performed by Danny Lepkoff, Lisa Nelson, Nancy Stark Smith, Christina Svane, and Paxton; and a piece of Paxton's called *The Reading*<sup>3</sup> in which five people with paper bags on their heads simulated the finger movement of a left hand while standing in a string-delineated cube. On one side the bags bore photo-blowups of finger-prints and the reverse sides were painted to look like fingernails. Somehow reminds me of a 1963 collaborative duet (*Word Words*—his title) for which he had at first tried to make up our faces to look alike and finally settled for “erasing” our features with soap and pancake make-up and performing nude... Your move.



# chapter 6

## A STUDY IN DISORIENTATION

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"What does not become developed in us?  
What can we only glimpse with our bodies?  
It is difficult to find out  
what we don't know."



# Nested nests. On framing bodies and spaces in dance and choreography

*Martin  
Nachbar*

*This chapter is a reprint from Jeroen Fabius and Sher Doruff (eds.),  
Paxton Ave Nue, a revisioning, Amsterdam: RTRSRCH, vol. 5, 2011.*



On 12 February 2009 a revision<sup>1</sup> of Steve Paxton's *Ave Nue* from 1985 premiered at Loods 6, an arts venue in Amsterdam. It was a production by the Artist in Residence program AIR, the SNDO and the AMCh of the Amsterdam Theaterschool. The piece was shown five times in total. The author of this paper was present during most of the rehearsals, and watched the general rehearsals and the premiere of the performance. He takes the opportunity to trace some of what he perceived as Steve Paxton's guidelines and to interweave them with some of his own thinking around choreographic work.

In a short backstage talk right after the premiere, Steve Paxton replied to a question about the mix of abstract dance and anecdotic scenes in the piece: "Yes, isn't it? Cunningham and comic books!" He read comic books as a young adult, because it was there that one could find the "real information about what was going on in Vietnam, in economy, ecology, and in other political fields. At the end of the 60's, I spent a lot of time in comic book stores." In 2010, let us spend some time with comic books as well and with one in particular, as it might give us a way into thinking about *Ave Nue* and Paxton's work in general.

#### 'GUTTERS', FRAMES AND CHAOS

In his entertaining yet illuminating comic book *Understanding Comics* Scott McCloud talks about our perception of the world, especially of time, and how this can be represented in comics. The tool relevant for this paper is what McCloud calls the 'gutter', the space between the single panels of a comic, which is the space that holds most of comics' magic and mystery. It is an empty space that only gets filled by the reader's imagination. This imagination in turn is informed by experience that there must be something in this space that connects the panels. This ability allows the readers to construct a continuous reality and, in the case of comics, narrative. Psychology calls this ability 'closure'.

<sup>1</sup> This term is particular to the process described in this paper. Normally, dance and performance scholars as well as practitioners refer to processes that work with material from the past as 'reconstructions' or 'reenactments'. The notion of revision was introduced by Steve Paxton and seems to stress the fact that a maker looks again at an old work of his and reworks it according to circumstances and desires that have changed over time.



While McCloud specifically speaks about the art of comic book writing, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explores how and under which conditions art in general emerges. In her compelling essay *Chaos, Territory, Art—Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* she suggests that art proper doesn't only involve a creator and a perceiver but needs sensation that is detached and autonomous from either—sensation as an independent actor within art and at the same time formed from chaos by art. The first step on the way to such independent sensation is what Grosz calls with Deleuze “the first gesture of art”: the making of a frame. Art then takes some chaos into it and “forms a composed chaos that becomes sensory”. The frame tames earth's uncontrollable forces, renders them “compose-able” and allows for intensifying and transforming living bodies (Grosz 2008). McCloud's panels and ‘gutters’ seem to be renderings of Grosz' notions of frame and chaos specific to the art form of comics. Comics' panels or frames act as indicators that a story's time or space are being divided. Placed one after the other on a two-dimensional page, they follow more or less a narrative's timeline. Although visibly empty, the ‘gutters’ are filled with all the potential narrative connections between two panels, which are as closely related to the narrative's timeline as to the undistinguishable qualities and uncontrollable forces Grosz talks about when she talks about chaos.

#### LAYING THE FLOOR: THE OCCURRENCE OF CHAOTIC BODIES, DANCING

With furniture-maker and architect Bernard Cache, Grosz asserts the wall as the first frame. It creates an inside that excludes everything outside of it. Projected downwards onto the ground, the wall becomes a first human territory, a smooth, supple and consistent floor, which is the condition for dance's emergence. On it the body is protected from everyday activities and can indulge in an exploration of elements such as weight, thrust, yielding or momentum in new ways. Thus the body can explore gravity's and movement's excess. It becomes a “unique chaotic event” (Paxton 2009). Framing these chaotic



events through movement exercises is the gesture that comes right after framing a part of the earth by putting down a floor.

During the opening workshop from 26 to 28 January 2009 in Amsterdam Steve Paxton introduced the dancers of *Ave Nue* to his movement technique Material for the Spine (MFS), which entails not only a collection of physical exercises but also a philosophy about the body and its sensing, moving and thinking potentials which increase once a dancer has stepped onto the (dance) floor. Regulating, organizing and forming their movements through choreographic operations follow.<sup>2</sup> But unlike comics' panels, which follow each other on a timeline, the frames in dance and choreography are nested: Earth's chaos framed by the floor, unleashing the powers of the body framed by exercises, unleashing the powers of movement framed by choreography. Accordingly, the 'gutters', where parts of the dance escape us and have to be filled in through 'closure' are not to be found in between single moments of a dance or in between certain points in the room where a dance takes place. As there are no panels that arrest movement, 'gutters' in dance must be of a different nature than being empty spaces on a page. They will probably be found nested in between parts of a body that have not yet come to the senses, and in between bodies that experience the event of a dance from different points of view. But let us first have a look at two instances when the body occurs as chaotic event:

*First: anatomy.* When we see a body in front of us, we perceive its form, the color of its skin, its posture. When it is close enough, we might also smell it. What we don't perceive are its insides, its bones, muscles, and organs. We don't even perceive the complete insides of our own bodies. We might feel their weight. We might have seen images in anatomy books that show us what a dead body cut open looks like. And perhaps these images have become part of our imagination that

2 "Art is the regulation and organization of its materials—paint, canvas, concrete, steel, marble, words, sounds, bodily movements, indeed any materials—according to self-imposed constraints, the creation of forms through which these materials come to generate and intensify sensation and thus directly impact living bodies, organs, nervous systems." (Grosz 2008: 4; emphasis by the author of this paper).



helps us bridge the gap to our insides. But most of our lives and even after death, our anatomy remains inside our skin, enwrapped in darkness. And if our skin is cut open during a surgery, only the few specialists in the theater will see parts of our anatomy in full color.

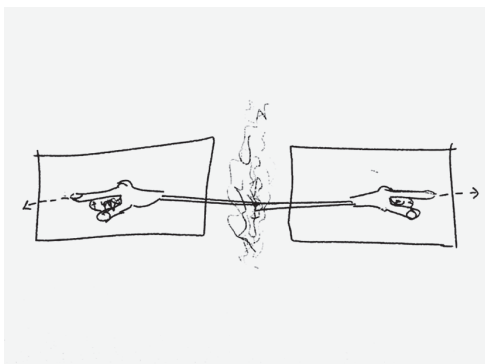
*Second: the well-(un)known intervals between sensory stimulus and its realization, and between decision to move and motor activity.* Since neuropsychologist Benjamin Libet got involved in research into neuronal activity and sensation thresholds, he and his colleagues have developed methods to gauge the duration between unconscious movement readiness and subjective feelings of volition (Wikipedia 2010). In the 1980's, they found that the gap between the two lasted approximately half a second. But unless we use EEG's, EMG's and other instruments, there remains an uncanny inability to pull these intervals into the frame of our perception. What ever happens during these intervals remains largely in the 'gutter', inspiring much speculation about its purpose and lively imagination to bridge its duration.

Our bodies are not always distinguishably ours, not entirely represent-able in language, and not visible in their interior structures nor in all their effects and affects. They always also form "a plethora of orders, forms, wills—forces that cannot be distinguished or differentiated from each other, both matter and its conditions for being otherwise, both the actual and the virtual indistinguishably" (Grosz 2008: 5). Much of the body's potential is thus not perceived. Most of the sensations available to it are not sensed and can thus not be unleashed. They mostly stay outside of the frames of perception and conscious experience. They remain in the 'gutter' and can only be brought to sensation through activity that includes imagination and 'closure'.

#### PREPARING THE GROUNDS: EXERCISES IN DANCE

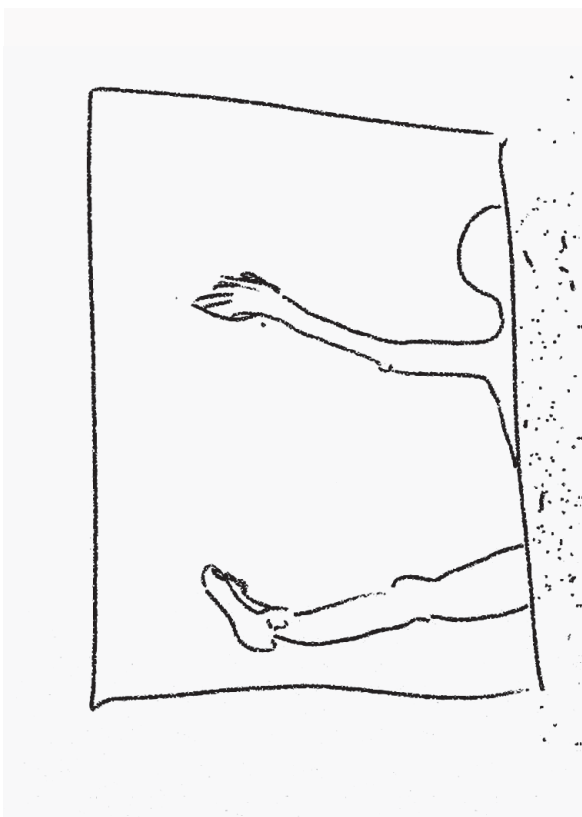
This is when dance and choreography take a step away from the body, so that the body can become the matter for their framing operations: physical exercises, improvisational tasks, choreographic operations and staging procedures. All of these





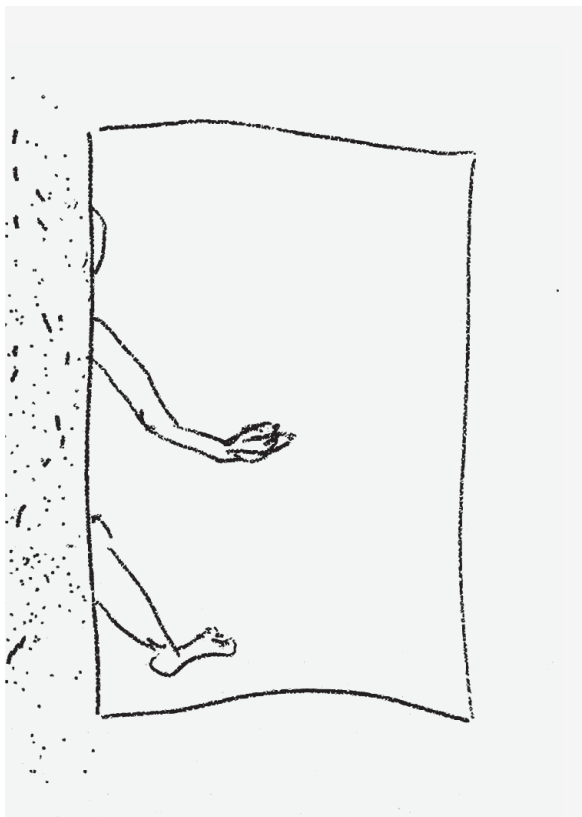
*The ambiguous zone.* Drawing by Martin Nachbach (2011).



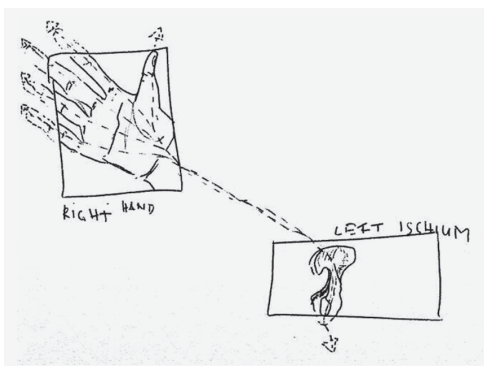


*Framing the body.* Drawing by Martin Nachbach (2011).



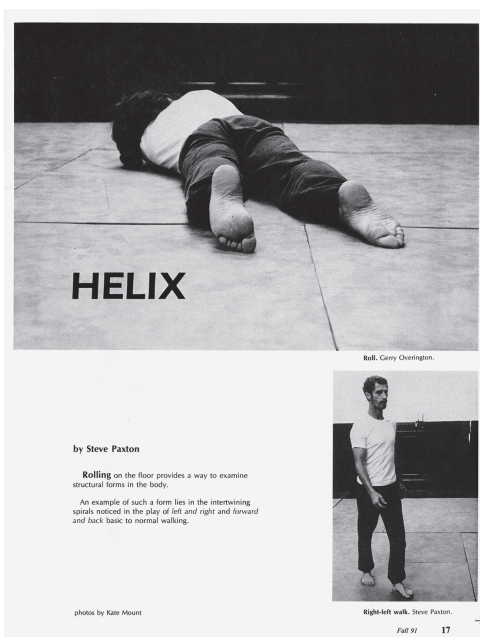






*Pointing.* Drawing by Martin Nachbach (2011).



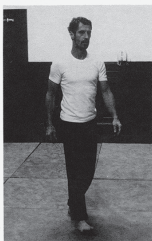


“Helix. Nine rolls” by Steve Paxton with photos by Kate Mount. Reproduced from *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 16(3), Fall 1991.

This photo-essay presents some of the core “perfect forms” that will later be explored in *Material For the Spine*: the helix and the crescent rolls. Here, they are investigated in the context of Touchdown Dance, a collective founded with Anne Kilcoyne at Dartington College of Arts, UK, to teach movement to people with visual impairment.



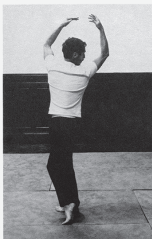
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Left-right walk. Steve Paxton.

If you take a step and continue the oppositions in the body to an extreme, you can see two spirals circling around each other.

And if the next step is taken to an extreme, the spirals reverse.



Right side moving around support of the left.

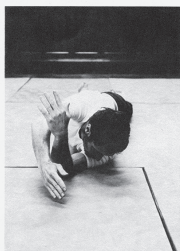


Left side moving around support of the right.



Helix legs. Gerry Overington.

photos by Kate Mount



Helix arms. Steve Paxton.

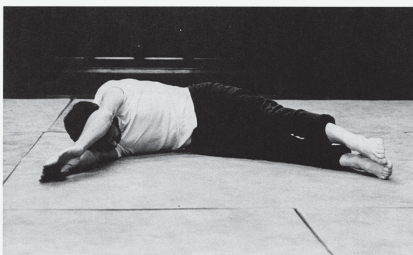
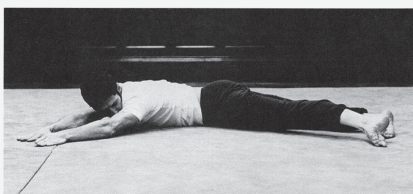
When this form is taken to the floor the energy of the extreme twist of the body promotes a coil which can be rolled with no apparent effort. This is done with the spiral initiated either at the top with the hands and arms, or with the toes, feet, and legs at the bottom.

In these spiral rolls, a single initiation of energy flows into the most extreme spiral the body can achieve and the roll continues as long as the shape is maintained. The movement stems from changes of weight inside the body as different surfaces of the spirals are rolled upon.

The less extreme alternating helices of walking also permit movement initiation from different places in the body, but in practice just a few such options are integrated into an habitual walk. The other options wither with disuse. Turning this basic form onto its side causes many parts of the body to extend and take responsibility for the roll.







photos by Kate Mount

Two moments in the 'Simone Fort' rolls. If coming forward, the roll is toward the points.  
If moving backward, toward the bend.

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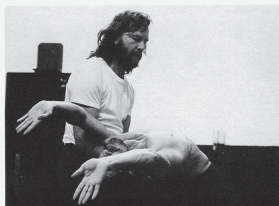
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Exploring discs.



Teaching by touch. Gerry Overington & Steve Paxton.

*This article is excerpted from a forthcoming writing by Touchdown Dance, a project working for extended mobility for the blind, directed by Steve Paxton and Ann Kilsayne, Devon, England.*

Exploring form in these nine rolls has several advantages. Fear of falling does not interfere with learning. The sensations found in the exercise are unusual: we rarely notice these singular forms in our daily movement, but in these rolls we can hardly miss the basic forms—the helix and the turning crescent.

These forms give the spine itself a workout, as well as the muscles and attachments of the spine. The point is that there are sensations in the body of the spine itself, in the discs. This rather dull lot of feelings along the length of the spine can best be identified in the lumbar, where a vague pinching sensation may accompany the backbend.

Once the quality of sensation in the spine is found, it can be noticed in the course of the rolls. It then begins to make new sense to speak of 'the spine'. A prerequisite to this discovery is relaxation, as tension masks sensation and maintaining it requires wasted effort. Once the feeling in the spine has been located, one can more accurately stretch the circling arms through the upper spine at the center of the back, or align points on the spine to discover new postures.

Sighted people start to learn these rolls by seeing them. For those having difficulty in translating what they've seen into what to do, hands-on is most useful, with verbal aids.

Blind people I work with learn the rolls by feeling with their hands and are further assisted by hands-on and verbal aids. When the blind then direct the efforts of the sighted, they tend to teach by hand. They convey the principles, and the sighted person can visualize what is meant.

In teaching, one can transmit the basic spiral forms visually, verbally, and kinesthetically. Each of these transmissions is effective, but touch is the keystone of the work. ★

photos by Kate Mount



cut into and through the body as milieu or space and connect it to the territory of the (dance) floor, bringing back into contact the chaos inside and around it. Through the various exercises, tasks and operations in dance and choreography, chaotic states of the body are entrapped and movement qualities are extracted from the body that thus comes to the senses and is eventually enabled to produce consciously sensed movement.

This oscillation between unconscious chaos and knowledgeable sensation is one of dance's and choreography's basic conditions and does occur constantly when training the body via different kinds of dance exercises. Acknowledging the body as unknown and chaotic in order to then expose it to an exercise that frames the body's chaos and brings certain parts of it to the senses, leads to knowing the body and territorializing some of the bodily chaos, mapping it and, through repeated exercise, to developing habit, skill and technique; which then might be questioned again through a new set of exercises that bring different parts and properties of the body to attention and sensation, thus making it chaotic again in order to reframe it ... a constant back-and-forth along flexible edges between grasping sensation and letting it go, between panel and 'gutter', frame and 'closure', between sensing the moving body and imagining what has not yet been sensed and what has yet seemed impossible in movement.

In this sense, physical exercises can be seen as frames that make the chaotic body choreographic territory<sup>3</sup>. They act similarly to the floor that marks the very territory on which

3 In dance, it is an on-going discussion whether a dancer's training should focus on strengthening muscles through repeating certain movements and situations until they fit into a dance style such as classical dance or Graham, or whether a training's set of exercises should enhance the dancer's ability to sense her body that dances. In dance history, much attention has been paid to repeating formal exercises. But since the early 20th century with, among others, Isadora Duncan and Rudolph von Laban the focus has shifted towards a more open approach to dance training that understands itself as a frame for perceiving the body within different contexts rather than as a pathway to achieve the looks of a certain dance style. Steve Paxton's *Material for the Spine* can be understood as an example of a training that tries to combine both strategies through strengthening parts of the body by bringing them to the senses within the frames of its exercises; dance technique as something that according to Jeanine Durning, "enables dancers to adapt to changing contexts and situations rather than making them repeat situations."



the body becomes chaotic in the first place, facing its new relations to gravity and movement released by it. However, dance exercises don't just exist flat on the floor but as virtual and dynamic images and instructions that become spatial in their execution. We have to develop our metaphor further. Referring again to Grosz and with her to Cache, maybe we can say dance exercises act as furnishings. They are threedimensional entities put onto the (dance) floor to become bodily supports that trigger our imaginations and afford our bodies to certain movements and sensations. Exercise as "furniture brings the outside in," (Grosz 2008: 16) not in the sense of the chaos outside of the (dance) floor coming into the body, but in the sense of bringing the chaos within the body into the frame of consciousness through sensing the body within the design of a certain movement or mental focus. Exercise as "furniture enables the body to be most directly affected by, but also protected from, the chaos of every outside: 'For our most intimate or most abstract endeavors [...], furniture supplies the immediate physical environment in which our bodies act and react; for us, urban animals, furniture is thus our primary territory'" (Cache 1995: 30, quoted in Grosz 2008: 15). For us, dancing and choreographing animals on the (dance) floor, exercise is thus our primary territory, in which the exercised and aware body finds an inside, a house that keeps the chaos of the not-exercised and unaware body outside without rejecting but offering it a chair to sit down next to, or even with, the sensed and sensing body.<sup>4</sup> "Exercise is what brings to consciousness the inner sensations, the moments, when usage reveals operations of the skeleton, the muscular connections available between

4 "It is the job of the dance student to first bring the unconscious movement of their body into the realm of consciousness. Next, to form the movements into an array of possibilities, a dance technique, which is useful for choreographers to pattern into the new, albeit customary, dance of their culture. For the student and the culture it is a precious legacy: the steps, their organization, and the way we learn them. Cultural legacies, however, can be confining. My inquiry was not so much about escaping the legacy of dance as discovering the source of it. Where was something pre-legacy, pre-cultural, pre-artistic? Where was ancient movement? [...] The answer of course, was right under my nose. I placed the chair in the space, and began to stand." (Steve Paxton, from a note to the White Oak Dance Company, summer 2000).



pelvis and fingertips [...] *Material for the Spine* takes as given that the palette of the dancer exists as sensations in the body. It attempts to point out naturally occurring events and develop exercises which bring them forward for examination.” (Andrien, Corin, Paxton 2008)

#### SIMPLE POINTING AS COMPLEX EXERCISE

During the workshop preparing for *Ave Nue*, this understanding of the dancer’s sensational palette in the body was central. Sensations<sup>5</sup> of the body within the design of an exercise were to be marked and worked with. One of the exercises or forms of *Material for the Spine* that was studied during the workshop shall clarify how Paxton’s approach to training the body and its senses acts as a strategy to frame the body’s chaotic events, in order to extract qualities from and create sensation with them. This exercise is *pointing*.

Pointing seems to be not very complex. After all, pointing is an everyday gesture all of us think we know how to do. But it becomes complex once we acknowledge that there might be kinds of coordination involved that we actually haven’t sensed yet. Paradoxically, this simple recognition of the body’s chaos and excess throws it onto the (dance) floor, a territory that allows for the abandoning of the everyday clarity of habitual movement, and for surrendering to its chaotic excess. In other words, the known frame of the pointing gesture and the known territory of the body acting as a frame within the frame of the gesture must be opened up to what is not yet sensed and has so far remained outside of the gesture’s frame, in chaos:

*There are moments when we point in two directions, for instance, expressing ‘from east to west.’ Somewhere in the middle, in the shoulder girdle, two imaginary lines are leaving, each projecting toward these opposite directions. Now, my question is what to call the space*

5 The obviously different uses of the word ‘sensation’ in Grosz’s and Paxton’s thinking is not entirely unproblematic and could be the topic of a whole paper. In this essay, the author has chosen to understand Paxton’s use of the word as ‘sensing’ or ‘experiencing’, although it is a simplification and leaves out the complexity of sensation occurring in the event of sensing.



*between the origins of those two lines. It is not a simple place, because if one arm is more emphatic, then the shoulder, the scapula, and all the way to the spine are implicated in that direction. But anyway, there is a central area, which is an anchor for the gestures, uncommitted to either direction. It's directionally ambiguous. And I have named it the 'ambiguous zone'. (Andrien, Corin, Paxton 2008)*

This ambiguous zone brings attention to one of the blind spots or better 'gutters' nested in between known zones or parts of the body. During the workshop, pointing was exercised with all the fingers and with the ischia.<sup>6</sup> In one of the exercises, pointing was done by an ischium of one side and one of the little fingers on the other side simultaneously, thus diagonally stretching the body along the backsides of arm and torso. The questions raised in the workshop were: "Where is this area? How does it feel? How far can the tissue in this area be stretched, so that it becomes a kinesthetic continuity, bridging the invisibility of your back?"

*With such inquiries, stretching between two points of the body becomes an exercise, not only lengthening the muscles but also widening a dancer's sensory capacities. It does so by blending instigating questions in language with a movement design that enables sensorimotor experience, and by enhancing sensing through imagination (that there is a certain structure that looks like a picture in the anatomy book; that there is a line that can be drawn between the places in the body; that there is something at all). The exercise thus brings together sensing and imagining, movement and image, blind spot and vision, in order to actualize a certain potential of the body's*

<sup>6</sup> "Usually pointing is done with the index finger. But any finger can do it, even the thumb. If you try this [...] notice how the scapula reacts through the spectrum of different pointing fingers. I find the scapula rises with the thumb point, and goes down as one points with the third and fourth fingers. These two fingers are a part of the hand that is used to push us away from things, or things away from us, because it connects along the underside of the arm to the lower part of the scapula, and from there down the back to the pelvis, where the center of mass exists, which must be moved, if we are to push ourselves away from something, for instance, the table." (Andrien, Corin, Paxton 2008)



chaos. The exercise instigates and touches the body in a way that the dancer is enabled to bridge the ‘gutters’ of the body on the (dance) floor. The exercise addresses a dancer’s desires and impulses and affords him or her to move and sense the body in a new way. It allows them to look carefully at the resulting movements and actions and how they project within the body and into space, eventually refining the dancer’s perception of her anatomy and, as a result, her movements and actions.<sup>7</sup>

#### NESTING BODIES: CHOREOGRAPHING

Working with bodies in order to organize their movements in space where they appear in front of or among spectators, in other words to choreograph, is a different operation than exercising the body. While the latter frames the body on the background of its own chaos on the (dance) floor through repeatedly adapting to certain kinds of movement, the first frames the body on the background of the chaos of the earth through inventing moving relations. Exercising focuses on sensing the ‘chaotic’ bodies and their parts, choreographing stresses the sensations unleashed by and in between bodies and their parts. But despite being different practices, *none of the two ever comes purely. Each always contains portions of the other, and, although without causal relation, they are* always nested in each other. Sometimes they even depend on one another.

Exercises extract from the body movement qualities and the ability to produce and unleash sensation: the body starts to dance and oscillate. Choreography relates this oscillation back to, and organizes it within the performance space and its resonant qualities. It nests the dancing bodies. Its *techniques* are improvisational tasks, choreographic or compositional operations and staging procedures. The latter concern the performance spaces and thus also spectators and how they will watch or be nested in relation to the dancing bodies. In order to

7 Steve Paxton puts it this way: “Material for the Spine aims to provide a kinetic identity that the student is unlikely to have encountered before, a spine, head and pelvis-centered experience, which is explicit in design, but asks the practitioner to design the necessary sensations of movement for its manifestation.” (Andrien, Corin, Paxton 2008: introduction)



understand this relation better, let's have a look at some elements of the performance of *Ave Nue* revision, which took place in a six meters wide and 79 meters long performance space.

It begins with a birth scene: The cast's four female dancers carry in a human-size hand sewn from canvas and lay it down gently on a white cloth spread on the narrow space between the two rostra, on which the audience is seated. They then animate the hand as if in labor until one dancer pulls out a little package from its insides; midwives at work helping to deliver the hand's baby-hand. Shortly before it is born the cast's six male dancers appear smilingly. The recorded sound of waves soothes the contractions' pains. There is a sense of tenderness and comfort. The audience's gaze is smoothed by two gauze screens, which are put up in front of each rostrum. A distorted popular tune is faintly heard. The midwives gently fold out the new born. At the end all dancers exit, taking the hands and the cloth with them and removing the screens in front of the rostra to the sides of the space.

#### MOVING SPACES AND OSCILLATING SENSATION

At the beginning the rostra were placed close to each other. After the screens had been removed they started to be slowly pulled away from each other, revealing the full length of *the space at the end of the performance but at first producing an odd feeling: as the eye balls continuously needed to adjust focus to the changing distance from the scene, the ciliary muscles were constantly busy; their tension was felt without knowing that a distance had changed, leaving the spectator with a tingly, almost vibratory sensation in the eye sockets. It took a while to realize that the space was actually growing bigger. Only then could the tingling be related to the eyes' actual focusing. But vision had already become a kinesthetic event. There was a quality of movement of the eyes that was achieved by moving the rostra away from the dance and thus changing the perceptual frames of the spectators. The rostra's movement smuggled a kinesthetic sense into the eyes that were perceiving the images of dance in front of them. In *Ave Nue* Paxton used*



the motion sensitivity of people and integrated the activity of vision in the game of motion. There was an interval between an indeterminate feeling and a conscious determination of what this feeling was. Before stepping over this sensation threshold and realizing, the spectators felt vision's movement while watching dancers move.

This sort of sensational inclusion was not just part of the performance. It was a constant process in the revisioning of *Ave Nue* in 2009 and apparently also in the making of *Ave Nue* in 1985. Jan Ryckaert, Paxton's technical director from 1985, called this inclusive way of building frames "building a nest" in an interview with Myriam van Imschoot. Paxton began this process in 1985 by making the performance space as comfortable for the performers and staff as possible. In 2009 he also build a nest by introducing the dancers to his movement practice, so that they could calibrate their artistic frames with his—of the body, of movement, of space, unleashing their chaoid powers, produced by the dynamic tensions between sensation just framed and sensation yet unknown: an oscillation that was brought into the performance space, unleashing sensation and imagination in the audience and in between the audience and the dancers: an oscillation nested, bridging the 'gutters' specific to dance: the not yet sensed parts of and inbetween bodies.

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# chapter 7

## A STUDY IN SOLO

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..... the sensations that are constantly coming to these senses







"Solo dancing does not exist: the dancer dances with the floor: add another dancer, you will have a quartet: each dancer with each other, and each with their own floor."



# Steve Paxton's *Goldberg Variations*

*Ramsay Burt*

*This chapter is composed of an edited series of extracts from a much longer article by Ramsay Burt, "Steve Paxton's Goldberg Variations and the Angel of History", TDR: The Drama Review, vol. 46, number 4 (T 176), Winter 2002, pp. 46-64*



*Goldberg Variations* [...] is the name Steve Paxton gave to an improvised dance he performed between 1986 and 1992<sup>1</sup> to the pianist Glenn Gould's two celebrated recordings *The Goldberg Variations* by J.S. Bach. Steve Paxton is undoubtedly one of the most important dance artists of the past 40 years. However, while *Goldberg Variations* was a very popular piece in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and was performed nearly 200 times, virtually nothing has been written about it. At the beginning of the 21st century it is relatively easy to find out about Paxton's work in the 1960s and about his role in the development of Contact Improvisation in the 1970s, but much more difficult to learn anything about his work as a performer during the past 30 years. I saw Paxton perform *Goldberg Variations* a couple of times in England in 1986. I have always loved Bach, but had never heard of *The Goldberg Variations* nor of Glenn Gould. Years later, on impulse, I bought myself a CD of Gould's 1981 recording of the *Variations*. Listening to this prompted me to try to remember something about Paxton's dance, and this led me to look for reviews to remind me about what I was convinced had been an important event. To my surprise, at first I couldn't find any—though I later found two. By chance, in a dance videotheque in Lyon, I came across a video recording of Paxton's *Goldberg Variations* filmed by Walter Verdin<sup>2</sup>. And then Paxton generously allowed me to record an interview in February 2001 about this piece that he had first started to dance and that I had seen 15 years earlier<sup>3</sup>.

After 15 years our memories—Paxton's and mine—of this piece have inevitably suffered loss and deterioration. I could have tried to obtain a copy of the video and studied it exhaustively, or even asked if Paxton would look at it with me and talk about the piece. But then we would have probably ended up talking about the video rather than the live performance. The difficulty of acknowledging the liveness and uniqueness of the performance

1 Paxton recalls giving one last performance of *Goldberg Variations* at the end of a two-week period during which Walter Verdin had been filming all of his work. The video was filmed at Felix Meritis Concert Hall, Amsterdam, in April 1992.

2 There are actually two videos, released separately by Verdin. *Goldberg Variations 1–15* was issued in 1992, *Goldberg Variations 16–30* in 1993.

3 All quotes attributed to Paxton, unless otherwise indicated, are from this February 2001 interview.



event itself is one of the main problems dance writers have. The fact that *Goldberg Variations* was an improvised piece appears to have made it more difficult to discuss than a performance of set choreography, and this is surely one reason why so little has been written about it. In this article I hope to show that *Goldberg Variations* can help us imagine another way of writing about performance that acknowledges the value of all those qualities within dance performances that cannot be fixed and are gradually destroyed through rehearsal; yet, paradoxically, without these very qualities, performance could not exist.

I saw *The Goldberg Variations* twice in 1986. First, in April at Dartington College of Arts during an annual International Dance Festival, Paxton performed the first 15 of the 30 *Goldberg Variations*. Then in late August I saw him perform all 30 variations at the ICA Theatre in London. At the start of both performances, Paxton introduced the piece wearing a T-shirt, loose black cotton trousers, and his signature black Chinese “kung-fu” slippers with white cotton soles. He explained about Glenn Gould and his two recordings of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, the first made in 1955 when he was 22 years old, the second in 1981 at the end of his career. Paxton said a little about Gould’s eccentricities including the fact that he sometimes sang along while playing. While Paxton was dancing he sometimes listened for the traces of Gould’s singing which the recording engineers had not managed to excise. Paxton’s tone was casual and pointed to his personal interest in this music and this particular recorded performance of it. At the full performance at the ICA he said that he was using the 1981 recording for the first 15 variations and the 1955 one for the last 15. Paxton confirmed that he invariably used them this way round so that he had the sprightly energy of the youthful Gould to help carry him through the later variations.

*The Goldberg Variations* consist of an aria followed by 30 variations and then a repeat of the opening aria—32 sections in all. The aria began in a blackout after Paxton had left the stage. He didn’t dance with it, returning toward the end of it with a white half-mask painted onto his face that included his



nose but left his mustache clear. I remembered this mask as extremely glossy, and assumed that it was grease paint. Paxton however told me that it was slightly green French clay, which gradually dried out as the piece progressed, ending up by the conclusion of the performance cracked and desiccated like a desert road. If not dancing to the aria gave Paxton the time he needed to put on his mask, it was also conceptually appropriate that his variations or improvisations to Gould's performance of Bach should start with the first variation. Paxton sometimes performed all 30 of the *Goldberg Variations* without a break, as he did during a short season at the Kitchen in New York City in March 1987 when it was performed along with *PA RT*, a duet with Lisa Nelson using music by Robert Ashley. At the ICA, he performed the first 15 before the interval. When he returned, having changed into a clean T-shirt, he performed the rest of the variations, including some movement during the final aria, but leaving the stage before the end of the music.<sup>4</sup>

[...] The pleasure of listening to *The Goldberg Variations* [lies] in the complex way several different melodic lines combine or are played off against one another. It includes several canons, fugues, and passacaglias. In a fugue the theme is repeated in different registers, by the left and right hands, one after the other, often overlapping in a continuous and increasingly complex way leading to a final resolution. In a passacaglia the theme is split into two voices that continually repeat and seemingly chase one another. Some of the variations are quite short, some longer. Together with the aria, they are all in G major except for three variations in G minor, two of which are very slow and meditative. It was written for the harpsichord rather than the piano, and is full of trills and other baroque ornaments. Altogether the speed and complexity of *The Goldberg Variations* allowed Gould to use them for incredibly glittering displays of pianistic virtuosity.

<sup>4</sup> Paxton does not remember dancing during the final aria, but I do. Marcia Siegel describes this in her review and he dances during the final aria in Verdin's video.



The clarity and accuracy of Gould's daring playing and its lack of Romantic overlay are qualities that also characterize Paxton's dancing. Marcia Siegel wrote that Paxton's movement was "totally unpredictable, working against the formal patterns of Bach by capturing the rhythmic thrust and often the logic of the musical line" (1987). I certainly remember the way the movement captured the rhythm and logic of the music. In 1986 I recorded that during one variation Paxton's intricate footwork fitted the music so closely as it drew towards its conclusion and ended so deftly and exactly with the music that it raised a laugh from the audience. But I suspect that what Siegel was getting at when she said Paxton worked against the formal patterns of *The Goldberg Variations* was the fact that there was a postmodernist sensibility informing his performance. Humphrey's *Air for the G String* seems to be an almost inevitable choreographic response to one of Bach's best known pieces. It is perhaps the fact that *The Goldberg Variations* wasn't particularly well known that allowed Gould initially to use it as a vehicle for his own fascinating, idiosyncratic interpretation. It is not therefore a piece of music that a choreographer might easily turn into a definitive musical visualization, but one which allows almost endless possibilities for interpretation.

Paxton picked and chose one voice or another from among the many voices and interactions between voices, sometimes jumped between these, listened for Gould's own half-erased singing, and at times worked from his own personal response to the musical flow—using all these as starting points for improvisation. The fact that he could pick and choose in this by no means irreverent way suggested a pluralism and openness that is characteristically postmodern. While Humphrey's piece seemed to suggest there was only one, definitive way of setting movement to a particular piece of music, Paxton, by the fact of improvising, implied that there was not one definitive way of dancing to *The Goldberg Variations* but seemingly endless possibilities, and along with these, new and imaginative ways of hearing and experiencing Bach's music. Almost everything about the performance—the clothes, the casual introduction, and above all the movement style itself—conspired to create this openness.





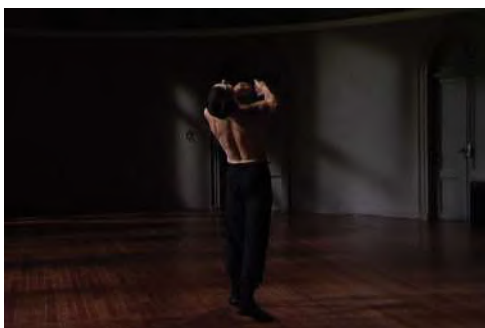
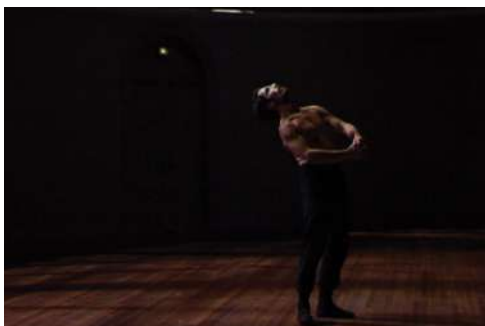
Video stills from *The Goldberg Variations* by J.S. Bach  
played by Glenn Gould in 1982 and 1955 and improvised  
by Steve Paxton, performed at The Painted Bride,  
Philadelphia, PA, 1987.  
Video by Cathy Weis. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.





Video stills from *The Goldberg Variations* by J.S. Bach played by Glenn Gould in 1982 and 1955 and improvised by Steve Paxton, performed at Felix Meritis Concert-hall, Amsterdam, on April 11, 1992. Video by Paul Snauwaert; edited by Walter Verdin. Courtesy of Walter Verdin and Kaai Theater.









Video still from *The Goldberg Variations* by J.S. Bach played by Glenn Gould in 1982 and 1955 and improvised by Steve Paxton, performed at The Painted Bride, Philadelphia, PA, 1987. Video by Cathy Weis. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.



What I remember of Paxton's movement style in 1986 is surprisingly similar to Sally Banes's description of a solo improvisation by Paxton in the late 1970s. She wrote:

*There is a curious mixture of tension and relaxation in Paxton's body when he dances. At times one sees analogues to Cunningham's shapes, but more fluid, loosened: nimble, intricate footwork executed with floppy ankles and feet; circular shapes made with lax rather than held arms. (1980:69–70)*

In *Goldberg Variations* I clearly remember a similar mixture of control and fluid ease. Precise, very small, almost isolated rotations of the head, or a subtle, deep twist within the muscles of an arm occurred within passages that seemed casually exploratory. As an improviser Paxton was trying out precisely focused movement events yet with an openness to see where they would lead. Where Banes in the late 1970s saw lax rather than held arms, in 1986 I saw much more extension and projection within the arms; and where Banes had seen traces of Cunningham, I saw traces of ballet. These were not straight quotations but seemed to have been digested and absorbed into Paxton's very personal movement vocabulary. Paxton confirmed that he was conscious of these ballet associations in his work with *Goldberg Variations*, and I will return to this. In 1986 I kept seeing these traces of ballet in the way Paxton extended his arms, upward or out to the sides, and in my notes I likened some of the statuesque poses he momentarily took up to baroque figures of the crucifixion—in particular El Greco. I may have made this connection through associations of the music, but it must also have been due to the lighting—sometimes merely a pool of downward light in the middle of the space surrounded by darkness. Paxton sometimes seemed to be looking upward to the light as if toward heaven, like a figure in a Baroque religious painting. Siegel noted in *Goldberg Variations* that “he can burst into ecstatic whipping, fractured turns, or melt into impossible twisted falls” (1987). Banes described Paxton in the late 1970s as using the weight of his head or bent leg “to jerk his entire body around the vertical axis with sudden violence” (1980:187).



In my notes from 1986 I recorded a great deal of turning, but I remember these not as jerking and violent but as powerful movements initiated within the torso itself.

I remember one variation in particular, which I think was the short “Variation 8.” Gould plays this fast and breathlessly, and Paxton danced it entirely as an unbroken series of variations on turning, twisting, and rolling—a simple, head-long circling rush without hesitation from start to finish. Another I remember is “Variation 13,” whose light clusters of demi-semi-quavers Gould plays in an extraordinarily delicate and almost hesitant way. During this, Paxton just wandered almost vacantly around the performance space, with occasional nods of the head or shrugs of the shoulder while he looked around with a wide focus. Keeping a level of interest going in this way, he occasionally seemed to try something but never let it take off. For example he extended one arm out behind him, rotating his palm to face alternately up or down, and used it to tentatively explore space to his rear. Always appearing about to start something but never getting beyond that point created an effect that seemed to complement and amplify the exquisite atmosphere Gould had generated through his interpretation of the music. Siegel was perhaps thinking of a moment like this in *Goldberg Variations* when she observed that: “Always a diffident performer, Paxton seems to be trying to detach himself entirely from his actions in *Goldberg*” (1987). I remember both of these sections very clearly from the Dartington and London performances and found them again in Verdin’s video. When I discussed this with Paxton and asked whether there had been an underlying plan to his improvisation during *Goldberg Variations*, he said emphatically no. He insisted that, if there were the similarities between different performances of the same variations that I believed I had found, he himself had neither been aware of them nor intended them: “If I were trying to reproduce the same improvised material in each of those variations, remembering the right sensations for each variation, that would be a phenomenal feat of memory.” His concerns were precisely the opposite. Toward the end of the six-



year period during which he danced *Goldberg Variations*, he felt it started moving toward choreography. This, he says, was why he eventually finished performing it.

Nevertheless Paxton remembers that there were some variations when he tended to turn and that the turns were eccentric:

*The spine was not just a straight rod in the center of the turning but was actually moving itself inside the body while the body turned. I know I did that quite a lot and I loved to do that. I've stopped doing that since I left Goldberg behind because I do identify it with that period. Maybe it did come up with the same variation. I think of those as based on breathing. There's one that's definitely laughing. The rhythms are that and the pitch is bubbly—if you engage them in the body you feel a real lightness of being.*

The rhythm of “Variation 8” could be likened to laughter. Whichever variation it may have been, Paxton says it was this particular variation that got him “involved in feeling the music physically.” He also remembers some very slowed down variations that Gould played as if there were spaces between the notes: “something like lights winking in the darkness, as if there were something dark between the notes for me [...] maybe not lights but points in the darkness, in velvety, humid space” (2001). As well as “Variation 13” there are other slow variations in Gould’s recording that might also create this image, just as there are several other variations that doubtless also inspired Paxton’s joyful turnings.

[...] Paxton acknowledges that while working on *Goldberg Variations* he was rediscovering things he had learned years before. He said he had been surprised at “how much my mind related to the technical training I had had; how much of it was still there including yoga and aikido and things beyond dance techniques, and how they had amalgamated.” Observing that certain sorts of twists in the spine and torso inevitably make the arm take up a ballet-like shape, or that movements in the pelvis sometimes produced effects that suggested Graham contractions, Paxton acknowledged how much early training



conditions dancers. “Much later you start to rediscover the same material but at a different level. What was happening to me was that I was discovering that the logic of the skeleton has implicit in it certain forms that I know.” Siegel neatly encapsulated Paxton’s extraordinary movement invention in *Goldberg Variations*: “The arms, shoulders, back, legs seem to consist of more parts than we ever dreamed of, and they can all move independently or in sequence as he wills them” (1987). This was not of course an innate ability but the result of persistent, hard work, researching the complex physical structures of muscles and bones and the various ways forces transfer through them. The tool for this exploration, Paxton says, is sensation. He explains:

*To try to find out what the structures are as clearly as you can and try to identify the sensations of those structures becomes a way of finding new material, deeper material. And they are always there and you are already feeling them. That is what is so irritating about this whole process but you don’t recognize them, they’re just feelings of me-ness. So to separate out all those feelings and differentiated being into separate muscles and bony points is what one is attempting to do.*

I commented earlier on the similarities and differences between *Goldberg Variations* in 1986 and Paxton’s dancing, as Banes described it, in the late 1970s. When I told Paxton that I thought he had done the same types of movements in *Goldberg Variations* in 1986 and 1992, he suggested that this might just be because that is the way his body is: its particular shape and mass, its strengths and possibilities for stretching are “a kind of organic limit” to the range of movements he can do. Furthermore he pointed out that “the body doesn’t forget,” as his rediscovery of ballet and Graham-like movement events attests. “I think that, no matter how I change my ideas, if you could see much earlier videotapes you could probably see most of those elements” (that I had identified in *Goldberg Variations*). The earliest film I have seen of Paxton dancing is Gene Friedman’s *Three Films* (1963). In part of this Paxton jives to rock ’n’ roll music and sure enough he seems to be moving more



parts of his body than we ever dreamt of, while Judith Dunn, his jiving partner, has stopped dead with her mouth open, looking aghast. Paxton commented that the main difference between now and then was that “now I know that I do that but then I probably didn’t know.” Or wouldn’t have been particularly interested perhaps? Paxton told Liza Béar in 1975: “Yvonne [Rainer] asked me at one point in the sixties why I was interested in what I was doing and why I wasn’t using my body for what it could do. And I really didn’t have an answer for her except, why do *that* stuff?” (Béar 1975:30) What he was interested in during the 1960s was very ordinary movement and how to perform it with clarity. This posed the problem of how to ensure that the audience would actually focus on the phenomenological experience of the dancing body.

That is, of course, what he was still concerned with in *Goldberg Variations*. His extraordinary physical concentration while he was performing this piece in 1986 communicated itself to the audience. Nevertheless, the problem he faced then, as he had in the 1960s, was, having overturned a way of communicating through dance and instated another preferred way, how could he ensure that what had been overturned could not become reinstated? Some abstract painters have called their works “Untitled” so as to focus the spectator on the substance of the painting itself. Paxton, in order to direct the audience toward his body needed to ensure that they stopped looking in other distracting ways. His solution to this in 1986 was the clay half-mask, and this, like the music and his ballet training, also looked back to his early career.

In *English*, a group work made in 1963, Paxton wanted all the dancers to look the same so they used “flesh-tone pancake makeup” (Rainer quoted in Banes 1993:98) to uniformly cover the face including eyebrows and lips. The idea of using makeup to make dancers look alike had been considered in another piece, *Word Words*, also from 1963, which he made in collaboration with Yvonne Rainer. Paxton has suggested that a starting point for the piece was a response that he and Rainer had received when they had unsuccessfully auditioned for a concert



at the 92nd Street YW/YMHA. They heard that someone at the Y had said, “Those Judson people all look alike to me” (in Béar 1975:26). Rainer remembers that, in order to make the two dancers in *Word Words* look the same, they originally thought of wearing gorilla suits, then Santa Claus suits. Then they thought of using makeup to redraw their faces to make them look alike, then finally settled on the idea of dancing in the nude with g-strings and with paper covering Rainer’s nipples (in Banes 1993:89). Paxton was not, of course, doing this merely in response to what the programmer at the 92nd Street Y may have said. But it is suggestive that a venue that had for so long been associated with modern dance would have rejected choreographers who eschewed the kind of expressive individualism with which the dance program at the 92nd Street Y had been connected since the 1930s.

I have suggested that Paxton was concerned with minimizing the expressiveness of the performer’s face in order to redirect the spectator’s attention toward the expressive but abstract movements performed by the rest of the body. Siegel commented that, “During the whole dance he maintains a blank expression, with only glints of aliveness breaking through to reflect the scintillation, joy, humor conveyed by the rest of his body” (1987). This strategic use of a blank expression appears to have derived from Paxton’s analysis of his experience dancing with the Cunningham company. In a recorded interview with Martha and Gerald Myers during the American Dance Festival in the 1990s, Paxton contrasted the use of masks and of blank faces in Alvin Nikolais’s work (which they had just seen at the festival) with the empty faces of Cunningham’s dancers. He suggested that the blank face which Cunningham’s dancers adopted in the time he was a member of the company was not a mask but an empty face:

*We danced along trying not to add anything to the movement that we didn’t know what to do with because we didn’t know what context we were performing in. When you’re out there in front of an audience you want to do your best and you want to*



*do the movement as well as you can, and it is hard not to want to somehow use that performer's tradition of what the human soul is doing in the body—the recognition of human glances, the expressions, the actual muscles of the face that are actually working while you're dancing.* (Paxton in Rosenberg 1996)

Paxton suggested that the lack of these signs in the performance of Cunningham's work left some people emotionally in a void: "Once you remove the human elements, once you remove the human messages to other humans from a dance work you don't know how to invest it with emotion and there is a great quandary how to perform it." That, Paxton suggested, was the puzzle that Cunningham set for his dancers to solve. This puzzle is one that Paxton appears to have continued to investigate in his own pieces and that Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown have also taken up. In her discussion of her 1965 piece *Parts of Some Sextets* Rainer gave a list of aspects of theatrical performance that she wanted to eliminate from her work, which has subsequently been taken as a manifesto. As well as saying "No to spectacle," this list also includes "no to involvement of performer or spectator" and "no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer" (Rainer 1974:51). Writing about her piece *Trio A*, which she first performed together with Paxton and David Gordon in January 1966, her solution to the "problem" of performance was to choreograph the dancers' faces so that their gaze was always actively involved in looking at particular points within the performance space that were usually away from the audience. Throughout her career Trisha Brown has also been concerned to redefine the ways in which the dancer addresses her audience. Perhaps the most striking piece that has arisen out of this investigation was her 1994 solo *If You Couldn't See Me*, which Brown danced with her back to the audience. In an open "Letter to Trisha" about *If You Couldn't See Me*, published in *Contact Quarterly*, Paxton argued:

*Facing upstage, you aren't blinking uncomfortably in the light of our avid eye. You know you cannot know or concern yourself with how you may look to us, and*



*so try to deflect us. With that issue aside and privacy assured, you seem to relax and really put out. Lordy, how you dance. Pure, assured, full-bodied, wild and fully self-knowing. We are not watchers but onlookers. You are not our focus exactly but a medium mediating between us and something, some unknowable or unthinkable vision in the upstage volume or, something beyond [...]. (1995:94)*

In Paxton's account the spectators' avid eyes tried to invade the dancer's privacy. Brown's device of not facing the audience allowed her to redirect energy that she would otherwise have had to divert into a reactive process of deflecting avid eyes in order to assure her privacy. The mask in *Goldberg Variations* surely worked in a similar way, deflecting the spectator's gaze and thus permitting Paxton to concentrate on his dancing.

[...] Paxton over the years has been an articulate advocate of new dance. He has given a number of extremely informative interviews about improvisation. He helped found and helps run the journal *Contact Quarterly*, and has devoted a lot of time and energy to teaching. On many levels, he believes that the function of art is, in part, to heal. He started doing ballet barre exercises to cure his bad posture, and says that immersing himself in a great piece of Bach's music is extremely beneficial. He has also been involved in dance projects with wheelchair users and with people who have visual impairment. In these ways his position is the opposite of that of the pessimistic, Adorno-esque modernist. What is at stake, however, is not whether Paxton has been successful in creating a new social context for art, but the ways in which this libertarian aspiration was expressed through Paxton's performative proposal in *Goldberg Variations* for new ways of moving and new possibilities for sensitivity within the body.

To answer this question, I want to consider one more observation Paxton made about the experience of dancing *Goldberg Variations* [...]. In the recorded interview he gave at the American Dance Festival, Paxton said that in his entire career, one or two of his performances of *Goldberg Variations* probably contain the moments with which he feels most satisfied. When I asked



him about this he qualified the comment by suggesting that at the time of that interview he was still in the middle of working with *Goldberg Variations*. Nevertheless he recalled that there were “a few moments of unthought movement where I could feel the difference between my mind and my body and my body had taken over and was dancing.” These brief moments were, he said, “quite treasurable, and filled with potential. I could do anything at that moment—any amount of balancing or stretching. My body would become rubber sometimes around those kinds of events.” This, I suggest, is a much more revealing statement than it might perhaps appear. What I understand Paxton to be describing here is not so much an euphoric sensation of seeming omnipotence, but a moment when consciousness has been suspended or overridden so that “what the body remembers”—the unconsciousness of embodied subjectivity—is able to engage with the dance *Goldberg Variations* without having to react to censorious preconceptions about how the body is supposed to act and what its limits are supposed to be.

[...] I have argued that *Goldberg Variations* is one of a series of pieces by Paxton, Rainer, and Brown which troubled the traditions and conventions surrounding performance by deconstructing the performer-audience relationship—saying no to seduction of the spectator by the wiles of the performer or preventing the spectators’ avid eyes from invading the dancer’s privacy. By trying to detach himself as much as possible from his actions in *Goldberg Variations*, Paxton was in effect acknowledging the historically specific and noncogent, nonunified processes of subject formation. To put this another way, by playing down his involvement in *Goldberg Variations*, he was trying to make the spectator see the dance as an independent entity, produced by a contingent attachment of a performer to a set of ideas that defined the dance he was performing. Looked at in this way, *Goldberg Variations* becomes an evolving set of events that arise from interaction between dancer and a dance entity. The value of this piece therefore does not lie in the past—in the extent to which the artist through his or her genius has been in touch with something



transcendent. It lies in the present, in the quality of the interactions between dancer and dance and in the extent to which these expand the spectator's conception of possibilities for experience and knowledge.

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interlude

# A STUDY IN IMPROVISATION

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"Improvisation is a word for something  
that can't keep a name."



# The interior substance of dance

*Bebe Miller*

*American choreographer Bebe Miller revisits the time when she first saw Steve Paxton dance, soon after she had moved to New York City in the early 1980s, at a time when she was “figuring out the interior substance of dance vs. the demonstrated effect, or beginning to realize there was a difference.” The ensuing conversation took place on the island of Manhattan in January 2019. [R.B.]*



BEBE MILLER: Improvisation was, and remains, my first dance language. When I was very young, I went to dance class every Saturday morning at Henry Street Settlement where my teacher Murray Louis asked us to be clouds, lines, to move-while-thinking. There was no pretending involved, and I loved this. I was a little brown girl going to dance class on the subway from Brooklyn, I was going to an away place, I was extremely happy, and I got to dance.

At some point in the early 1980s I saw Steve Paxton dance, alone, at Danspace Project. By this point I knew of STEVEPAXTON, which is to say that I'd caught the inference of his particular magic as an improviser, which is to say that I hadn't seen him dance but I knew people who had and I knew that he was important to their thinking about dancing and I wanted very much to know what they knew, and to know who they knew. No one referred to him as Steve, he was STEVEPAXTON.

The church was full, STEVEPAXTON was already in motion. I recall how he seemed to find every possible way to move his head, which I much later realized was every possible way to move his spine. His interior was the question he was asking. I recall the realization of the gift we were receiving, watching him solve his question. Watching him re-search was enough of a reason to be there, with him.

What is fascinating for me is the mystique of the time. Recently, there was a Judson Dance Theatre exhibition at MoMA, and I noticed that there were hardly any brown people. There are a number of brown—and white—people now that question this: were there people of color in the Judson era? At the time it didn't matter to me: that's what it was. I think it is important at this current moment to peel away the time around Judson, the organization of thought and practice, the geography of dance in New York City, and who was doing what, and where, and for what audience. The importance of what Paxton was doing is sometimes overshadowed by the sheen of being conspicuously present at that time, being "seen" in the downtown scene.



There is an implied sense that Judson did something wrong in terms of the visibility of brown people. Clearly though, we can allow for those who chose another kind of work that was seen and celebrated differently, not under the Judson aura. I went to see Steve Paxton perform, and I was not the only brown person in the room. I remember how at the time I had a sense that the visibility of the choices being made about where you—and who else—would show up at certain events, very much overshadowed what you were actually seeing.

ROMAIN BIGÉ: Hearing you, I am reminded of how improvisation, if it wasn't really considered as an independent art form in dance yet, was already very much present in some aspects of the martial arts of Japan and China, which were starting to be more present in the US, and of course, how it was in parts of the African-American musical culture, and jazz in particular, that was bathing New York's soundscapes at the time.

BEBE MILLER: I have had Steve's *Material for the Spine* for a while now, and never fully looked at it, but I watched it this morning and really saw how those curves, his helix rolls, are extremely martial. I wanted to figure out what was martial to me, and I think it has something to do with a certain carving of attention, of preparation, which is different from the nature of the action, war or not war.

I am flashing back now to when I first saw Steve dance, alone, at Danspace Project, in the early 1980s. And I thought: "I want to do that". Or, "I recognize this: this is what took me to dancing when I was a kid". When Steve was honored by Danspace Project in 2014, someone I knew spoke of his age as a limitation. I wondered what they meant; for me there was no limitation. There was a signature in gesture, in time, in sequencing and opposition, that was so totally STEVEPAXTON, and remained palpable. I recognized a rhythmic entry into what he was doing. I'm curious, what is a good day for Steve Paxton?



ROMAIN BIGÉ: I don't quite know, but I remember him speaking of one of his best dance memories, which was from dancing the *Goldberg Variations*: he said he got to witness his body dancing, in a way like dreaming, in real time, his own dancing. There is something in your work that resonates, for me, with this: this idea of making apparent the inner laboratory of the dancer. Even in your set work, I have that feeling in your pieces: it is not so much about making the figures in space, it is about making the background visible.

BEBE MILLER: I can answer with two images. I remember one score from the 1990s, with Scott Smith<sup>1</sup> and others. We had decided to make a "boring room" and worked with that "room of boredom" for half-an-hour. Halfway through, someone suddenly came in, and this interruption became the question: how does *that* abrupt change shift the room tone, and how can we embody that? Or, skipping ahead a little bit: we<sup>2</sup> were in the studio with Angie Hauser,<sup>3</sup> and she was looking out the window, we couldn't see what she saw, but we could see that she felt *seen*, and we could see her purposefully *be* in both of those places. The interior story-ness of that is what was interesting: the float of these layers of attention: when they are not aligned, and when they align, when they're available.

Whatever my hands might be doing at this moment when I am speaking to you, whatever space they are carving, it is just one aspect of the moment and a very clear one, that doesn't need my *showing* it, or demonstrating it, to appear. It is the thinking-feeling dancer that holds our attention. If the expression of the moment's focus calls for the mover to step out of the moment in order to demonstrate its effect, we are already out of touch with its actuality. Our complicated human transparency—our interiority—is available and engaged, both as audience and performer. We bring our cultures

1           Former member of Bebe Miller Company; frequent collaborator with Steve Paxton.

2           Talvin Wilks, dramaturg with Bebe Miller Company, in rehearsal for *Necessary Beauty* (2008).

3           Current member and Principal Collaborator, Bebe Miller Company.



with us, inevitably, immediately. I think of Steve as operating in that present-moment channel. He is in tune with his own embodied, fleshy histories, following and leading, allowing the dancing to come and go. We witness his dancing at the same time he does. He shows us nothing, he demonstrates nothing. If we are fortunate enough to pay attention to the attunement of all the layers being considered, we have a dance.

ROMAIN BIGÉ: I am thinking about the conditions that need to be created to allow for that attention to attunement, and specifically the characters that emerged in *PA RT*, his duet with Lisa Nelson. “A weird blind man,” as he put it, very stiff, with sun glasses and an inexpressive face for him; a woman body with a mustache and a loose shirt for her. One of the points of those characters was to avoid any sexual interpretation of that duet: they could be anything but a romantic couple. There is a sort of perpendicular relationship between those characters: neither facing each other, neither side by side, but living in worlds that are almost alien to each other. And they seem to have made that effort, throughout the years, to remain unaligned, in order for their encounter, their negotiation to be visible.

BEBE MILLER: I like the perpendicular, I like to recognize the pull. As a director, this is what I craft: taking people into the curve, in the wake, recognizing that ideas are in the wake of the encounter. This has to do with a kind of physics: there is an articulation of the forces that take you toward parallel behaviors and intentions, and of the forces that take you away.

And I wonder: what in that singularity, as Steve and Lisa are approaching, what is the trace of the counter movement toward parallel? They are crafting ways to attending to that fire between them without falling in that fire.



# chapter 8

## A STUDY IN RELATIONS

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"... the state of being or mind permitting  
mutual freedom with mutual reliance."



PA RT.  
Independent  
Together

*Patricia  
Kuypers*



Writing about the lifelong dancing relationship between Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson places me in an ambiguous zone. Given the opportunity of revisiting *PA RT*—an iconic piece that they danced together for two decades—I experience incredible joy but also curiosity and sense a shyness, a hesitation in approaching such a dense and delicate human story born of a personal relationship. I was surprised to hear that, until now, there has not been any writing on this work, which was performed and acclaimed internationally for years. Their insider knowledge became the foundation for this chapter, dedicated to their twenty-two-year journey through the piece. I also have my own experience of witnessing the piece to speak from: I saw it several times in the flesh (in 1988 in Berlin, and in 1998 in Paris) and watched it a number of times on video (1983 and 1987 performances in New York, and a 1998 performance in Marseille) for the writing of this paper. This text therefore presents a collage, a weaving between my memories, my notes, the videos of the piece, and the conversation that I have had with the artists, mining the underground of *PA RT* and their life together.

My familiarity with Steve's work dates from 1983, when I first saw a solo of his work *Bound*. I began to engage with his work more deeply when I enrolled in a number of workshops that he gave in Brussels during this time and began to discover what he called the "discipline of improvisation" and the puzzles of movement he loved to teach. His authority, his martial way of teaching, gave me the contours of an open space, to explore not only Contact Improvisation, but the intelligence of the creative human mind/body. Through his attitude, he manifested an intensity of involvement, a questioning through dance/movement of what it is to be a human being and what is our place on Earth. Later, in 1985, I participated in the creation of Steve's choreographic work, *Ave Nue*. It was like entering eyes wide shut into a universe already full of layers. From my perspective at the time, it took me a long time to distinguish the multiplicity of its facets. The chance to discover Lisa Nelson's work on the senses, opening up new directions in the

*There were two and inside  
those two, there were  
two more  
It's not an easy situation  
But there was something like  
abandon in the air  
There was something like  
the feeling  
Of the idea of silk scarves  
in the air\**

\* All quotes are from *Private Parts*, a 1978 opera by Robert Ashley that constituted the soundtrack of Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton's duet, *PA RT*.



approach, more layers of perspectives to consider dance and composition through touch and vision. All this comes into play today when I envision the resonances and implications of Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton's artistic journey and intimately intertwined collaboration.

#### BEGINNING

*I am not sitting on a bench  
next to myself, whatever  
that means  
I am a city of habits  
I am completely knowable  
in every way  
I recognize superstition  
in every form*

The story of *PA RT*'s beginnings, which arose after some years of their artistic collaboration, appears so simple that one could not have imagined that its performance would mark so many generations of viewers. Steve Paxton was invited to teach at a school for non-dancer students, and thought that it would be a good idea, as Lisa Nelson was visiting the school, to present a performance together. Steve remembers: "*PA RT started in '78. I was in Dartington and Lisa was visiting, I was playing the music of Robert Ashley and Lisa was dancing and I thought it was very beautiful what she was doing. We decided to do a performance there at Dartington. We did it and then kept the same form the whole time we did it, which was the general structure of solo/duet/solo/duet. After Lisa's eight-minute solo, I come in slowly; in a way, I intrude into her stage. I have the kind of affect of somebody who is blind. I am wearing dark glasses, pants and a muscle shirt. Lisa is wearing a Hawaiian shirt and men's underpants from North Africa, from Morocco, which have a very long crotch, kind of floppy. She is obviously from two different cultures. I figure as some modern creature, modern and possibly disabled. The disability goes away slowly through the whole piece, but it's sort of without the use of eyes on my part, not looking at her, nothing significant happening between the faces.*"<sup>1</sup>

This quite factual description of *PA RT*'s basic elements provides a container to the incredibly changing and complex process highlighted by this improvised performance. First of all, how is it possible to improvise the same piece over such

1 All quotes in italics are from a Skype conversation between Patricia Kuypers (Auvergne, France), Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson (Vermont, USA) that took place on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Transcript by Patricia Kuypers.



a long period of time, and keep it improvised with the same soundtrack, costume, characters, performers? According to Steve, *“it’s a curious phenomenon. You improvise something the first time and then you stick to it, but as a form, throughout. That’s what happened. There are ways in which we changed over the many years that we did it, as an experience of it. But one thing is that it’s improvised so we couldn’t do exactly the same thing time after time again. To keep it improvised, to do the same piece by title and yet keep it improvised was a problem and became ever more of a problem [...]”*

In 1972, Steve initiated a series of explorations that became Contact Improvisation, a dance form which is still practiced today by thousands of dancers. How do these initial questions continue to operate? It is a mystery. In the same way, it is intriguing to try and understand how *PA RT*, created in a specific context for a specific purpose by the dancers, was performed and had a duration of life that most choreographed pieces do not.

To do this, we need to observe who these artists really are, and how their meeting triggered such a phenomenon. If, for example, we compare their way of confronting training, we discover that both have a paradoxical relation to ‘formative training’. Steve was very wary of the potential deformation and cloning that schools in general, and in particular anybody teaching, were bringing in by transmitting fixed forms, and Lisa was even more resistant to the standardization of movement. It took time to let what she had learned from dance techniques decay in order to get back to her idiosyncratic way of moving. Both fiercely protected the richness they intuitively knew their ‘natural’ body harbored. Farming, editing *Contact Quarterly* and videotaping were Lisa’s strategies to get away from the formalism of modern dance and retrieve her body’s imagination. Gardening, cutting wood and throwing himself into the air without knowing how to get back to earth are some of the ways through which Steve opens, reopens, and resets the body’s *habitus* and the tendency to stabilize.



# MEETING

*Now she is on the left edge.  
At some point midway,  
we face, both looking  
at the center.  
The center is between us.*

When I asked Lisa and Steve whether they could explain the context of their artistic encounter, they simply answered that they were dancers, improvisers, and that at this time there had been few developments of this approach. *"We met when we were already very involved with improvisation",* specifies Lisa, *"both teaching in Bennington College. Steve had just made Contact Improvisation, which I had missed seeing, and we just had a natural affinity to play together. We danced together, we were improvisers, and not everybody was. We met on that ground and kept meeting on that ground. There was a lot to develop in the early seventies, there were so many different efforts with improvisation in dance, it was like a virus, Judith Dunn-Bill Dixon, Grand Union, Dianne McIntyre's Sounds in Motion, Daniel Nagrin's Workgroup, all were happening at the same time. It was like an explosion of activity and some of those efforts continued for many, many years. There was no canon at all of what dance improvisation could be".* In this context, where everything was to be discovered, their taste for independence, freedom and unpredictability probably facilitated their total agreement to dance together without having any imposing constraints on each other. Steve posited that Contact Improvisation allowed for someone to dance with somebody else with total freedom to invent and vice versa; no partner restricts the other. In this way, their duet, in this particular piece *PA RT*, borrowed from what Cage and Cunningham had articulated as the mutual independence of dance and music: a way of collaborating without having to discuss, plan or organize the piece in advance.

As an improvised duet, *PA RT* embodies the moving space of a relationship that reinvents itself through each performance. Thanks to the strategy of not rehearsing or practicing together in between performances, Steve and Lisa kept the dance unpredictable. As Lisa reflects: *"we could meet on stage, because there was no rehearsal, with the other elements, with the music, the costumes, the lights, meeting each other anew depending on what each of us was working on personally, in our own bodies, in our own practices."* They did not practice together in between





Video stills from *PART*, performed by Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson, at Danspace, New York City, June 1983. Video documentation by Penny Ward. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.















performances, but they did see each other's work. And they also sometimes got some feedback from video documents of the performance captured with Lisa's camera. *"Whenever we would have the opportunity to stay together after, we would watch it together with amazement. Something we could never know is the synchronicities happening between us because we can't see it while dancing. It's the typical functioning of dance improvisation that you cannot get the whole picture while you are within. We would watch with amazement, noticing all the coincidences, serendipities, synchronicities between us and with the text. So, there was very little that we might critique. We could say: fuck I am sorry I stayed on stage too long before your solo, for example, but there was not any critique about each other's dancing, except to appreciate it."*

### CONNECTION

It is this connection that strikes the spectator watching these performances. The curious fact that these improvising bodies by chance seem to find so many moments of connection, agreement and coordination. The miracle of their being in tune and at the same time so independent. Viewing different performances of *PA RT* reveals this recurring phenomenon through surprising moments of synchronicity. It is surprising to see the two dancers moving so differently, in different spaces, with different timing, with contrasting tonicity and an absolutely distinctive and personal approach to movement, yet still able to care for the moving relationship and make the changing density of the space between them tangible.

In a practice that rests so deeply upon trust and intimate knowledge, what happens outside the studio is as important as what happens onstage. Which makes me wonder: how is it that Steve and Lisa's connection is so fine-tuned? Certainly, what Lisa shares about their collaboration, that "there was not any critique about each other's dancing", is a key that Steve expresses positively when he describes with admiration Lisa's dancing: *"It was nothing similar to typical female soloing. It was a unique solo, from the solos I have seen in my life. It was not clearly technical in any kind of known technique, it was not clearly designed,*

*Is it possible, if one already  
has a certain experience  
of life  
To start directly on the path?  
Or is there danger involved  
in trying to do advanced  
practices  
Without having the proper  
foundation?*



*it was very communicative, it was very witty, humorous, but at the same time unpredictable and absurd, delightful. I watched that solo every performance from the back of the audience, because I often came in from behind the audience, so I could watch that solo time after time and I just loved it. There was never a time when it didn't amuse me and make me feel energized.*" Bound together by mutual admiration, respect, and the pleasure of dancing together, they both acknowledge that this easy connection they had together was a gift of sorts, an innate affinity that made it quite natural to find harmony together. They also shared a taste for the stimulation born from the fact that, when they met, both were busy with their own work and this nourished their artistic collaboration without any need for naming a process. No naming, no discussing, no criticizing, no rehearsing, no working on it together in-between. Rather, seeing each other's work, living at the farm, confronting opinions. A very particular way of keeping connected, with a great deal of freedom.

#### PART

*And there is some machine  
approaching  
Wider than it is high,  
as they say  
A pack of motorcycles, a herd  
of elephants, a tribe  
of Bedouins*

Among the elements supporting the identity of this improvised piece are the characters that they appear to be playing. But also their relation to Robert Ashley's text, a continuous flow of spoken images that he reads throughout his opera, *Private Parts*, which constitute the soundtrack for Steve and Lisa's dancing. These characters are implied by very subtle transformations of their faces, permitting the dancers/partners to not perceive each other as simply themselves. Lisa gave some more details: "*We were underlining the gender ambiguity, me with a mustache and flowing men's underpants, which could be read as very feminine, while soloing to the story about a man, Steve very macho, almost cartoon-like, soloing to the story about a woman. Referencing the characters of the parts of Ashley's opera: Lisa during the story about the man in the hotel room, and Steve during the story about the woman in the backyard.*"

These additions to their appearance, Lisa's mustache and Steve's round sunglasses, function as a sort of mask. Why a mask? For Steve, this emerged out of necessity in the context



of the first performance: *“We were performing for our students, we were well-known, familiar elements in their day, we wanted to transform a little bit, a sort of shamanic transformation, change our faces a little bit, do something to indicate that this was supposed to be another reality.”* Underneath this first necessity, and seeing that these characters lasted for so long, it appears that these subtle transformations are in fact essential for orienting the interactions between them. Steve adds to this: *“I also made a decision that when we were in physical contact, I would not gaze intensely into her face. In order to make this extremely clear, I would often look away. We could be in some movement embracing, touching, hands holding or even a lift and I would look into the wings, or the floor, in other words, I was undirecting my attention so that it would not turn into a normal relation, not necessarily romantic, but even not situational. I wanted the situation to remain stranger than a normal conversation or dance duet or whatever.”* They did not want it to be a romantic duet, the classical man and woman dance duet, expressing love to each other in an explicit way. Love, tenderness, sweetness, kindness were present in their relationship anyway: this is probably why they needed to find ways to evade them, to transform these qualities into an unknown, open, unpredictable, unstable interaction. Both had strategies for maintaining the dance together and keeping the playground always new, always different. The mustachioed Lisa with her Chaplin-like way of moving, jumping from one action to another with no possible anticipation. Steve playing with the blind macho figure, not looking directly at her, but full of attention and awareness of the slightest change from his partner without needing to gaze at her.

#### ATTENTION GAME

Having watched these moments, I have a fresh memory of this virtuosic game of being together, while at the same time maintaining a distance that helps feed uncertainty. It is perhaps the alternation between direct and indirect attention that they both used at different moments, which is at the heart of the shared inner score sustaining the whole piece. *“Not giving*

*My mind turns to my breath.*  
*My mind watches my breath.*  
*My mind turns and watches*  
*my breath.*  
*My mind turns and faces*  
*my breath.*  
*My mind sees every aspect of*  
*the beauty of my breath.*



*in is the whole thing*”, comments Lisa in dialogue with dancers revisiting PA RT through their own improvised duet. “*That’s the nature of our way through PA RT. I like the way it balanced direct attention—shifting attention from a kind of peripheral, parallel universe, where each of us are in our own imagined space with the other, into a more direct attention to one another, and direct touch.*”<sup>2</sup>

Steve’s faked blindness helped him to not look at his partner. For Lisa it raised other questions over the years. She mentions how delicate it became to make decisions about moments of transition from solo to duet, from duet to solo and back to duet. In these key moments, where the transition occurs, from presence to disappearance, or vice versa the performers can choose whether to let the transition become visible, readable, either in an ambiguous or obvious way, and these moments became increasingly subject to questioning: “*...a really fascinating issue that I was scared to confront every time we met on stage to do another performance were three places in the piece. It seems somehow that everything hinged on those three decisions. One was when Steve entered my solo in the beginning, the other when I left the stage for his solo and then when I returned. These three moments in this 45-minute piece were crucial for me in terms of form over time and how the form not just encompasses content, not just holds the content or orders the content, but influences the content. And that, in this case, for me, had to do with direct or indirect attention.*”

#### RELATION TO MUSIC

Central to the piece and subject to a lot of interpretation, Robert Ashley’s soundtrack was a source of infinite exchange and observation between them, as Lisa recalls: “*there were also totally different ways that Steve and I attended to Ashley’s text, which you’re able to follow if you understand English well enough.*” From the beginning, Steve was fascinated by the text, and over the course of an entire year tried to understand its meaning.

*This is a record, I am sitting  
on a bench next to myself  
Inside of me the words form  
Come down from the tree  
and fight like a man  
Two G’s in “eggs”  
This is not a record, this  
is a story*

2 Extract from “Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton in Conversation with Megan Bridge and Beau Hancock”, *Movement Research Critical Correspondence (online journal)*, February 2019.



Through years of listening, it became somehow familiar while still mysterious. Conscious of how difficult it was for an audience, even an English-speaking audience, to grasp the text's meaning at the same time as looking at the dancing, Lisa and Steve anticipated the potential effect on the viewer. According to Steve *"We knew that an audience listening to these words would be distracted by the dancing and forget the sense of the words, and his voice is hypnotic. [...] If they don't speak the language, they may just listen to the musical elements. I thought it was marvellous, such an interesting way to think about theater, dance theater, in the shifting of the senses from one to another. And not trying to keep them all together, not trying to keep each one visible or audible or sensible. To allow the senses to shift as they would."* Steve reports that he was carefully listening to the whole—the text, the words, the music, the tabla, the fictional and historical characters evoked in the writing—for example, his recurring sadness when remembering Giordano Bruno's fate. On the other hand, Lisa who says that she is mostly text-deaf, remembers playing in and out of the text: some phrases awakening her attention more than others, such as "He handles himself in the morning" or "Every kid is armed, so where are you going?", which she humorously recalls trying to avoid reacting to or anticipating. In a way, Lisa was trying to deliberately elude the possibility of being drowned by the soundtrack, while simultaneously being deeply infused with the sound of Robert Ashley's voice, tone, rhythm, phrasing. Over time, she discovered new strategies for interacting with the text, less avoiding being moved by the organ music, playing in and out of it.

#### INDEPENDENT TOGETHER

*PART* offers a field in which to observe Steve and Lisa's unique ways of collaborating and of finding unison together while staying on their own paths. I experienced this ability for unison first-hand in my interview with them: moments in which it was nearly impossible for me to discern who was speaking first because the two voices echoed each other, and moments in which they were speaking together, overlapping a little,

*They stretch.  
They never lose their shape.  
They are ageless.  
They don't need repair.  
They need attention  
and respect.*



and not saying the same thing... Steve sums this up in his own words: *"It became a kind of work in which she was independent and I was independent and we were together."*

#### POST-SCRIPTUM: NIGHT STAND

*Dear George, what's going on?  
I'm not the same person that  
I used to be.*

Perhaps, it is easy to understand why, after twenty-two years playing the same piece, even if it was improvised, they felt the need to let it go and build a new piece. But the challenge was high. *PA RT* was born effortlessly, even if its continuation brought its own bundle of questions. The making of *Night Stand* (2004-2014) had to be different: it required a whole different process of making decisions in advance, building the piece by following both Lisa and Steve's desires, interests, dreams and solos, in order to give to this new piece a configuration that would reflect their current artistic motivations.

Strangely, only the acceptance of a loss, a kind of bereavement, would make it possible to reach a new place. Steve also describes this path as a reconsideration of their way of being together: *"Out of our relationship and out of our life on stage for 22 years, it was important that it would not be PA RT. So, when we started, I was so inconsolable because we had lost that loving feeling, we had lost the intimacy and the assumption of collaboration because that was part of PA RT. It was a much colder relationship, I felt much more isolated. For sure I am connected with Lisa. Before, I had the feeling we can connect at any time. But it had to be achieved this way because otherwise it couldn't be a different piece."*

When I witness *Night Stand*, with the recent memory of *PA RT*'s performances, I have a glimpse of a 'trans-piece', a world where things happen through what the performers do and make visible as well as through what they do not do and do not let us see. Disappearance has as much value as presence, darkness as lightness, objects as persons, relation as non-relation, movement as stillness. A ghostly performance, which imprints upon the spectator deep impressions with vague contours.



Lisa describes *Night Stand* as a shadow piece to *PA RT*: yet another side of the same seemingly infinite relationship of mutual discovery. *"We finished the setting of the light environment right before we stopped performing it, she said, because it was always in progress each time we performed it. We got to perform it six or seven times before we stopped performing it. It was not an easy piece, but it was such a great challenge, I wished I could continue doing it for the rest of my life."*







# portfolio





Steve Paxton in Colorado, 1990.  
Photo by Peter Nelhaus.





so everything you're hearing or seeing is afterimage









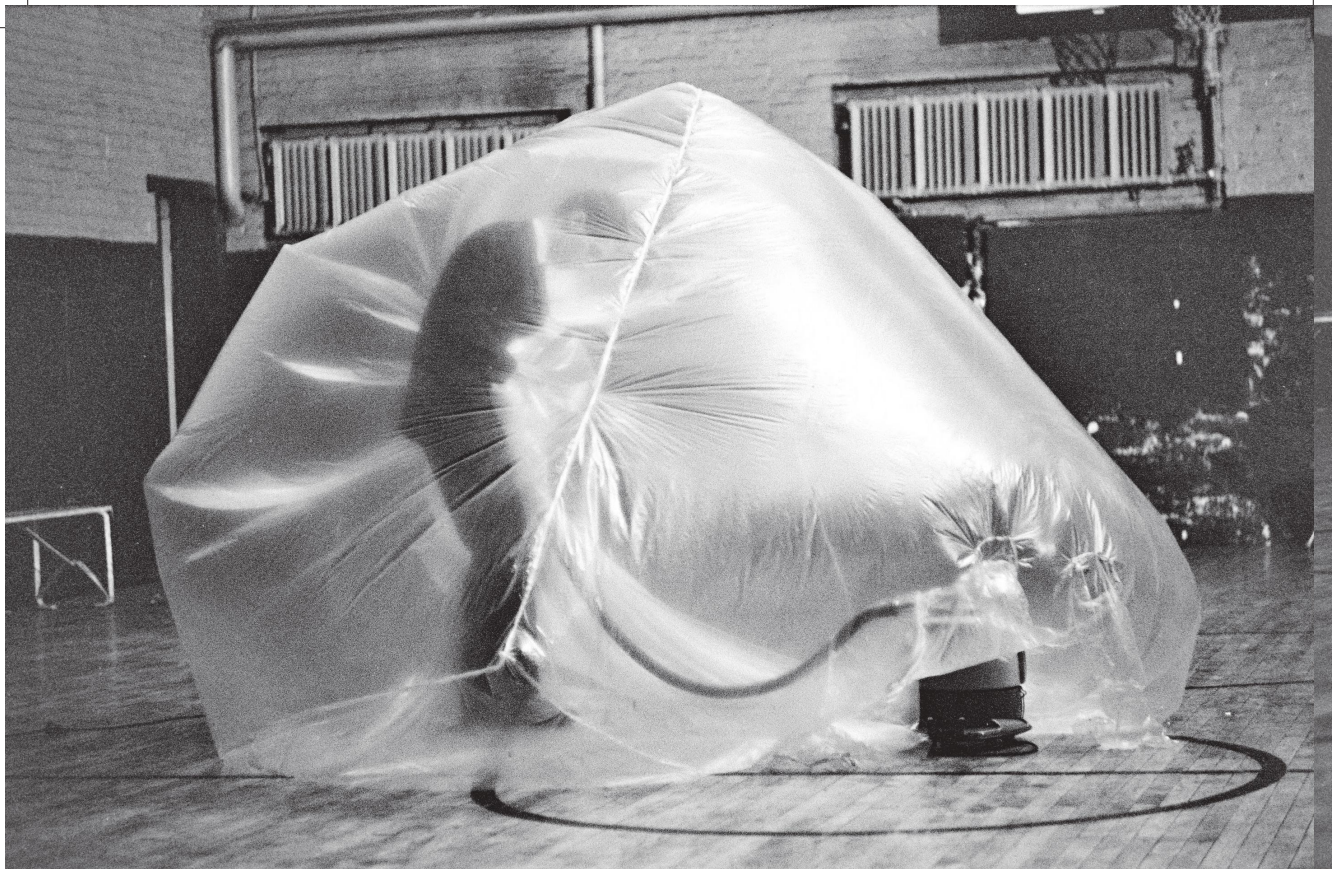




























































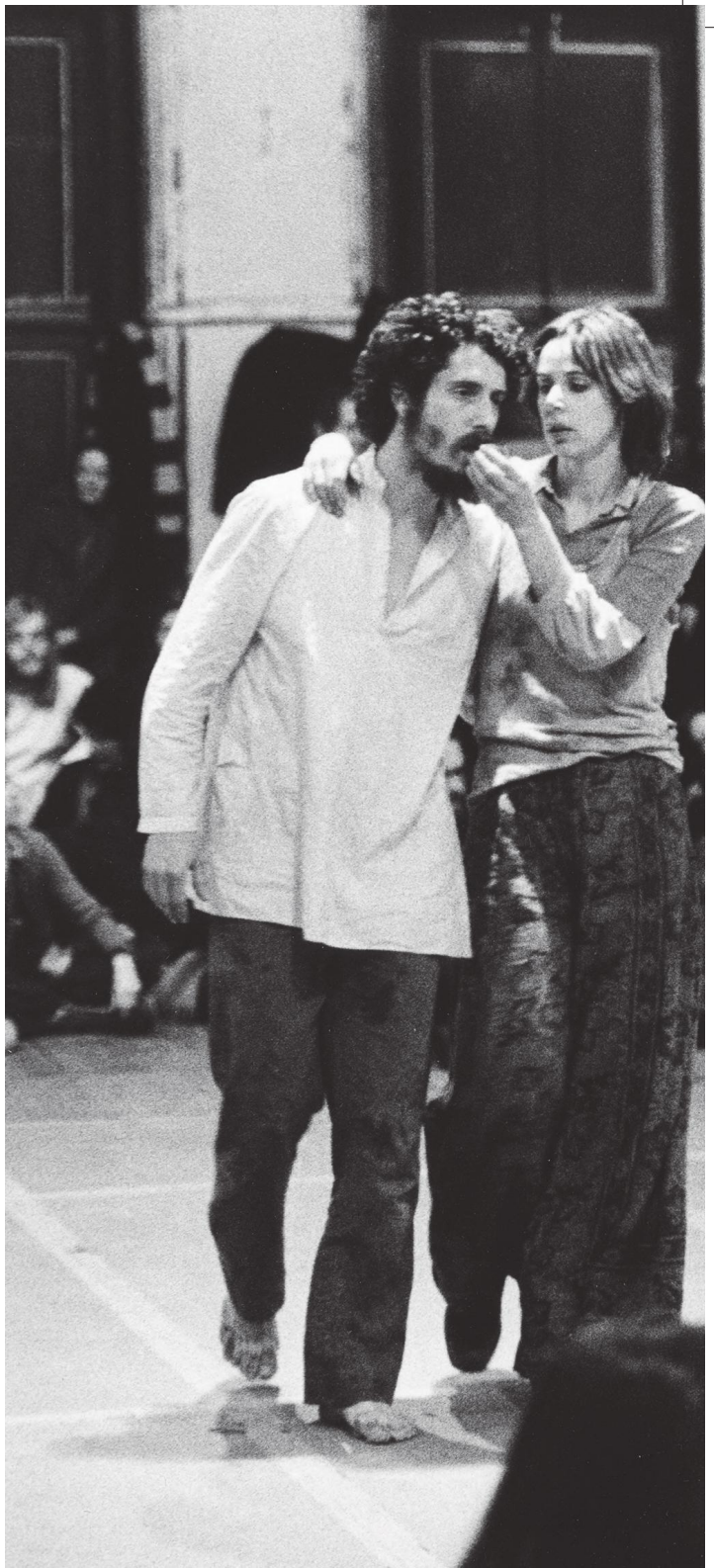
Peter Moore, performance view of Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin Lover*, at the Whitney Museum, New York City, April 20, 1971.





Have you lubricated your joints with the movement? ...





(from left to right) Steve Paxton, Nancy Green, Barbara Dilley (?), Yvonne Rainer and Dong in a Grand Union performance, at Joe LoGiudice Gallery, in New York City, on May 28, 1972. Photo © 1972 Babette Mangolte.





massage and wring like a sponge





(from left to right) Barbara Dilley, Steve Paxton (with ladder), Nancy Green, Douglas Dunn, Trisha Brown, and David Gordon, in a Grand Union performance, place unknown, circa 1975. Photo © 1975 Babette Mangolte.





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(from left to right) Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and Nancy Green  
in a Grand Union performance, at La Mamma, New York City, 1976.  
Photo © 1976 Babette Mangolte.

the tightness around the edge of it ...





Accidental double exposure of Steve Paxton at the Whitney Museum performing with Grand Union, and Carolyn Brown (far left) and Merce Cunningham (far right) performing with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City, 1970. Photo by James Klosty.





let the nerves tell the brain to send more juices there ...





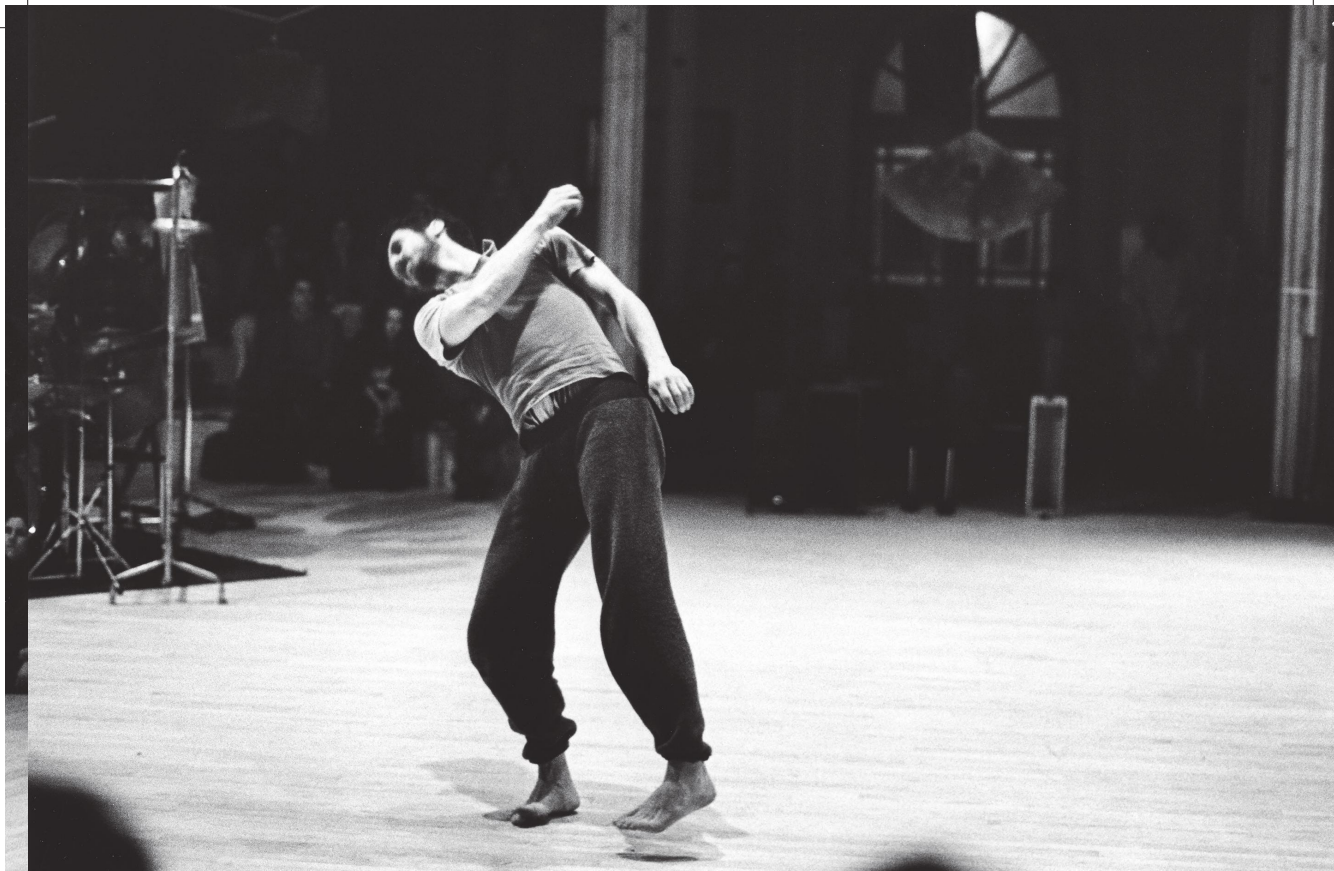




























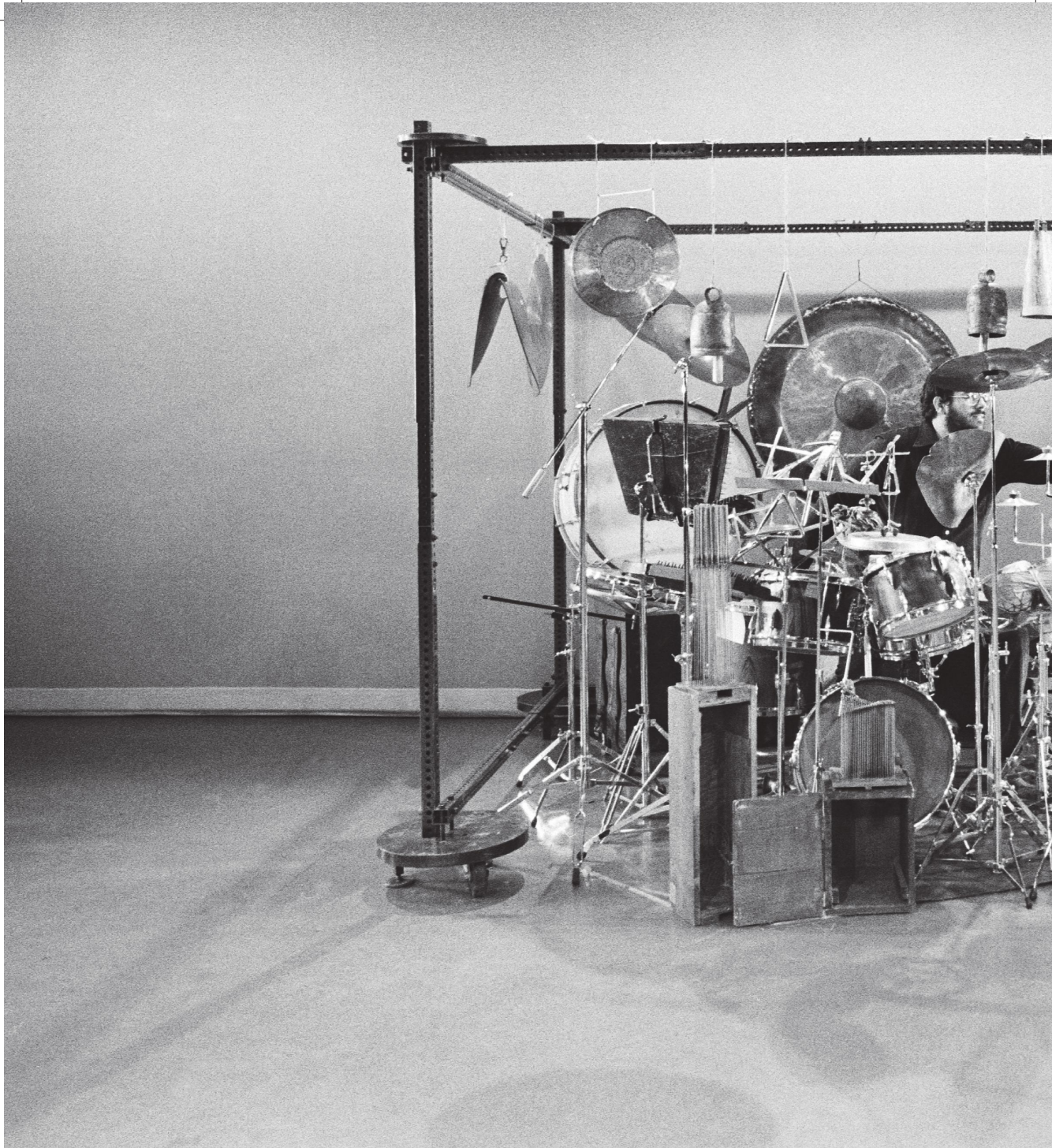












Steve Paxton and David Moss performing *Backwater: Twosome*, at the Dance Theater Workshop, New York City, November 1978.  
Photo by Stephen Petegorsky.

























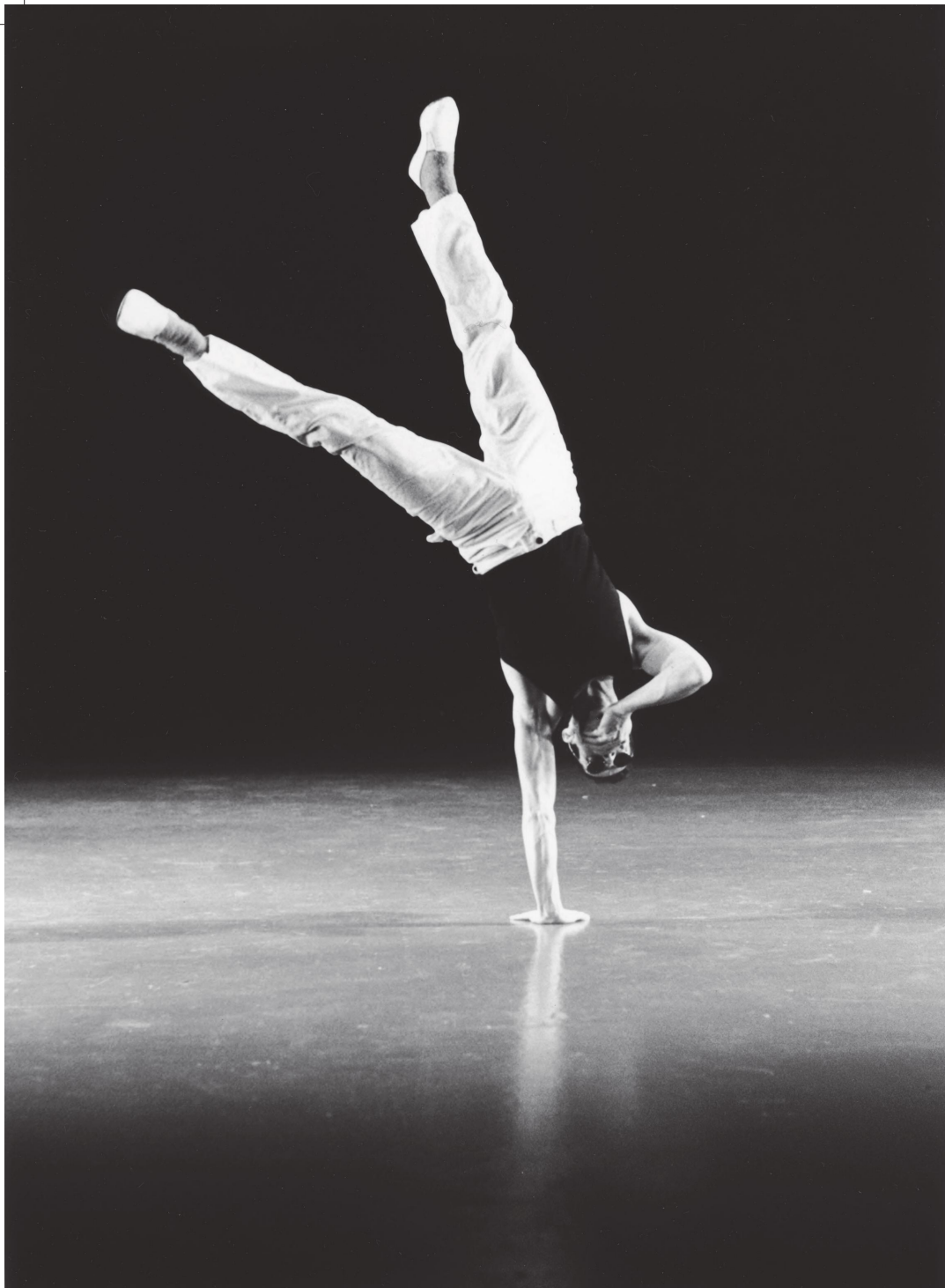
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(from left to right) Lisa Nelson, Daniel Lepkoff, Christina Svane, Steve Paxton  
and Nancy Stark Smith in a Contact Improvisation performance, at Thornes Market,  
Northampton, MA, October 1978.  
Photo by Stephen Petegorsky.

































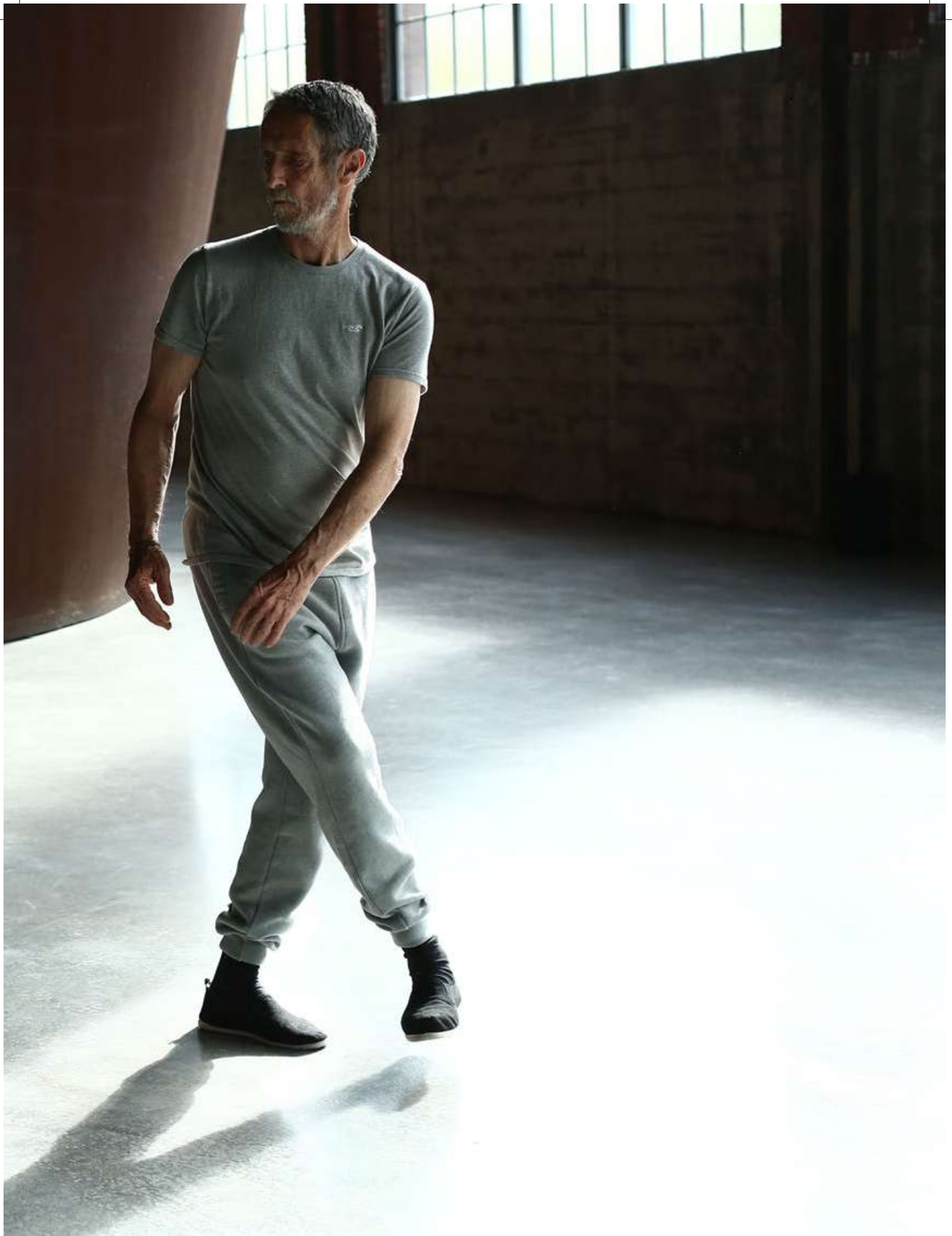












Okay ... Standing ...







Relax erect with the weight toward the back half of the knee...



dancelifeworld

*Colleen  
Bartley*



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1939

Emerges in Phoenix, Arizona, USA

January 21, 1939  
Birth

WWII breaks out.  
  
Bennington College  
Summer School  
of the Dance holds  
its session at Mills  
College in Oakland,  
California. Martha  
Graham discovers  
Merce Cunningham  
and invites him to  
join her company.

1941

Hears about the attack on Pearl Harbor on the radio. Dec. 2.

Family moves  
to Prescott, AZ.

Ted Shawn founds  
Jacob's Pillow  
Dance Festival.

1944

Enters kindergarten.

Douglas Paxton  
(father) goes to war.

Doris Humphrey  
retires from the  
stage pursues her  
later career as  
choreographer,  
teacher, and artistic  
director of the José  
Limón company.

1945



Steve Paxton, circa age 6

Family moves  
to Flagstaff, AZ.

WWII ends.

1947

Merce Cunningham and John Cage drive past family farm  
on Route 66.

1948

Establishment  
of the American  
Dance Festival at  
Connecticut College.  
Alwin Nikolais  
appointed director  
of Henry Street  
Settlement Playhouse.

put some weight on the balls of the feet...



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1950

Appendix removed. 1 month later, abdominal drain installed to cure abscess.

1952

Puberty

1954

1955

1956

Tucson (Arizona) High School gymnastics team.

Begins dance studies in Graham Technique.

1957

1958

ADF (American Dance Festival)  
Connecticut College.

Scholarship with José Limón, also studies  
with Merce Cunningham.

Marta Hill establishes  
a dance department  
at the Juilliard School  
of Music.

Brown vs Board  
of Education

Family moves  
to Tucson, AZ.

José Limón's company  
tours South America.  
The first modern  
dance company  
to do so under the  
sponsorship of the  
State Department.

Vietnam War begins.

University of  
Arizona at Tucson  
(dropped out in 1959).

Alvin Ailey forms  
his first company.

Moves to NYC.

Works as document  
messenger/conveyer.



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1959



1960



1961

**Prozy**, Judson Memorial Church, New York City, NY  
A slow paced dance in four sections, with two photo movement scores for 2&3; instructions (walking, eating, use of basin) for 1 & 4. Props: a 3-foot square of bright yellow 1"-wide tape stage R ¼ stage 8 feet from back wall; a white plastic basin 18" in diameter with steel ball bearings covering the bottom; a glass of water and a pear. Trio.



1962

**Transit**, Judson Memorial Church  
A series of spectrums; classical dance; "marked dance"; pedestrian movement; running-slow motion. Solo. No props.



Dancer in José  
Limón Company

Cuban Revolution

Alwin Nikolais  
presents excerpts  
from his dances  
on NBC television.

Doris Humphrey's  
*The Art of Making  
Dances* is published.

Robert E. Dunn  
starts the composition  
workshop that will  
lead to the Judson  
Dance Theatre.

Dancer  
in Merce  
Cunningham  
Company

The New York State  
Council of the Arts  
is founded.

After being  
turned down for  
the annual Young  
Choreographer  
Concert, Ruth  
Emerson, Steve  
Paxton, Yvonne  
Rainer and Robert  
Ellis Dunn convince  
Protestant minister  
Al Carmines to host  
the first of a series  
of Concerts of  
Dance. The Judson  
Memorial Church  
offers sanctuary for  
the Judson Dance  
Theatre to begin  
their experiments.

Cuban Missile Crisis



1963

**English**, Judson Memorial Church

Group configurations done no faster than a walk. Pedestrian activities mimed in middle section. Props: 3 plastic screens, 6½x3', hung at thirds of the performance space width, 1&3 near audience, 2 upstage. Skin-colored make-up over face and brows. Twelve people.

**Left Hand David Hayes**, 809 Broadway, New York City

I signed Hayes's left hand and took a polaroid of the hand and signature. An on-going dance.

**Word Words**, Judson Memorial Church

Movement contributed by Yvonne Rainer and Paxton.  
3 sections: solo, solo, duet; the same movements for both dancers.  
Costumes: coverings for genitalia & Rainer's nipples, i.e. costumed by law.

**Music for Word Words**, Judson Memorial Church

An inflated 12x12' transparent plastic room with arms and legs. Paxton inside, deflating room into a costume which was worn as he left. Rainer with tape recorder catching ambient sounds; audience entry, vacuum cleaner, deflation. First performed with *Word Words* at Pop Festival, Washington D.C.  
Music made in performance at Judson.

**Afternoon (a forest concert)**, a forest behind Billy Klüver's house, Apple Tree Lane, Prospect Heights, NJ

Movements selected and rehearsed in a New York City studio with trained dancers; performed in glades and openings of a New Jersey forest for moving audience. Six performers (including small child) & 5 trees had camouflage and day-glo polka dot costumes. Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Barbara Lloyd, Benjamin Lloyd, Tony Holder, Paxton.

Martin Luther King's  
"I have a dream"  
speech

JFK assassination



1964

**title lost tokyo**, Sogetsu Art Center, Tokyo  
Movement determined by task. Measuring and recording measurement of rabbits. 3 rabbits, 2 wicker baskets, tape measure, table, chair, screen, speaker worn on head with harness.  
Duet (Paxton & Deborah Hay).

**Flat**, Surplus Dance Theatre, New York City  
Photographic score-catalogue performed in unset order.  
Score mixed with activities: lean against wall, circle walks, removal of shoes, jacket, shirt and pants; clothes hang on 3 hooks taped to body. Performer re-dresses and exits. Solo.

**First (For Elaine)**, Surplus Dance Theatre  
Movements selected. Contact shelving paper stuck to floor.  
Body painted black. With paint wet, dance done on paper.  
Paper taken to stage. Body washed. Paper stripped and applied to floor. Graphics applied to the contact paper in the previous session used as a score; paper taken up. Solo.

**Jag Vill Gärna Telefonera**, Moderna Museet, Stockholm  
Long movement score, instructions with live chicken, chair-cake eating. Chicken coop, three chickens, full-size overstuffed chair made of yellow frosted cake suspended 10' above sawdust.  
Costumes: ordinary clothes with complex of zippers in seams of shirts & pants, which could be re-zipped to alter drape (short arm to pants leg) or to the other performer's zippers, worn over regular soccer wear (shoes, shirt, shorts).  
Design by Öyvind Fahlström painted on one performer's arm.  
Duet (Bob Rauschenberg & Paxton).

Last year in  
Cunningham  
Company

Encounters Aikido  
at Hombu Dojo,  
Tokyo, Japan.

Co-produces Surplus  
Dance Theater with  
Yvonne Rainer, Judith  
Dunn, Deborah Hay,  
Lucinda Childs,  
Robert Rauschenberg,  
Alex Hay, Paxton.  
4 performances over  
two weekends  
at 74<sup>th</sup> St Theater.

Merce Cunningham  
tours Europe and  
Middle East

American Dance  
Theater formed  
under the artistic  
direction of José  
Limón

1965

**Section of a New Unfinished Work**, Judson Memorial Church  
1. On a chair a speaker and a bucket, speakers broadcasting Army-McCarthy hearings (Welsh and McCarthy as a chair or bucket.) Technician stands near tape recorder, enters and exits to adjust volume etc. 2. Technician enters, wearing a canvas "overbody": a heavy, wrinkleskinned, painted, stuffed, woman image. Curly blond wig. Under this he wears large white shorts and white blouse. Changes into formal dowdy dark blue chiffon dress. Does small dance with graceful arms: exits. 3. Re-enters with speaker on head: stands facing audience. Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* emanates from speaker, two tracks, one a minute behind the other.

**The Deposits**, Kutshes Kountry Klub  
Outside on a lawn; an inflatable plastic chair, two long paddles with which to hit the chair, an invisible nylon fishing line connecting one performer to the other which flicked the grass between them as they walked. Duet with Deborah Hay. The title involves prior collection of a number of actions, events, props, costumes; their order and setting were then organized on site.

**[unknown title] duet with Joseph Wehrer**, Ann Arbor, Michigan  
VW bug drives into the performance space on the top floor of a 6 story parking structure. Door opens and 100-foot polyethylene tunnel extruded. Two performers place materials in parts of the tunnel and from the inside draw the tunnel into separate balloons which contain: 1 table and chair; 2 highway flares; 2 500 day-glo pingpong balls.

Co-produces the First  
New York Theater  
Rally. Twenty-one  
evenings by dancers,  
painters and groups:  
Jim Dine,  
Claes Oldenburg,  
Robert Rauschenberg,  
Robert Whitman;  
Carolyn Brown,  
David Gordon,  
Deborah Hay,  
Yvonne Rainer;  
The Once Group,  
in three venues:  
the Judson  
Memorial Church,  
an abandoned  
TV studio, and a  
swimming pool.

National Foundation  
of the Arts and  
Humanities  
established in  
Washington, D.C.



1966

**Section of a New Unfinished Work: Augmented,**

Judson Memorial Church

Trio (Paxton, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay). Props: a very large inflatable arm chair.

James Jerome  
Gibson's *The Senses*  
*Considered as*  
*Perceptual Systems*

**Improvisation with Trisha Brown,** Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA

Duet (Paxton, Trisha Brown). Props: chalk (Brown), chair, hydraulic lift (Paxton), theatre.

**Earth Interior, LACMA**

Performers contribute events around & inside a 100-foot polyethylene tunnel 8 feet in diameter, with a twenty-foot inflated tower at the end. Usually 6 people, including Trisha Brown and Carolyn Brown. *The Deposits* commonly used as material, together with a lecture on walking by Brown and Paxton. Performed in skating rinks at least 200' by 100' (in Los Angeles and also at POP Festival, Washington, DC).

**Lecture on Walking,** place unknown

Excerpted from the above performance went on to become a duet in itself. One performer lectures on any aspects of walking, the other pays no attention, dances aimlessly, looks around, pays no attention to partner. They hold hands, walk around the space. Sometimes done with wireless microphone, allowing the walkers to leave the space as the report continues.

**A.A., LACMA**

Consisted of a tape of instructions to air stewards to speak to air passengers over the crossing of the USA. It was played during intermission as the audience rose and walked the aisles. House lights on.

**Physical Things,** The 69th Regiment Armory, New York

A part of Billy Klüver's *9 Evenings of Theatre and Engineering*. 250 x 160'. Audience passed through an S-shaped inflated environment of tubes, cubes and rooms filling the armoury. The final room was a 100 x 8-foot tower with a speaker at top emitting white noise. At the end, hand-held portable radios modified to receive magnetic waves were given out; a net supporting large rings of wire was overhead, each ring defining the area the message could be heard in the space below. About 20 messages broadcast magnetically, called 'smallcasting'.





1967

**Satisfyin Lover**, place unknown

42 people walk from stage left to stage right, standing or sitting according to instructional score. For 80' space or larger. Props: 3 chairs.

**Love Songs**, University of Utah Ballroom, Salt Lake City, UT  
Series of short pieces based upon a peculiar balconied speakers' bandstand in Union of Utah Student Union ballroom. Props: ping pong balls, ping pong ball airgun; formally dressed woman with gloves, grand piano, balcony; huge pile of clothes, each sewn to one another. 8 people.

**the sizes**, Ann Arbor, Michigan

Series of short pieces & overlapping longer pieces. 1. drawing of a 20' x 20' US map drawn by 5 to 10 people. 2. slides projected on blackboard image and worked upon (portions outlined and intensified with white chalk). 3. pornographic film projected on "erasing" screen of crumpled aluminium foil, but seen fleetingly on sails attached to performers as they moved past. 4. clothes-exchange race, 2 couples & timer.

**The Atlantic**, St Peter's Church, New York City

1. A speaking part: emotional experience in terms of colors: a story.
  2. Two spring-loaded window shades, one supported 6' from floor, pulled down, & one attached to floor, tightly rolled. Performer releases top shade first which rolls up; she tells story, then pulls the lower one up and ties it to the top one.
  3. Dull red scrim 2½' from brick wall with lights (from behind) illuminating performer climbing up between scrim & brick wall to 5' from floor.
  4. Two women mirror each other eating' at table.
- Duration 5 minutes. Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, Rachel Lew, Kate Rediker.

**Somebody Else**, School of Visual Arts, New York City

Units, similar to *The Deposits*: woman against door; pillow & sheets, suggesting vertical beds, used as screen for pornographic film. Woman in nurse's uniform carrying suitcase with side zipper. Inside the suitcase, a live chicken. Lecture on walking.

**Some Notes on Performance**, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

Six paragraphs on performing, played from a tape, repeated in reverse order. A stool, a dog (Laika) and performer. Dog and performer engage in a "gland" game of subtle changes in stance, aggressive to wary. Some romping. A second version, at the New School, in New York City, involves the same text written out by a typist: dancer rewinds tape as necessary. Between minding the recorder, performer improvises movement, reacting to more subtle "gland" game with audience.

**Walkin' There**, New School, New York City

A score on note cards handed out at door to the audience. Initially cued by dimming of house lights each card had a different name and question or statement of a general nature. Each remark subsequently cued by mention of the name. Formal cue-response diagram resembles an extensive family tree. Cue #1 begat 2 Roberts. 2. Roberts begat 3 Rachels and 1 George, etc. This piece was later performed in Vancouver, B.C., under the title *Audience Performance #1*.

During his annual performing and teaching Spring tour on the West Coast, Steve Paxton teaches a one-hour standing meditation to a group of young women in a high-school for people of color in Oakland, California. Thus begins the practice of the Small Dance.

**Summer of Love**



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1968

**Audience Performance #2**, Vancouver B.C.

During concerts including *State* and *Satisfyin Lover*, seven minutes were designated as an *Audience Performance*. Beyond designation and a “thank you” at the end, the work has no description.

**Salt Lake City Deaths**, Vancouver, B.C.

Recording of a doctor reading autopsy reports. Performer lies under white sheet on a table.

**State**, Douglas Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.

42 people walk to the center of the area and stand a certain (near) distance from each other in a random scatter with no groupings, but no one isolated. 3 min. 15 sec. Blackout in which to move adjust or scratch. 3 min stand and 15 sec. blackout, repeated. A timing-person can exit, cue those facing them. Others can cue at the departure of any performer.

**Beautiful Lecture**, New School, New York City

16mm b&w film of Bolshoi's *Swan Lake* (Ulanova), and an 8mm b&w porn film projected on a wall with 3” gap between them; a performer dances minimally against the wall in the gap, and remains there for 45 seconds after the films have run out leaving squares of white light.

Assassination of  
Martin Luther King  
and Robert Kennedy

Ruth St. Denis dies

1969

**Smiling**, place unknown

2 performers, 2 chairs. The performers smile for 5 minutes: they may sit or stand or move but may not relate strongly with audience (that becomes too aggressive).

**Lie Down**, Cal Tech., Pasadena, CA

Audience peers down shaft upon a reclining performer whose eyes are open, not staring. Music: musak staples.

**Pre-history**, unknown

*Deposit*-style composition; wearing earphones. Music: 3 Dog Night's *Chest Fever* for dancers. Full version. Earphones for audience, occasional cut-ins of 1-2 seconds duration.

Festival Danza Volo Musica Dinamite, L'Attico Gallery, Rome, Italy.

Performances by Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, and Steve Paxton, including: *State*, *Smiling* and *Satisfyin Lover*.

**Intravenous Lecture**, New York University, New York City

Dancer and doctor enter, doctor pushing intravenous equipment. Doctor inserts needle into dancer's arm, saline solution begins flowing. Dancer dances and delivers talk about how sponsorship affects his work, *i.e.*, how the president of New York University did not allow performers to perform *Satisfyin Lover* with 42 red-haired performers in the nude at an NYU performance. Duet.

Rainer and Dance  
Group's *Continuous  
Project Altered Daily  
[CPAD]* premieres  
at the Pratt Institute,  
in New York,  
with Becky Arnold,  
Barbara Lloyd  
(Dilley), Douglas  
Dunn, David  
Gordon, Steve  
Paxton and  
Yvonne Rainer.

Apollo Moon Landing

Woodstock

Stonewall riots, NYC



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1970

**With Rachel, Suzi, Jeff, Steve & Lincoln,** SUNYAB, Buffalo  
A collaboration. In form akin to *Earth Interior*. Jeff Lew contributed Sesame Street section illustrating near and far: Dong (Lincoln Scott): a collision and rebound section starting from random walking. Paxton's contributions included a meal in which 2 people are symmetrically mirroring each other's movements, changing leadership within the actions. Parallel ¼" steel cables 50' long (Paxton) with reinforced coveralls with legs attached to wood blocks with hooks (designed by Jeff Lew) allow 2 people to approach each other hanging upside down, do a pendulum dance and dismount. Suzie Harris, Rachael Lew, Jeff Lew, Steve Paxton, Lincoln Scott, Steve Lawrence.

**Roman Newspaper Phrase,** Niagara Falls, CA  
For a group of about ten people. Movement phrases improvised by selected performers and  
1. repeated until all have learned the material  
2. until everyone feels they have managed it as well as possible.  
After optimum performance all stand. Should one person need to repeat, all repeat until everyone is satisfied.  
Compromises resulted.

**Grand Union,** a loft in Greenwich Village, New York City  
An improvisational company, emerged from Yvonne Rainer's *CPAD*, and involving originally Becky Arnold, Trisha Brown, Dong (aka Lincoln Scott), Barbara Lloyd (Dilley), Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Nancy Lewis (Green), Paxton and Yvonne Rainer. Each is choreographer and performer and material: the roles are not rigid. Early, Paxton contributes three forms: *tiny dance*, a trio made of very small set of movements; *conversations*, brief verbal exchanges to be used with any movement; *solo*, a movement piece progressing gradually from small low movements to large thrashings. The collective disbands in 1976 after a great number of appearances in New York City, tours in the US, and performances in Rome and Tokyo.

Moves from NYC to  
Mad Brook Farm, VT.

Cambodian War  
  
Treaty on the  
Non-Proliferation  
of Nuclear Weapons

because certain things mask other things...



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1971



Steve Paxton kissing a frog in George Manupelli's *Cry Dr Chicago* (1971)

**Saint Vincent's Hospital**, St. Vincent's Hospital, New York City  
Suzanne Harris photograph of Paxton in hospital bed after emergency surgery

**Collaboration with *Winter Soldier***, Whitney Museum, New York City  
The initial 17-minute version of *Winter Soldier* projected, 2 figures suspended upside down (wearing Lew coveralls) as onlookers.

In January 1971, Grand Union gives a concert to raise funds for the Black Panther Defense Committee at St Peter's Church.

Jim Morrison dies.

WTC tower completed.

On the evening before his departure for India, a large party was given to surprise Paxton. Mid-evening, he was struck with horrible gastric pain. Rushed to St. Vincent's Hospital in NY, he was swiftly operated for 'perforated ulcer'.

1972

**Magnesium**, Oberlin College, OH  
Work from Paxton solo material. The precursor to *Contact Improvisation*. Paxton and eleven male students on a large wrestling mat in a wild series of falls, leaps and collisions followed by 10 minutes of Paxton's signature Stand or Small Dance.

**Benn Mutual**, Armory, Bennington, VT  
A collaboration with Nita Little exploring *Contact Improvisation* in theatrical forms as duets & a quintet, with additional material as in *The Deposits* and the first dancing (solo) with David Moss, percussion.

**Contact Improvisations**, John Weber Gallery, New York City  
An exploration of a duet form in which participants each follow the other, responding to physical signals such as touch, weight, support and momentum, with space defined as a sphere around the two touching bodies, and any possible position is allowed.  
The performances, lasting five hours daily, were presented more as an installation than a dance concert. Audiences came and went at their own pace. 17 colleagues and students: Tim Butler, Laura Chapman, Barbara Dilley, Leon Felder, Mary Fulkerson, Tom Hast, Daniel Lepkoff, Nita Little, Alice Lusterman, Mark Peterson, Curt Siddall, Emily Siege, Nancy Stark Smith, Nancy Topf, and David Woodberry. Supported by a grant from Robert Rauschenberg's foundation, Change Inc.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment is held in Stockholm.

Northern Ireland  
Bloody Sunday

José Limón dies.

Alvin Ailey establishes his company as resident modern dance company at the New York City Center 55<sup>th</sup> Street Theater.

Ted Shawn dies.



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

## 1973

**Dancing**, 14th St. Dance Gallery, New York City  
A personal form in which movement is used to manipulate sensations in the body to alter time awareness. On-going. Solo.

**Air**, 14th St. Dance Gallery  
Collage of video, sound and films. The ballet and porno films from *Beautiful Lecture* are superimposed with manipulations such as slow motion and reverse. 2 TV sets stacked one on top of the other showed: (upper) Nixon's live speech at the White House ("no whitewash at the White House") aired at 9pm; (lower) videotape mostly of dancing legs, with brief section of Nixon's 1952 "checkers" speech plus a long view of Pacific Ocean. The audiotape was part of *A.A.* ("welcome to American Airlines") which happened to coincide with the end of an American Airlines commercial on the top monitor. Live video shooting by Steve Christiansen.

**You Come. We'll Show You What We Do**, Fireside Theater, California  
Contact Improvisation performance with Nancy Stark Smith, Nita Little, Paxton, Curt Siddall and Karen Radler. Followed by a West Coast Tour.

**Contact Improvisations**, Rome L'Attico Gallery  
European premiere of Contact Improvisation with Mary Fulkerson, David Woodberry, Danny Lepkoff, Margot Basset, Annette La Roque, Nancy Smith, Paxton, Steve Christiansen.

Steve Paxton invites child psychologist Daniel N. Stern to present his work on affective attunement between infant and prime caretaker to a group of artists in Soho, New York.

Watergate Scandal  
Roe vs Wade

## 1974

**With David Moss**, Bennington College, VT.  
Aspects of *Dancing* performed with improvised percussion.

**Romin (Aroma)**, Contemporanea, Rome  
Aspects of *Dancing*. Work with 150' cable stretched 18" above floor, activities and images with grey and tan wool blankets.

Nixon Resigns.

## 1975

**ReUnion**, California  
Contact improvisation performances with Danny Lepkoff, Nita Little, Nancy Stark Smith, Paxton and Curt Siddall. Toured annually until 1978.

**Peripheral Vision** [video]  
A b&w film, presenting selections from *You Come, We'll Show You What We Do* (1973), with a commentary (Paxton, Stark Smith and Christiansen) analyzing what is visible and memorable in the dancing from the point of view of 1975.

Nancy Stark Smith creates the first Contact Improvisation Newsletter (handwritten and photocopied), CA

The Contact Fund is created to support a Contact Improvisation newsletter.

Vietnam War ends.  
Cambodian War ends.

and it's better for this right now to have no concentration...



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1976

Last year of Grand Union

Apple Computer established.

*Contact Quarterly* founded.

1977

**Putney Contact Improvisation Conference**, Windham, VT  
About 50 dancers gathered for CI classes, jams, lectures, performances.

**Backwater Twosome**, American Theater Lab, New York City  
Ongoing collaboration with David Moss, percussionist. Performed in other venues (such as Dartington College) over several years.

Steve Paxton launches a petition for investing in the ghost town of Ruby in the desert mountains of Arizona, as an artistic commune around the practice of Contact Improvisation.

Voyager spacecraft launch.

1978

**PA RT**, Dartington College, UK  
Collaborative duet with Lisa Nelson.  
Score: solo, duet, solo, duet. With the music of *Private Parts* by Robert Ashley (Lovely Music, publisher).  
An ongoing collaboration touring worldwide, from 1978 to 2002.

**Free Lance Dance**  
Improvisational touring company with Daniel Lepkoff, Lisa Nelson, Nancy Stark Smith, Paxton, and Christina Svane.

**The Reading<sup>3</sup>**, Dance Theater Workshop, NYC  
“Five people with paper bags on their heads simulate the finger movement of a left hand while standing in a string-delineated cube” (Y. Rainer). Performed, twice, the Free Lance Dance company.

**Asteroid**, Western Front, Canada  
A dance made for the video camera in collaboration with Paul Wong.

Contact Collaborations, Inc. established. Nonprofit organization founded by Paxton, Nelson, Smith, Lepkoff, Neece, Svane, Zimmer to umbrella the publishing of journals, books, conferences, and video activity.

Invention of artificial insulin.

First test tube baby

Gordon Matta-Clark dies.

*The School for Movement Research & Construction* is founded in NYC. Paxton will become a regular collaborator.

1979

**Current Exchange**, Vancouver, B.C.  
(month long residency) 28 people danced, videotaped, and talked about dance. Classes, jams and performances.

**Chute** [video]  
A b&w film presenting edits of the first CI demonstrations/ installation in NYC. at the John Weber Gallery in 1972, with narration by Paxton describing some of the original concerns of the form.  
Camera: Steve Christiansen. Editing: Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, Paxton.



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1980

Keynote at American Dance Guild's *Dance as Art Sport* Conference, Minneapolis, MN  
Five days of classes, panel discussions, performances with over 300 people from US, Canada and Europe.

National Endowment  
for the Arts Award  
(NEA)

**Raft**, Northampton, MA.  
Freelance Dance, collaboration with Paxton, Lepkoff, Nelson, Smith, and Svane. Choreography and improvisation including spinal waves, imagistic duets. Full evening.

1981

MTV is born.

AIDS crisis begins.

1982

**Bound**, Spaziozero, Rome  
Solo. A sound-score that includes scratchy ham radio voices, Bulgarian women's choir; a cradle and a rocking chair onstage as the piece progresses, with the performer sitting between the two, an upstage projector screen and a costume of camouflage fabric.

Stephen Petronio  
and Randy Warshaw  
perform their version  
of the score of *Tag*  
*Vill Gärna Telefonera*.

Falklands War  
First CD Player  
Michael Jackson's  
*Thriller* release

1983

**Oono Home Permanent**, Spaziozero, Rome  
Vignettes relating to planet damage. Set included a rope bridge between poles of the circus tent, large branches hung with plastic waste from the Tiber, a full scale 2-d elephant, a fore-fringe which turned from grass to fire. Lisa Nelson, Marc LaCroix (props and sets), Paxton.

**Contact at 10<sup>th</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup>**, St. Mark's Church, New York City  
Conference and performances, panel discussion and a CI jam looking at the continuities and changes of CI from 1972-1983.

Granada invasion.

1984

**1894**, Dartington College, UK  
Collaboration with Anne Kilcoyne and students. A play based on the autobiography of Dr. Daniel Schreber, whom Sigmund Freud analysed, apparently from the autobiography.

Famine in Ethiopia

UK Miners Strike

Indira Ghandi murder

feel the play of rush and pause of the small dance...



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1985

**Ave Nue**, Dailly Square barracks, Schaarbeek, Brussels  
Created in a long hallway (300') of an abandoned military school in Brussels with the support of the Kaai Theater. Audience seated in facing rostra (about 50 people), 8' apart. As the piece begins, with live music (cello and voices), the rostra imperceptibly draw away from each other, and the audience proceeds slowly backward 75' to the end of the hall. Screens are used to alter the audiences' sense of horizon. Along the hallway were approx. 30 columns which had been painted a spectrum from bright red to grey blue so the near columns were red and the colors faded progressively into the blue distance. Movement derived from photo scores by Paxton. Cello: Ryszard Turbiasz. Singers: Mieke Verdin, Katrien De Vos.  
Technician: Jan ReynaertFive. Performers: Patricia Kuypers, Eddy Vaes, Willy Thomas, Guy Dermul, and Paxton.

**Ankle On**, *Western Front*, Vancouver, BC  
A choreography for Peter Bingham's company, Edam.

Live Aid

End of Lebanon War

1986

First **Material for the Spine** workshops sponsored by Movement Research, at Ethnic Folk Arts studio, New York City  
"a rigorous, meditative exploration of the spine and the shoulder blades and the hips and the head, the central body."

**The Goldberg Variations by J.S. Bach played by Glenn Gould, Improvised by Steve Paxton**, Santa Fe, NM.  
Encompassing the 50-minute duration of Gould's 1955 and 1981 interpretations of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Working for the first time to music, the movement was completely free improvisation. An ongoing piece, toured internationally from 1986 to 1991.

**Audible Scenery**, unknown location, UK  
A score based on a collage of photographs taken from sport magazines conceived for Extemporary Dance Theatre with dancers Michelle Richecoeur, Kathy Crick, and Tam.

Steve Paxton becomes less involved with Contact Improvisation

Challenger and Chernobyl disasters  
Hailey's Comet

*Touchdown Dance* founded with Anne Kilcoyne at Dartington College of Arts, UK, to teach Contact Improvisation to people with visual impairment.

1987

**Fall After Newton** [video]  
A color and b&w film taking "a sweeping look at 11 years of practice of Contact Improvisation by Nancy Stark Smith and initiator, Steve Paxton."  
Script/Narration: Steve Paxton. Editing: Steve Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith.

New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award for *PA RT* and the *Goldberg Variations*

Stock Market Crash  
Prozac available.

1988

**Population**, Montreal, PQ  
Collaborative duet with Lisa Nelson, to various indigenous musics and field recordings.

**A Large Body of Work**, Dartington School of Arts, Devon, UK  
An entire class of students (about 30). A choreography, with audience on two sides, one on a balcony, the other on floor level.

Perestroika  
End Iran-Iraq war  
End of Pinochet dictatorship  
Channel Tunnel construction begins.



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1989

**Flip Side**, Kaai Theater, Brussels

A piece mixing dance (improvisation) and theatre elements, creating fragmented images evoking a boat, a shipwreck, and the crossing of a border. Three dancers (Fumiyo Ikeda, Julyen Hamilton and Paxton) and two actors (Ryszard Turbiasm and Johan Dehollander).

**Suspect Terrain**, State University College at Purchase, NY

A dance improvisation with Laurie Booth, Dana Reitz, Polly Motley and Paxton, with improvised music by Hans-Peter Kuhn and improvised lighting by Jennifer Tipton.

Tienanmen Square

Berlin Wall collapse

Exxon Valdez spill

1990

Gulf War begins.

WWW invented.

Climate Change panel

1991

**Some English Suites**

Following the *Goldberg Variations*, Paxton searched for another way to solo. He chose yet another Bach work played by Glenn Gould. He changed the selection of musics as he wished. Ongoing performances from 1991 to 2005.

1992

EU created.

John Cage dies.

1993

1994

**Long and Dream**, Impulstanz, Vienna  
Solo and duets with Trisha Brown.

Vermont Governor's  
Award for Excellence  
in Arts, USA

Nelson Mandela  
becomes president  
of South Africa.

Rwanda massacre

1995

John Simon  
Guggenheim  
Memorial Foundation  
Fellowship

Paxton participates  
in Mark Tompkin's  
improvisation festival  
*On The Edge: Créateurs  
de l'imprévu* in Paris.

... that holds you upright when you relax ...



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

1996

**Excavation Continued**, Montpellier, France  
Paxton directed. In collaboration with Nelson and Richard Nonas, sculptor, who contributed a very large chunk of architecturally rendered stone. Back door of the stage was open, revealing at a distance a hedge and later, a horse. Site specific work (performed once).

Quatuor Knust  
(Christophe Wavelet, Jérôme Bel, Xavier LeRoy, Boris Charmatz, and Emmanuelle Hyunh) reenacts *Satisfyin Lover*

David Tudor dies.

1997

**Ash**, Antwerp, Belgium  
Solo dancing to a taped text describing the circumstances of his father's death, burial and the scattering of his ashes. Dance occurred along a "V" shape with point upstage, revealed as Paxton danced along that path. In the center, a chair, where he sat for the last 5 minutes of the work, describing the comedy of errors as the ashes were thrown from a small plane.

**Crash Landing**, Vienna, Austria  
A large group of improvising dancers from various countries, produced by Meg Stuart / Damaged Goods.

**Carbon**, Paardenkathedraal, Utrecht  
A solo for Vincent Dunoyer. Soundtape: Vincent Dunoyer and Alexandre Fostier.

1998

Steve Paxton performs *Flat*, *Some English Suites* and *Ash* at the Festival d'Automne in Paris

Google founded.

Viola Farber dies.

1999

Steve Paxton performs *Flat*, *Some English Suites* and *Ash* at Danspace Project, in New York City.

New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award for *Ash*

In November, Steve Paxton performs *Flat*, *Some English Suites* and *Ash* at the Festival Danças na Cidade in Lisbon. A week later, at Teatro da Comuna, he performs in a group improvisation with Silvia Real, Teresa Prima, Vera Mantero, Boris Charmatz, Xavier Leroy and Frans Poelstra, aka The Lisbon Group.

2000

Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance tours *Flat* and *Satisfyin Lover* as part of PASTForward.

International Space Station begins.

Paxton participates in Boris Charmatz's *Ouvrée—artistes en alpages*, in Annecy, France.



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

2001

Twin Towers collapse.

African Union  
founded.

2002

**New Work**, Arsenal/Burgtheater, Vienna  
A group of choreographers (the Lisbon Group) asked  
Steve Paxton to join a collective improvisation at Danças  
na Cidade, a Lisbon-based festival. Paxton invited them back  
for Impulstanz.

2003

US invades Iraq.

Human Genome  
Project completed.

2004

**Night Stand**, Centre Chorégraphique national  
de Montpellier, France  
Collaborative duet with Lisa Nelson, and Carol Mullins  
(lighting design). Music: Robert Ashley, Pyotr Mamanov.  
Improvised movement. Three large set pieces, two door  
uprights, platform, all on wheels. Set and stage dressing black.

Facebook founded.

Orange Revolution,  
Ukraine

2005

**The Beast**, Baryshnikov Art Center, New York City.  
Solo improvising with the mass of the pelvis, and its tri-axial  
movement. Music: sounds of the red bat.

Hurricane Katrina

Kyoto Protocol

YouTube formed.

2008

**Material for the Spine** [DVD]  
4-hour video-based interactive instruction manual to  
engage with the exercises, ideas and images of Steve Paxton's  
“meditative study of spinal and pelvic movement initiations  
combining a technical approach with an improvisational  
process.” Publisher: Contredanse, Brussels. In collaboration  
with: Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin.

*CI36* (Juniata College,  
USA), a gathering to  
celebrate 36 years of  
Contact Improvisation  
with teachers from  
all over the globe with  
classes, discussions  
and jams. Paxton  
is the keynote speaker.

Barack Obama elected  
President of the USA

Large Hadron Collider

Robert Rauschenberg  
dies.

2009

**Ave Nue (a revisioning)**, School for New Dance  
Development, Amsterdam.  
This version was in a shorter hall with fewer columns, painted  
a variety of bright colors. Danced by students of the school  
in choreographic forms by Paxton.

Treaty of Lisbon  
ratified.

Merce Cunningham  
dies.

**Phantom Exhibition**, Yamaguchi Center for Arts  
and Media, Japan.  
An immersive video installation (varying from one to five  
screens) integrating elements from *Material for the Spine*.  
Co-produced with Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin.

Pina Bausch dies.

Feel the small dance ... it's always there ...



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

2013

*Bound* is recreated for TanzImAugust, with performer Jurij Konjar, and subsequently toured internationally.

Black Lives Matter.

2014

*Steve Paxton: Selected Works*, a series of performances at Dia: Beacon, NY, including *Flat*, *Smiling*, *Bound* and *The Beast*

Golden Lion Award, Venice Biennale, Italy

*Composing Forward: The Art of Steve Paxton* mini-festival at the Walker Arts Center

2015

New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award for lifetime achievement

Some United Nations sign the Paris Agreement on Global Warming.

2016

**Quicksand**, The Kitchen, NYC  
This work, divided into three acts of 16 scenes each lasting 3 hours, combines sequences of choreography, electric orchestra composed by Tom Hamilton, and light environments by David Moodey to present a unified work with a linear narrative structure spoken by Ashley. Music and Libretto by Robert Ashley. Choreographed by Steve Paxton. Performed by Maura Gahan and Jurij Konjar

Trump

**Steve Paxton and Simone Forti in a moving conversation**, REDCAT, San Francisco, CA  
An impromptu dialogue in the lobby prior to the opening night performance of Paxton's *Bound* by Jurij Konjar.

2017

**Tea for Three**, St Mark's Church, NYC  
Writes Paxton: "*Tea for Three* is the recent interplay by Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer, three veteran dancers who admired each other's work forty-five years before performing together. They each bring their doughty selves to the stage, making dance and performance conversation. No tea is served, but food for thought."

Nicholas Scissione performs an excerpt from Steve Paxton's 1992 improvisation of the *Goldberg Variations* in Stephen Petronio's *Bloodlines* (Joyce Theater)

Trisha Brown dies.

Maori Whanganui river granted same legal rights as human being



↓ DANCE

↓ LIFE

↓ WORLD

2018

**Gravity** [book]

A joint edition of fragments and aphorisms written by Steve Paxton during the making of *Material for the Spine*. Edition: Florence Corin, Baptiste Andrien, Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton. Publisher: Contredanse, Brussels.

*Satisfyin Lover* is performed during *Gestes du Contact Improvisation*, a performance-exhibition curated by Romain Bigé at Boris Charmatz's Musée de la danse in Rennes.

15-yo Greta Thunberg initiates the *Skolstrejk för klimatet* ("School strike for the climate") to combat biodiversity loss and the risk of ecological collapse.

Yellow Vest protests in France.

*Jag Vill Gärna Telefonera* and *Goldberg Variations* (excerpts) are performed at MoMA in Ana Janevski and Thomas Lax's exhibition *Judson Dance Theatre: The Work Is Never Done*.

2019



Steve looking at himself in the exhibition, *Drafting Interior Techniques*, at Culturgest.  
Courtesy of c.e.m-centro em movimento documentação.

*Swimming in gravity*, organized by Contredanse in Brussels, offers a series of workshops, lectures, and an installation to celebrate the publication of Steve Paxton's book, *Gravity*.

Bolsonaro becomes President of Brazil.

The Global Climate Strike for Future gathers 1.4 million pupils from around the world.

The US Congress rejects the Green New Deal.

*Steve Paxton: Drafting Interior Techniques* an exhibition curated by Romain Bigé and João Fiadeiro for Culturgest, Lisbon, takes a retrospective look at Steve Paxton's work and legacy. The program includes the performance of *Flat*, *Satisfyin Lover* and Jurij Konjar's *Goldberg Variations*.

Think of the alignment of the bones, limbs,



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# exhibition list of works



## STEVE PAXTON: DRAFTING INTERIOR TECHNIQUES

Curated by Romain Bigé and João Fiadeiro. Culturgest, Lisbon: 8 March—14 July 2019

### room 1

#### A STUDY IN PEDESTRIAN MOVEMENTS

##### *Waiting, Walking, Standing and Sitting* (2019)

4k video installation, color, sound, 14:16.

Performers: Aduino Clemente, Alexandra Cleanu, Antonieta Ribeiro, António

Alvarenga, António Jorge, Aziza Hecht, Bernardo Bethonico, Bernardo Rodrigues,

Carla Dias, Carla Oliveira, Cassilda

Fernandes, Catarina Letria, Cláudia

Carmo, Fátima Pessoa, Felícia Fernandes,

Filipe Figueira, Filipe Maria, Ilda Santos,

Joana Dias, João Carneiro, João Santos,

José Rodrigues, Júlia Catita, Juliana

Trindade, Luís Delgado, Luís Cordeiro,

Maria João Rebelo, Mário Valente, Mauro

Soares, Mina Anguelova, Nazaré Torres,

Nuno Ribeiro, Patrícia Carvalho, Pedro

Rodrigues, Rita Martins, Rita Sá, Robert

Soares, Rodrigo Borralho, Rosa Peva, Sílvia

Pinto Coelho, Úrsula Aguiar, Vitor Silva.

Created by João Fiadeiro, Romain Bigé and

Rui Xavier after Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin Lover* (1967). Courtesy of the artists.

##### *Satisfyin Lover* (1967)

##### *Smiling* (1969)

##### *State* (1968)

Video, black and white, 5:07 (extracts).

Performers: residents of Rome, Steve Paxton and Joseph Schlicter. Galleria l'Attico di Fabio Sargentini, Festival di danza, volo, musica, dinamite, June 1969. Video documentary by Francesco degli Espinosa for la Pont-Royal film TV. Courtesy of the Trisha Brown Archives.

### room 2

#### A STUDY IN ANARCHY

##### *AIR/Beautiful Lecture* (1973)

Video, black and white, 25:29. Performer:

Steve Paxton. 14th Street Gallery, New

York City, April 30, 1973. Video by Steve

Christiansen. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.

##### *Grand Union at the University of Iowa* (1974)

Video, black and white, 2:17:14.

Performers: Barbara (Lloyd) Dilley, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Nancy (Lewis) Green and Steve Paxton

Center for New Performing Arts,

University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA,

March 8, 1974. Video documenter

unknown. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.

##### *Grand Union at Joe LoGiudice Gallery* (1972)

Video, black and white, 15:44 (extract).

Performers: Trisha Brown, David Gordon,

Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer. Joe

LoGiudice Gallery, New York City, May

28, 1972. Video documenter unknown.

Courtesy of Yvonne Rainer.

##### *Grand Union at Guthrie Theatre* (1975)

Video, black and white, 10:05 (extract).

Performers: Trisha Brown, Barbara (Lloyd)

Dilley, Douglas Dunn, Nancy (Lewis) Green,

David Gordon and Steve Paxton. Guthrie

Theatre, Minneapolis, October 5, 1975.

Camera: McCoy. Courtesy of the Walker

Art Center.

##### *Grand Union at Guthrie Theatre (Lobby)* (1975)

Video, black and white, 8:20 (extract).

Performers: Barbara (Lloyd) Dilley,

Douglas Dunn, Nancy (Lewis) Green,

David Gordon, and Steve Paxton.

Guthrie Theatre (Lobby), Minneapolis,

October 10, 1975. Camera: Stanley.

Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.



room 3

## A STUDY IN TOUCH

... *in a non-wimpy way*... (2012)

Video, color, sound, 19:00. A film by Bojana Cvejić and Lennart Laberenz. Featuring excerpts from videos by Contact Collaborations Inc., courtesy of Contact Collaborations, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton. Thanks to Pat Catterson, Irene Lotspeich-Phillips, Virginia Mosklaveskas, Glenn Phillips, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, The Getty Research Institute.

*Fall After Newton* (1987)

Video, color, black and white, sound, 22:45. Featured performers: Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith, and others. Script/Narration by Steve Paxton. Edited by Steve Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith. Courtesy of VideoDa and Lisa Nelson.

*Contact Quarterly* (1975 to present)

70± original issues of the magazine. Founded by Nancy Stark Smith. Current editors: Melinda Buckwalter, Lisa Nelson, Nancy Stark Smith.

*Contact Improvisation* (1972-present)

Initiated by Steve Paxton, with 17 students and colleagues at the John Weber Gallery, New York City, June 1-5 1972. Copyleft. Practice space (with gym mats) activated every Sunday, between 11am and 1pm, with a series of Contact Improvisation (open-to-all-levels and physical abilities) classes co-curated with Rita Vilhena and led by local and visiting teachers. At any other time during the week, anyone can come and claim the use of the gallery space to organize spontaneous jams or dance dates.

rooms 4/5

## A STUDY IN GRAVITY/ A STUDY IN STILLNESS

*Steve Paxton reads Gravity* (2019)

Audio recording, 40:25. Recorded at Mad Brook Farm, Vermont, August 2018. *Gravity* was published in Brussels by Contredanse Editions. Courtesy of the artist.

*Gravity* (2018)

Paperback book. Texts written by Steve Paxton between 2005 and 2008 (and a reprint from 1986). Edited by Florence Corin, Baptiste Andrien, Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton. Published in Brussels by Contredanse Editions.

*Napping* (2008)

Video, color, 0:56 (extract). Extract from *Material for the Spine—a movement study/une étude du mouvement*. Published in Brussels by Contredanse, 2008. Edited by Steve Paxton, Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin. Courtesy of Contredanse.

*Adjusting Feet* (2008)

Video, color, 5:19. Extract from *Material for the Spine—a movement study/une étude du mouvement*. Published in Brussels by Contredanse, 2008. Edited by Steve Paxton, Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin. Courtesy of Contredanse.

*The Stand or The Small Dance* (1972-present)

Audio recordings, 5 to 7 minutes. Initiator: Steve Paxton. First transmitted in Oakland, California, 1967. Small dancers recorded for the exhibition: Steve Paxton (Vermont, 2018), Nancy Stark Smith (Massachusetts, 2019), Sofia Neuparth (Lisbon, 2019), João Fiadeiro (Lisbon, 2019), Patricia Kuypers (Auvergne, 2018), and Romain Bigé (Lisbon, 2019).



room 6

**A STUDY IN  
DISORIENTATION**

*Phantom Exhibition* (2009-2019)

Video, color, Aikido mats, tablets.

Conception and creation: Steve Paxton, Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin for Contredanse. Filmed by Baptiste Andrien and Florence Corin. Programming:

Florence Corin with Isadora software.

Featuring: Steve Paxton, Baptiste Andrien, Florence Corin, Charlie Morrissey, Paola and Marti Ramis-Munoz, Scott Smith. Production: Contredanse.

With the support of: L'animal a l'esquena (Celrà, Spain), CND (Pantin, FR), WBI, Ministère de la Culture de la fédération Wallonie Bruxelles (service danse), Cocof and CNL (Paris, FR) and Ville de Bruxelles (Échevinat des Beaux-Arts).

*Roman Movies* (1969)

Video, black and white, 6:02 (extract).

Performer: Steve Paxton Choreography by Yvonne Rainer. Galleria l'Attico di Fabio Sargentini, Festival di danza, volo, musica, dinamite, June 1969. Video documentary by Francesco degli Espinosa for la Pont-Royal film TV. Courtesy of the Trisha Brown Archives.

*Asteroid* (1978)

Video, color, 18:54. Film made by Steve Paxton (performer) and Paul Wong (camera). A Western Front video production, Vancouver, Canada, 1978. Courtesy of Paul Wong and Western Front archives.

*The Beast* (2010)

Video, color, 10:09 (extract) Performer: Steve Paxton. Baryshnikov Arts Center (BAC), New York City, May 2010 (rehearsal). Video documentation by Lisa Nelson. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.

room 7

**A STUDY IN SOLO**

*The Goldberg Variations by J.S. Bach played by Glenn Gould in 1982 and 1955 and improvised by Steve Paxton* (1992)

Video, black and white, and color, 50:17. Felix Meritis Concert-hall, Amsterdam, 11 April 1992. Video by Paul Snauwaert; edited by Walter Verdin. Courtesy of Walter Verdin and Kaai Theater.

*The Goldberg Variations by J.S. Bach played by Glenn Gould in 1982 and 1955 and improvised by Steve Paxton* (1987)

Video, color, 21:30 (extract: variations 16-32). The Painted Bride, Philadelphia, PA, 1987. Video by Cathy Weis. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.

*Bound* (1982)

Video, color, 51:19. Performer: Steve Paxton. The Kitchen Center, New York City, May 1982. Camera: Phil O'Reilly. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.

*Some English Suites* (1993)

Video, color, 7:27. Performer: Steve Paxton. Music: J.S. Bach and Glenn Gould. Filmed by Power Station. Video, Oregon. Courtesy of Contredanse.

*Backwater* (1978)

Video, black and white, 1:05:25. Performers: Steve Paxton and David Moss (percussion/voice). Filmed at Joy Movement, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 21 January 1978. Video documentation by Lisa Nelson. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.



room 8

**A STUDY IN RELATION**

*Humano Caracol* (2009)

Video, color, 41:45. Featuring Steve Paxton, Maria Muñoz and Pep Ramis. Filmed at L'animal a l'Esquena, Girona, Spain, Fall 2008. Directed by Ixiar Rozas. Camera: Paco Toledo. Courtesy of L'animal a l'esquena and Ixiar Rozas.

*Goldberg in Vermont* (1988)

Video, color, 4:53. Created by Steve Paxton (dance and concept) and Cathy Weis (camera and editing). Filmed in Vermont, in 1988. Courtesy of Cathy Weis.

—

*Mad Brook Farm* (2019)

Video, color, 4:02. Filmed at Mad Brook Farm, Vermont, in 2015. Camera and editing: Lennart Laberenz. Courtesy of Lennart Laberenz.

—

*Interior techniques of improvisation. Or how to be danced* (2019)

Audio, 23:35. Interview with Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton and Romain Bigé. Recorded between Mad Brook Farm, VT, and Lisbon, Portugal, on 14 February 2019. Editing by Romain Bigé.

—

*Conversations in Vermont: Keyword Interview 'Gardening'* (2001)

Audio, 15:07. Steve Paxton interviewed by Myriam Van Imschoot. Recorded in Vermont, 5 May 2001. Editing by Paxton, Imschoot and Tom Engels, 2019. A Sarma production (oralsite.be).

*Conversations in Vermont:*

*Keyword Interview 'Score'* (2001)

Audio, 16:47. Steve Paxton interviewed by Myriam Van Imschoot. Recorded in Vermont, May 5, 2001. Editing by Paxton, Imschoot and Tom Engels, 2019. A Sarma production (oralsite.be).

*Conversations in Vermont:*

*Meeting Steve Paxton in the 1970s* (2001)

Audio, 25:57. Lisa Nelson interviewed by Myriam Van Imschoot. Recorded in Vermont, 20 November 2001. Editing by Nelson, Imschoot and Tom Engels, 2018. A Sarma production (oralsite.be).

*Conversations in Vermont:*

*Keyword 'Back to the land'* (2018)

Audio, 15:51. Lisa Nelson interviewed by Myriam Van Imschoot and Tom Engels. Recorded in Brussels, 29 March 2018. Editing by Nelson, Imschoot and Engels, 2018. A Sarma production (oralsite.be).

—

*PA RT* (1983)

Video, color, 47:46. Performers: Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton. Music: Robert Ashley, *Private Parts*, published by Lovely Music in 1977. Filmed at Danspace, New York City, June 1983. Video documentation by Penny Ward. Courtesy of Lisa Nelson.

*Private Parts* (1977)

Music recording. 45:28. Opera by Robert Ashley, performed by "Blue" Gene Tyranny (piano, synthesizer, clavinet), Kris (tabla) and Robert Ashley (voice). Recorded at Center for Contemporary Music, Mills College, Oakland, CA, July 1977. Produced by Robert Shieff and Robert Ashley. Courtesy of Lovely Music, Ltd.







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*Culturgest Porto*  
Susana Sameiro  
*Bookshop*  
Rosário Sousa Machado

**PARTICIPATION,  
FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS**

*Production*  
João Belo

**COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES**

*Director*  
Catarina Carmona  
*Assistant*  
Sofia Fernandes

**TECHNICAL DIRECTION**

*Technical Director*  
José Rui Silva  
*Stage Manager*  
José Manuel Rodrigues  
*Audio Video Specialists*  
Américo Firmino (*coordinator*)  
Ricardo Guerreiro  
Suse Fernandes  
*Lighting Technicians*  
Fernando Ricardo (*chief*)  
Vitor Pinto  
*Stage Machinery*  
Nuno Alves (*chief*)  
Artur Brandão  
*Stagehand*  
Vasco Branco  
*Office Assistant*  
Nuno Cunha

**COMMUNICATION**

*Direction*  
Catarina Medina  
*Copy Editing*  
and *Promotional Materials*  
Maria João Santos  
*Graphic Design*  
Studio Maria João Macedo  
*Press Relations*  
Helena César  
*Video*  
Pedro Gancho, Sara Morais

**ARCHIVE  
AND COPY EDITING**

Paula Tavares dos Santos

**FINANCIAL DEPARTMENT  
AND BACK OFFICE**

*Director*  
Cristina Nina Ferreira  
*Assistants*  
Paulo Silva  
Teresa Figueiredo

**FRONT OF HOUSE  
AND BOX OFFICE**

*Director*  
Rute Sousa  
*Box-Office Staff*  
Manuela Fialho  
Edgar Andrade



and come up.







Colleen Bartley  
Romain Bigé  
Ramsay Burt  
Bojana Cvejić  
João Fiadeiro  
Hubert Godard  
Alice Godfroy  
Patricia Kuypers  
André Lepecki  
Daniel Lepkoff  
Bebe Miller  
Martin Nachbar  
Julie Perrin  
Yvonne Rainer  
Delfim Sardo  
Nancy Stark Smith