

What I would
dance with
is a sort
of a witness.
There is a
conscious mind
involved,
but it's not
doing active
duty.

Training Perception

Steve Paxton / interviewed by Robert Steijn

Robert Steijn interviews Steve Paxton at the School for Dance Development in 1999. Paxton took part in the improvisation event organized by Magpie and Katie Duck at the Frascati Theatre where Steijn was the producer. In the interview Steijn explores the boundaries of what improvisation means to Paxton. They discuss questions around perception of the moving body, by the dancer and by the audience.

RS / I will start with a short quote: "improvisation comes from 'improvisio' and that's about 'what is not to be foreseen'." Is that a correct description of improvisation for you?

SP / It's one of them.

RS / Is it an important aspect of improvisation, to deal with what is not to be foreseen?

SP / I wonder about the role desire plays and if desire doesn't at least foresee some goal. It's hard to imagine moving without desire, an urge to go.

RS / But is that an urge to be in an area you can't foresee?

SP / I think this must be one of the deepest urges of mankind, don't you think? Take for example Vasco da Gama.

RS / What is your quest in exploring improvisation?

SP / Well, what is interesting is this idea of goallessness, aimlessness, or not knowing. That seems to be part of it but as though there is a quest not to self-create the future. And if you do have a goal or even just a dream or a desire or something which is hazy in your mind but still something that feels like you need to reach, get up and pretend you are creating - you are putting energy into the future. Now, that future is probably just right here. It's not the future, it's like the future. But it moves you. It's like looking at small atomic particles. You have created energy, like your own carrot that you're going to follow. So now there is a carrot in the picture. In terms of being goalless, aimless, get rid of your goal: your carrot. I don't find it possible to quite get rid of it. I do find it possible to change it.

RS / To change the carrot?

SP / Yes, this fantasy carrot, this goal, this aim, this desire to do something. I find it possible to put it right here, so that I turn to it, to change it, to put it far away, to bring it close, to put it inside me, you know, to work within, whatever. So I don't find a place where nothing is foreseen. I find a place where what is foreseen is the question. And do you want it, or do you want to change it, is the process.

RS / But why should you play with this goalless-ness as an artist, to change your vision of what a goal is?

SP / I guess there is a vision. There is some sort of vision going on. I described injecting the goal into your own future and what that does. It seems to me that we have to talk about how we perceive where we're going, how we want to get there. I had many years of doing what you refer to, a created vision; you know, with months of rehearsal and touring performances. I had many years of that and it has always seemed to me that there is another current which is the one that exists if you don't inject too much of yourself into the process. There are still currents to ride. Maybe that's the question, at what point does it eat itself, this process of making dance and art?

That's one of the questions. Because we know how long it will be. The act of choreography is one of the most laborious acts, if you're really working on a new movement for every body in your company, it's the equivalent of making Turkish rugs or something, weaving tiny stitches of movement together, or it can be. These tiny stitches, you're making them anyway. Sometimes you want to see what the pattern you make is, in which case you might make a plan. Sometimes you want to see what the nature of the desire is in itself. How it changes, having made it. So if I make a gesture, I am then on the path I have created a new process by changing my state. I then have to make another decision which will also change my state. It's like the principle of uncertainty, you are applying it to the interior. Every time you look at your self you change it. So you can't tell quite where you are. The thing you're looking at is very often the thing that's really the observation. You're looking for yourself, for instance, and as you look for yourself you withdraw to try and see.

RS / I was thinking is rejecting a certain goal to find your true self, with no ambition, without... how the mechanics work for yourself?

SP / You're very romantic, in this question. Do you think there is one true self?

RS / I don't think you can analyze the mechanics of yourself, how you are aware of how you are. If that is your true self, it is only for the moment.

SP / I sense the conditions are so unstable. All the conditions under which I work. Space, the most ephemeral of materials, there is nothing quite so indefinable. I could put architecture around to try and hold it in but I think the heavy-handed. The clumsiness of architecture shows you how elastic the thing is that we're trying to contain and create. I know it from inside the space that there is an architecture around. But through this invisible medium I'm supposed to be working, I'm supposed to be occupying it and changing it. I embody this terribly delicate work, this is the nature of the instability. Time is extremely volatile when it's measured by human standards. Sometimes it's extremely slow or sometimes it's extremely fast, as the relativity. Through this I'm supposed to keep some measure of myself through time, in a way, so that I can work with it, within myself I suppose. Again, a terribly delicate situation, in which as my time reception changes, so does the perceiver change, so that if time goes slowly I'm apt not to notice it.

When it's just yourself, it's very difficult to have anything to correct your impression of time with. Every incident then becomes time. The clock is your feet on the floor, and your body through the air, and your senses moving, you know, going where you're looking, what you're hearing, how you're balancing, how you're feeling gravity. Every event becomes one of the ticks on this kind of a clock, the clock of chaos. And I'm supposed to be operating in this extremely elusive field with what I think of as a very clunky, thick, blunt instrument, which is my conscious mind. I think most improvisers see this, have this kind of relationship to things, that the conscious mind is seen as a bit in the way of what's happening.

3

The time interval of consciousness is too long. We're very much manipulated by the act of speech. So having thoughts and ideas actually is a very slow process. So what one is dancing with is maybe a little bit faster. What I would dance with is a sort a witness. There is a conscious mind involved but it's not doing active duty. I'm trying to turn the action over to other parts. I think they're our true parts, however. I'm very interested in your idea about why would I have to be searching for my true self. You used the word humble earlier? Why not just me as I am. I mean, the true self is not a humble creature. My true self is not a humble creature.

RS / It's self-consciousness, right? That has a very negative connotation, doesn't it, when you say to a person, you are self-conscious?

SP / So are we then talking about two kinds of self-consciousness? Because certainly in what I'm doing, I'm as self-conscious as possible. I think there is a lot of stuff like this involved, you know. I mean, you take the image of fire and you've got one of the major killers, destroyers, big image of destruction. But when it's tamed, it becomes useful, it becomes our tool. I think self-consciousness is the same kind of clarity of self-regard, self-understanding. Or it can be the most extraordinarily painful event, causing all kinds of blushing and stage fright, that kind of a thing.

RS / In an interview with Katie Duck, last week, she said something like "dance is a woman, and I listen to her and then I dance. She's in the space." That dance is almost the other, another woman in the space. Is improvisation also a means, to discover what dance is? Or is it a means to discover what a human body is in space?

SP / It's improvisation as almost a machine, almost, to discover what happened. You discover it when you do it. Whereas if you go in with a plan, then you're going to know by the end, you're going to pretty much know what happened. But with improvisation you have to look very, very carefully. Like a naturalist, you have to look at all the evidence and all the intuitions you have about the process. This is very difficult to do if you're in it, it's really a process for the audience.

RS / To dance, would you say that you are a kind of an observer of things which are produced by the unconscious mind?

SP / As much as possible.

RS / How do you let it happen?

SP / It doesn't happen all the time. When does it happen? I get about twenty seconds of performance, if I'm lucky. What happens to me is that I think, "what's happening, is this it?" And then the nature of that thought pretty well throws me

outside. The self-consciousness of saying "am I in it now" is enough to throw me out of it. So it's again very elusive, very elastic, very unstable, in this state. If I could get into it and then just kind of stop all thought, I could just stay there, but thoughts do come and go, so that's part of the instrument.

RS / When I see you dance it's like you have an analytical approach to show to the public. Is it also what the thinking is about?

SP / It's probably what my research is like. There is a kind of a thought process built into everything I do. My research is: I think about it.

RS / But thinking and dancing, is it connected, for you?

SP / It's the same process.

RS / I just want to say - what is wrong with thinking? Because you say "this moment when it happens," those twenty seconds, is it a quest for ecstasy, so in a way that you are not thinking any more?

4 **SP** / No, the problem is I am still thinking. What's wrong with thinking? Nothing's wrong with thinking. Nothing's wrong with getting close to this state and it's operation, to some degree, and yet my conscious mind is operating some as well. Every now and then it's very good to have the conscious mind say "go to another light" or "change space" or "start moving because you haven't moved for a while," you know, wake up to the fact that you're on stage.

The other goal is toward a kind of an extremely small particle of behavior and maybe twenty seconds is a long time for this fine-grained kind of work. But it is usually a change of state and I notice it when it happens, so that in a way, just the fact that I don't drift there without noticing, maybe that's the problem. Maybe that would be a way to approach it, if I can drift there, but instead I go through some little click, then I notice the "noise" of change of state and remark on it. It's a question - what am I doing when it happens, that is, if I'm involved in something I can't stop, and it carries me along, I might get more of it. If I'm involved in standing still when it happens, maybe I get a very short amount of it, because there would be no momentum to carry me on. What it feels like; that moment I feel like my body will do anything. I don't have a conscious mind to direct it to do anything, however, I'm out of that relationship to it, and that's why it then just seems to have open potential.

And I have no idea how this looks. Sometimes it happens in the middle of a movement. I assume the movement is changed somehow by the state, but I don't know, as it comes and goes so fast. And I don't have a good memory. For instance it might happen in a performance where they videotape and I know it happens some place in the performance but I might not have the outside eye to recall exactly where it was.

RS / When I see you dance and when we talk about this moment, it seems like there is a kind of purity.

SP / In moderation.

RS / It's as if you have chosen for details, to know what's going on in what you are doing, until the moment when you can't know it any more because you are really focused.

SP / Something like that seems to have happened.

RS / Did it cost a lot of training, to be so precise?

SP / But that's what a dancer does, you know, it's constant training. I'm still training, so maybe it'll get more precise, I don't know.

RS / In your piece *Ash*, or in *Some English Suites*, when is the time you can perform? Can you perform immediately for the public and improvise on the tape. Is it something you do for the public, the first time?

SP / The very first time. I mean, it's always the first time, in a way. The subject causes us to have to play these curious games with language because language goes with order. Language is a structure in itself, and it's another medium. And one medium does not well describe another. There aren't good paintings of dance, there are no good dancers of novels. It's very difficult, translation. But before operating, in an improvisational way, with something like *The Bach*, I have to have it in my body. I'm not listening to it so much from the loudspeaker, the way the public is, it is imprinted on my mind and in my body, from lots of dancing with it.

In dress rehearsals, during the sound checks, when the sound man will turn off the music while I'm dancing, sometimes for quite long periods, my body knows that music and it goes right on dancing to that music. When he turns it back on I'll be almost exactly where I would have been if the music had never left. With the text: I wrote that text, you know, and I recorded that text, so that text is already part of my nervous system.

RS / That's what I wanted to ask, first *The Bach*, then this text, this text is much fresher. How did it influence you as a person to dance solo and improvise on the music of Bach?

SP / Bach creates a marvelous game for the ear, and there are so many interwoven, in these pieces so many interwoven tracks to play on. And he was a great improviser. I just wonder what his body looked like when he was playing all these interweaving things. I've watched Glenn Gould play a little bit but I can't understand what his body is doing. I do feel a little bit the mechanics of making that music, how many different thought poems are going into each finger, and the discipline each finger has to have, that kind of thing. I mean Gould is sort of playing like this, but still, it's all got to be danced by the musician. Essentially it's got to be danced.

5

I would love to have seen Bach dancing to his music in that way. I would like to have seen him from the back. I would like to have seen him with no shirt, with a camera right on his spine, just to see what was happening in that spine, as that music came out. We presume he played well. We must make that assumption. When he improvised, we must assume what kind of a guy he was. Did he smile when he played? All these things one wants to know. Did he laugh uproariously as he came round certain corners again and surprised us all.

Glenn Gould just seems like the most extraordinary percussionist I've ever heard. There's an extraordinarily clear, percussive quality to his playing. He has other values as well, but that's what I really like, his very clear and very tiny intervals, just how small an interval he can keep clear, whatever finger he chooses to allow to hit more than once.

RS / Why is there a kind of happiness when you listen to this music, how does it work? How is this connected to a kind of emotion?

SP / I mean, there's Bach and there's also a Georgian choir, and I mixed the two. Each of the two teams here, the Georgian men's choir and the Bach Sonata mixed during the performance sometimes I root for one to win it, sometimes I root for the other. As though the teams are musicians on the football pitch, trying to get their notes onto the other side. I performed the *Goldberg Variations* before I performed this current *English Suite*, and many musicians told me that it was considered to be quite healing music. Maybe it's just a kind of task that Bach set for himself plus he was such an extraordinary energy, his human force was not only enormous but beautifully directed. Maybe that comes through. Maybe the sound of one man's creation makes other people happy. Maybe that's the nature of the arts, maybe it isn't just the nature of Bach or Glenn Gould.

RS / How about moods or emotion, what kind of place do they have in your work?

SP / If I start by having a desire to move, then I'm going to have a reciprocal back and forth relationship between what I do and how I feel about it. How I feel about it I think of as the mood. So I make a move and then there's a rapidly shifting of reactions, which are creative as they go to the next move. So all I have to do is start the process going, and it goes for quite a while, this kind of internal ping-pong. There was a period where I felt like the emotions were outside my body. They were available and as I moved I was moving through them. Like the space itself had been colored with exteriorized emotions, not even necessarily my own emotions. I didn't even feel like I was projecting, it felt like there were emotions out there, to be bumped into like weather.

That was a very bizarre period. It made me dance in a very different way, having that perception. It only happened in performance, I didn't much feel it outside of performance. Performance is heightened and I don't think we know what's going on in that act very fully. In that heightened state I felt as though the movements addressed themselves to how they made me feel, that is, seemed to deliver to me feelings defined by the movement qualities; the angles, extensions, contractions and so on very directly. That was just a period, then it went back to being much more normal again. That is, emotions seemed inside my body, feelings propelling the actions. It was for about two years in the 80s, when I felt this.

RS / Does it mean that you have emotions, while dancing, but that you are not the centre of it? That you are just channeling it?

SP / I also wonder if the audience wasn't responsible for this.

RS / I thought so because you said it was a very dense space, so many people look at one person. Of course, it's you but one can feel it also when you dance, that there is always this quality of...

SP / Emotionality? An emotional state? Sometimes.

6 **RS** / And how is it, because this observation is also always there, is it also there when you're dancing by yourself.

SP / No.

RS / But what is this emotion?

SP / It can be a lot of things. It's hardly ever straight happiness. It's not bliss, it's not that. It's a complex emotional situation. I'm not really trying to pay attention to that, I'm really trying to pay attention to the movement. They just kind of come and go as they need to, I guess. I was talking about the senses a bit, the reality that I construct as I move, and the mood. And I have mentioned *the Bach*, and the Glenn Gould piano, which is so crisp and clear.

The way I dance, however, the turns and head-swings and the speed at which I dance causes Doppler Effects for my hearing. Under the Doppler Effect, I'm not any longer getting Glenn Gould as the audience is hearing him. I'm getting Glenn Gould mashed through some bad telephone answering machine, you know, and coming at me in waves. I'm also experiencing lights flashing of course, and in some theatres, I have no idea, through quite long periods of time, what direction the audience is sitting in. Something has taken me, I've gotten involved with it as far as I can go. And this is sometimes the reality I'm operating in. If you put that all together, I'm in a very altered state. I get none of the stability of the body, including aural stability, you know, the ability to know where sounds are in the room. And my body is not necessarily upright, it might be upside down, sideways, slipping through space in some way. Put that together with the perception of exterior emotions that I felt like I was in a trance or something, or outside of myself as I danced in that period, I was in these kind of states.

The senses are fairly predictable events, when I'm just upright. But when I start moving my body the way it does when I dance, things get a little wobbly. I guess it all has to do with the elusiveness of the situation. Maybe it's why I don't remember things well afterwards, too. One of the things about Bach is that he makes things memorable. A good composer does that. It's easy to characterize, somehow, or at least to remember that you've heard it before. But when you start having the kind of experience I described, realities like this Bach come up, and are landmarks in the experience that place me well.

When I come out of those, god knows what's happening to my adrenals and my endocrine system. I mean, sometimes I'm racing, I know I'm racing. I have a feeling that my perceptions are not good, they're so much faster than the audience's, because the audience are sitting there quietly watching. So then, even if I slow down, I'm going so fast that I can move very slowly and feel a very fine-grained, a very fine-grained kind of movement reality going on, in which there are thousands of choices, whereas before there were maybe dozens, in normally making that movement. I now find junctures, places where my mind won't reach. That's very close to that moment, when it gets like that. It's very close to the point where my brain can just, well, sit back and watch for a while. My conscious brain.

RS / Is it dangerous that the body is always surviving, finding it's own path??

SP / I think not. I've only been doing it for twenty-five years. So far it doesn't seem dangerous to me. But that is one of the questions, and people ask it. The main thing that I think is dangerous is that, like every other way you construct a reality, it is a very compelling, rich and full version of reality, as they all are. It's very tempting to stay there. It's very tempting. It's not really possible in today's world to be like that and keep organized enough for what has to happen in life. Imagine it as a studio, or a stage phenomenon, in other words. It may not be the kind of phenomena that you would want to be in in daily life. I think it's OK in parks and forests, as well, the seashore, it's OK to get into it. Sometimes you have to pay attention to where you are, and what's happening around you. You have to be suspicious, you have to be in a hurry, you have to be well organized, all of these things have to happen as well, in life.

RS / I suddenly thought of being alone, also in nature, loneliness, being solo, on stage. When you improvise with more people, is it then possible to go into this kind of state?

SP / Not likely, I have, in contact improvisation, found it, but in many of the improvisations, if I'm working with somebody else, I feel like I'm working with their image, in a way, which is probably a projection on my part. But I feel like they are embodying something, energies and line and masses moving and it comes out of body language, doesn't it? Inevitably you'll see it or read it in some way. And then I respond to that. And I think that requires... it gives an opportunity for a different set of improvisational reactions.

7

In contact improvisation, in a good one, you become a unit with the other person, in gravity, through touch, using each other's limbs. And when it's going well you can just rely on it. Somebody else's leg is as good as your leg, if you know where it is and how it's working. Through the touch you get that kind of information. I think probably only about four times in twenty-five years with another person in contact improvisation, not a lot. It's not the only thing that happens though, you understand, just one of the things that can happen. Other quite nice things happen as well. I think you're the one who's interested in the mysterious and the ecstasy? Would you consider that interesting? When you said the mindless state, the ecstatic state, in that sense...

RS / We just wrote about improvisation, we did as a kind of... just to open our thoughts to go into this weekend (Magpie / Frascati Improvisation event) and ecstasy is one of the things. Desire is a big word but I am curious about that state. And not ecstasy as a kind of Greek translation of being drunk and going into a very unknown area with any kind of behavior, just to pump yourself up, but ecstasy as a way of being in harmony with the moment.

SP / What if the moment doesn't require ecstasy? Do you think they do require ecstasy to be in harmony? What if it doesn't require that? Do you think the body would respond that way?

RS / What I find interesting is that, in loneliness, there is a different requirement for harmony. There's another harmony when you're alone than when you're with someone and when you are on stage there's another kind of quest than when you meet someone outside the stage. I think what I am looking for, what I like on stage, is that there could be space for very pure form. For me, pure form is to do something with ecstasy and that can help again people outside the theatre, when a lot of other forces come in: social, political, money, everything.

SP / Well, we'll have to have this discussion after the performances to see how much ecstasy was actually available.

RS / Are you a little pessimistic about our culture at the moment?

SP / No, I'm completely pessimistic. You ask about our culture, though, do you mean everything? I don't see much culture, really. If I saw real culture, I would not be so pessimistic. Just to start some place, bad policing, bad medical practices, bad situations for teachers and nurses. I see pressure being put on families, I see people being confused by what's going on, and trying to make decisions, and finding that they've made the wrong decisions. And having very complex decisions to deal with which are just the results of laws and rules which are, I suppose, to somebody's advantage. I see abundances of food and no will to put that food where the people are starving. I see children dying. I see the air getting more polluted. I see the sun burning through the atmosphere because we have destroyed it. I see floods, and famines, and disease.

RS / But you don't see solutions?

SP / It has always been there. But you were asking about culture, you weren't asking about all history. This is how I see the culture. I haven't always been there, so this is all new to me.

RS / What does art have to do with it?

SP / I don't know. After answering the last question in the way I did, I can't think how to answer this one. What's art have to do with the last question sort of stumped me.

RS / Let's say the stage is a kind of, not a mirror, but a place where you can suggest other strategies to look at life, or yourself. For instance, let's make it very simple. Is improvisation, let's say, what you did on Saturday with the other dancers, is it mirroring life or is that much more about an ideal state which you show the public?

SP / I don't think so.

8 **RS** / We still have two minutes. Is it a political choice to improvise?

SP / In what terms, politics? Well, not so much anymore. Improvisation has gotten far too popular, and is getting more popular, and I can't think why. Except that I... maybe it's has something to do with the video perception - it's getting faster and faster, the clips and cuts and games and all that business. Maybe we're finally starting to train perception up to the point where it starts to be able to see more subtle body language.

RS / I think it's a nice last thing.

SP / Probably a lie.

About the Contributors

Paxton, Steve

Paxton was born in 1939 and is an experimental dancer and choreographer. He has an early background in gymnastics and danced in works of Merce Cunningham, José Limón, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. He is a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater, Grand Union and Contact Improvisation. He has pursued persistent interest in the functioning of the body and perception, physical laws of friction, momentum, gravity, and inertia in dance improvisation.

Steijn, Robert

Steijn, teacher at the School for New Dance Development since 1998, was producer of the Frascati Theatre between 1989 and 2001, has been working as dramaturge for many dance makers, among whom Desiree Delaunay, Gonnie Heggen, Paz Rojo, Nicole Beutler, has been making a series of solo performances since 2003, and currently works with Frans Poelstra under the name United Sorry.

Colophon

TALK / SNDO 1982-2006 online is a series of online publications related to the School for New Dance Development, published as an extension of the book under the same name published in 2009.

Editor

Jeroen Fabius

Editorial support

Andrea Bozic, Lise Brenner, Elien van Riet, Gabriel Smeets, Nienke Tjallingii

Transcription

Jo Woodcook

Production

Peter van der Hoop

Graphic design

Esther Noyons

This publication was made possible with support from
Nederlands Fonds voor de Podiumkunsten+,
De Theaterschool, Lectoraat Kunsttheorie en Onderzoek,
Lectoraat Kunstpraktijk en Artistieke Ontwikkeling,
Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten.

School for New Dance Development www.theaterschool.nl.

All rights reserved. We have done all we could to contact everybody who has contributed to this book to obtain their permissions, whoever has been omitted we kindly ask to contact us.