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Edited by Jeroen Fabius and Sher Doruff

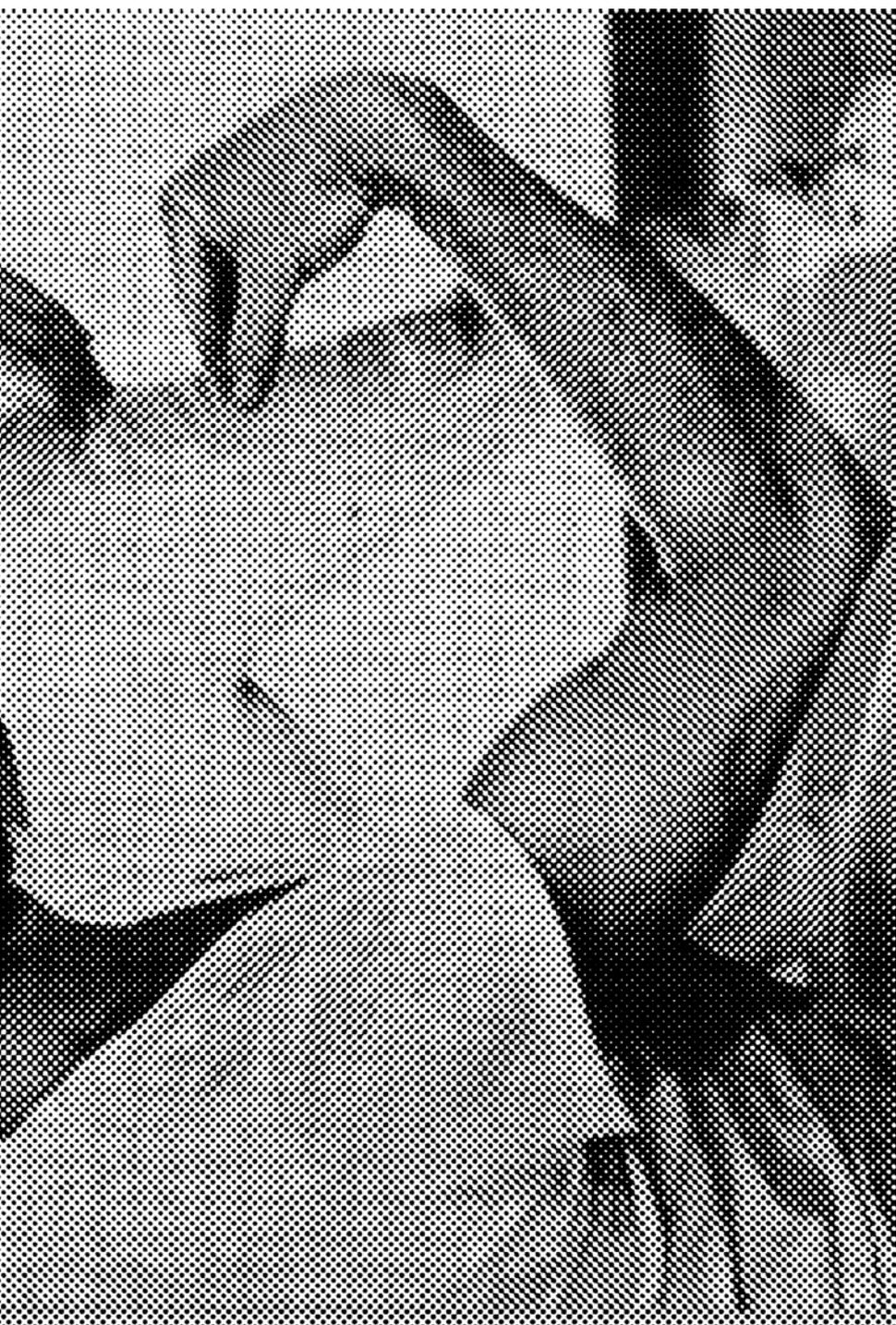
Paxton Ave Nue, a revisiting

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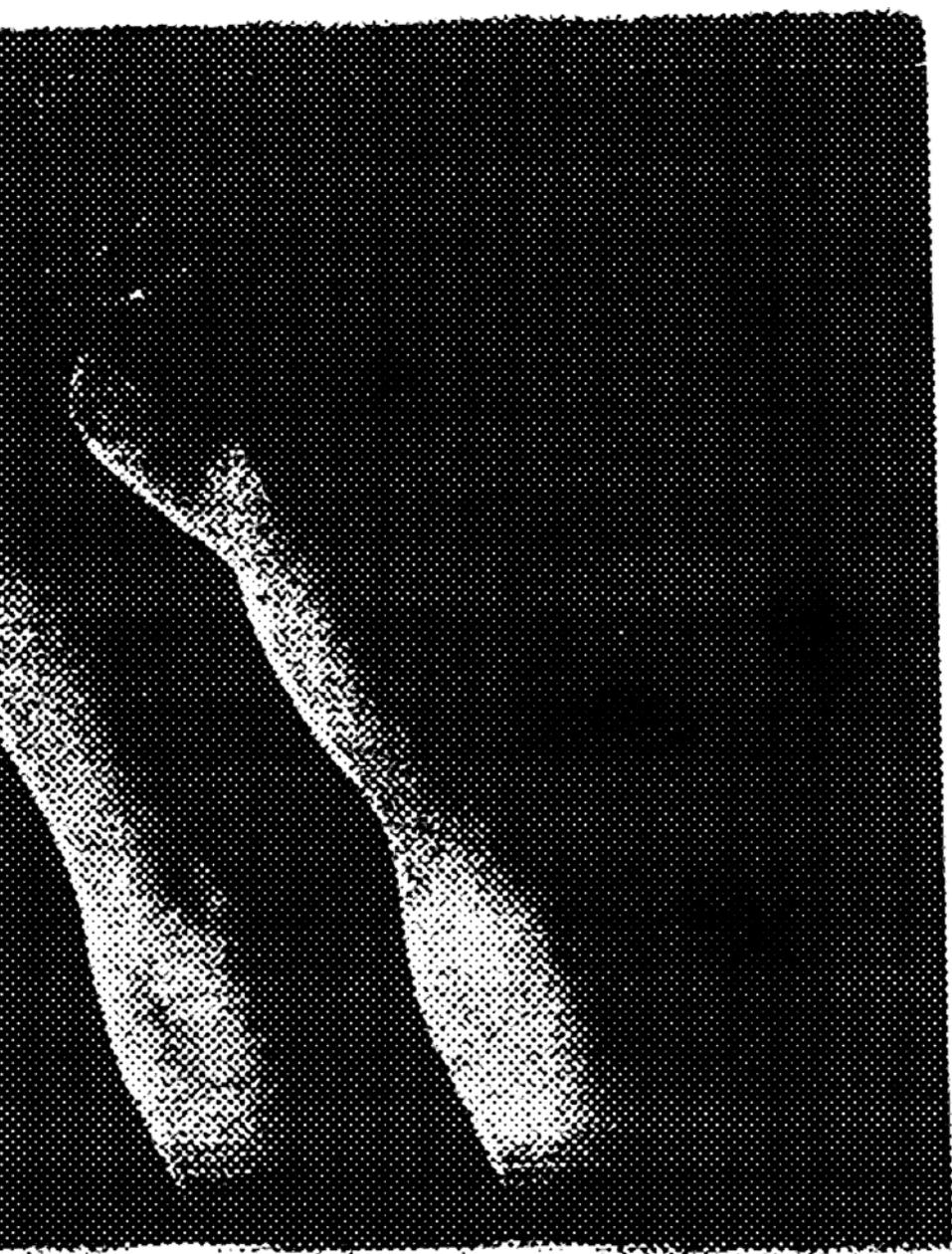


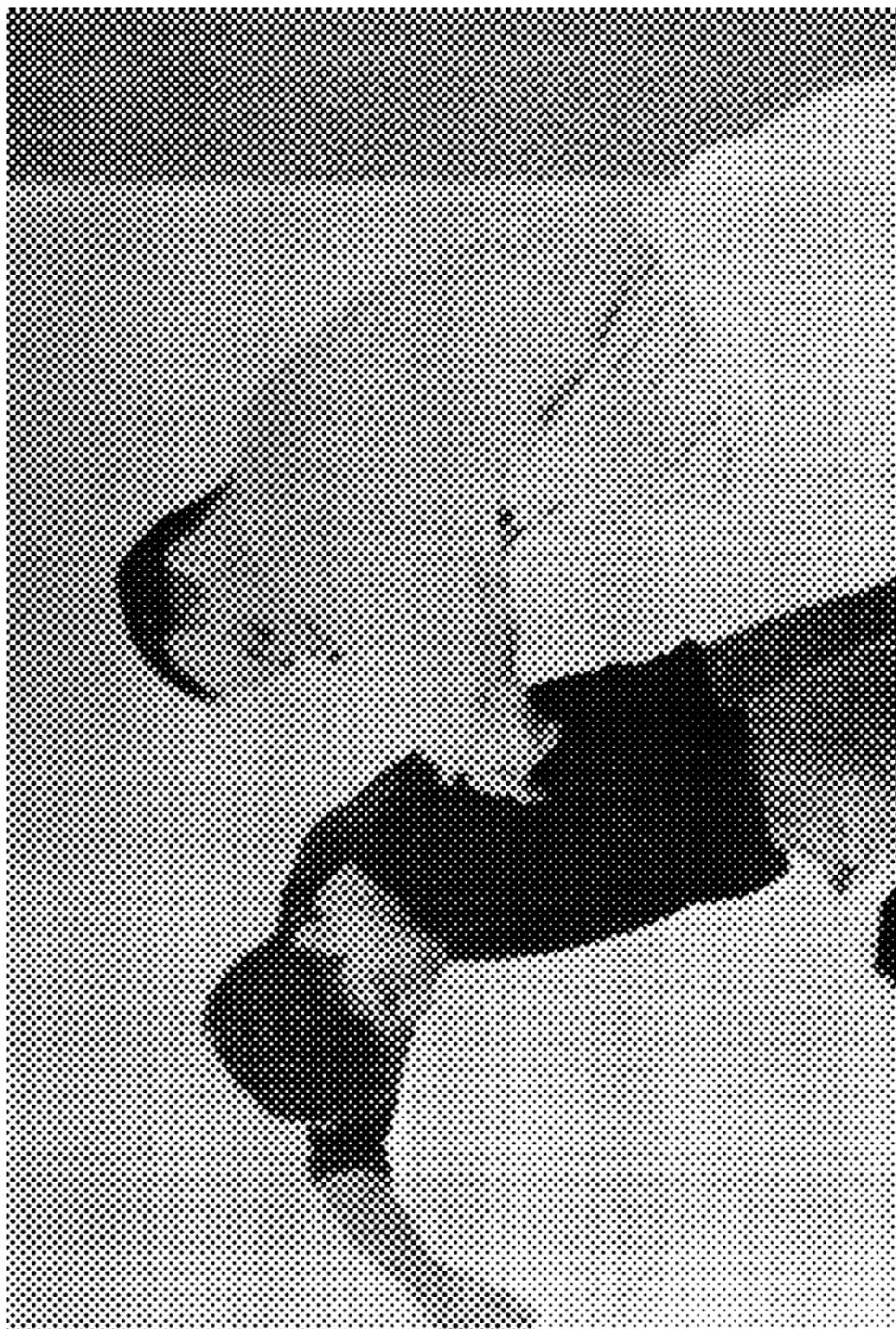












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Steve Paxton, comic strips, choreography: a monograph of anomalies

It was during a conversation with the team preparing for Steve Paxton's period as Artist in Residence at the Theaterschool in 2009, with the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) and the Amsterdam Master of Choreography (AMCh), that Paxton himself suddenly came up with an idea for a project to which he could dedicate the three weeks of his residency. It was a pre-existing piece, he explained, but there was some 'unfinished business' still to be settled with it. At the time we understood nothing of what this meant, and it was only after he had left on the train for other destinations that we gradually came to discover more about the history of the choreography he had been referring to.

Its title was *Ave Nue*. Originally performed in 1985, this dance production featured a hand of comic, outsized proportions. Who would ever have thought that Steve Paxton – the renowned participant in the Judson revolution in dance and the celebrated 'inventor' of the widespread practice of contact improvisation – was also the choreographer of a comic strip story?

Paxton's objective was to settle some unfinished business with the work. The objective of this publication is to engage in dialogue with it. You will find sufficient elucidation on the project in this booklet, a monographic assemblage of writings by eight contributors focusing on a single, unique choreographic work: *Ave Nue*. The idea of reappraisal, or 're-visioning' as Paxton puts it, is a central thread running through the contributions included here. Together they form a reappraisal, a re-seeing of what the piece presented in 1985.

A structured choreography by Steve Paxton the consummate improviser may seem like a contradiction in terms to dance connoisseurs, but a closer examination of his career reveals it is not as anomalous as might first appear. We discover, for example, a Paxton who concocts the most wonderful ways of presenting the body. In her article 'Physical Things' Sally Banes explains how Paxton modifies objects to emphasise the importance of the everyday. He delights in rendering mundane things fantastic through

transformation, for example by altering size or some other quality. Huge, transparent inflatable plastic tunnels appear in a series of works. He also employs actions that one might not expect to encounter in a dance performance – actions such as eating a pear, drinking a glass of water or standing on ball bearings in a plastic basin. The movements in *Proxy* (1961) are based on sequences developed from sports photographs. *Jag Ville Görna Telefonera* (1964) featured a live chicken and a full-sized, overstuffed chair made of cake and yellow frosting figures, *Afternoon* (1963) featured trees ‘dressed’ as dancers and in *Flat* (1964) Paxton hung his clothes on three hooks taped to his chest. Although these works were made long ago, the knowledge of their existence perhaps makes it less surprising that Steve Paxton used the comic figure of a huge hand in a choreography in 1985.

Pieter T’Jonck’s essay is an examination of the eras in which the original and revised versions were made and the time between, while also being a wonderful account of his own career as a dance critic.

Patricia Kuypers was a member of the cast in the original version of *Ave Nue* in 1985. The act of seeing, this time from the performer’s perspective, is also central to her article. She was a dance critic at the time, but was invited to participate as a performer. Kuypers’ is very much an insider’s account, drawing as it does from the strands of her memory; her first viewing of *Ave Nue* from the outside was on video in the early 1990s. The original French version of her article first appeared in *Nouvelles de Danse no 48/49 (automne-hiver 2001)*.

Myriam van Imschoot has been maintaining an email correspondence with Steve Paxton since the 2009 performances of *Ave Nue*. It is an exchange of continuously developing perspectives generated by conversational reflections on the project. The wealth of insights it provided made it one of the inspirations for this publication.

The other four essays examine elements of the choreographic process with Steve Paxton that the contributors felt drawn to explore.

In ‘On a journey, backwards’ Konstantina Georgelou inverts Paxton’s project chronologically to suggest the collusion of three elements: the audience moving backwards on the platforms, Paxton’s own process of re-visioning and the precedent of commissioning a dynamic archive. Georgelou recounts the experience of a journey and the immobilising effect of the blurred forms and the fading, never completed movements. She suggests that the project’s past ‘need not be viewed as an inert black box of facts,

and its future need not be threatened by questions of a simplistic and fundamental nature.'

Martin Nachbar takes a backstage comment by Paxton, in which he referred to *Ave Nue* as 'Cunningham and comic books', to construct a choreographic theory that nests the relationships between frames, gutters, exercises, space and chaos that emerge from performance. In 'Nested nests: on framing bodies and spaces in dance and choreography' Nachbar diagrams a proposition for the immanently dynamic interplay between the technique of the performing body and the resonance of that body in choreographed space.

Ame Henderson argues that the 1970s' postmodern dance of Grand Union is best situated on a trajectory that converges with art practice as inter-human relations in a social context – a practice that that far preceded the contemporary turn to relational aesthetics. She discusses Paxton's *Ave Nue* project from the perspective of its 'felt processes becoming event'. Citing Bourriaud, Banes, Bishop and Rancière among others, Henderson states in 'Steve Paxton: relational democracies of sensation' that by 're-visioning' this archival work, Paxton establishes the conditions for a highly complex relationality to emerge, creating an 'emancipated and participatory event'.

Jeanine Durning's 'Some things come to mind' evokes an imaginative personal, historical and conceptual, topologically continuous transformation of Steve Paxton's elastic lifework. Inviting the reader to imagine fantastically real scenarios and events, Durning's contribution manages to generate an experience of intense wonder and the felt sensation of the remarkable: 'Imagine you are Steve Paxton. What would you think of dance now?'

The Amsterdam Master of Choreography aims to provide space for generative regeneration to the field of dance and the performing arts, and to provide a place for artists to further reflect and develop. In the 2008–2009 academic year we were fortunate to have Nachbar, Henderson and Durning as students in its newly 're-visioned' programme when the *Ave Nue* project was undertaken. They brought with them not only the skills and experience acquired throughout their careers in the performing arts,

but also a keen intelligence, avid curiosity and emphatic energy for invigorating research propositions in their everyday practice. Having participated in the 2009 *Ave Nue* project, the documentary texts they submitted were of such an inspired quality that we decided to seek out a publishing context to further disseminate creative reflection generated by Paxton's presence in Amsterdam. The Art Practice and Development research group at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, headed by Marijke Hoogenboom, provided not only the impetus for Steve Paxton's residency, but it also generously provided the means to publish a volume of the RTRSRCH journal as a dedicated monograph of the event and its processes.

The Theaterschool invited me to become an Artist In Residence. This position is meant to expose the dance master students to a working artist, although the activity that the students will encounter is not specified. I proposed reconstructing a choreography I had made in Brussels. It is a complex production, and we had only three weeks. This challenge would, I felt, expose the students to an artist working hard on real issues of dance, production, and deadline.

Ave Nue reveals very basic choreographic questions. Its basic components are three. The dance performed by the students, about one hour long. The activities of two large student-animated hands; gloves that were worn over the body with two legs sticking out the bottom, and with rods to move the fingers from inside. And the audiences, two of them, initially seated on rostra facing each other near the center of the long hallway in which the event takes place. The positions of the audiences thus describe the performance space at the opening of *Ave Nue*, and this remains the case because almost imperceptibly, the rostra begin to move down the hall carrying the audience backward away from the center, which lengthens the performance space.

The primary question then involves space itself, which becomes a flexible component as real space, rather than the illusionary changes in scenery or lighting of more conventional theater. Near my home in Vermont, the brilliant Peter Schumann mounts productions in a huge hayfield, in which the reach of the landscape is used to bring elements of the production to the center under the gaze of the audience. Contrasted with the Bread and Puppet extravaganzas, it was the audiences of *Ave Nue* whose movement caused the space to change. This change was both literally and metaphorically a journey; a journey backwards, that is, physically into the unknowable, and perhaps by metaphor into time. Journeys take time. And during a journey it is normal to look back to see where one has been. It is this moment that the audiences experience during *Ave Nue*. They are looking back toward their original position, and they

are seeing their mirror audience retreating in the perspective, becoming smaller and more distant during the performance, finally to come to the end. There, one final theatrical statement, the placing of a scrim in front of each group, through which they could clearly see into the lighted hall, but at the other end, not see through to the other audience. The hall now seemed empty of observers; only the dancers and one of the giant hands remained to populate an avenue, like islanders after the tour ships have sailed away.

The dancers, their dance, and the hand figures raise two further questions – which are questions for me as well as for the observers, both dancers and audience. The hand figures are essentially cartoons, caricatures, or perhaps analogues. The dancers are essentially humans engaged in their choreographic tasks that energize, personalize and unify the space. Why are these elements together? Or, to follow the image of the audience as tourists passing by an indigenous culture, in what ways might the dance and the hand figures be culturally connected?

These are the facts of their story: In the opening scene, one of the hands is laying on a cloth. The dancers enter, and it becomes clear they are tending the hand. Then the hand gives birth. The baby – a baby hand – is taken by one of the dancers and held, cradled.

As the space elongates, as the audiences retreat, the hands reappear. Now they are upright figures, with legs, and they tour the space. They hover around the dancers, but the dancers more or less ignore them, as though they are busy dancing and can't attend to these anomalous elements. The young hand begins playing, runs off. The mother is alone. From the side, a shower of paper begins to fall on her. The hands, normal human hands, are visible and the shower they throw overwhelms and covers the mother hand. The young hand returns, cannot find the mother. Then it begins to probe the paper, finds the body. There is a funeral; the young hand, accompanied by the dancers, visits the grave. All leave; as the lights dim slowly on the space, a fog covers the grave.

The dance resumes, the dancers tracking ever-longer space. The young hand returns. I like to think it is grieving, alone, uncertain. The audiences, now very distant from each other are blocked by the scrims and vanish from each others' sight. The lights dim on the continuing dance.

I don't know exactly what I have made here. *Ave Nue* unleashes unusual metaphorical forces. Perhaps it is a story of a myth? Or maybe

the hands represent the collective of the dancers' culture? Maybe they are representative of me, the guiding hands of the two productions of *Ave Nue*? I toy with the idea that they represent the religion of the dancers, or their government, or their aesthetic. All these seem possible.

I would like to thank the Theaterschool for this production and the opportunity to work with their excellent students and the great technicians they provided. Just to be complete, I also thank the School shops which built the necessary elements, the truckers who transported the enormous amount of material and turned the old Baggage Hall into a comfortable working space, and those students who had the awful job of sitting under the rostra to reel in the electric line which powered the movement of the seats. All did nobly.

A note of possible relevance: In 1971 I went to Mumbai, India, and visited Elephanta, caves carved out of the cliffs, containing various deities. I came out of the caves very late in the afternoon, and saw the road stretched into the distance, with the setting sun picking out the figures that could be seen along its length. Nearby I could see the villagers going home, further along perhaps a boy and water buffalo, and looking further, a cart and horse, the driver hunched over the reins. And on and on. People whose lives I would never intersect, whose minds I would never know, stepping onto the road to wherever they were going, whose progress I could watch for a long time as they became larger with approach, or smaller with departure.

Vermont

17 October, 2010

The antecedents

I first saw the American choreographer Steve Paxton at work in February 1984, at Stuc theatre in Leuven. I knew little about contemporary or postmodern dance at the time. It was only a short while before that I got my first hint that dance could be of artistic interest – at the first edition of Leuven's Klapstuk festival in 1983. The dance performances that I had seen before seemed stale or overblown to me: the Royal Ballet of Flanders, Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn and the then inevitable Maurice Béjart shows. Paxton had previously visited Belgium in 1983, having made *Bound* for the Kaaaitheater in Plan K in Brussels. I only saw a performance of this on video, in 1984. But in February 1984 he led a workshop in Leuven with an added improvisation performance that I assisted on.

There is no information about *Bound* or the workshop performance to be found on the Internet. Since I have no systematic archive of this period, it was very fortunate that among a collection of flyers and pamphlets I come across the programme of the 1985 Klapstuk festival, which contained a reference to this particular evening. In fact there is not much detailed information at all on Paxton on the Internet. Many sources dutifully repeat the description of him as a key figure of 1970s postmodern dance who went on to concentrate on the development of contact improvisation. But very few sites mention the fact that, as he told me himself, he became gradually less involved with this movement from as early as 1984. Paxton himself has made little effort to keep a record of his works and make this information publicly available. So you will not find, for example, anything about a performance such as *1894* which took as its subject the life of the German judge and paranoiac Daniel Paul Schreber – it was made in the same period as the Belgian performances *Bound* (1983) and *Ave Nue* (1985).

I do not know why Steve Paxton is apparently so detached from his work in this regard. I imagine that his approach to the notion of 'oeuvre'

is boundless: he sees his activities not as an accumulation of single works, but as a practice undergoing continual development, as a way of gathering knowledge. In a conversation in that period in the mid-eighties he explained: 'For me, art is a way of gathering knowledge about the world – a very good way. It kneads our thinking. Gravity intrigues me, for instance, even though I know very little about it scientifically speaking. Rather, it is to do with ways of working with gravity. Like that primitive man from Samoa who went out on the ocean by himself without any idea of navigation and without instruments. He found his way by attentively observing the stars, by following the sun, by listening to what the wind and the birds brought him as information. He even used his own scrotum as an indicator. I don't know exactly what he did. It has something to do with gravity, a system we don't have any knowledge of anymore. He used his genitals as a kind of pendulum to determine the nature of the waves.'

This kind of observation is Paxton through and through, and at the same time it illustrates that determinant representation means little to him. But these were definitely other times. This kind of dance was viewed as too difficult, too marginal and too strange. So neither the press nor the academic world were paying much attention to it, meaning there was little context or discourse – and even less money. Still, there was a small but very determined group of makers and spectators on the lookout for new experiments and discoveries. Over a very short period, the performing arts shifted from a relatively marginal position where not much was going on artistically speaking, to things really taking off – even if on a pretty humble scale. At Paxton's improvisation evening the tension in the room was palpable. It seemed as if the more alien-looking what he did was, the more people enjoyed it. It was as if the 1960s' drive for experimentation had blown over from New York to the Low Countries and blossomed – after a delay of twenty years. Even back then, the artists from Judson Church (and later the Grand Union) stayed under the radar of the established art world; the revolution was prepared in silence.

Alien it may have been, but what Paxton did that evening was of course not an isolated event. It was a stage in his lifelong research. There was an unmistakable sense in the room that something important was at stake and there was an accompanying uncommon sense of concentration. That single evening in 1984 in Leuven left such an indelible

impression on me. Of course my perception had been coloured by those in the know who had informed me of just how important this man was – something that was bound to influence the level of appreciation felt by the wide-eyed innocent I was, of course. But still it made a more different and a stronger impact on me than anything I had witnessed before. Was it the scenography, with the bizarre smooth and shiny objects spread around the stage mysteriously illuminated by the lights (only later did I realise that these objects were the ceramic toilet components)? Or was it the music, a soundscape that combined JS Bach, traditional Sardinian singing and the sound of rolling waves – a confusing and at the time unexplained mix. It later emerged that the music and sounds were primarily intended to confound the dancer himself. ‘The transitions were a shock because my body would move suddenly into another time and space. The music of Bach stands for the time of the Enlightenment, the rational and the intellectual; the other music stands for the irrational – madness.’ The scenography and the soundscape was the context from which Paxton operated. He applied a movement language that was unknown to me: a mixture of arbitrary movements, sophisticated and quirky torso and limb twists along with unexpected acrobatic jumps. He had a bad fall after a jump in the first part, but he did not show it in the least – although he did move differently after the intermission, his movements remained quirky, heterogeneous and unpredictable. Following that intermission Paxton announced that the evening could be regarded as a ‘formal event’, even though it had initially been announced as purely an improvisational event.

Some things were clarified the next day when I met Paxton for an interview at a hotel room in central Leuven. The first surprise was that his shoulder was bandaged. The second was hearing that the injury had occurred during the performance the previous night. And the biggest surprise of all was that it was actually the injury that had inspired him to complete the second part of the performance. ‘I wanted to investigate what it means for one’s equilibrium when you can’t use both of the arms.’ He was saying: the research must go on. Regarding the movements themselves, he said, ‘My dance is a combination of three things. There are conscious signals that are linguistic in nature. Next there is body language – under the skin, unconscious expression. Body language brings the suggestion of meaning into existence, but these remain vague impressions.

To that I add a sort of gymnastics, a movement form that refers only to itself. Standing on your head or doing a cartwheel doesn't mean anything.' What has always remained with me from our long conversation is that it was when I suddenly 'got' postmodern dance. Paxton engaged intensively with every question. The interview very nearly turned into a lecture on the 'fundamental ideas of postmodern dance since Cunningham.' From this day on I was a sworn Steve Paxton fan – unconditionally, as perhaps only youngsters can be. It is the unconditional trust you give to a teacher who makes you see the light for the first time. Although by then I had seen a certain amount of dance, he was the first to put it all in perspective, to demonstrate a mentality, to reveal an insight – which he hung like a carrot in front of the young critic's nose.

So I would not have missed the following year's *Ave Nue* for anything in the world. That was true for just about everyone who had been at the workshop or the performances of *Bound* in Brussels. He instantly created a small group of die-hard fans, a small conspiracy.

Ave Nue remembered

Paxton was unknown outside this small group and was by no means a big name in Belgium. This meant that only a few hundred people saw the original *Ave Nue*. There was simply no larger audience to be found for this kind of performance at the time. Kaaitheater was not the well-known and well-oiled organisation it is now. Hugo de Greef, its director at the time, could barely make ends meet, but together with kindred spirits he was to lay the groundwork for Europe's present impressive international theatre circuit. In 1985 De Greef commissioned Paxton to make a new work for the Kaaitheater festival. Paxton agreed to do so on the condition that he could work in an exceptionally long and narrow space. Years later, he explained that he had wanted to investigate what would happen if the basic architectural conditions of dance were redesigned. What impact would it have if dancers were so remote from the spectator that they looked more like puppets? How would such an extreme perspective impact on the movements? (This process was not unlike that employed in the Leuven workshop performance, which likewise involved creating a context that led into unknown territory). A 70-metre long corridor in the deserted Dailly Square barracks in Schaarbeek proved to be the most suitable location – in terms of space,

in any case, but not in all regards since it was quite a task to transform the barracks into a functional venue. Steve Paxton remembers that there was no heating or electricity and everything had to be brought in from outside, despite very limited financial resources.

Paxton invited four performers (they could not be called dancers in the professional sense) to take part in this adventure: Patricia Kuypers who was familiar with the world of dance through Contredanse, and Eddy Vaes, Willy Thomas and Guy Dermul, who all had some limited experience in theatre, but barely any formal training. They belonged to a generation that wanted to reinvent the entire theatre business from scratch and give expression to a different political ideology from what the theatre establishment represented. This dance experiment fitted well with the search for a new theatrical language. Together with Mieke Verdin and Dett Peyskens, Thomas and Dermul would go on to found their own ensemble, Dito'Dito, which exists to this day, albeit as part of the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS). Eddy Vaes was to leave the world of theatre soon after *Ave Nue*. The group was accompanied by the singers Mieke Verdin and Katrien de Vos and the cellist and composer Ryszard Turbiasz.

While this piece was certainly horizon-expanding for the inexperienced performers, it was also no obvious experiment for the seasoned professional Paxton. And not only because he, someone who had worked with some of the best dancers of the world, was going to be working with predominantly untrained people. Although it was not an illogical step in his research into the democratic body – and it was not the first time that he had done something like this – Paxton has always dreaded improvising with people he doesn't know. That much was clear from the conversation a year earlier: 'Improvisation has always had a problem with communication. There are only a few people I feel good improvising with. It's almost like telepathy. If you improvise as a musician, you hear the others even if you can't see them. But in dance that's not possible. If you have your back turned towards someone, you won't see what happens and you can't attune to each other. You have only your own body to work with. There's no separation between receiving and sending. You really need a special intuition for it.' At the start of rehearsals it was still open whether that intuitive contact with the other four dancers was going to be present.

Besides the performers, theatre technician Jan Ryckaert was crucially important to the original version of *Ave Nue*. His contribution

went far beyond the bounds of what is normally expected of a technician. Together with Paxton, he developed the idea that was central to the performance. The audience would sit on two small platforms positioned closely opposite one another. The platforms were mounted on large rubber wheels. During the performance the two platforms were to be slowly pulled away from each other using very long cables attached to powered winches. The dance stage area would thus gradually increase in size. This was to happen so slowly that it would take a good while before members of the audience would notice it. From that moment, spectators on either side could also observe the pilasters and roof beams painted in sequence in a spectrum from a dusty red through blue to grey in the distance.

Part of the reason it took a while before audience members became aware that they were in motion was that the space was manipulated in various ways. At regular moments, open-weave scrim curtains were placed between the audience and the dance area. Through ingenious interplay of scrim and lighting, the dance was sometimes only visible as a shadow play. At other moments one was able to view the dance, but body contours were blurred by the scrim. As the space between the platforms grew and the dance acquired more space, the light dimmed. The increased space combined with the scrim to make it appear as if the dance was gradually dissolving into space. Following the live music and the first phase the platforms began to move apart, a variety of slides were projected on these scrim: faces, painted portraits, a nude on a chaise-lounge, snapshots of sports events, dilapidated spaces and nature scenes – with the sports and nature scenes being most important. The movements made by the performers often referred in some way to sports actions, but then repeatedly and abruptly halted. It was a sophisticated game, because it showed what a curious thing the body is. It is all-but impossible to present the flow of information the body processes and responds to while moving; Paxton alone succeeds from time to time in bringing them into the conscious world.

It was an idea that had already been preoccupying Paxton for a year. In Leuven he said: 'If there's a reason for what I do then it is this: if you see someone move you can say or feel what makes it characteristic, but if you catch yourself doing an exact movement, like plucking at a little hair on your chin, you're not thinking about it consciously.'

Self-awareness means that you destroy these small things. A similar thing happens to many people when they become aware that a camera is being pointed at them. They suddenly put on their 'photograph face' because they want to look good for posterity.' He described how for *Ave Nue*, 'The dance was made from of a score consisting of photos and instructions on how they should be interpreted. Most of the photos came from sports magazines. I use these movements as icons; they should be imitated as exactly as possible. Of course the dancers lack the cause of the movement that the sportspeople had, but they still have to try to lift themselves off the ground and take on a position that's as absurd as the one the baseball player takes 'automatically.' Sportspeople have the advantage that they land on grass; the dancers fall on a hard floor.'

Another spatial intervention, one that recalled *Bound*, was a construction made of long wooden slats that the dancers built up and took down. The dancers also used the row of rooms adjoining the corridor to make unexpected exits from and entrances to the space, transforming the former barrack into a bizarre magic box, a camera obscura in which wild images appeared and then disappeared without a trace. And finally there was the leitmotiv of the giant hand, a body-sized baseball-glove-shaped object made of tissue and worn by Guy Dermul. It executed all kinds of small actions, such as brushing shreds of paper together or manipulating a chair – something that was only possible with huge effort. Sometimes Paxton would recline in the hand when it lay empty on the floor – it took him completely into its embrace. The hand also brought the spectacle that was *Ave Nue* to a close: it made a great sweeping gesture as if throwing a stone or ball and as if following the trajectory of the imaginary thrown object, all the lights in the corridor went out one by one, as if smashed by it.

Ave Nue bordered on the magical. It encompassed everything that took place inside that dark, expanding space – including the dancers when they were sometimes motionless, only watching the other dancers. So the action of watching – by dancers and spectators alike – also became a thread running through the piece. We experienced how the gaze of the spectator increases the intensity of an event and creates a heightened awareness that makes everything significant – even if the ultimate meaning never becomes clear. On a related note, the

title of the work has no specific meaning, but suggests many things: *ave* is Latin for greeted, *nue* is French for nude; *avenue* is French (and English) for boulevard. The boulevard in this case was the long performance area, a form allowing the performance to be gradually extinguished rather than abruptly ended, dissolving as it did, into the twilight: a rest, a coda – the provisional as an ending.

Twenty-four years later

The barracks in Brussels are changed beyond recognition, having been converted into apartments. The long hallways are long gone; *Ave Nue* can never be restaged in its original form. But even if these corridors were still there – even if one was to precisely repeat each movement – the performance would never come back to life and have its original impact. The renovation of the barracks can be seen as a metaphor for the transformation to which Brussels has succumbed, in both a tangible and intangible sense. The previously somewhat backward capital has been polished up and it has metamorphosed into an expensive, hip European metropolis where the word ‘dance’ is on everyone’s lips. In this refurbished environment it would no longer be possible to recreate the sense we had (performers and spectators alike) of setting foot on an urban terra incognita. And the same could be said of Amsterdam – where *Ave Nue* was restaged – for this city that has undergone a similar transformation.

In February 2009 de Theaterschool in Amsterdam invited Steve Paxton to be its Artist in Residence. For three weeks he worked with students at the School for New Dance Development on a restaging, or, as he called it himself, a ‘revision’ of *Ave Nue*. A location was found: the baggage hall in the Loods 6 warehouse in the old harbour district of Amsterdam. It is a shorter space, lacking the side windows or rooms along the corridor, but with prominent free-standing columns on both sides instead of the barrack’s pilasters and roof beams. These differences have quite an impact on the piece. Another important difference was that these dockland areas of Amsterdam have been redeveloped for modern, upmarket private housing – the baggage hall itself has also been entirely renovated. To paint on the walls was out of the question; any and all scenographic interventions had to be reversible at the end of the project.

Twenty-four years lie between the two performances, a period in which the world has changed dramatically. Nothing is left of the inhospitable but nonetheless romantic and strangely compelling urban ruins exemplified by barracks and harbour areas. Nowadays it means nothing if one creates theatre in these spaces rather than regular venues. These remnants of the past are routinely recycled into cosy, safe contexts for hip urbanites who thrive on a sea of culture. Performing in an old barrack or baggage hall is no longer a step outside of the institution of the arts, because that institution is plainly ubiquitous. It has become almost a law of nature that old buildings are transformed into cultural infrastructure, shopping malls or apartment blocks. We muse over the loss of the real in the mummified cadaver of the city. It is a fact; nothing will undo it. One is therefore bound to view the restaging of a piece such as *Ave Nue* in a different light, especially if it is initiated within the framework of an institution, a school. And Theaterschool students know what is going on in the world of dance and have a trained body, which means that the performers are, almost by definition, not the kind of neophytes involved in the first version – these are not people who are passionately driven to do something totally different and embark on an unknown adventure. In short: the stakes are different.

It is a sign of his wisdom, then, that Paxton decided to create a different performance. He did preserve some of the fundamental parameters, however. The platforms with spectators moving away from each other were now driven by quiet electric motors. The long space was illuminated unpredictably, but with stronger, more sophisticated lights – very different from the semi-darkness that enveloped the space in 1984. The columns running along the long hall were covered in coloured paper in light-spectrum sequence on both sides. The peculiar apparition of the original human-sized hand that appeared as if from a comic strip next to the dancers has multiplied and become two big hands. But there were even bigger differences. There was less use of scrims to manipulate the image. There were no more projections on the scrims, no constructions using wooden slats, and the live music was replaced by a soundscape comprising fragments of music and sounds from nature. These were the changes as far as the context of the action is concerned.

But the action itself also differed in important respects. The students not only had more experience than the original performers, their contribution was also greater. And, crucially, there were more of them: ten performers rather than the original five. There were distant echoes of the movements based on sports photographs, such as the characteristic swing of a golf club. There were only occasional reappearances of the game of sudden halts that so characterised the original version. In contrast with the original, the revision featured more precisely rehearsed group actions – recalling the elaborate form games that Trisha Brown developed in her later work rather than the quirky patterns of Paxton's own solo dances. At one point the dancers, departing from a line, meander agilely through the formation or, beautifully positioned in pairs, relayed a movement to each other. Ultimately, the strong, elaborated 'dansant' and the recognisable figures defined the experience of the dance at least as much as the unusual nature of the organisation of the space.

The most fundamental difference however was that the Amsterdam version was less 'open' than the original, because the dance was emphatically contained within a narrative framework of metaphorical connections. At the beginning of the performance a wooden-framed scrim is placed at the centre of the space between the two platforms – which are still close to one another at this point. We hear the roaring of the sea cut through with fragments of the Christmas song *Little Drummer Boy* (pa rum pum pum pum!) starting at the line 'A new born King to see'. And then we do indeed witness a birth: the dancers lay a cloth between the scrims and a dancer solemnly brings out the huge hand and lays it on the cloth. From this one hand, another is 'born'. It is immediately obvious that this is not intended to be an exact reconstruction of the earlier event: this performance is being born from the previous one and will lead its own life.

A little later the platforms start moving. Further on in the performance the mother hand dies, shortly after the update of a scene – amusing in the original – in which the hand gathers up snippets of paper. Here, the young hand grabs at the snippets only to find the mother hand lying lifeless beneath them. This is followed by a hugely sad funeral scene, a funeral, from which the young hand departs to

go its solitary way. As if to underline once more that the subject here is a farewell to the old and the start of something new, a bent figure appears at the end of the performance, using a walking stick as he carefully shuffles across the dance floor, accompanied by the sound of twittering birds. Shortly afterwards, just like in the original work, the young hand uses a single huge swinging movement to extinguish all the lights one by one.

These moments determine much more of the experience and meaning of the event than Guy Dermal's ludic but only faintly signified interventions as 'the hand' in 1984. If I saw anything in it the time, then it was the image of a huge baseball player's glove. Now the hand is a metonym for humanity. An apt image indeed, for if there is one part of the human body where the tactile, the intuitive, the emotional and the cognitive come together it is in the hand. Hands communicate more through their movements than we tend to be aware of. But more than this, what Paxton constructed here was a metaphor, an allegorical image, representing the way many performers feel driven to present beautiful dances that follow the lead of celebrated examples.

The intentions behind the new *Ave Nue* were, then, very different from the original. In the earlier version the various choreographic, expressive and spatial ideas were brought together in fragile equilibrium. The performance itself was almost entirely fixed, but the making and thinking that led to the final form remained tangibly present. In the new version the exchange of thoughts between the SNDO students and Paxton was central. Paxton encouraged students to work using his recent DVD *Material for the Spine* as their point of departure. The students embarked on their work on the basis of the approach to movement and improvisation explained in the video. Paxton later collected together the results of the research to form a whole. The impact of the students' contributions on the process was not inconsiderable. In answer to the question of whether the choral dances were intended as a homage to Trisha Brown's later work, Paxton explained with a smile that it was the students themselves who had proposed these regimented, organised dance figures, because the SNDO programme rarely offers the chance to experiment with groups in this way.

The strange conclusion of this story, then, is that Steve Paxton seems to be suggesting that the restaging of an old work is perhaps impossible and essentially pointless. The core of a work such as *Ave Nue* lies in its spatial and expressive conditions. The event itself – whatever was negotiated and concocted by the original performers – cannot be retrieved, so it is not even worth attempting to do so. All that does remain is the transmission of a sensibility, a way of looking at dance and choreography. The ‘grand old man’ can surely reach out his hand and share his experience, but it is up to the next generation to solve the puzzle by themselves. And this is precisely what the new generation at SNDO did so excellently in the new version of *Ave Nue* – although nothing can erase the sense of tension and emotion created in me by the original.

Moved by perception of space

Kaaitheater 1985 Casernes Dailly – Théâtre de la Balsamine

Ave Nue was the product of Steve Paxton's remarkable imagination. The audience sat in two sections of 25 on raised platforms facing each other in a huge, long hallway – 90 metres long and 5 metres wide. For the duration of the performance, the platforms rolled imperceptibly slowly away from one another, ultimately arriving at opposite ends of the hall. The duration of this journey corresponded exactly with the length of the performance. At the start, the two platforms were just 3 metres apart; by the end, their journey backwards had separated them by 80 metres.

Ave Nue was the first dance performance I participated in, shifting from the position of critical observer to performer. My experience was as of a foggy landscape: I could sense the intelligence and poetry of the project, but did not have the opportunity to appreciate an outside perspective. Not until much later, when Lisa Nelson enquired about this work – which she had heard about but not seen – did I start to examine various significant aspects of this work. Aspects such as the way in which it questioned process memory by actualising a metaphor in which the traversing of the space corresponds exactly with the passage of time. It was put into play by what Steve Paxton called 'the emotion of space', something that I did feel – by living the piece at the time – but could only understand by viewing it again through the prism of a video recording, at a time-distance of fifteen years.

The materials used for the performance were a collection of proposals and images that related to various periods in Steve Paxton's oeuvre. A collage of cut-outs of images of sportsmen in action formed the point of departure from which we (performers, non-dancers or nearly-dancers) developed our movement phrases. Our task was to create transitions from one position to another and find the move-

ment that linked them and gave us energy. The images themselves and our freedom to interpret each of them in our own fashion combined the objective and subjective. If the image was of a solo figure, we would be alone; if it was of two figures we would accommodate a partner; and so on. The resultant short movement phrases were presented to the audience at various distances, moments and locations – compacted, or expanded into the growing area created by the platforms as they drew apart.

Other elements of the basic vocabulary included simple walks, runs and back flips, forward or backward, approaching or withdrawing from the audience as we played with our distance from them. Without doubt, it was the more regulated components of the movement vocabulary that provided us as performers with the greatest opportunity for the most playful moments, because we could play with the speed of displacement of the platforms. By turns, we matched their speed and maintained a constant distance; we ran smoothly on the spot to create the illusion of approaching, while actually allowing the distance between us to grow; we approached very quickly, covering a long distance; we stayed in one place allowing distance to increase through immobility as the platforms drew backwards; and so on. This dual motion of audience and dancers sometimes also cancelled one other out as the dancers were offered the opportunity to make movement tangible by not moving.

These games with proximity, with reducing and increasing distance, were the most important aspect of what Steve Paxton revealed to us through this project: the quality of physically touching an audience through a visible figure disappearing in the distance or increasing the effect of presence by approaching, by transforming from a minuscule, distant figure to a macroscopic presence at suddenly great proximity.

One of the most mysterious characters in *Ave Nue* was the giant hand that would sometimes suddenly appear. ‘Inhabited’ by one of the performers and absurdly out of proportion, its size and form contrasted with our human figures. Sometimes Steve Paxton would lie down in the hand at the end of an improvisation session. During the performance, though, the huge hand could lend weight

or humour to the movements of the dancers – was it the hand of god or perhaps a giant emerging from another dimension?

Other ingredients added into the mix included mobile projection screens that modified the perception of space much in the same way as the moving platforms did; wooden slats manipulated to highlight the act of constructing or deconstructing, showing bodies performing manual labour; projections of erupting volcanoes; and a musician and two singers producing aural interventions marking equal intervals of time and space, creating another sensorial measure of distance.

Beyond the performative content, the way in which the space was organised lent the production an added expressive force. The many arches of the long corridor were coloured sequentially from washed-out pale red to bright blue – recalling Josef Albers's abstract paintings inspired by Inca architecture. This was coupled with the subtle integration of light coming from all the doorways leading into the hallway. This increased the sense of depth and disappearance. And when the lights in each archway went off one by one in a glissando effect – the darkness desaturating the colours and eating up the space and the silhouettes of the backlit performers – it produced an indescribable aesthetic emotion.

One scene that made a particularly deep impression on me was the passage of a man using a walking stick. In the darkness we could only hear him. The rhythmic clatter of the wooden stick on the concrete floor was an organic marking of the passage of time and space – the space heralded the passage of time and evoked ageing. It lasted for a long time. Infinitely long on some evenings, it seemed. That sound still reverberates in my ears.

For me, the emotional content of the work is contained in the physical sensation of the continual backward motion of the audience platforms. In my emerging memory there is a scent of nostalgia, a very real colour springing from an extremely abstract tableau that nonetheless produced enlivening physical sensations: a very real experience of moving backwards, seeing beings increasing their distance or disappearing.

Myriam Van Imschoot

Letters on Ave Nue

February 20th to March 15th 2009

Note by Myriam Van Imschoot:

This series of letters revolves around analyses of *Ave Nue* that Steve Paxton and I exchanged by email, not long after I had been present as a witness to the creation of the Amsterdam version of *Ave Nue* (January and February 2009). I had never seen the first version of 1985, other than on a video document made in 1985. Steve's project resonated with my interest in how artists deal with their own historical legacy. I would like to thank Steve Paxton, the Amsterdam School of the Arts, the dancers, light technicians and administrators of SNDO, Ame Henderson, Martin Nachbar, Jeanine Durning, Jeroen Fabius and Sher Doruff from the Amsterdam Masters of Choreography for their generosity when sharing this process. More than anything the period in Amsterdam brought to light the impact different time epochs, life phases, working conditions have on the work and the way these factors bring singularity to each project. Finally I'd like to thank the members of the original cast, whom granted me an interview on their experiences: the then performers Guy Dermul, Willy Thomas and Eddy Vaes, and Jan Ryckaert, who was technical director of the 1985 version and gave technical advice for the 2009 version.

**On 20 Feb 2009, Steve Paxton wrote:
views ave nue**

Are you OK? Last I saw you our conversation was about something funny with your eustachian tube or inner ear. Was it quickly resolved or did you succumb to it?

I'm awaiting your analysis of Ave Nue 09. Just to see how it jibes with my own inevitable metaphorization of relatively nonsensical images... or is that something you don't do? Maybe it is just my own compulsion, being an Aquarian and all.

It was a great time, being, miraculously, successful as a production. Some chat after about doing it again, but finally I think I want to use that theater for something darker and more poetic, meaning a sepia spectrum and more about dance. Out with the hands, which took over this time, hogging the time and the path to symbol-play. However, for 2 1/2 weeks of work, we all pulled together into a respectable evening, I thought. Some spectacular photos by Thomas Lenden, via website, if you haven't got the coordinates, I can dig them out.

Hope you are or got well,
warmly,

steve

**On 26 February, Myriam Van Imschoot wrote:
Re: views ave nue**

Hello Steve,

Do you want to consider including a big ear in the next version of Ave Nue? It could walk around, make a couple of jumps, but basically it would be just there to listen intently. I would like to volunteer to play its role. I did candidate for the hand, but now my case is stronger: I might be a better ear, than I'd been a useful hand...

You see, I need another pair of ears, since mine aren't good anymore. Hospital tests show that the eardrums are going too much inward, with a failing sound reception as result. Higher frequencies can be painful; lower sounds I don't seem to hear very well. The regularization of pressure is also not quite what it should be. And I hear sounds I never heard before: I intercept – out of nowhere – a foghorn, like a continuous drone. Someone said this may be the sound of my blood running. Sometimes a high whistle is added to it. No idea what that is the trace of.

Ave Nue resonates in me. In my mind I am running through scenes, trying to come to grips with the enigma's of this piece as it emerged and unfolded miraculously in only two weeks and a half time.

It's an intriguing remark that you could think of another version that is more 'about' dance. From a certain point of view, there was a considerable

amount of dance material. Many duets (how many, 12?), a sextet, trios, figures, line configurations. The focus on unisono, the alternation of duets and larger group formations or puzzles, the shared group discipline (composed, collected behavior, all dressed in white) in fact gave it a very 'choreographic' feel in the most common 'crafty' sense of skillful arrangement of set dance material in time and space. The duets were 'dancerly' – sequenced phrases, shaped contours, with detail inside. Dance all right! Yet, as you also suggest, a lot of dance does not mean it is 'about' dance. And here the hands come in. The short interventions from Ave Nue 1985 extended in this version into parables, with a breath of the epic. That there were two hands this time instead of one gave them a stronger foothold. Two creates narrative. Two leads into saga. Their scenes were sequential, stringed chapters of birth, life and death (and phantom – the man with the stick?); the tales of a dynasty.

I never timed how much time the scenes with the hands eventually took up in the overall 40 minutes. One third of the time? But more importantly, rather than having 'x many' scenes of a certain duration, the hands featured in the important hinges (slots like 'opening scene', middle and final end gesture) of the piece and seemed to suggest a sequential development. As a consequence, rather than punctuating the dance material (Ave Nue 1985), it constituted the narrative frame and became the overall structure (with dance as the insert).

As time goes by, my impression is not so much of a piece with dance parts next to more narrative sequences, but the elements transpire into one piece. The instances of interaction between the dancers and the hands (giving as-

sistance, offering a shoulder to sob on, carrying the newborn baby hand) created the pathways for further meaning-contamination to the point that all (the dance and the dancers too) is bathing in the realm of persona, of fiction. In my own metaphorizations Ave Nue (2009) evokes an idyllic world where two species live together. But then there's a dystopic side to it as well. One hand not simply dies, but is killed and suffocated by the very same dancers who (hypocritically?) console the one who stays behind. Those who assist birth also serve dead. How much compassion is in that? What bio-politics are operating here in this society of death and birth control? It can get grimmer: a lord of the flies scenario: a mob of young people, not just unisono, but un- age, killing the aged, in order to safeguard their candy coloured neverland. And why is the man with the stick suddenly so threatening a presence? Because it's captain hook. (whose false leg also makes a ghastly sound).

If I think of Beckett's plays. I am impressed that he came away with things that, had they been written by less known spirits, would be rejected as silly. He made silly respectable. And of course, it was never silly.

I remember that you said after the first week that you were considering to leave the hands out altogether. What a big jump they made in the subsequent weeks from possible erasure to protagonists. It took some time for me to accept the symbolical and the near-pantomime aspect of the scenes with the hands. And I think that I was not the only one who was puzzled. And that's what we dealt with. Precisely this cog in the machine, this taboo, this surprise, this what-the-fxxx, the ????, the !!!!!, ' ... '. A piece had to be made.

An avenue opened up and you walked it all the way. If there's sublime in that play, it may very well be in those places. It's a mystery play.

A friend of mine, he said, that the piece IS a hand. A hand unfolding. This friend lives a life of fist clenching; he learned a lot from the attitude or philosophy of yielding, open up to the emergent. Hand over. By accident, another friend, showed me postcards of El Greco paintings. It struck me how El Greco paints hands. In some of the paintings you see a pattern reoccurring. Men who have a right hand gripping something and another opening up as if in surrender.

We need to surrender.
The hands made me surrender to their intrigue.

Steve, your toes may be curling by now, upon reading this. Rather than making an analysis I exhume the rants of my mind. Is this what narratives do? Every day new readings come up. These were today's.

On 27 February, at 12:33, Myriam Van Imschoot wrote:
Re: view ave nue (part 2)

Hello Steve,

Marx once said that the first time history manifests itself it does so in the form

of 'tragedy', and the second time it (re)appears is in the cloak of farce. He could have said that history reappears as a comic book with a gothic edge.

I am intrigued by the series of permutations that happened between the two versions of Ave Nue. The first Ave Nue was an essay on the senses. The elements of space, sound, image, movement, prop and light had each their respective moment, integrity, something intact and yet overall aggregating into syncretic art. The piece begins in the darkness, with people sitting opposite each other, listening to music. A prelude. Music and darkness. And later a scene with just slides building image, the art of collage. Even the roster starting to move (in the older version) became a thing in itself, because it could not conceal itself. – Constructivist.

Ave Nue in 2009 became an integral play. Space was perhaps not the protagonist, but the container. Two main elements meshing: dance and absurd play. The other elements may have become more support acts (a result of short rehearsal period). Light was determining the palette, but not leveling to an art in itself with an agency of its own. The stretches of music were touches, brushstrokes, not independent sections. Rather than scores in themselves, underscores, as they supported usually dramatic moments. – Fusional theater with the elements not aggregating but integrating.

Another permutation: from a small ensemble to a group of ten dancers. This is a huge factor and I am still wondering about the repercussions of the small group versus big group. The latter triggers image of society, social formation, the former, well... I can't really tell, but more something

of individuals. The shift is one of multiplication. From many solo events (in Ave Nue 1985) to the duet as major platform. It doubled, and so did the hands (two). The trio moments of the first Ave Nue version doubled into sextets. Here's mathematics at work, if not pragmatics (you work with what is offered).

Permutation from using scores to using improvisation in rehearsal and setting it into choreographic sequence. From something perhaps raw with jump cuts between body postures, to the fluent phrasing of stringed dance movement. And in both cases you do not govern the generation of material; you trigger it.

Drastic difference: you were not performing, this time.

Drastic change of conditions: you worked for three weeks.

Is it helpful to compare two versions? What does it tell about where we were then and where we are now? You said it a couple of times, when speaking on the new take on the hands: we are not in the eighties anymore, that's over. What does a version say about its time and artistic position?

If history appears as tragedy, and then again as comedy, what shape does it take when it makes a third apparition? I hope Ave Nue answers that question, and reappears again. It lives under a good karma. Twice a magical piece came about. You know the saying: no two times without a third.

I sense Kaaitheater (Guy Gijpens) has an interest. They have an upcoming festival next spring that has as a theme 'reenactments'. Maybe that is a context. Or any other occasion that makes it happen. Jan Ryckaert can find you a corridor, he's dreaming already corridors.

I dream too.

Of a smaller cast. You inside. And people of a variety of ages. Scientists of performance, with a long life of expertise. Gesture as dance, dance as gesture, and the sepia, yes.

Do you think a posteriori of a performance (once it is made) as it is? Or –, with the vibes of creation still so present – as it could be, might have been, will be? When creating one balances on that dividing line between potentialities and actualization. It is like an exercise not only in depth vision, but in double vision: how or what it is/how it can be. The avenues, so far, are not specimens chronologically sequestered into different time periods. They are the manifestation of the parallel worlds that your mind is capable of bringing to the surface. They coexist. And persist.

Over to the aquarian...

Myriam

On 01 March 2009, Steve Paxton wrote:

Re: Re: View ave nue

ahhh, Myriam, a lovely long rant, so many times parallel to my own musings. What did I make? I know I never know ahead of time, even as elements emerge and become foundations of some karmic accumulation at the end. I don't know because although I dream it up, I can't determine the interpretation one sees later. I dream scale and means, then I see additions and multiplications, sum it up as we do, making meaning where in nature there is only emergence and process. Reading Darwin just now... his effort to de-emphasize human supremacy in favor of a more inclusive view of how our (mean all of species) develop. So, more or less that natural effect inacted in an hour's accumulation, distinct yet part of the natural world, art of the natural world. We can't escape completely, though some think we have escaped are somehow different than the natural world. But Not me, I accept that in playing god we set in motion and in playing human we are the motion if not the direction, not the winner, just Brownian events, molecules collected.

Your poor eardrums. This is disability. So instructive. I pray that it is just a taste and then it goes. A visitation. There is no mention of causation in your description. So I guess that is an unknown. Nothing like "less air pressure inside the body syndrome". I have tinnitus. That may be the high sound your ears produce. Did you know that the ears produce a sound normally? It is

the interference pattern with that sound which produces the effect we know as 'hearing'. Probably you know that now, someone may have recently explained that, in the course of diagnosis...

Amusingly, your sentence "Do you think a posteriori of a performance (once it is made) as it is?" I first read a posteriori as a posterior. A butt. Somehow that misreading gave me the image, along with giant hands and now ears, of a huge bottom in the space. Now we are getting someplace. uh oh...

More later. I have been away from my emails, and of course they pile up like sands in a dune.

love

steve

**On 11 March 2009, at 17:21, Myriam Van Imschoot wrote:
columns and weed, dunes**

Hello Steve,

How are you and the pile of mails?
Can I add some more sand to the dune?

Of course, I had to laugh a lot with your interpretation of Posterior/ 'a posteriori'. The cast of body parts lining up for Ave Nues – whether imaginary or existing versions – now gets really bizarre. What do we've got so far? Let's see, two hands, an ear, a butt, and what about the penis you once told of as the prop you had made along with the hand (what piece was this for? Was this at Dartington? I die to hear more ;-))

I feel like adding one more permutation to my previous mail and it concerns the columns, one other fundamental element in the Ave Nues so far. No highway without streetlamps. If Ave Nue were a road movie, then the streetlamps/columns would be its punctuation marks. In Ave Nue (1985) they were the immaculate components in what for the rest was all 'patina', run-down, decay, melancholic doom of impending demolition. They regimented, sectioned and framed the 'tunnel of vision' with harder edges, and in doing so turned the corridor into a modular series of camera obscuras, reminding of the viewing box, peephole... those kinds of architectures that play with vision whether used for the purpose of science or meant to be toys, both equally pleasurable. The corridor with its adjacent rooms of course suggested space, but it being so narrow plus the features of the columns and friezes underscored its function as an ocular apparatus. It did not just enable telescopic vision but actually may have given the audience the feeling that they had entered the telescope, gotten inside of it. There's science in this Ave Nue, and a shade of the spectre of Newton and his consorts (not only because the light changes of the color spectrum were meant to defy Newton, as I heard you say once.)

But there's also another tradition at work, a whole lineage of painting. The columns and the frieze joining them constituted a frame. It seemed that many pictorial repercussions of the frame were resonating in Ave Nue. The frame and its assets were used in so many ways to its fullest. The frame as that what makes the image inside gel. And just like in painting, the frame can work on two opposite ends of illusion making. It can accentuate depth of the image, or, reversely, make depth protract into the foreground and implode into sheer surfaciality (when frame and the picture plane become all one). On the video I saw the extremities of both. On the one hand, depth to its maximum; an avalanche of frames, leading to the optical effect of 'mise en abyme', where depth becomes vertigo. On the other hand, there was also two-dimensionality pushed to the extreme of surfaces that hit you in the face with the opacity of monochromes. You got really slapped by the black (in your words: a shadow thrown in your face), or at other moments confronted with nearly sheer colour field surfaces. At least that's what I deduct from the video. Ave Nue 1985 was to my eyes also very much a tribute to painting. (from Rauschenbergian collage aesthetics and silk screens to color spectra, to modernist colour field painting, monochromes, Dan Flavin, etc). It may come as no coincidence that Willy Thomas and Guy Dermal described you at certain points in the interviews I had with them as a visual artist, always busy mingling colors, cutting newspapers, making collages. To them this was a striking occupation.

In the Amsterdam version of Avenue the space was much more clean and tidy, all well renovated. In this nearly white cube like gallery space the columns

were now doing the reverse: they were not immaculate, but the patina providers, the vestiges of something older. They looked like Dorian Greek pillars, which fitted well with the feeling that the piece evoked a society (older, futurist, alien). Space did not change so much into hard edge colour painting surface; space kept being spacious – with open wings, side lanes, breathing volumes. A favorite moment: I never experienced the feeling of sitting in front of a massive spacious block of darkness so physically as in one of the longer black outs during the piece. I was not facing an opaque surface, but a volume of darkness. It didn't hit you with its shadow but it could swallow you or pervade. (and since it was a friendly darkness it nibbled at us)

Now back to you.

All yours,
Myriam

On 15 March 2009, 04:11, Steve Paxton wrote:
RE: columns and weed, dunes

It's an interesting thing is to meditate on the differences between the two Ave Nues. The difference in the painting is the difference between eras. '85 was the most delicate transitions from red into far blue. Romantic and in ef-

fect faded, transitions could be so subtle that it was difficult to find progress in the color scale. '09 the fewer columns were clearly identified. I must say the whole paint-finding procedure was different. Jan was mixing his own, and the more efficient Amsterdam crew could just order colors. I sweated the decision to go so overt this time. I bet I spent more time considering color progressions than any other category. I was amazed at the result. Not only the difference in scale, but also the lighting upon them. So a hotter load of color than in the '85 space.

Columns? Yes, no Ave Nue without. But I did like the paint on the physical surface of the hallway, rather than the column paintings we had to do this time. And I do like many more chambers in the hall. 09 Ave Nue has to be seen as an Ave Nue trial balloon.

It is clearly an optical devise. I really like your observation about the effect of the narrower '85. The '09 had more peripheral vision available. '85 was more central retinal. Smaller visual field and longer focal length. Maybe a more delicate spatial 'lever'?

going home on Monday. back to unreality.

such as it is,
steve

On a journey, backwards

A journey signifies the process of some kind of change, a movement forward; eyes and bodies turned ahead, towards a final destination. But, let us also consider a sea voyage, when on departure most travellers gather at the stern watching the land recede; sometimes waving goodbye, measuring the distance, anticipating. How significant are the gestures of *looking back* and *moving backwards* during a journey? Both presuppose setting the eyes in the opposite direction to the movement and form something like a transition phrase, a threshold, in which a disorienting experience of movement and time occurs.

And as a journey backwards we can understand Steve Paxton's three-week residency project, organised by the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) and the Amsterdam Master of Choreography (AMCh) in 2009, during which he re-visioned the performance *Ave Nue* with the students. This journey can be, namely, seen as having three components: the audience travelling backwards during the performance itself, Paxton re-visioning *Ave Nue* (first created in 1985) and the Amsterdam School of the Arts departments looking back to the era of postmodern dance.

By proposing the notion of a journey as a medium for reflection on this specific event, I seek to infuse actual movement into the act of *thinking about* movement. This has the potential to produce a shift in our understanding of temporality (which usually presumes a clear separation between the three positions of linear time: past, present and future) and foster an engagement with a dynamic experience of time that can cause disorientation. By 'de-creating' and reinventing an artistic event within time, it can be made to resist classification and closure; it remains open and has the potentiality of producing new ideas and imaginings.

This text is similarly moving backwards in time, from the performance of *Ave Nue* 2009 to the project's inception.

Ave Nue (2009)

Steve Paxton's *Ave Nue* is being performed in the long hallway of the baggage depot at Loods 6, Amsterdam. The audience is divided and seated on two raised platforms facing one another. Their proximity allows for immediate interaction to take place among the spectators. But once the performance begins, these two platforms start to move backwards and away from one another until they reach their respective ends of the very long corridor. As Paxton explains, 'The rostra start very close to each other, creating a kind of social relationship among the audience sitting on them. Moving away is like waving goodbye, something like standing on the back of a boat, watching the land and feeling oneself moving backwards.' Their movement is extremely slow and remains imperceptible to the audience for a long time, evoking an initially unconscious experience. *Ave Nue* is primarily a journey backwards, concerned with perceptions of movement, light and space. Bodies, lights and colours appear and disappear continuously in various shades and proportions.

From the outset, there is the promise of a puzzling perceptual effect. A couple of dancers enter and lay a cloth on the floor, upon which they also place a large white hand. Personifying this hand, they treat it with tenderness and care, as it eventually gives birth to a smaller one. This ritualistic scenery of a hand-birth is enacted in between two scrimms that partially obscure the spectator's view, contributing to a dreamlike state of mind as the wheels begin to roll back and the journey begins. At the same time, a well-known christmas melody filters through the space. But, repetitions of words and rhythms and an occasional beat interrupt this song's known form. What we rather listen to, while witnessing this scene, is the left-overs of a christmas melody – or even, its becoming-forgotten...

The dramatic aspect of this very first scene is distinct, because of the clear representation of a birth. And these hands will return later on in the performance as two upright walking figures, continuing the development of a little story line. However, the dance of the dancers throughout the rest of the performance is not alike; namely, it does not support the story and even contradicts

the dramatic element. Remaining abstract and very formalistic, it possibly evokes questions that are doomed to stay unanswered about what this bodies' movement might represent in relation to the story of the hands.

The abstractness of the dance starts manifesting itself already in the end of the first scene. So, right after the hand-birth, the scrims are removed and the dancers, all dressed in white, start creating spiral and alternating lines that expand in space like swarms. Their faces do not show any emotions. Their movement is very clear and precise and their eyes stay calm and confident. What the audience basically sees is human bodies executing movement combinations, going off-balance, pausing, changing dynamics and playing with movement synchronization, being in or out-of-tune with each other. Characteristic is also the consistent way these bodies cross over in space: knees bent and feet often producing a sound of sliding on the floor. This simple but seemingly anomalous form of walking is a returning motif in the performance, thus eliciting a recognizable refrain within what seems to be an incoherent and fragmented array of movements and rhythms. But other than that, the dance is abstract, minimal and mainly concerned with the form and volume of bodies in the expanding space. Even the christmas melody gradually fades out – for a while it is replaced by sounds of wind and sea waves, and later on by silence.

As said, the hand caricatures make their appearance again in the performance. They run amongst the dancing bodies and, in a sense, create an autonomous territory within that space. Acting like comic figures, the mother and the baby hand interrupt the 'seriousness' of the dance and create a humorous environment. However, their story ends up not being that happy. At one point, the mother hand is alone on stage. Human hands appear from the side and start throwing paper rubbish over her. She dies and the ritual of a funeral follows. When the baby hand becomes aware of its mother's death, it grieves, feeling sad and lonely. This simple and clear story is similarly dramatic and ritualistic to the birth scene. So, the dance happens *around* and *within* these stories of the hands, without following them. It is independent from but also intrinsically related to them, since they are all elements of the same performance.

Hence, these stories weave together the abstract dance moments with dramatic and comic tension, narrative and humour and provide a counterweight to the perceptual paralysis.

To be more precise about this perceptual paralysis, attention should be re-directed to the journey of the rostra, since moving slowly backwards allows the audience to experience more effectively that multiplicity of abstract events. The sizes of bodies and objects, namely, become obscure since perception of them is affected by their proximity to the platforms and the changing lighting. For instance, when dancers moving at different positions in the hallway begin to synchronize or make very grounded movements or hide themselves behind the columns in space, perspectives and proportions are rendered even more disorienting. The spectator's geometrical perception of space becomes twisted and confused, making for a haunting experience. In addition, the long hallway is framed by columns that enter into view as the wheeled platforms pass them. Covered with scrims and painted with a series of colour tints (from warm to cold shades) they generate a spectrum that is visible from either end of the hall. Contrary to traditional theatre stages, this long and relatively narrow space allows just a single field of focus. The performers have to exploit this restricted field in qualitative ways, and rhythmic alterations and appearance/disappearance play important roles. But the lighting changes, mainly improvised, do not necessarily follow the dancers. The lights seem to have a quite independent route that directs the audience's vision and attention away from the spaces where there is movement – it often illuminates the coloured columns or empty areas, for example. Lighting, movement and space, thus, all synthesize a *topos* of abstractness, the changing perception of which becomes the principle event in the performance.

'The performance has slowly appeared, stayed, and disappeared... and has now become a memory,' says Paxton. The overriding experiential quality of this journey is its paralyzing effect caused by the blurred forms and fading movements that are not easy to assimilate. Perceived or not, they remain incomplete.

Re-visioning Ave Nue

Paxton suggested revising *Ave Nue*, a group piece he created in Belgium in 1985. As he announced before the project started, 'This will be a re-visioning of *Ave Nue* rather than a reconstruction.'

After *Ave Nue* was performed in 1985 in an old military building in Belgium, only a video recording of the event and some articles remained – and the building itself was demolished some years later. The choreography for the original performance was based entirely on scores derived from football photos and everyday movements. But it was also concerned with the perception of light, space and movement. Everything developed from simple observations about vision, such as the interrelationship between size and distance (parallax vision), colour perspectives, the monofocus effects created by a hallway, the articulation of shapes in perspective, the disappearance of movement in the distance and the power that light has to shift the focus of vision. Paxton invoked the same choreographic thinking in 2009 – despite the intervening fourteen years, a new group of dancers, a wider space with shorter corridors and more materials and lights.

At the outset of the rehearsals, Paxton explained that the movement of the piece would be similar to the one in 1985 – movement that is perhaps best described as 'reduced ballet', movement that is extended, broad and relaxed. In this version, however, narrative and humour were to be more overtly present, mainly through the use of the two hands rather than the single one used in 1985. 'The hand will have a more interesting life in today's version!' Paxton explained. And this was clearly manifested through the stories of birth, death and funeral ceremony in *Ave Nue* 2009. However, the reason for such a decision was not discussed by Paxton. What is the significance of the hands' 'interesting life' and what is their relation to the abstractness of movement? Is there a reason, whatsoever?

The reason might not be so important in the end. But perhaps the need to pose such questions demonstrates a paradoxical situation: the articulation of a story, a narrative, is unexpected within contemporary dance practices, generally obsessed with fragmentation and abstractness. In that sense, the narrative might

even have a subversive force in today's performance practices, which Paxton explores in his own humoristic but also very dramatic way. What 's more, Paxton's work with movement as well as with narratives shows an extraordinary sense of simplicity. He is on a continual, even philosophical, quest of basic articulation: 'I question things that are too basic to be questioned, not in order to get answers but to get different platforms of questions.' Therefore, by re-visioning *Ave Nue* and re-asking basic questions, Paxton engaged dynamically with 'the past', rather than cutting it off from the present and the future. He exploited the past, cautiously de-creating it, re-exploring it and opening it up to reveal its contemporary potential.

The project

Western 'contemporary' dance evolved from what we call 'post-modern dance', the era of dance that Paxton is identified with. This dance form is associated with aesthetic and political ideas that may well be very useful for our times. But in what ways can the postmodern and the contemporary communicate within the context of dance creation today? Can a productive engagement take place – one that does not condemn the past or repeat it but instead redirects it such that new imaginations can emerge? The AHK invited Paxton to become an Artist in Residence in 2009. In other words, it not only looked back to one of the most important figures that initiated postmodern dance in the 1970s, it also moved along with him.

During the rehearsals at Loods 6, Paxton inspired the participants to approach the work in way that was simple, relaxed and mutually trusting – values heralded by the dawn of postmodern dance. Experimenting for many years with the everyday actions of walking, standing still and sitting, Paxton circulated his investigations around 'the dance of physical and ordinary things'.¹ And contact improvisation (a technique he developed together with other artists at Judson Church) is also based on ideas of touching, giving and receiving weight, balancing and trusting. In his presentation, he explained that his technique transformed fundamentally from the moment he started dancing with the image in

his mind of his body being a ‘container of fluids’ or a mass, rather than a body aiming for alignment. ‘I was feeling like a big mass of water: very nice and plain thought to work on instead of complex coordination. The relationship between fluid and gravity became my mental state.’²

The SNDO and AMCh, thus, attempt to understand dance beyond the rigid determination of temporal and aesthetic categories, intertwining the postmodern with the contemporary. In this way, we can show that dance’s past, its history, need not be viewed as an inert black box of facts, and its future need not be threatened by questions of a simplistic and fundamental nature.

Opaque destinations

At their beginning, none of the journeys has a clear destination: the audience cannot know in advance the geometry of the space (hence, its endpoint); the re-visioned choreography of *Ave Nue* cannot be predetermined; and it cannot be known how Paxton will have individually influenced the young participant artists. Thus, the experience of the journeys is enhanced with the notion of the *untimely*, meaning with a disconnection from the actual present, that offers potentiality for imagination and creativity. Hence, these events resist closure and re-engage with the past by de-creating it in dynamic encounters between harmonies and discords. For philosopher Giorgio Agamben ‘de-creation’ is an operation inherent to potentiality and to eventual creation, ‘making the complete of the dictated incomplete’ – that is, to reopen the past and ask ‘What did not happen?’ or ‘What could have happened differently?’³ In other words, something needs to undergo processes of reflection, re-examination and undoing in order to find its resonance and relevance today. And one need not perfectly coincide with one’s own time trends and styles to become inventive and creative. In a similar way, philosopher and dramaturge Bojana

1

Banes, Sally, 1986, ‘Steve Paxton: Physical Things’ in *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, Wesleyan University Press, p.57.

2

Paxton presented the DVD-ROM *Material for the Spine* at de Theaterschool in Amsterdam. Published by Centre National de la Danse; edited and produced by Contredanse, Brussels, 2008.

3

De la Durantaye, Leland, 2003, ‘Agamben’s Potential’, in *Diacritics* 30.2, p.22.

Kunst uses the notion of potentiality to talk about the future of performance, elucidating the distinction between something actualized and something potential. She remarks that only when not obsessed with actualizing and finalizing, performance can become a field of potentiality. Under this light, she can imagine performance to be ‘a continuation and disclosure of lesser acts, acts which don’t end in their own finalization, a kind of active present that is intertwined with the unrealized thought of the real.’⁴

Likewise, the words you are reading cannot and do not complete the journeys they discuss. Let them be interrupted and re-activated in unexpected ways.

Nested nests

on framing bodies and spaces in dance and choreography

On 12 February 2009 a revision ¹ 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 premier 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.

1

This term is particular to the very process described in this paper. Normally, dance and performance scholars and 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 here a maker looks again at an old work of his and reworks it according to circumstances and desires that have changed over time.

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’.

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.² 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.'³ 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 entail 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.⁴ 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:

2

Grosz, Elizabeth, 2008, *Chaos, Territory, Art – Deleuze and the framing of the Earth*, Columbia University Press, New York, p.1.

3

Paxton, Steve, 2009, *Ave Nue*, workshop, rehearsals and performance, Theaterschool Amsterdam and Loods 6, Amsterdam, January 26.

4

"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).

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 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.⁵ 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.'⁶ Much of the body's potential is

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Libet, accessed on August 10, 2010.

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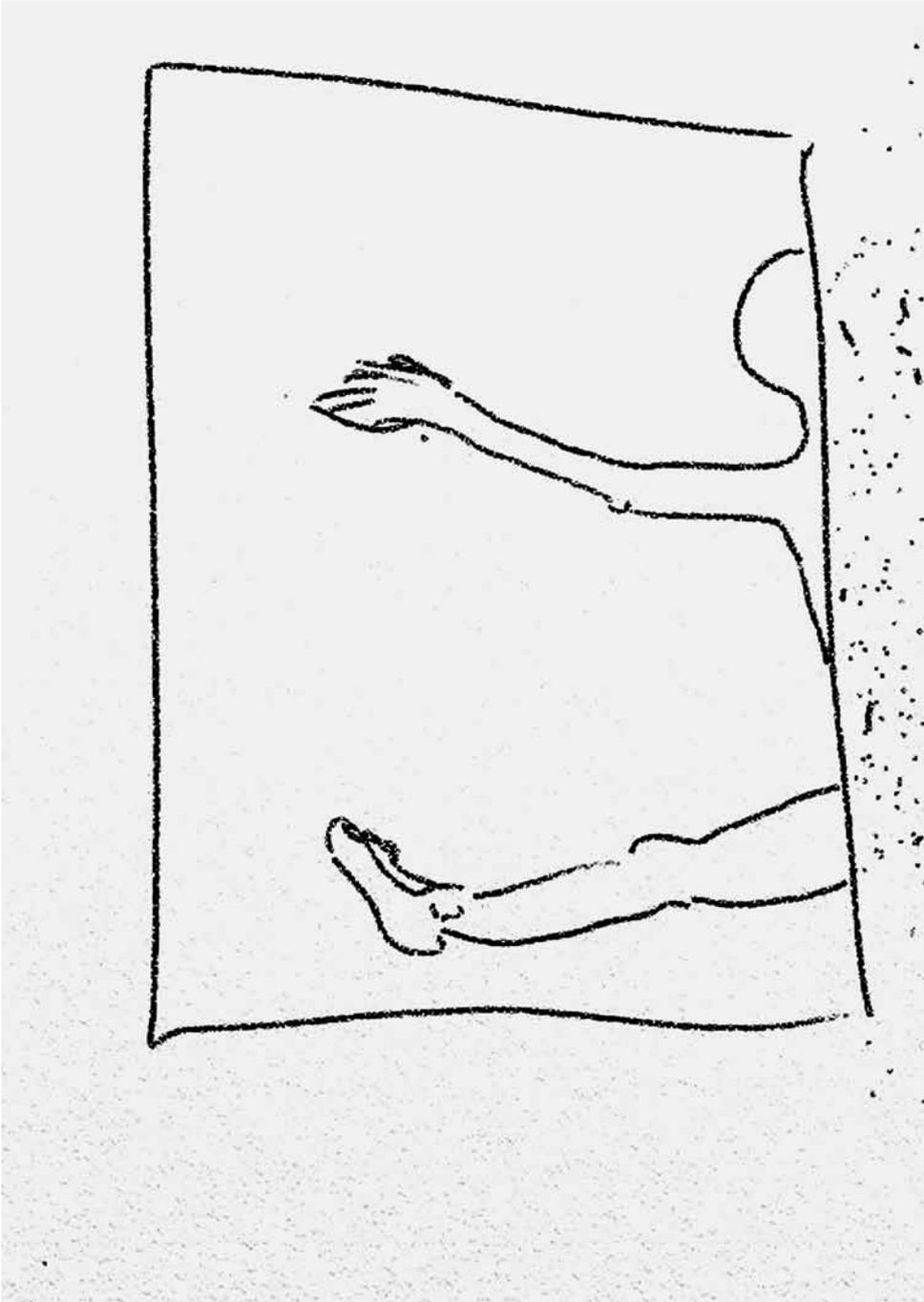
Grosz, Elizabeth, 2008, Chaos, Territory, Art – Deleuze and the framing of the Earth, Columbia University Press, New York, p.5.

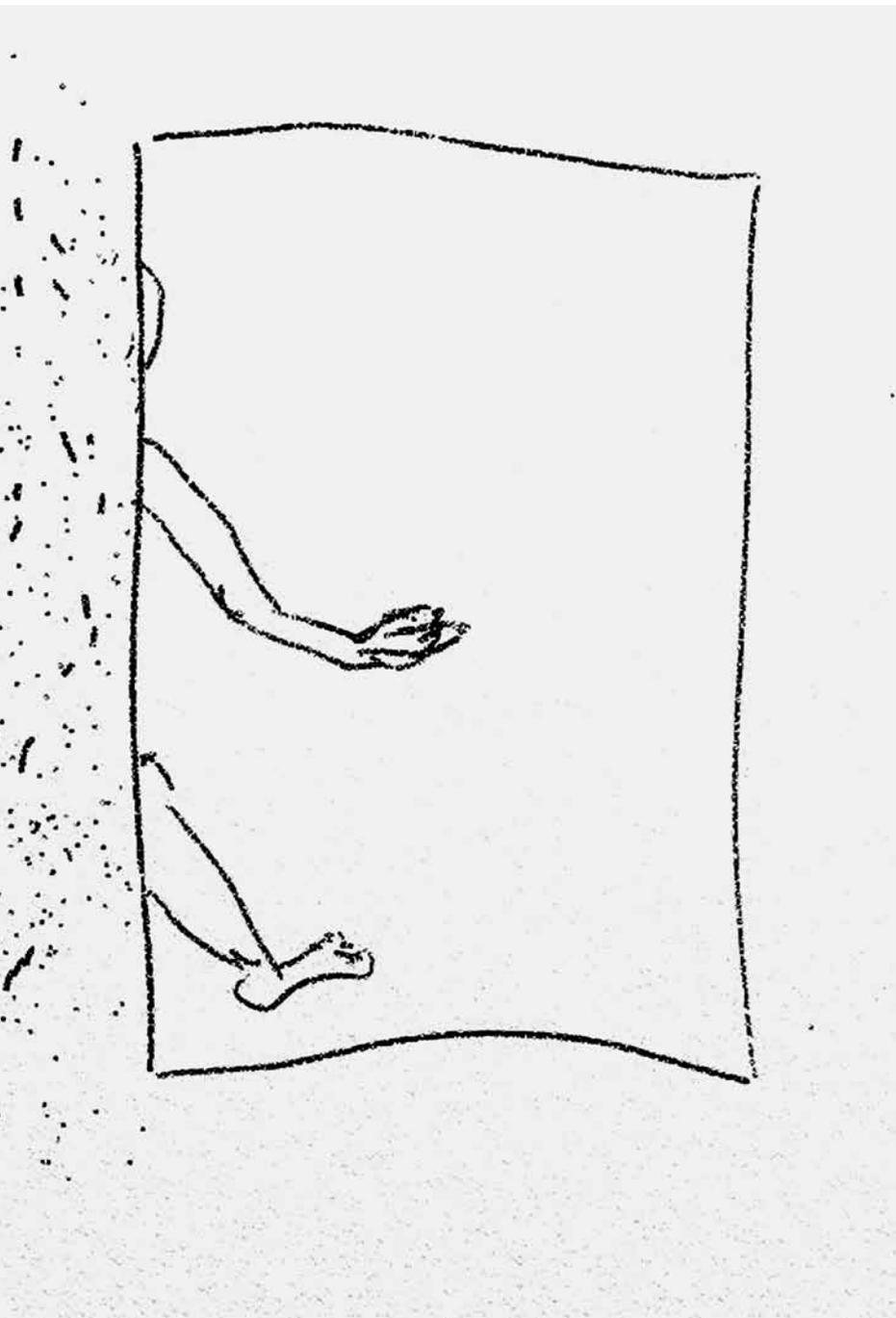
thus not perceived. Most of the sensations available to it are not sensed and can thus not be unleashed. They mostly stay outside of the frames of perception and conscious experience. They remain in the 'gutter' and can only be brought to sensation through activity that includes imagination and 'closure'.

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 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 re-frame 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 ⁷. They act similarly to the floor that marks the very territory on which 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 three-dimensional 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,' ⁸ 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' (30).'⁹ 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.¹⁰ Exercise is what brings to consciousness the inner sensations, the moments, when usage reveals operations of the skeleton, the muscular connections available between 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.¹¹

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. Sensations¹² 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 they know how to do. But it becomes complex once we acknowledge that there might be kinds of coordination involved 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

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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 rather as a frame for perceiving the body within different contexts 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."

8

Grosz, Elizabeth, 2008, *Chaos, Territory, Art – Deleuze and the framing of the Earth*, Columbia University Press, New York, p.16.

9

Cache, Bernard, 1995, *The Furnishings of Territories*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.30 in Grosz, Elizabeth, 2008, *Chaos, Territory, Art – Deleuze and the framing of the Earth*, Columbia University Press, New York, p.15.

10

"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." (From a note to the White Oak Dance Company, summer 2000).

11

Andrien, Baptiste and Corin, Florence and Paxton, Steve, 2008, *Material for the Spine*, DVD, Contredanse, Brussels, introduction

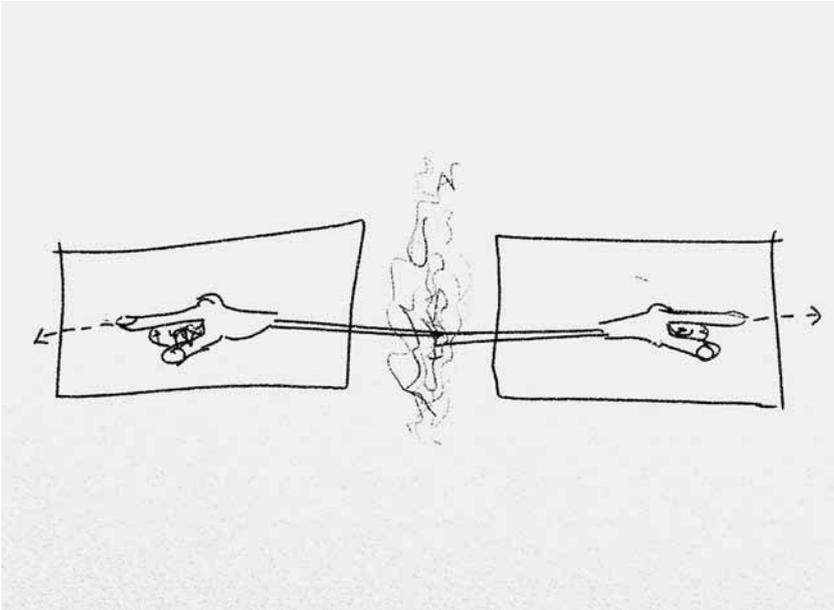
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The obviously different uses of the word 'sensation' in Grosz' thinking and in Paxton's is not entirely unproblematic and could be the topic of a whole paper. For this one, the author has chosen to understand Paxton's use of the word as in 'sensing'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

that allows for abandoning 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:

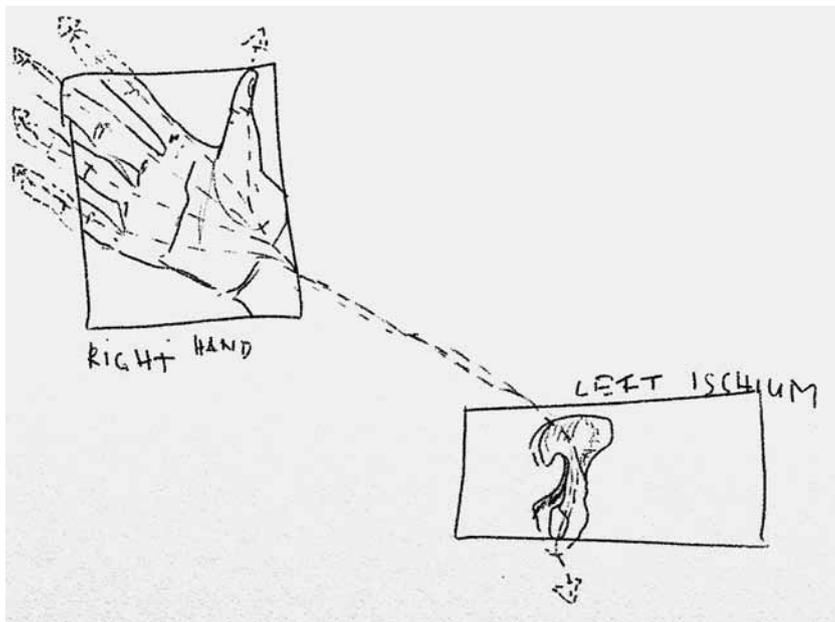
'There are moments when we point in two directions, for instance, expressing 'from east to west.' Somewhere in the middle, in the shoulder girdle, two imaginary lines are leaving, each projecting toward these opposite directions. Now, my question is what to call the space between the origins of those 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.'¹³

The ambiguous zone



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.¹⁴ 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?’

Pointing



13

Andrien, Baptiste and Corin, Florence and Paxton Steve, 2008, Material for the Spine, DVD, Contredanse, Brussels.

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“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, Baptiste and Corin, Florence and Paxton Steve, 2008, Material for the Spine, DVD, Contredanse, Brussels.

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 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 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.¹⁵

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

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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." (Baptiste, Corin, Paxton 2008: introduction).

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 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

During this 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 the tingling could 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 perceived 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: not yet sensed parts of and in between bodies.

‘Choreography became the name for an act of perception, when performer and audience together attend to the experience of moving.’¹

1.

Steve Paxton walks into the studio to meet a group of students. It is a winter morning in Amsterdam. There is much anticipation in the room; we have heard about this man before. He is unassuming but firm, gentle but exacting as he describes the project at hand. Not yet speaking to the entirety of the task of reconstructing *Ave Nue*, Paxton focuses his attention on sharing a set of physical exercises through which he guides the group. Beginning with the body, with how it moves, with the ways we can together discuss and experiment with its functionalities and its mysteries, Paxton begins by recreating processes – felt processes that become events in and for themselves. This is the beginning of the attempt to answer the question of how to go back, how to revisit a work that has already been made and performed years earlier. The beginning of this new process is located in the exchange with the people that happen to be present now and with how they might connect physically with ideas gleaned from another space and time.

In January 2009 Steve Paxton accepted an invitation to join a group of students and faculty at de Theaterschool at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. Paxton spent three weeks teaching his movement exercises and then facilitating the

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Dempster, Elizabeth, 2008, ‘The Choreography of the Pedestrian,’ *Performance Research* 13 (1), p. 27.

remount of his 1985 work *Ave Nue*, working closely with ten students who went on to perform the work in a series of public performances. Witnessing this event provided an opportunity to contemplate Paxton's work, and in the remounting process, to try to understand what it was that Paxton valued as the elements of the artwork. Paxton repeatedly referred to the project not as a reconstruction but as a 're-visioning' hinting at what, for him, might be at stake in this complex undertaking.

Diverse engagements with the archive and with reconstruction practices have been a recent focus in contemporary art. In the dance milieu, this interest has focused particularly on the repertoire of a generation of artists loosely belonging to the era in dance history called post-modern. This group of artists included those active in the Judson Church and the Grand Union projects in the 1960's in New York. So it is not surprising that a leading art training facility would invite Steve Paxton – a major figure in this movement – to revisit a past artwork both as a pedagogical and as an archival endeavor.

A first impression is that for Paxton, the construction of a context-specific working situation is of as much importance as the desire to remain faithful to the original artwork in question. This reading arises from the fact that although some of the details of the 1985 production were carefully adhered to, others were noticeably divergent from their first iteration, a product of either circumstance or decision with apparently no problematic consequences for the artist. In analyzing the elements that were directly translated instead of completely transformed one becomes aware of the status of the relations between the group of people making the work (in this case Paxton and the students) as well as the relationship between the artists and the imagined spectators of the eventual performance. It seems that the most important element recreated was a working dynamic which included sharing space, eating together, and even sleeping in the workspace in addition to discovering the modalities, scores and systems for the performance.

Attention to what Paxton calls the ‘theatre machine’ was also of primary importance. This term referred to the space being used for the performance and how it operated based on the perspectives of both the performer and the spectator. The positioning and movement of the spectators, on two seating banks that would slowly move apart over the course of the performance, was considered before any other staging elements. The original production took place in a hallway of an abandoned army barracks in Brussels: a long, narrow space featuring the moving banks of seating at each end. In Amsterdam the space was slightly wider and shorter but still gave a similar impression of length. So while the remade stage environment was altered because of the architectural differences between the two spaces, the basis for the set construction was similar. Paxton often referred to the differences between the spaces as he worked. However, the fact that the number of performers had almost doubled and the scores and movement phrases they performed bore almost no resemblance to the original work seemed barely noteworthy to him.

The term Paxton used to describe the remaking of *Ave Nue*, ‘to re-vision’, implies its processual nature. Somewhere between memory and imagination, re-visioning also points to the work’s conceptual focus on the apparatus of visual perception. It can also be understood to imply a shared activity of creating the project in new circumstances: a collective reimagining of an existing form.

Paxton’s movement practice focuses on sensorial awareness in the body – the muscular and skeletal structures, the relationship between inside and outside, directionality, gravity and weight. In Paxton’s methodology, these very ordinary sensations are first noticed, and then through training, the dancer is challenged to become more aware of the sensations and, ultimately, to become skilled in directing them. Paxton suggests a complex perceptive framework that extends from the body and into space. These lines of direction or intention intersect each other and extend towards

the audience. He then makes a connection between the dancer's awareness of their own movement and what this might mean in performance, as if this awareness could be extended to include the spectator:

'Perhaps it is time to look at the contract of performance again. It seems to be an arrangement intended to facilitate some sort of sensorial exchange. By using vision, the audience is able to 'ride' the physical situation of the dancer. This is empathy, and also synesthesia.'²

At the same time, the language Paxton uses to describe making performances points to a deep awareness of the situational, the contingent and the contextual. In a recent interview with the dramaturg and performance maker Robert Steijn, Paxton remarked that he 'sense[s] the conditions are so unstable. All the conditions under which I work'³ and that the performance is '... really a process for the audience.'⁴ Here the improvisatory and participatory nature of his works means that the performance is being made as it is unfolding, and that this process occurs between the performers and the audience. So what does this approach imply when the performance has already taken place years earlier? The re-visioning of *Ave Nue* was not wholly about re-making previous forms, but about setting up the conditions for relations between performers and audiences to be re-felt based on the architectures of the previous work: a sort of reinstallation of an apparatus for shared perception.

2.

Relational, dialogical, participatory, dematerialized – these are ways of describing a movement in contemporary art that has emerged and been largely theorized though the 1990s, emerging practices that reorient the responsibilities and roles of both artist and spectator. When witnessing Steve Paxton facilitate the re-visioning of *Ave Nue* this same terminology seems completely appropriate.

Paxton's process echoes with the concerns of artists whose work is sometimes categorized in terms of its 'relational aesthetics'. This movement in art-making emerged in the mid-nineties and Nicholas Bourriaud, an artist, curator and theorist, is credited with coining the term in his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*. Bourriaud defines it as an 'aesthetic theory consisting of judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations they represent, produce or prompt' and relational art as a 'set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.'⁵

Paxton was an active participant and contributed to the movement that is now referred to as post-modern dance, a collection of groups and individuals whom over several years experimented with approaches that upended previous assumptions and proposed new modes for making, performing and watching choreographic works. These artists used pedestrian movement, participatory explorations, scores and unusual performance contexts to disturb the normative performer-spectator relationship, creating new terrains for shared sensation. These investigations and the cascade of reorientations they explicitly and implicitly proposed, predated the discourse on relational practices by nearly thirty years. This could be attributed to the fact that this body of work and the art movement that it belonged to date long before the theorization of Relational Aesthetics. But it is also crucial to acknowledge that even today dance art is conspicuously absent from the discourse on relational art and its historical roots. Thinking about dance in this framework provides a challenge to a discourse that rarely addresses the inter-relations among performers in terms of relational structures. Paxton's work

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Paxton, Steve, 2003, 'Nothing Comes to Mind: Mindscapes and the space; an amble,' *Contact Quarterly*, Summer/Fall 2003, p.19.

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Paxton, Steve interviewed by Robert Steijn, 2009, 'Training Perception' *Talk: SNDO 1982-2006*, p.3.

4

Ibid

5

Bourriaud, Nicolas, 2002, *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du reel, Paris, France, p.112-113.

asks us to consider the agreements between performers and how these extend to the spectator as a relational and participatory event.

3.

Ave Nue is a manifestation of Paxton's engagement with the production of shared sensation among performers and then between performers and their audiences. This core focus can be traced to his early involvement with the Grand Union and its collective organizational structure and event-like performances, as well as with Paxton's ongoing interest in pedestrian movement. The later development of Contact Improvisation, which was largely credited to Paxton, also explored the physical relationality between practitioners as well as blurring the distinctions between participant and spectator, amateur and professional, studio and performance space.

'There are no answers, no goals, no expectations. Just two or so hours to look at some things. To try out some things. Making choices individually, collectively, then dealing with the implications and repercussions. Finding out how the others respond. Using the presence of the audience as another feedback mechanism. If someone feels hostile, it comes out; if someone is hurt or surprised by someone else's actions, that has to be dealt with. If two people are picking up readily on each other's signals one night, the performance works differently than when no one's connecting.'⁶

The Grand Union used scores, tasks and improvisation to allow a different kind of organization to occur between performers. Arising from a loose set of agreements that were then put into motion in front of an audience: 'They always involved a level of unpredictability and hence the need for performers to make decisions or solve problems on the spot – thus to be engaged in the creation and unfolding of a present rather than in the reproduction of a

(rehearsed) past.’⁷ Making work that set up the potential for the unpredicted to flourish meant that problem-solving and meaning making happened between participants in the performance as well as with the audience.

The Grand Union was one context where Paxton and his colleagues experimented with pedestrian or ordinary movement, an interest that he had explored in many earlier works. The curious coupling of everyday movement and the desire to reject representation, while problematic and probably impossible, allowed a space for meaning to be written between spectator and performer – a constantly shifting assignment of value, meaning and referents.

Sally Gardner writes that the ‘issue for these artists was to explore the possibilities of loosening the connections between bodies and their significations, to play havoc with the ways in which bodies were conventionally patterned in order to suggest other possibilities.’⁸ While these artists were concerned with disturbing the significations of recognizable gestures and movements, the fact that these elements related to the social realm meant that their actions could be understood by the spectator, even as assigned meanings were undermined. This readability allowed the re-patterning that Gardner describes to be collective and to include the spectator. In simple terms, pedestrian movement allows the spectator to recognize their own body in the body of the performer and to participate in the rewriting of inscriptions as they were occurring.

In *Ave Nue*, the pedestrian gesture has given way to something far more stylized, codified and potentially representational. But by placing this in a perception apparatus – Paxton’s ‘theatre machine’ that includes the audience’s point of view in the very framing of the artwork – the work remains contingent on the participation of the viewer.

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Banes, Sally, 1978, ‘Grand Union: The Presentation of Everyday Life as Dance,’ *Dance Research Journal*, Vol.10, No.2 (Spring–Summer 1978), University of Illinois Press, p. 47.

7

Gardner, Sally, 1999, ‘What is going on in Post-Modern dance?,’ *Writings on Dance* 18/19 (Winter 1999), p.187.

8

Ibid, p.193.

One cannot help but wonder if Paxton thinks we are ready for this, that 'we're finally starting to train perception up to the point where it starts to be able to see more subtle body language.'⁹

So it could be said that Paxton's work belongs to '... an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme... the collective elaboration of meaning.'¹⁰ Claire Bishop defines a range of artistic practices that not only highlight the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries but also engage with the social as a participatory praxis. Works that 'appropriate *social* forms as a way of bringing art closer to everyday life' and that are 'striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception. Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience.'¹¹ Bishop places the recent proliferation of this type of artwork on a continuum tracing back to the Dada movement of the 1920's and, like Bourriaud, attributes it to artists working in the last decade of the 20th Century. Yet it seems like the particular, studied focus on the pedestrian of Paxton and others together with the contingency of improvisation as performance belongs on this trajectory.

4.

On two seating banks facing each other a divided audience is aware of themselves through the regard of the other. The audiences then slowly move away from each other over the duration of the event, their movement allowing a performance space to emerge between them. In this way the viewer is framed as an active participant in the unfolding of the performance on a very practical level. More subtly, the slow movement of the rostras sets the audience moving too, changing the space with their own activity and magnifying perceptive shifts. We are right in the middle of it. Over thirty years earlier Sally Banes

described the complexity of a Grand Union event where six people reordered her world irreversibly:

‘Expectations, assumptions, memory, freedom have been tested and pried open. A new world of possibilities for dance, performance, art has come into being. But this new special world, created by six individuals working together this night – with more power together, and of a different sort, than any of them has working individually – is so inextricably interwoven with the “real” world I live in, and they live in, that the world can never be the same again.’¹²

She acknowledges the co-existing and inter-relating fields of interaction: First, between performers moving and working together and second, between that discrete group and those who perceive their process to engender a second and equally important process to unfold. One might feel similarly witnessing Paxton’s recent *Ave Nue* in Amsterdam. A revered master extends the invitation to a group of young artists to collectively re-imagine his work, a project that at the same time might reorder our perception of both the historical and authorial importance of the archive. Here the act of re-visioning is social and experiential. It is relational for both participants and spectators. And while these realms might be understood as existing in a non-hierarchical field of experience, they are discrete democracies of sensation.

If a relational work of art is in perpetual flux, with meaning constructed between art object and viewer¹³ then an improvisatory, collectively created, score-based work proposes relational structures both within the cre-

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Paxton, Steve interviewed by Robert Steijn, 2009, ‘Training Perception,’ Talk: SNDO 1982-2006, p.8.

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Bourriaud, Nicolas, 2002, Relational Aesthetics, les presses du reel, Paris, France, p.15.

11

Bishop, Claire, 2004, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,’ October Magazine Fall 2004, MIT Press, p.10.

12

Banes, Sally, 1978, ‘Grand Union: The Presentation of Everyday Life as Dance,’ Dance Research Journal, Vol.10, No.2 (Spring – Summer 1978), University of Illinois Press, p.49.

13

Kestler, Grant H, 2004, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art, University of California Press, p.48.

ative process as well as in the performance of the work. If this project is then reconstructed an even more complicated relationality emerges. Claire Bishop writes on the problem of documentation and describes the methods and strategies employed by artists to combat the elusive nature of collaborative event based artworks.¹⁴ Perhaps Paxton's concept of re-visioning – which defines the protocols of a new event on the documentation of the old – is a strategy that might inspire other ways of thinking about the legacy of this body of work. It may also reveal the intricacies of the question of what it means to remount works that are inherently participatory in their creation and performance.

It seems this action might expand current relational theories, drawing away from the two-way relationship between an audience that is grouped and the artwork (or artist). In calling for spectators who are active as *interpreters*, Jacques Rancière implies that the politics of participation might best lie, not in anti-spectacular stagings of community or in the claim that mere physical activity would correspond to emancipation, but in the putting to work the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations.¹⁵ We watch Steve Paxton work with students, allowing them to make and feel their own translations of a colossal history, and at the same time, allowing audiences to do this too. The project to remake an artwork from the archive gave way to a kind of emancipated and participatory event and in so doing reveal a site for a relationality that surpasses and complicates much of the theoretical discourse to date.

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Bishop, Claire, 2004, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,' *October Magazine* Fall 2004, MIT Press, p.15.

15

Ibid, p.16

Jeanine Durning

Some things come to mind: imagination, sensation, space, and the body – an impressionistic amble after Steve Paxton and the revision of Ave Nue

‘Artworks are not so much to be read, interpreted, deciphered as responded to, touched, engaged, intensified. Artworks don’t signify; instead, they make sensation real...’¹

Elizabeth Grosz

“And even if I don’t know when it happens, I will endeavor to make good work on my own terms, and perform it when required. Good work will speak for itself, and the lacklabels will be a welcome clarity as we gather in the moment of the dance. Beyond words. Which needn’t be very far, just a mental slip into the closest sensorial dimension”²

Steve Paxton

It goes like this:

Imagine a contact improviser walks into a bar –

No, no, no, wait. That’s not it...

Imagine a philosopher, a dancer and a mystic walk into a bar –

Wait a second, no.

Imagine a giant hand walks into a bar. It sits down and asks the bartender for five drinks, one for each digit. The bartender looks up, says: ‘Nah, mister, I can’t serve you. You’re already out of hand.’

Wait, no. That’s not it either... this is it:

Imagine a guy, say his name is Steve, walks into a bookstore.

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Elizabeth Grosz, Chaos, Territory and Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, Columbia University Press, 2008, p.79.

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Steve Paxton letter to Daniel Lepkoff, Contact Quarterly, Winter/Spring, 2004, Volume 29, Number1, p.49.

Yeah, this is it. Comfortable with exploring, fine with discovering, curious but not necessarily knowing what he wants before hand, Steve wanders around. Knowing it's a bookstore, he knows he'll find books, but other than that he doesn't know what he'll walk away with when he leaves the store. He finds himself in front of a display table. His eyes quickly scan over the titles of the books, the designs of the covers: combinations of words mixing with aesthetics, colors, shapes, images, signs – all working on his imagination. Before he asks why, he's already leaned forward, his hand is reaching for the chosen book, a complex organization of the senses, outwardly projecting the desire of what he sees into the action and direction of his arm and hand reaching toward the book. He clasps the book, curling the last two fingers of his hand around the object. He retracts his arm at the elbow, bringing the book closer to him. He feels the weight of the book in his hands but it's a fleeting awareness, barely made conscious since it's a common occurrence, a common sensation. He turns the book in both hands, feeling the surface, the texture of the cover. Registering the title now up close: *Chaos, Territory, Art*. Flipping through the pages, he feels the air of the small rush of paper, faintly smells the newness of the book. He lands on a page, his eyes scroll up and down, catching snippets: 'territorialization and deterritorialization through the senses' ... 'provisional order of chaos' – flip, another page – 'cosmological forces that we can understand as chaos, material and organic indeterminacy' – flip – 'Art and nature share a common structure: that of excessive and useless production, production for its own sake, production for the sake of profusion and differentiation.' Flip –

'What philosophy can offer art is not a theory of art, an elaboration of its silent or undeveloped concepts, but what philosophy and art share in common – their rootedness in chaos, their capacity to ride the waves of a vibratory universe without direction or purpose, in short, their capacity

to enlarge the universe by enabling its potential to be otherwise, to be framed through concepts and affects. They are among the most forceful ways in which culture generates a small space of chaos within chaos, where chaos can be elaborated, felt, thought.’³

Curious who the author is, Steve snaps the book shut and looks at the cover: Elizabeth Grosz. The book costs \$13.50. Curious, he decides to buy it. But as he leaves the store, he thinks to himself: ‘Some shifts are toward greater simplicity rather than to higher levels of abstraction.’⁴

Imagine: Steve Paxton. Standing. Standing on the cold concrete floor of the Baggage Hall of Warehouse 6, in the East Harbor District of Amsterdam, on a rainy January morning in 2009. Standing in his black martial arts slippers, soft, worn sweat pants, cotton turtleneck, sweater over it, knees slightly bent, weight projecting down, spine elegantly, expertly extended, poised, responsive, his right hand raised, the last two fingers projecting forward into the 100-meter long space, toward ten students, as if to shake a hand. He appears to be standing still, but, really, micro, immediate reflexes are in constant adjustment to keep him upright. This is movement so normal, so frequent, and so minute that it is often perceived as stillness. But it is not stillness. It is the small dance.⁵

Imagine Steve Paxton walking. Walking toward an eight-foot hand. The walk is ordinary, common, and yet through and because of the three people walking in unison beside him, it seems noticeably formal. They pick the hand

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Elizabeth Grosz, Chaos, Territory and Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, Columbia University Press, 2008, p.11.

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Steve Paxton, Nothing Comes to Mind, Contact Quarterly, Summer/Fall 2003, Volume 28, Number 2, p.18.

5

Steve Paxton talk at CI36, Contact Improvisation's 36th Birthday Celebration in Huntingdon, PA, June 13, 2008, reprinted from Contact Quarterly, Vol.34, No.1, Winter/Spring, 2009.

from the concrete floor of a dilapidated military building, a long hallway 110 meters long, in Schaerbeek, Brussels.⁶ The hand seems disoriented. It sways a bit, loses balance, stumbles, faces a wall, absently wipes at the ground with its large white cloth and Styrofoam fingers and then disappears.

Two years later the building will be demolished. It's 1985.

Imagine: Steve Paxton chopping. Chopping wood on a farm in Vermont. He's wearing jeans and work boots. His shirt is off. The ax, like an extension of his body, lifts overhead, projecting through the under arches of the arms, the lower part of the scapula moving down the back to the pelvis where the center of mass initiates the strike. The mind knows the action through the feeling of action. All around him, gnats and other flying insects are working too, with as much effort and ease and simplicity, doing what needs to be done. You hear only their buzzing – constant – and the deliberate, rhythmic strike of the ax.

Imagine Steve Paxton: historical dance figure, innovator, experimental dancer and choreographer, teacher, lecturer, writer, 'the man who is credited as being the initiator of'⁷ Contact Improvisation, an 'inveterate Contactor who is interested in improvisation,'⁸ who has 'researched the fiction of cultured dance and the 'truth' of improvisation for 40 years'⁹ and who has dedicated his life to 'some weird mix of research and mysticism.'¹⁰

Imagine researching Steve Paxton: there is everything imaginable, no loss for information. There are Google searches, issues of *Contact Quarterly*, books and articles on the Judson period, Grand Union, Contact Improvisation and the early years of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, remembrances, letters, homages and references, DVDs, VHS clips and YouTube spots, Paxton's own writings, articles, interviews and lectures, and now the DVD documenting the technical systems and forms practiced and taught by Paxton, which explore the interior and exterior muscles of the spine (the key 'limb' in Contact Improvisation), called *Material for the Spine*.¹¹ And of

course there are the performances themselves, the dancing itself, ‘lived’ in the imaginations of those who have seen them/it/him – the dancer who is the ‘-scape for the duration, a container of [the audience’s] foci.’¹² Imagine you are the audience: eyes seeing, bodies seeing/sensing other bodies dancing/sensing, eyes observing physical images in motion, minds in continual, fluctuating consideration of these images, imaginations creating empathetic sensations, these sensations informing and opening up imaginations. It’s an elliptical, unending process of constantly shifting perceptions. This is the contract of performance, what Paxton refers to as an ‘arrangement intended to facilitate some sort of sensorial exchange. By using vision, the audience is able to ‘ride’ the physical situation of the dancer. This is empathy, and also synesthesia.’¹³

Now imagine that what you see is not actually what you ‘get,’ or, rather, that what you ‘get’ is not what you see or not at least what you think you are seeing or, maybe, after all, what you ‘get’ is an experience of seeing in relation to a mixture of fixed assumptions and expectations in relation to continually shifting sensations in relation to constantly fluctuating perceptions of space, color, light, objects and moving bodies. Imagine, instead, that what you see is an ongoing shifting expression of potentiality. Within this space, a space of performance that Paxton has called the ‘artscape,’ where the contract between performer and audience exists, a kind of chaos is framed, and becomes an artificial reality, or, as Brian Massumi (political philosopher

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Ave Nue. Choreography: Steve Paxton. Production: Kaaitheater. Kaaitheater Festival, Théâtre de la Balsamine, May 1–12, 1985.

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Cynthia Jean Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p.52.

8

Steve Paxton Bio, *Contact Quarterly*, Winter/Spring, 2005, Volume 30, Number 1.

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Steve Paxton biography, www.movementresearch.org/festival/08/index.php?/artists/steve-paxton/

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Steve Paxton, *Contact Quarterly*, Winter/Spring, 2005, Volume 30, Number 1, p.69. 11

Steve Paxton, *Material for the Spine*, DVD, published by Contredanse, 2008.

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Steve Paxton, ‘Nothing Comes To Mind,’ *Contact Quarterly*, Summer/Fall, 2003, Volume 28, Number 2, p.9.

13

Ibid.

and social theorist) suggests, it is a construction of ‘*artifactuals* – crafted *facts* of experience... experiential potentials brought to evolutionary expression.’¹⁴

‘I have been improvising for a long time. Essentially 90% of the work I’ve done since 1970 has been improvisation... That’s a very long time to stick with one kind of basic idea. But once you step into these sorts of large amorphous ideas, like indeterminacy or improvisation, it’s hard to get out again, because there is so much of it. You get as much chaos as you would ever want to have. You run out of ideas perhaps, but not chaos.’¹⁵

Steve Paxton

‘Art is what enables chaos to appear as sensation...’¹⁶

Elizabeth Grosz

What can an individual observe in a moment as it happens, then passes, as it is seen, then sensed, sensed, then considered, remembered, then imagined in the time-space of a hyphen? This observation, each observation, is a bodily practice, whereby one uses one’s vision to ‘ride’ the physical sensation of another. But it is also a practice of the mind as it acquires alertness and consciousness of the observation of the moment as it happens, the moment that is usually unattended or ignored, that is passed over or taken for granted – that which may otherwise seem commonplace.

Paxton has dedicated his life to an endlessly fluctuating ‘form’ that defies and resists identification or definition,¹⁷ a form that is in a state of constant becoming. He has honed and formalized a practice of attending to unattended moments of the everyday, of bringing to consciousness the seemingly ‘least’ of the body’s unconscious activities and awareness to ‘the dark side of the body, that is, the side not much self seen.’¹⁸ An investigative art of

the senses, his work is a challenge to the collective conventions and personal habits of observation and concentration. It is a paradoxical exchange of practiced indeterminacy and chaos, designed and formalized, a framing, as it were, of chaos that enables a conscious emergence and awareness of sensations.¹⁹ These sensations directly impact the body, plunging it back into the realm of indeterminacy:

‘not through the brain, not through representations, signs, images or fantasies, but directly on the body’s own internal forces, on cells, organs, the nervous system. Sensation requires no mediation or translation. It is not representation, sign, symbol but force, energy, rhythm, resonance.’²⁰

Again, this elliptical, unending, non-conclusive cascade of becoming seems at the heart of Paxton’s work: starting with a desire to move – into an indeterminate action, into the sensing of the action, into the image of form through noticing sensation, into a critique of the action based on an imagination of design and form, back into sensation, back into desire and the impulse to move. Sensations

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Brian Massumi, ‘The Thinking Feeling of What Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation,’ Inflexions 1.1 ‘How is Research Creation?’ www.inflexions.org, Université de Montreal, May 2008, p.18.

15

Steve Paxton in conversation with Aat Hougee, ‘Chaos and Order: Improvisation Taken to the Limit,’ Movement Research Performance Journal #11 – conversations, Fall, 1995.

16

Elizabeth Grosz, Chaos, Territory and Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, Columbia University Press, 2008, p.61.

17

Paxton addresses the difficulty of defining improvisation: ‘I feel it is a difficult situation you have caught yourself in with this issue on improvisation. You are requesting articles in language (that most civilizing, consciousness “raising” medium, requiring so much formal effort), about a pre-lingual and probably largely unconscious arousal of manifested physical imagery which,

by its nature, resists definition because whatever you claim it is it is immediately not; definition (by definition) pinning down the immanent and turning it into available techniques and thus into history.’ Steve Paxton, Contact Quarterly, Volume 12:2, Spring/Summer, 1987.

18

Steve Paxton, Material for the Spine, DVD, published by Contredanse, 2008.

19

In Chaos, Territory, Art, Elizabeth Grosz speaks of a primal impulse to create territory, a space, both in the natural and human worlds, where sensations (mobile and mobilizing forces) can emerge. ‘Framing and deframing become art’s modes of territorialization and deterritorialization through sensation... The frame separates... This cutting links it to the... provisional ordering of chaos.’ Elizabeth Grosz, Chaos, Territory and Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, Columbia University Press, 2008, Chapter 3, p.13.

20

Ibid, page 73.

that are experienced and then objectified as images are at once equally subjective objectivities *and* objective subjectivities. Paxton believes that sensations are ‘what we feel to be happening at the moment, and they become images when we take notice that we are observing them.’ This suggests that the consciousness can be aware of itself,

‘and that there is a positive use for this ability to split into self-regard... First we feel the movements, then we objectify the feelings into images. The moment between these perceptions can be as short as a hyphen. All the above suggests that there is an important difference between knowing-noticing and noticing-knowing.’²¹

The urge to fix form is seductive, and yet the very nature of the body reminds us that it is always chasing a potential even as it cascades toward inevitable change. It is a form which never reaches conclusion, which never seems to come to the point. This is what Paxton’s work does: it reminds us that form is not fixed, that it cannot be fixed, that the mental, sensorial and bodily work of a dancer is accomplished in the multiple failures or successes to bring to consciousness the constantly changing relationships among what they are doing, what they think they are doing and what is seen. Both the worker and the watcher become aware that vision and the object of vision, internal and external, are dynamic, that the object of vision is virtual. In Paxton’s work, the normally imperceptible becomes perceptible while the activities that are usually taken for granted, that ‘otherwise slip behind the flow of action and [are] only implicitly felt,’²² such as walking or standing, are brought to the foreground of our consciousness.

Imagine walking: walking across a stage.

'Past is prologue.'

Joe Biden (via William Shakespeare)

On March 24, 2009, Boris Charmatz, the French choreographer and dancer, improvises a lecture to a full house at Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam. The lecture series is called '*The Old Brand New*,' focusing on issues of what is 'new' in the arts. This evening's topic is '*The New Virtuosity*.'²³ Charmatz begins by saying that he is not a lecturer. Instead of standing behind the podium with a script, he chooses to sit cross-legged toward the edge of the massive stage, so that he is closer to the audience. Every once in a while, he places the microphone down and gets up to walk across the stage to get some water from the podium. Charmatz sees the new virtuosity in dance not as a means of displaying technical prowess or of showing what the body can do based on historicized or predetermined idealized forms, the way a conventional concept of aesthetic virtuosity might, but rather as a kind of borderline between mastery and ordinary ability. The new virtuosity is about potential, he suggests. It is not about what we *actually* see but about the potential of what we *could* see. His examples of this 'new' virtuosity are: 1) a sweaty Baryshnikov bowing after his performance of *La Bayadere* and 2) Steve Paxton walking across a stage. Charmatz seems to suggest in these examples that it is not what these artists *do* that is virtuosic but rather our experience of what these artists *could do*; of imagining potential in the simple action of an artist walking or bowing, dissolving the dividing line between the ordinary and the extraordinary. What we actually *see* is no thing or action,

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Steve Paxton, 'Drafting Interior Techniques,' *Contact Quarterly*, Winter/Spring, Volume 18, Number 1, p.6.

22

Brian Massumi, 'The Thinking Feeling of What

Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation,' *Inflexions* 1.1 'How is Research Creation?' www.inflexions.org, Université de Montreal, May 2008, p.7.

23

www.theoldbrandnew.nl.

Some things come to mind: imagination, sensation, space, and the body – an impressionistic amble after Steve Paxton and the revision of Ave Nue

Jeanine Durning

extra ordinary; instead, what we *feel* is a person or action rife with potential, full of vitality and force that isn't actually visible but sensed. We *sense* the potential for something extraordinary. We *sense*, in that bow or walk, our own capacity or potential toward ourselves becoming *other*. This new virtuosity, according to Charmatz, is the sensation of the capacity and potential for transformation.

One wonders: What would Steve Paxton imagine to be the new virtuosity? One also wonders: Is everything old indeed new again? Or does artistic history repeat itself by honoring lineage and carrying on the legacy? Fred Astaire appropriating from Bojangles? Beyonce and Michael Jackson appropriating from Bob Fosse, who appropriated from Marcel Marceau and striptease? Lady Gaga appropriating from everybody? Everybody appropriating from The Wooster Group who appropriated from Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, William Forsythe, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Anton Chekhov and William Shakespeare, to name just a few? Steve Paxton was influenced by Robert Dunn, Merce Cunningham, gymnastics, aikido and tai chi. Baryshnikov performs Paxton. Charmatz choreographs Cunningham...

In 2001, in an ironic twist of bringing the past forward into the present and paying recursive homage to the Judson Church masters, White Oak Dance Project and Baryshnikov Productions (under the artistic direction of Mikhail Baryshnikov) presented an archival evening called 'Past/Forward' in which the revolutionary post-modern American dance masterworks circa 1960s were brought back onto the extremely formal, corporate-sponsored proscenium stage of The Opera House at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM): Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay, David Gordon; from churches, gymnasiums, and loft studios to grand halls, opera houses and proscenium stages; from hundreds paying nothing to thousands paying hundreds. And a few months after the great choreographer Merce

Cunningham passed away, in a feat of hijacking hijinks and/or irreverent respect, Boris Charmatz premiered *Flip book*, a piece ‘made’ by dancers (all ex-Cunningham company members) studying positions from David Vaughan’s book, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, and then linking those positions into movement.

The grand ol’, old brand, new virtuosity!

‘How extraordinary is our work these days? Once it was, I think – philosophically, aesthetically – but 30 years later, that revolution is commonplace.’²⁴

Steve Paxton

Imagine being part of a dance revolution, so democratic in its approach, method and purpose, having consciously erased the signature of the hand that helped to write its history as it went along, so ubiquitously embedded in the cultural canon these days, that we hardly notice it anymore. Then, the tyranny of the body was liberated, masters were dethroned, hegemonic techniques dismantled, and the performing presence of personalities challenged. Now, however, the deterritorialization that was so revolutionary thirty or forty years ago has been canonized and institutionalized, rendered utterly mundane. Today, improvisation as a viable art form, as a viable creative practice, choreographic tool and foundation for performance is commonplace. Democratic choreographic structures are used; nonhierarchical, horizontal organizations are considered the ‘new’ model in dance; authorships are reconsidered; styles, techniques and traditions are borrowed, sampled and ‘quoted.’

Contact Improvisation is being appropriated and taught in dance institutions across the world, sometimes without credit to or any awareness of its origins.

‘It seems that the impact of improvisation... is sort of accepted now,’ Paxton said in conversation with Aat Hougee, ‘even in very conservative circles. I think it was clear from the 60s that there was a problem with conservative training, that it turned out clones, it is actually very good at turning out clones, but it did not easily turn out people of performance genius. Now we run into the danger of creating improvisational clones.’²⁵

When Steve Paxton came up in the New York dance scene of the 1960s, revolution and ‘freedom’ were in the air and minds and lives of people making art. He danced for a few years with Merce Cunningham, who by then was already considered radical in his chance approach to choreography, having emerged from the representational mode of dance and narrative composition of Martha Graham. Cunningham was influenced by his work with John Cage, himself influenced by Zen Buddhism, through whose practice insights arise naturally and spontaneously and the seemingly disparate elements of the world coexist even as our personal attachments – including the seemingly logical ways in which we are conditioned to understand the world – are relinquished. Paxton was interested in challenging all common assumptions about dance method and technique, including those of Cunningham, in favor of something more concrete, immediate and quotidian – a challenge to himself and to convention with a ‘why-not?’ kind of attitude. In the 1960s composition classes of Bob Dunn, Paxton first experimented with chance methods, but then took it a step further when he arrived at movement by chance.²⁶ What seems to have stuck with Paxton over the span of these forty years is how Dunn taught:

he proposed ‘ideas by almost neglecting us, by mentioning things but tending to disappear at the same time... It was rather Zen-like, because how can you teach something that is in a constant state of mutation? What do you teach? He taught forms...?’²⁷ Like Dunn, Paxton too teaches through a kind of disappearing self, suggesting but never dictating. He also teaches forms, the mechanics of very broad and functional movements, then breaks them down into the minutest detail: aikido forms, crescent rolls, helix rolls, spirals, walking, standing. Yet beyond these forms, what he transmits is something less concrete, more ambiguous, brought on by something more subtle and multi-layered – a way of sensing the design of the form as it is constantly changing its relationship to stimulus and information, of how to marry one’s individual uniqueness of shifting sensations with the idealized image of the form. Paxton teaches a way of experiencing dance, or rather a way of experiencing an experience, until it becomes an osmosis of information in which the dance, while dancing, is teaching itself, a kind of self organization and knowledge present in the practice of doing. His method, in short, consists of sensing sensation ‘transmitted from the force of an event to the nervous system of a living being and from the actions of this being back onto events.’²⁸

‘I truly don’t seem to believe very much in the idea of set material, or set life, or set anything, I truly do feel a strong connection to the idea that things are always changing.

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‘Chaos and Order: Improvisation Taken to the Limit,’ Movement Research Performance Journal #11, Fall 1995, reprinted courtesy of Mr. Hougee for Critical Correspondence; <http://www.movementresearch.org>.

26

Sally Banes, Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993, p.58.

27

Ibid, p.10.

28

Elizabeth Grosz, Chaos, Territory and Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, Columbia University Press, 2008, p.72 – 73.

So the idea of “set” is a kind of linguistic convenience, for these ways are more the same than they are different, each is just one of the possibilities.’²⁹

Steve Paxton

‘The idea that there is such a thing as fixed form is actually as much an assumption about perception as it is an assumption about art... Art brings back out the fact that all form is necessarily dynamic form. There is no such thing as fixed form. Art is the technique for making that necessary but normally unperceived fact perceptible, in a qualitative perception that is as much about life itself as it is about the things we live by. Art is the technique of living life in – experiencing the virtuality of it more fully, living it more intensely.’³⁰

Brian Massumi

‘Nothing exists but momentarily in its present form and color. One thing flows into another and cannot be grasped. The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes.’

Shunryu Suzuki-roshi (1905–71)

Reinvestment? Reinvention? Reinvestigation? Reconstruction? Or something else? Paxton, choreographer of *Ave Nue*, preferred to use the word ‘revision,’³¹ which seems appropriate for a project that has to do with parallax and optical illusions through the use of light, space and movement. Twenty-four years after it was first performed, Paxton – the godfather of improvisation, a man

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Steve Paxton in conversation with Aat Hougee, ‘Chaos and Order: Improvisation Taken to the Limit,’ *Movement Research Performance Journal* #11, Fall 1995, reprinted courtesy of Mr. Hougee for Critical Correspondence. <http://www.movementresearch.org/publishing/?q=node/458>.

30

Brian Massumi, ‘The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation’,

Inflexions 1.1 ‘How is Research-Creation?’ www.inflexions.org, Universite of Montreal, Montreal, May 2008, p.7.

31

Steve Paxton, program notes for *Ave Nue*, Feb 13, 14, 2009 at Loods 6, KNSM laan 143, Amsterdam, See also Steve Paxton’s contribution to this publication *Ave Nue* 2.

who defied institutionalism in dance and challenged conventions of performance, who resisted theorizing and defining of a form he helped to instigate – is now surrounded by students, theorists, dramaturges, teachers, documentaries and academics.

Imagine a hand. Steve's hand, extended and supported. An open hand, thick and wide and articulate from use, a hand that is poised to give, and to receive.

Imagine re-imagining a performance that was made more than two decades ago. The main premise of the work was based on using a very long, narrow space. Two rostra, on which an audience of about 50 sat facing each other in close proximity, were gradually and steadily drawn apart via a kind of motorized pulley until coming to rest at either end of the 100 meter space. In 1985, the work was produced by a theater festival in Brussels and entailed: four months of preparation and rehearsal; a choreographer performing with four other people (another dancer and three actors); live cello and video projection; two weeks of public performances; and a giant, open, tangentially present hand, which introduced a kind of eerie, cartoonish realism to the piece's abstract formalism. *Ave Nue* was originally scored from cutout photographs of sports-actions and other non-aesthetic based movements. In 2009, the circumstances are completely different, and none of the conditions are the same. This work is presented as part of an artist-in-residence program at the School for New Dance and Development in Amsterdam; the space, while still long, is shorter and wider than the original; Paxton has only three weeks in which to build the piece; ten students are performing and creating set material from tasks given and edited by Paxton; there are two invitation-only performances; and, finally, the audience is presented with not one but *two* giant, open, tangentially present hands.

Imagine an avenue: a long pathway through which to enter or leave a 'place.' Indoors. A long, hollow

hallway lined by rainbow painted columns on either side. A visual landscape through which to experience a constantly shifting perspective of space and proximity. It is an ever widening Technicolor dreamscape, at one moment acutely present and the next distant, murky. It is an avenue of appearance and disappearance, of moving bodies, now near, now far, now there, now absent, in between increasingly distant audience members being carried away from each other on motorized stands. It becomes the *sensation* of distance, the *sensation* of time passing, a chasm of experience, a sundering occurring so gradually as to become its own continuity – an *ave nue*.

Across the distance, you can't be sure if someone is moving, though you hear the shuffling of feet coming nearer, echoing in the hollow space. The shuffling becomes an audible continuity of distant space, a visual marker of passing time. Then, abruptly, the light changes, directly and brightly illuminating the space nearest you. There are three bodies moving there, close enough to feel the air move, while farther off, in the landscape of your vision, there are five other bodies, smaller, dimmer – murky doppelgangers, blurred variations of sameness, a motif of likenesses. You become aware of the action of your vision – *the sensation of your seeing, a witnessing of your own witnessing*. It is a lullaby of eyes, a melody of bodies in action and rostra in steady backward motion. The act of seeing is the articulation of the space: your body moves without your moving.

Imagine a big hand giving birth to a little hand. You witness this from beyond one of two large scrims, which, palely lighted, impart a filtered, dream-like quality to the scene. Within the scrims are ten people, all in white – a *community*. When the little hand emerges, one of the community cradles it and pats its back. You think you hear a burp but know you hear Christmas music... *I am a poor boy, too, pa rum pa pum pum...* You chuckle at the absurdity, cartoonish and eerie. Later, the big

hand is smothered by a flood of garbage and papers. A funeral is held for it. It is carried overhead to its grave. A meager puff of smoke dissipates over the cardboard tombstone, almost as soon as it spits from the smoke-machine – a wink and a nod to theatrics. The little hand looks on from a distance. You think for an instant it must be sad, lonely for the bigger hand. Then you chuckle at your own reading: absurd. The little hand skirts aimlessly among the community, who, unconcerned, continue their work, their dance, until at last the little hand throws itself forward and triggers a stuttering, cataclysmic surge of light that rushes away from you one night and hurls toward you the next, before vanishing in blackness so sudden and total that you are rendered void of sense and sensation.

‘I know what I’ve done for music, but don’t call me a legend. Just call me Miles Davis.’

Miles Davis

‘I use forms in farming that I use for dance. I cut my grass to bring consciousness to my spine.’³²

Steve Paxton

It goes like this:

Imagine you are given the opportunity to write about Steve Paxton. You begin with a reconstruction and end up with a deconstruction, a breaking down, a delving in – to history, to context, to propositions, to paradoxes, to analyzing forms, to politicizing purpose, to theorizing intentions... Finally you come back to simplicity, to the feeling of feet on a floor, to the reminder of the spine responsive to movement and arms that

give and receive. Imagine you knew what it was like back then, when 'possibility' was possible and creativity wasn't co-opted and commercialized. Imagine what it would have been like to sit on the floor of the Judson Church on July 6, 1962 and actually *not know* what you were looking at, having never seen anything like it. Imagine asking without agenda, irony, or cynicism: 'Is this dance?' Imagine the excitement and the outrage, the possibility of more to come.

What are the impressions we can get and give of a man who has, by no admission of his own, become a legend, a reluctant icon of experimentation? Dedication to dance is a quiet cause. It is a guerilla revolution of the senses, subterranean and unseen. Your own history in dance has brought you here, and you know the influence of Paxton's work on you, through his teaching, through the teaching of others who have worked with him or have been influenced by him, through reading about him, through reading his writing, through watching him perform, many, many times. This influence, this information, is in your body, in your imagination, in how you see the world, how you walk down the street. It is even in how you sit at a table and write.

Where *are* we going, and what are we *doing*? What happens, as John Cage asked in 1961, when you set out for one place and find yourself in another? What does it mean to dedicate yourself to a service of indeterminacy, of the undefined and undetermined, of exploring dimensions of the sensorial, of following a hunger to discover more of what movement is or can be? Imagine you are Steve Paxton. What would you think of dance now?

Imagine you live on a farm. Every now and again, your work requires you leave home. You are invited to major cities to conduct workshops on cultivating awareness of the senses and the body. One night,

you're sitting in your hotel room looking out the window onto the crowded street below: neon lights, rushing people, honking cars, cold asphalt. You notice your distance from this world outside, outside yourself. You think of the evolution of nature, of our natures, of dance. You think of how dance reminds us of our natures. And you think of existence, simple and basic, and of time, and of space and gravity, and of our feet, of our spines, our reach. ³³

Some things come to mind: imagination, sensation, space, and the body –
an impressionistic amble after Steve Paxton and the revision of Ave Nue

Jeanine Durning

Biographies

Jeanine Durning (New York, USA) is a dance performer, maker, and facilitator. She is currently working with Deborah Hay on the Motion Bank project, conceived by William Forsythe. This year she is a guest teacher at NYU/Tisch, SNDO (Amsterdam), and SODA (Berlin). She completed the Amsterdam Master of Choreography programme in June 2010, focusing on the intersection of body, thought and language.

Konstantina Georgelou (Amsterdam, Netherlands) is currently a PhD researcher at Utrecht University. She studied philosophy, art theory and psychology at the universities of Athens, Berlin, London and Amsterdam. She works for dance and performance as an author, dramaturge and performer and she is an external research and programming collaborator at the Kalamata International Dance Festival.

Ame Henderson (Toronto, Canada) is a performer and choreographer as well as the Artistic Director of Public Recordings. Her performance works have been presented across Canada and internationally. Henderson has developed work in residence at Le Groupe Dance Lab, Tanz Quartier Vienna, INK-Pula (Croatia), Studio 303 and Harbourfront Centre. Henderson received a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal and recently completed a Masters of Choreography at the Theaterschool at the Amsterdam School for the Arts (AHK).

Myriam Van Imschoot (Brussels, Belgium) operates at the intersection of writing, performance and visual art. Originally a dance historian and essay writer, she now regularly collaborates with Meg Stuart, Benoît Lachambre, Vera Mantero and Philipp Gehmacher. Since 2008 she has been employing her own archive as the hub for research and the creation of a series of works on auditive memory, orality and voice. She recently made Living Archive.

She is the founder of Sarma (www.sarma.be), a workplace for dance, performance, writing, dramaturgy and artistic research.

Patricia Kuypers (Brussels, Belgium) decided to follow the path of dance improvisation after her meeting and collaboration with Steve Paxton in the 1980s and after attaining her Masters degree in psychology. She founded Contredanse resource centre for artistic research in dance, and Nouvelles de Danse magazine. She is involved in personal and collaborative dance projects that she presents all over Europe at theatres, improvised music festivals, alternative spaces and studios. She also teaches extensively in dance institutions, universities and La Cambre in Brussels.

Martin Nachbar (Berlin, Germany) is a performer and choreographer. He also writes and publishes on his practices. He trained in Amsterdam at the SNDO, in New York and in Brussels at PARTS. In 2010 he graduated from the Amsterdam Master of Choreography programme. Nachbar has collaborated in a variety of functions with artists from a wide range of fields. They include Thomas Plischke, Vera Mantero, Les Ballets C. de la B., Meg Stuart, Thomas Lehmen, Jochen Roller and Martine Pisani. His own works tour internationally.

Pieter T'Jonck (Leuven, Belgium) is a practising architect and art critic, specialising in the fields of theatre, dance and architecture. He has written for various media, including De Standaard, De Tijd, De Morgen and Klara Radio. He publishes regularly in journals such as Etcetera and Ballettanz. He has taught architecture workshops at the University of Ghent, and at the academies in Antwerp and Ghent. He is involved with DasArts in Amsterdam and has run workshops on criticism. For an overview of texts and a statement on criticism, see www.sarma.be.

Ave Nue

About the project

In 1985, the American dance innovator Steve Paxton created Ave Nue in Brussels. Twenty-four years later he worked for three weeks with a diverse group of students on a 'revision' of the piece in a baggage depot in Amsterdam's old harbour district. Rather than taking movement as its departure point, Ave Nue focuses on architecture and the impact of extreme shifts in perspective on the observer's perception. Ave Nue places the audience on two facing platforms that are slowly – all but imperceptibly – pulled away from each other, gradually increasing the size of the dance stage.

Discussing the group process that led to this extraordinary performance, Paxton said, 'There was no hierarchy of a teacher and his students, there was not even a real teaching situation, but there was a lot of teaching and learning going on. On both sides.'

About the artist

Steve Paxton is an experimental dancer and choreographer. He has danced in works by Merce Cunningham, José Limón, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. Paxton was one of the founding members of the Judson Dance Theatre in the 1960s. He developed the Contact Improvisation technique, in which points of physical contact provide the starting point for exploration through movement improvisation. Paxton all but ceased performing in the 1970s to devote himself to training

workshops and writing. He still performs improvised solos and collaborates with choreographers, composers and artists such as Robert Ashley, Trisha Brown, Boris Charmatz, Katie Duck, Lisa Nelson and Vera Mantero. In 2008 Paxton published the DVD-ROM Material for the Spine, which captures his unique dance knowledge.

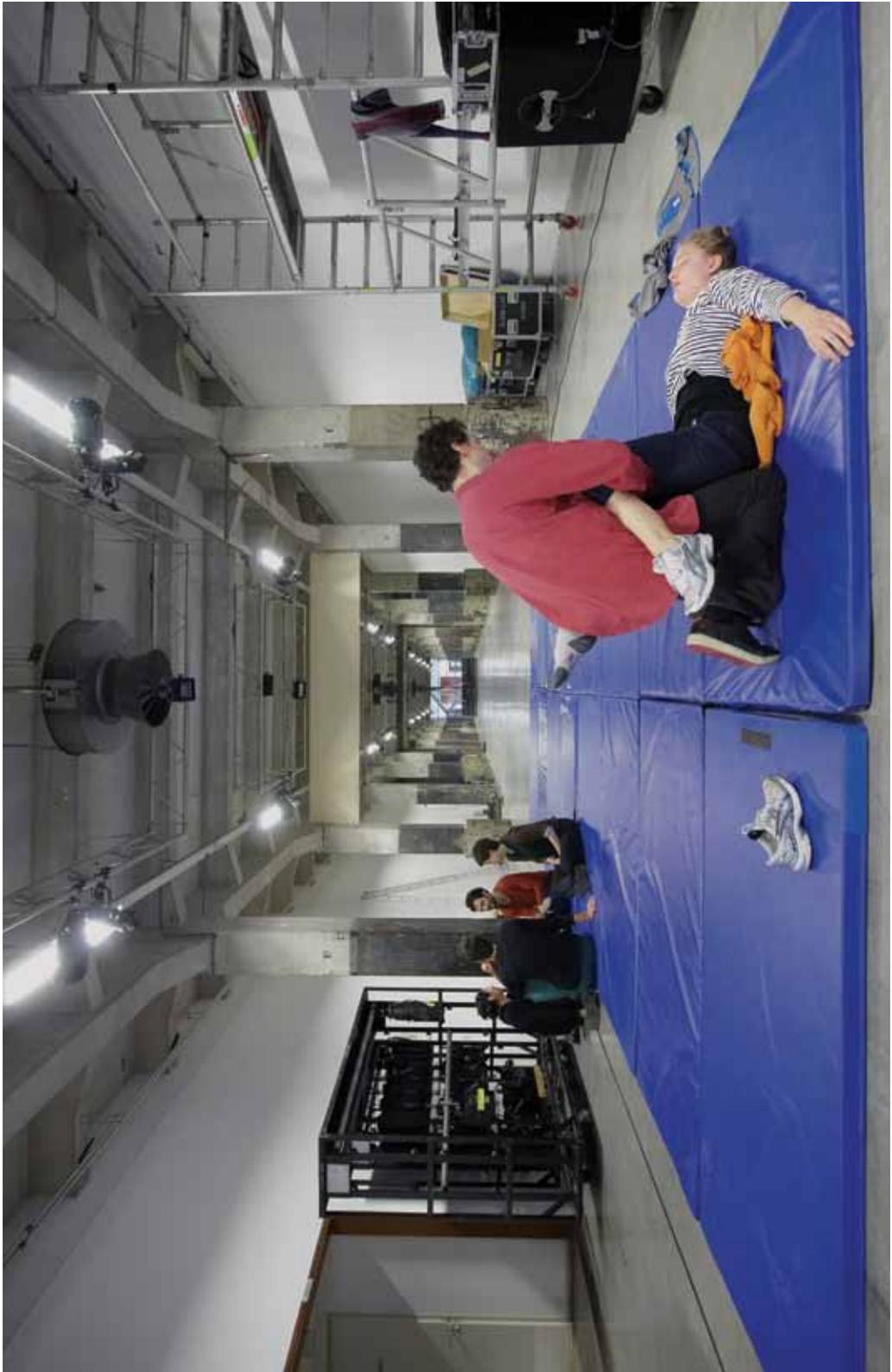
Project credits

Ave Nue was hosted by the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) and the Amsterdam Master of Choreography and performed by SNDO students in collaboration with students of Production and Stage Management and Technical Theatre Arts. Ave Nue was and created and performed at the baggage depot of Loods 6 in Amsterdam in February 2009.

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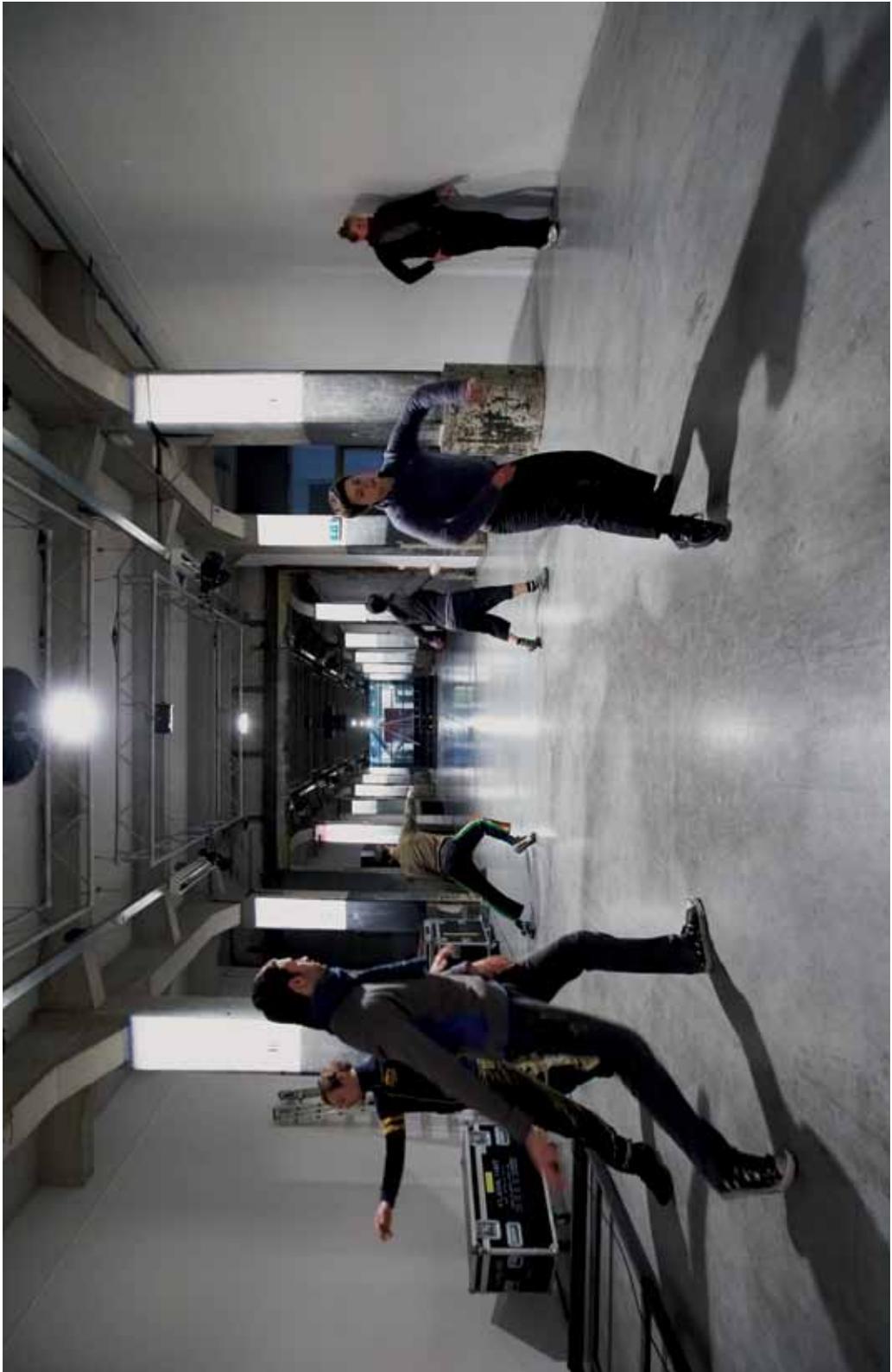


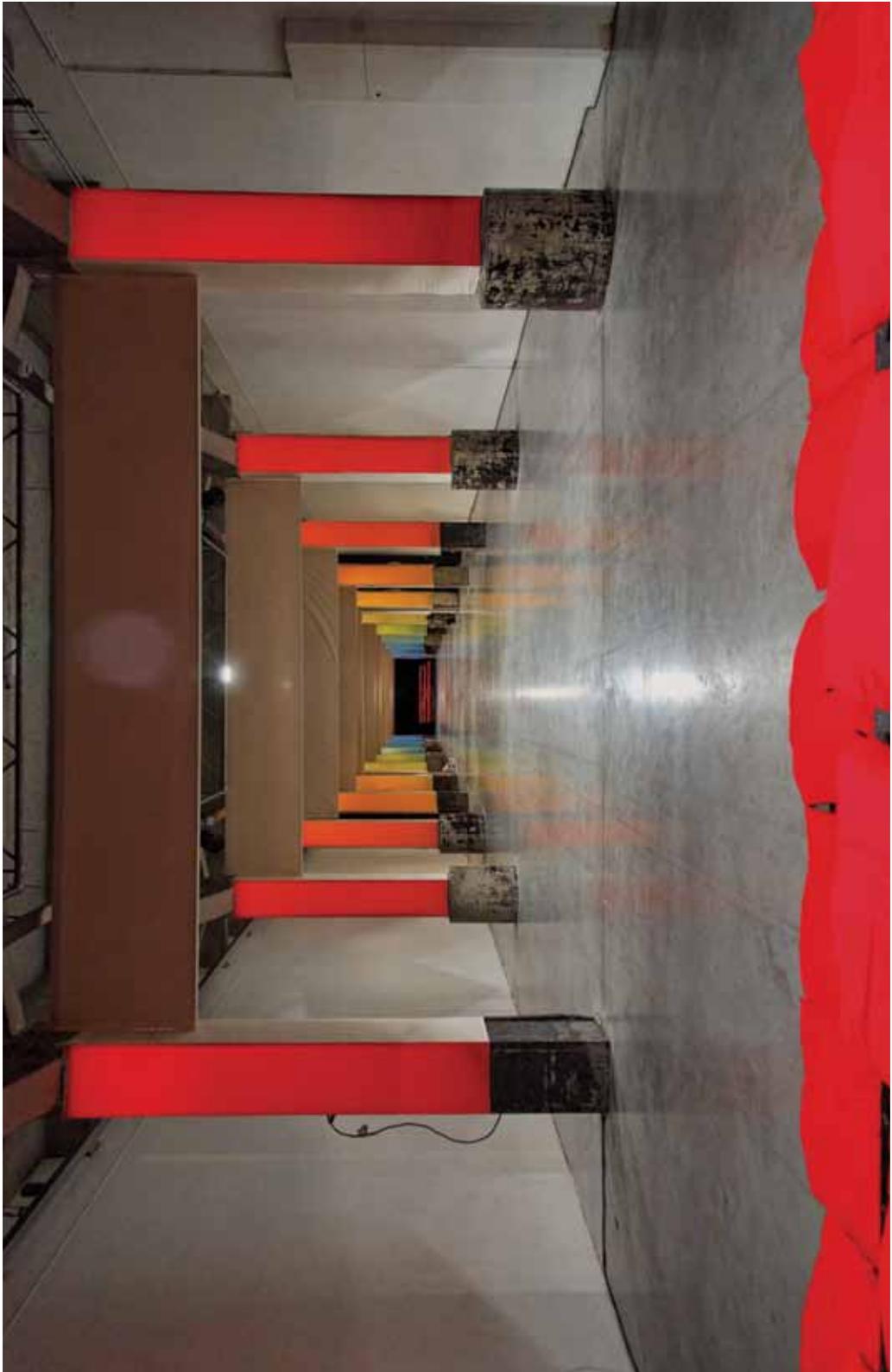


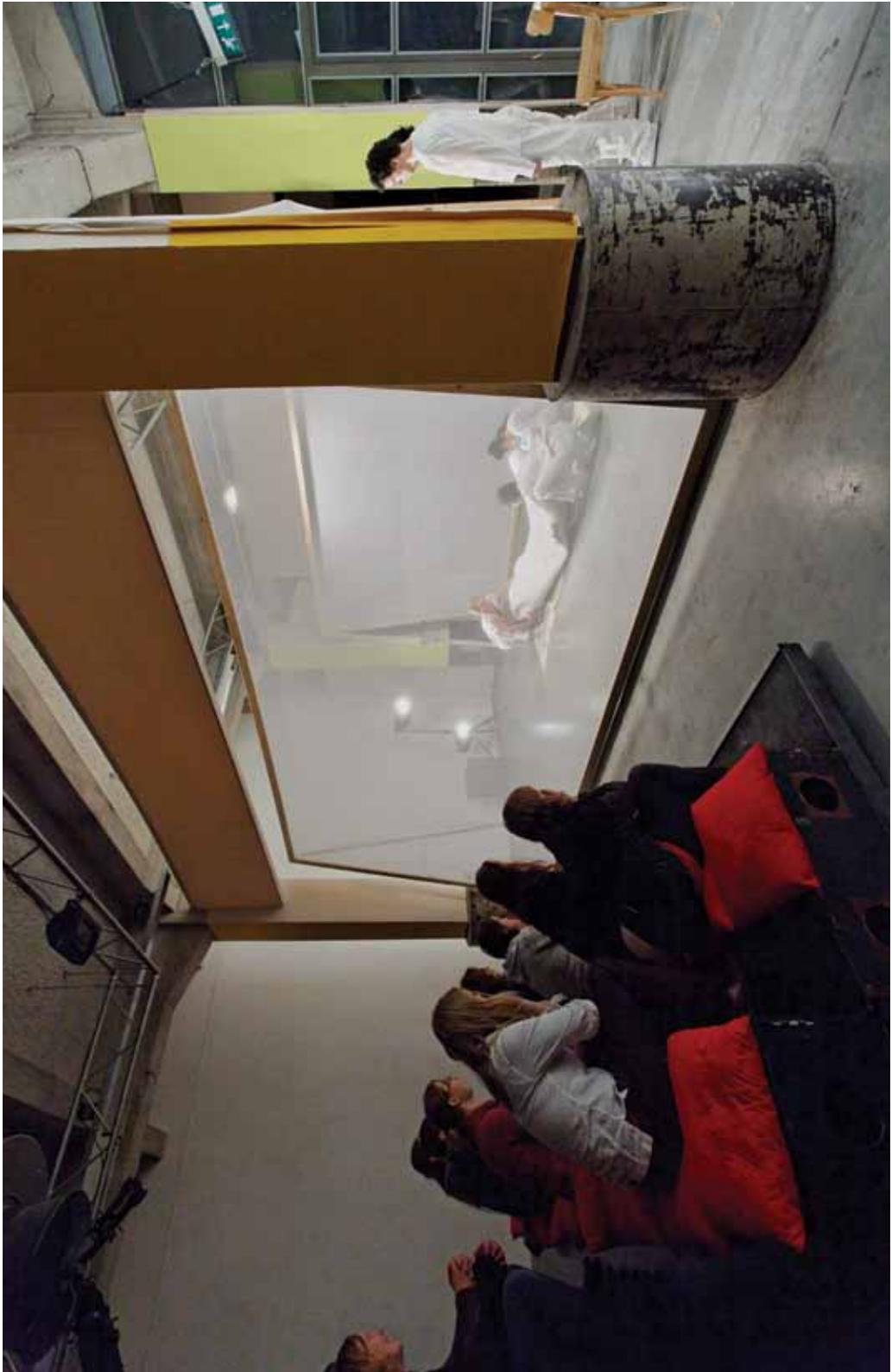




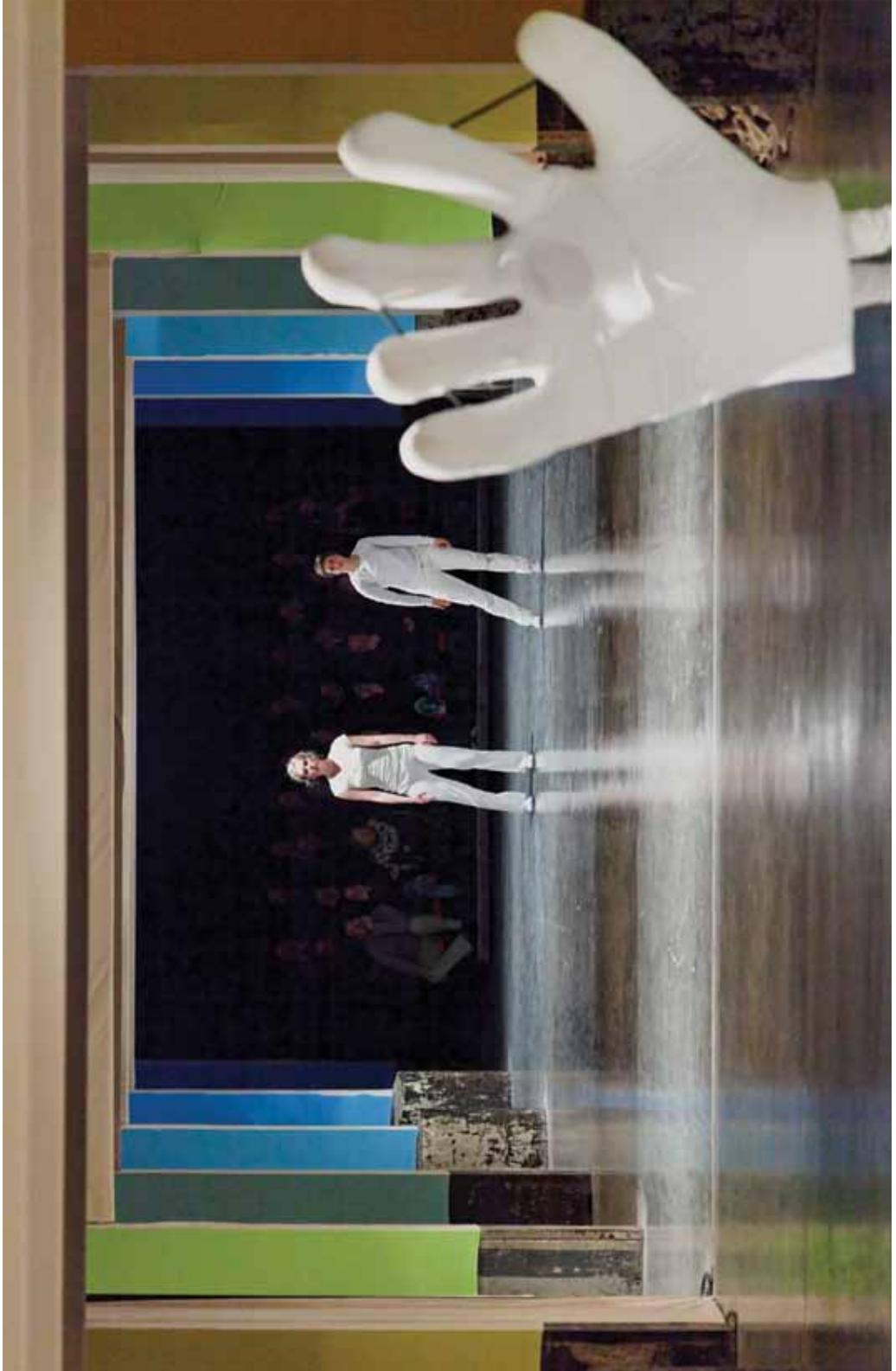




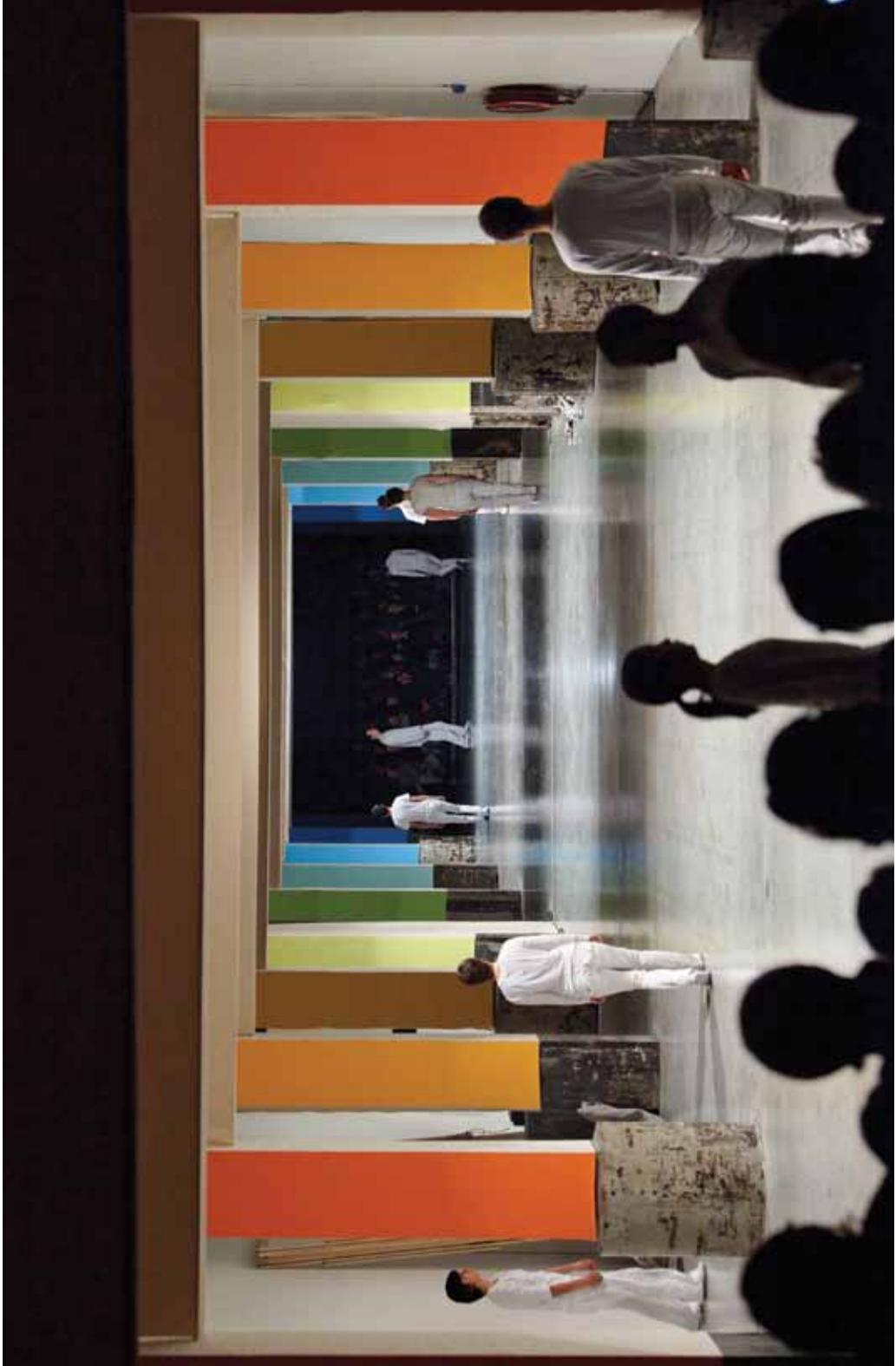


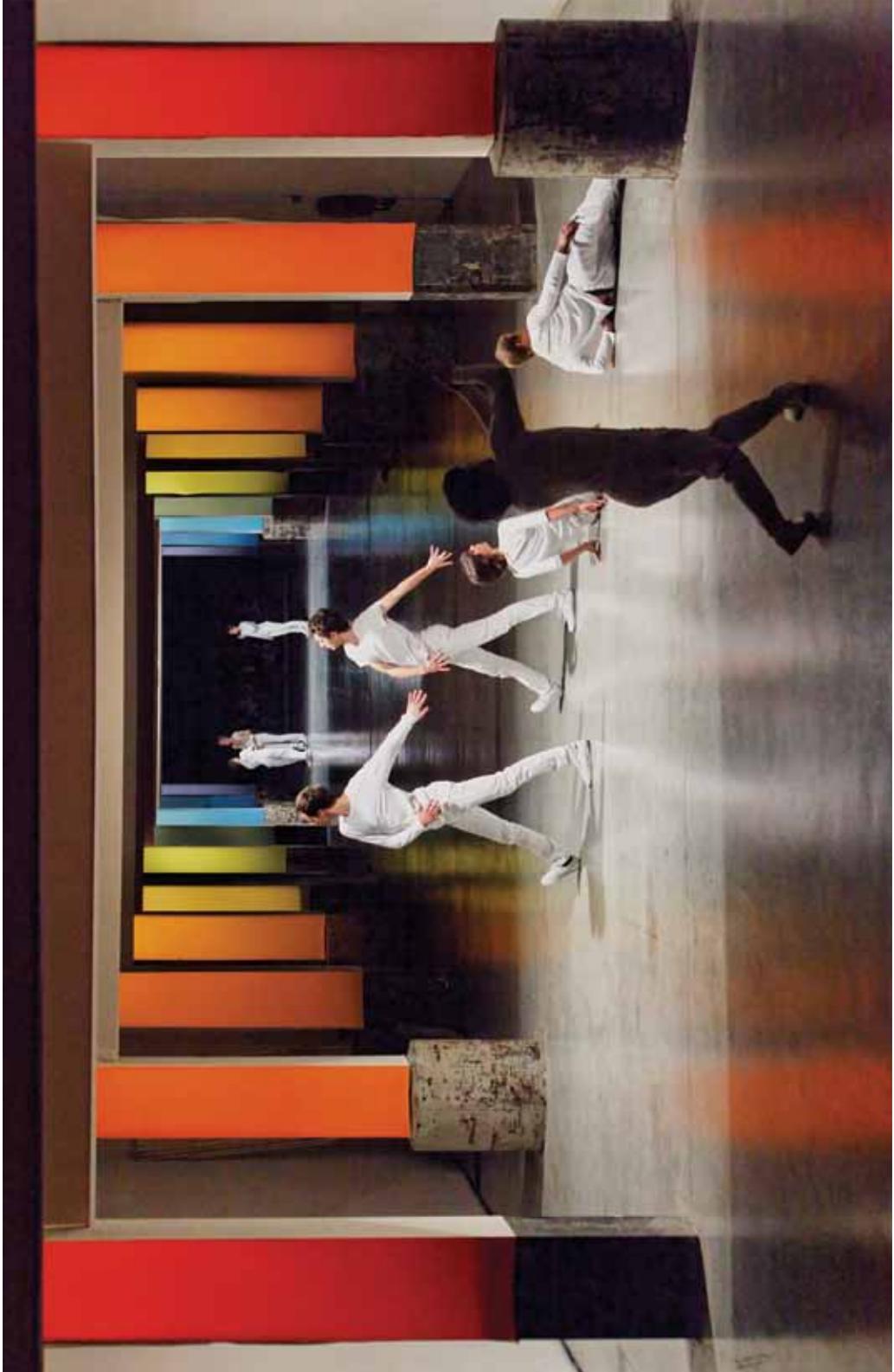


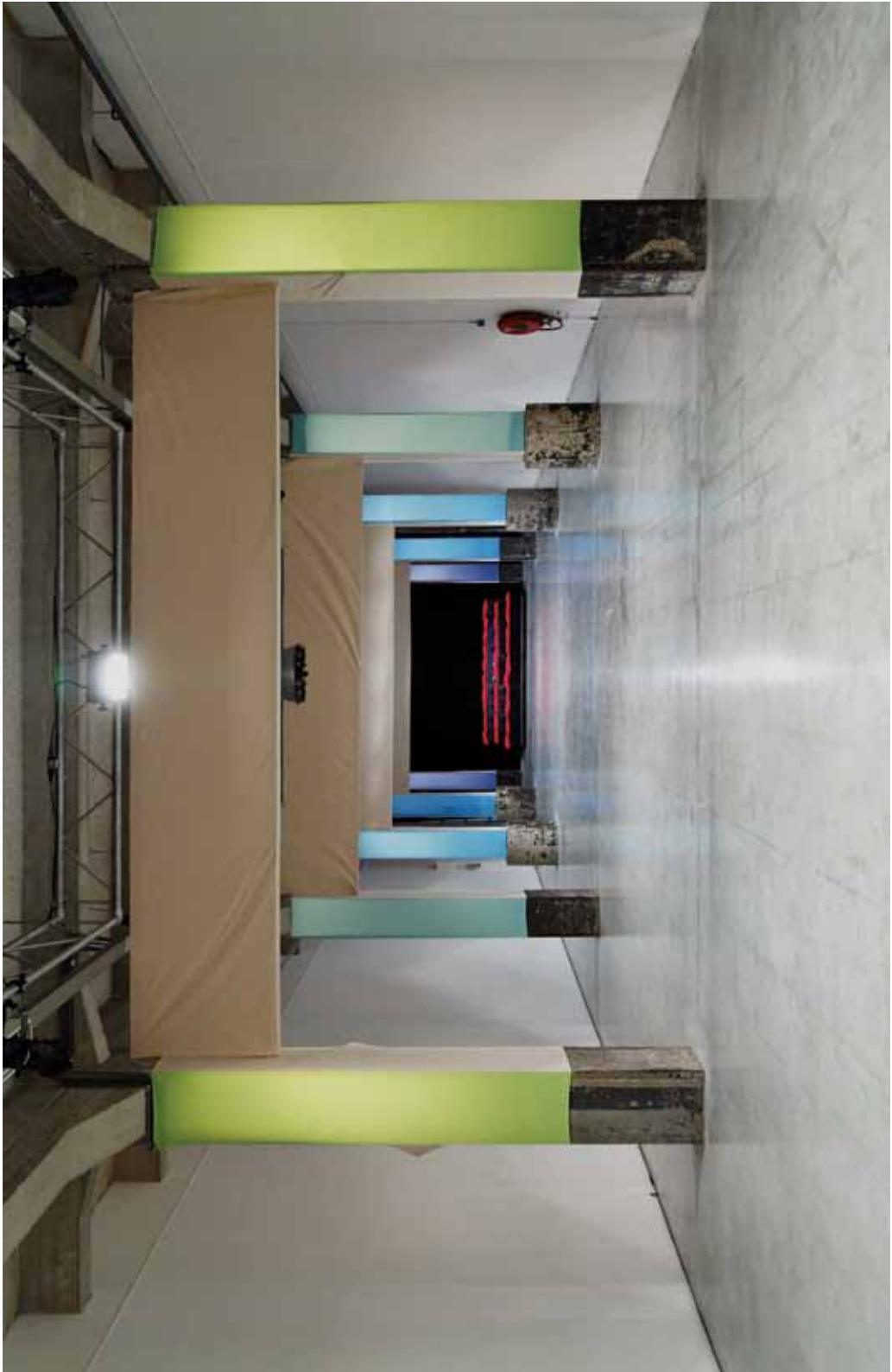












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