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**Words as a living source of documentation.
An introduction to Steve Paxton's account
on contact improvisation**

Interviews are a special historical source. Even when transcribed, they carry the traces of their oral nature, its immediacy and liveliness. At the same time, they convey a sense of inscrutability. In fact, as in any form of dialogue, the common knowledge the speakers share and the circumstantial contemporary events may be silenced in order to deal with specific issues or to find out something new about the interlocutor. When read after some time, these documents seem to contain a treasure of knowledge that every time needs to be rediscovered in order to dig up its potential richness, and thus give its silences a voice. This was true for Steve Paxton's talk with Folkert Bents, which was originally published in "Theatre Papers" (1982)¹ and that has been further selected, published and commented for this issue with Paxton's specific contribution.

Paxton's interview traces back to 1981, that is to Paxton's involvement with Dartington College in England. It is not by coincidence that the interview was taken in that place and at that time: since 1925 Dartington College has been an important venue for dance research and teaching. It hosted Rudolf Laban and Kurt Jooss in the first part of the century. From 1973 to 1987 the American dancer and choreographer Mary Fulkerson directed the dance section, spreading release work and thus an approach that shared some basic elements with contact improvisation. Anatomical alignment and an objective study of the body's functionality are pivotal in both practices, as well as an interior focus on the part of the dancer. Mabel Elseworth Todd's teaching was also highly

¹ Paxton, Steve, *Contact Improvisation*, in "Theatre Papers", fourth series, n. 5, Theatre Department, Dartington College.

influential both on Fulkerson and on Paxton, who has mentioned the impact of her book, *The Thinking Body*, on his generation. He has acknowledged that

where dance history concentrates our attention on the performance accomplishments of a relatively few people, this work concentrates upon the nature of the body and as the title suggests, gives that nature a mind, or rational component, apart from the aesthetic accomplishments of the choreographers².

After his first visit as a dancer of the Cunningham's company in 1964, Paxton was invited several times at Dartington College in the Seventies and in the Eighties as an educator³. During these years, dance in Britain was undergoing a change, opening up to the American postmodern dance and experimenting new forms of dance⁴.

This interview was taken almost ten years after the inception of contact improvisation in the United States. Thus, it introduces today's reader to a special moment in the artistic growth of this art form and of its founder. Paxton was by this time able to set body processes, teaching methods and the performative modes related to contact improvisation within a net of influences, resonances and cultural reactions. As a result, his words do not only illuminate what the body does while dancing but are also precious in showing what contact improvisation was a reaction to and to what it related to in the beginnings. They constitute an historical source on its genesis and early development and an impulse to today's thought on dance and improvisation. Even so, in the process of interpretation of this talk, some issues appeared to be only hinted at or to need clarification. When asked about permission to publish this material again, Paxton himself questioned his previous words allowing for an integration of information that is presented within the original text in brackets or in footnotes. As a result, the historical source is maintained

² Paxton, Steve, *Brown in the New Body*, in Teicher, Hendel (ed.), *Trisha Brown. Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961-2001*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), The MIT Press, 2003, p. 60.

³ See Larraine, Nicholas, *Dancing in Utopia. Dartington Hall and its Dancers*, Alton, DanceBooks, 2007, pp. 199-205. Paxton was invited to mount plays up until 1982 for a couple of months each time. From 1983 to 1987 he ran a contact improvisation workshop for visually impaired and non-impaired students together with Anne Kilcoyne. (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 30 november 2013. Quoted with permission.)

⁴ See Jordan, Stephanie, *Striding Out. Aspects of Contemporary and New Dance in Britain*, London, Dance Books, 1992.

and recognizable, but it is also enlivened and updated. The result is thus a new stratified text, including Paxton's interview with Folkert Bents as the main source, Paxton's feedback to my inputs and Paxton's present comments and elucidations on his 1981 statements.

One of the first aspects Paxton discusses is summarized by the paradox "act natural": how can someone act and be natural at the same time? All of his research into the pedestrian movement, prior to the creation of contact improvisation, is an exploration of this paradox.

Paxton was among the main choreographers involved at the Judson Dance Theater during the early Sixties⁵. During this time, he created pieces deconstructing ordinary movement such as *Flat* (1964), which was restaged by Baryshnikov in 2001. In *Flat*, Paxton would undress and redress himself while walking in circles around a chair, sitting and, at moments, freezing into certain positions. As he undressed he would hang his clothes on hooks taped to his body, while continuing to dance. The body was thus obscured by the hanging clothes and objectified. The individual we first saw transformed himself into an eccentric private man, then resumed his professional suit to leave the stage. But now the audience knew he wore hooks on his body⁶.

Irony certainly played a role in the conception of this dance in which ordinary gesture was both shown in its dynamics and in its artificiality. The political (or rather ideological) insight we can infer from this work is even more evident in choreographies Paxton made during the second half of the decade, such as *State* (1968) and *Satysfyin Lover* (1967) where tens of ordinary people would walk or stand or sit on the stage in their ordinary bodies. Both

⁵ The Judson Dance Theater has been extensively studied. All researches owe much to Sally Banes's books. In Italian and for a later interpretation of this group's work in relation to its historical and artistic context, see Mazzaglia, Rossella, *The Judson Dance Theater. Danza e controcoltura nell'America degli anni Sessanta*, Macerata, Ephemeria, 2010.

⁶ By using the word *Flat*, Paxton meant both a kind of performance style, generally pedestrian, and an apartment. He alluded to the man coming home to divest himself of his professional clothing, as one does after work. "If 'clothes make the man', then we see him unmaking that identity". And he comes to look like a clothes rack, too. (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 30 november 2013. Quoted with permission.)

choreographies were subsequently reconstructed at Dartington College during Paxton's teaching.

But Paxton was not the only one pursuing this interest in pedestrian movement. In this interview he also mentions Lucinda Childs' *Street Dance* (1964) that was illuminating for him, because it made it impossible to distinguish what was choreographed and what was real: "Nothing changed, except my attitude – added Paxton in a short publication almost forty years after that memorable performance – People on the street continued to walk. But now, I doubted them"⁷. The boundary between life and art, as well as between conscious and unconscious action is clearly at stake here. Paxton discusses it at the beginning of his interview, differentiating between conscious movement and inhibition, which may also come out of an awareness of one's own actions.

In 1964 Paxton started to study Aikido. This practice contributed significantly to his elaboration of contact improvisation, too. One of the elements Paxton took from Aikido is a spherical concept of space, which is particularly important when dancers fall or interact with the floor. In fact, it prevents them from getting injured. A particular alertness is also typical of both practices. Most interestingly, though, in this interview Paxton goes beyond the formal aspects connecting Aikido and contact improvisation, elaborating on their differences. The main one is that Aikido is a martial art and contact improvisation is a type of dance. In neither practices is the center static and in both the body is grounded, but the connection to the partner directs the body perception and movement in opposite ways. As Paxton says in the interview, in contact improvisation "instead of keeping your center away from somebody else as the martial arts do, instead of fending them off, you are allowing them into your center, you are allowing them to come close". A sense of intimacy and trust ensues and it implies a particular perception of one's own body center

⁷ Paxton, Steve *PASTForward*, in Banes, Sally (ed.), *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s. Everything was possible*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, p. 207.

in relation to the other's body, of one's own weight and balance in relation to the other's.

In the beginning, the need for awareness has also brought about an interest in the body while standing. At the time of the interview, Paxton did not necessarily start his workshops with stillness but continued to sustain the importance of this exercise to allow and focus perception. From 1967 and during the first years of contact improvisation, he would ask the students to do what was generally known as the "small dance", which was sometimes described as "finding that limit to which you could no further relax without falling down" because of a "sustaining effort that goes on constantly in the body". When standing, the dancers do not perform, but rather watch their "body perform its function"⁸.

Paxton also insists on the necessity for "peripheral vision" and peripheral attention to co-exist both in one's own dancing and in his/her immediate understanding of the partner's potential for leverage, movement, support. On the one hand, in contact improvisation awareness develops from within and is always directed inwards; on the other, the dancer has to be connected with the space in-between himself and the partner. He/she has to realize who else is moving in the space, without inhibiting his/her actions and reactions. This mental state requires an alertness that comes not so much from vision as from the other senses, such as a tactile sense (that allows the dancer to feel pressure and touch), balance, the perception of gravity and spatial orientation. Dancers are, in fact, instructed to "see through the body" and to "listen through the skin". For instance, even when the dancer is lifted from the floor, he/she might be able to feel the ground through the partner's body.

Working on these principles, contact improvisation becomes a tool changing and extending ordinary habit and towards a redefining of the self. A dialectical and reflexive relationship exists between the person and the surrounding world:

⁸ Paxton, Steve, *The Small Dance*, in "Contact Quarterly", v. 3, n. 1, 1977, p. 11.

Valuable feedback comes through our partners' responses to our movement, through the causal relationship of interacting bodies, and the emergence of sensory reactions, the sweat and flush, awkwardness and ease, reluctance and willingness. The supportive and trusting attitude of CI encourages acknowledging our impulses and tendencies, confirming who we are in the very moment of becoming, a simple act with profound consequences⁹.

This notion of a redefinition of the self reflects a phenomenological approach that is based on the idea that "I don't have a body", because "I am a body" and *my* body, as any other body, is not a given. In a certain way, contact improvisation thus appears to be a consequential development of Paxton's earlier interest in pedestrian movement. In stripping the body of its ordinary "costumes", Paxton would in fact strip it of its *habitus*, which - as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu - consists of the cultural aspects that are anchored in the body¹⁰. By extending body awareness into the pedestrian movement, Paxton worked towards a kind of dance that would not impose external forms and models on the body and that would rather derive from the person's capacity to look inward and to open up the senses.

What is your body doing? – Paxton asked himself during the Judson period – How does it get you uptown to the class? You've got your mind on the rehearsal or some piece you're building, but how do you manage to get uptown? How does it know to stick its hand in your pocket and get out the money and take you through the subway hassles? There's still an incredible reservoir of activity, quite separate from the technical activities that one is involved in as a dancer. To look at that was the aim¹¹.

Contact improvisation brings those concerns into the class by analyzing the body functioning in relation to other bodies moving and in mutual contact. It also allows for the exploration of another issue that was investigated during the Judson years: hierarchy among the dancers and between the choreographer and the dancers. Paxton deals with this topic in his conversation with Folkert Bents.

⁹ Pallant, Cheryl, *Contact Improvisation. An Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2006, pp. 57-58.

¹⁰ See Bourdieu, Pierre, *Le sens pratique*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1980.

¹¹ Steve Paxton, quoted in Novack, Cynthia, *Sharing the Dance. Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, p. 53.

The philosophy beyond contact improvisation goes against the usual dance company setting. Modern and postmodern dance are already a lot more open in respect to traditional ballet companies: a choreographer being asked to adapt a work of his/her own for the Opera will discover that the *étoile* never engages in partnering with a corps de ballet member, nor does a soloist of the company. In modern dance, dancers are more equal than in the traditional ballet institutions. Even so, contact improvisation has gone much further in equalizing partnering among dancers as well as in loosening the teacher-student relationship. This is partly why Paxton has been considered anarchic, though he would rather call himself an individualist¹².

In contact improvisation a dancer needs to be proficient to be able to advance safely in acrobatic forms, which may occur, but, generally speaking, this practice is not goal-oriented, unlike most dance techniques. A rich experience is possible even when partners don't share the same skills or don't explore high energies. At the same time, in pedagogical terms, its improvisatory nature allows for a certain amount of freedom. Quite interestingly, in this interview Paxton admits that a development of this art form that is coherent with its conception would imply the creation of new forms from the dancers practicing contact improvisation, rather than only extending his teaching into new contact improvisation exercises. Both reading his words and thinking of the development CI has had in decades, it is possible to consider his teaching approach as a maieutic one: particularly as contact improvisation spread, dancers have in fact been encouraged to experiment with their own movement without forgetting the basic principles that Paxton himself had experienced and taught, concerning the ways to enhance body awareness and to move safely. We can also infer why contact improvisation is hard to assess in respect to other dance techniques (in the USA, university students practice dance and are judged for their physical skills. Even so, CI cannot easily be integrated into the usual academic approach in which students are to be graded in the end).

¹² See *Steve Paxton*, Marseille, Lisière, 1998, pp. 5-6.

Paxton's connection to what has historically been defined as the Seventies analytical postmodern dance is also inferable from this dialogue with Folkert Bents. This connection is both correct and incorrect, though: correct in the sense that CI could only come out of a very analytical awareness of body functioning, incorrect in the sense that most analytical postmodern dance was aimed at establishing a different theatrical relationship to the audience in a more traditional way. A shared will to open up perceptions was, nonetheless, at the core of the art aesthetic in the Seventies. We find it in the minimalist music (Philip Glass or Steve Reich, for instance), as in the visual arts, in dance or in theatre (let's think about Bob Wilson's *Deafman Glance*, dated 1971). Among the dancers, Yvonne Rainer has particularly insisted on the analytic approach to dancing that was at the basis of her seminal piece *Trio A*, that in 1966 both anticipated the trend that would develop in the Seventies and seemed to inherit the phenomenological approach already adopted in visual art (as in Robert Morris' work)¹³.

On the occasion of an exhibition of photographs of Rainer's choreographies, the art critic Maurice Berger explained a change in the conception of art that was transversal and that conveys a deeper insight in respect to the well-known refusal against narrative and emotion that dance shared with other arts:

The emphasis on the viewer's own private, self-reflexive experience shifted the context of avant-garde art from idealized time and space, aesthetic conventions and transcendence to the exploration of one's own personal and immediate relationship with literal and direct experiences and interactions. This sensibility has allowed us to explore such phenomena as how our sense of self shifts in time and space, and how our immediate experience of the world helps to shape how we see ourselves in the world¹⁴.

This accent on the phenomenological experience of art brought about a spectator-driven approach to theatre, dance, music and art. This was and is certainly the case for the contact improvisation performances, though the early

¹³ See Rainer, Yvonne, *A Quasi Survey of Some "Minimalist" Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A* in Id., *Work 1961-1973*, Halifax, Canada – New York Press, New York, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1974, pp. 63-74.

¹⁴ Berger, Maurice, *Yvonne Rainer. Performance into Politics*, London, Barbican Centre, 1998, p. 10.

developments of this art form seemed to respond to a reversed analytical perspective: the dancer's first aim was not to open up the viewer/observer's perception, but to work on his/her own perception (in fact, performance was not the most immediate outcome of this practice).

Confronting the audience is thus not the central issue in contact improvisation, even though its dancers have explored several performing modes¹⁵. Moreover, if most analytical postmodern dance first performed in unconventional venues eventually found its way to the stage, contact improvisation continues to be performed in various settings and calls for a particular engagement on the part of the viewer. In fact, a lot of contacters are not professionals and do not refine their skills for the stage, but for the jams. These are neither dance classes nor performances, they are rather non-hierarchical gatherings of people sharing the same "language", meeting to dance. Even when it is shown in a performance framework, contact improvisation puts body function and relationship between the dancers before any aesthetic concern, requiring a shift of focus on the part of the spectator. In this regard, Paxton once stated:

I would like an audience of Sherlock Holmeses who would discern the interpersonal currents, understand the dialogue, and maintain a stance of no blame, even in the face of the guilty performer who could not fulfill his own ideals in performance¹⁶.

The interaction that any theatre event implies is consequently stretched to become reciprocal: a mutual satisfaction in a good performance between performer and observer comes along with the unpredictability of improvisation.

Nowadays several artists allow for a certain degree of improvisation within set choreographies or perform structured improvisations, but this was not the case before the New York dance vanguard broke with ballet and modern dance. Though in the African American tradition improvisation was always part of performance, whether at Broadway or, more widely, in music, in the

¹⁵ For the development of contact improvisation, see Novack, Cynthia J., *Sharing the Dance*, cit.

¹⁶ Paxton, Steve, *Still Moving*, in "Contact Quarterly", v. 9, n. 2, 1984, p. 7.

mainstream dance scene in New York there were no improvised performances before the Judson Dance Theater in the Sixties. And, even at that time, the public was not totally aware of it. Paxton himself actively began to think of the meaning of this word in 1967, when he included an improvised work in a tour of the West Coast, though he had already been thinking about improvisation for about 5 years at the time¹⁷.

In this interview Paxton gives a short definition of improvisation. Though he has afterwards expanded on this theme¹⁸, his explanation is still up-to-date and extremely complex in its implications. He in fact distinguishes between perception, projection and proportion. These words immediately give improvisation a relational nature: the same body sensations might in fact produce different perceptions both in the person dancing (depending on cultural, biographical or psychological reasons) and in his/her relationship to the partner. And, of course, the senses interact in more complex ways than we usually imagine. For instance, in *Improvisation Is a Word for Something That Can't Keep a Name*, Paxton mentions having seen a blind woman who once dropped and caught a plate she was washing: "For once, the eyes didn't have it."¹⁹ Her body was attuned to gravity and had a subjective perception of time, which allowed her to catch the dish: the body was moving automatically before the mind could realize it.

Putting momentarily the second element aside, proportion concerns "the way you perceive something", that is the amount and depth of each of the senses and of the emotions operating during the dance. By refining his/her skills, the dancer becomes aware of the interaction between sensation and action. Through training the contact improviser learns how to eliminate the

¹⁷ Email communication from Steve Paxton, 30 november 2013. Quoted with permission.

¹⁸ See Paxton, Steve, *The History and Future of Dance Improvisation*, in "Contact Quarterly", v. 26, n. 2, summer-fall 2001, pp. 98-101; Paxton, Steve, *Improvisation Is a Word for Something That Can't Keep a Name*, in Dils, Ann - Cooper Albright, Ann (eds), *Moving History/Dancing Cultures. A Dance History Reader*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 2001, pp. 421-426; also see Foster, Susan Leigh, *Genealogies of Improvisation*, in Id. *Dances that Describe Themselves. The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2002, pp. 19-68.

¹⁹ Paxton, Steve, *Improvisation Is a Word for Something That Can't Keep a Name*, cit., p. 422.

tension preventing a subtle and conscious sensing of the body and develops the capacity to balance certain ingredients (as relaxation, weight, timing, flow, for instance) so as to adjust his/her reaction to the flow of movement and to the impulses coming from the environment and the partners. This is important not only for improvisers, but also for any other dancer: in fact, even within a set phrase that is being repeated, there is always a certain amount of improvisation (sometimes it is very little and might be a slight variation in time, but it is never totally absent). Ultimately, proportion also has to do with the balance between structure and improvisation, which is at the core of jazz music and of the freedom and ability of the dancer to create something out of a set or flowing situation.

The word “projection” recurs several times in the original interview and is both related to mind projections and, more insistently, to emotional projections. In contact improvisation, emotion is dealt with in a more “objective” way in comparison to modern dance, where psychologically defined characters are personified. This idea of a body able to feel emotions but not representing them is a direct heritage of Merce Cunningham’s dance that the Judson Dancers took on, mostly presenting the dancer as a “neutral doer”²⁰. Anyways, even for them, acting neutral did not mean looking neutral, as they were aware that the viewers could cast their projections on the dancers.

In 1981, when talking about projection Paxton adds some considerations on theatre and builds a connection to Jerzy Grotowski’s approach, thus giving the word “projection” an extended meaning. At the time Grotowski’s method had already evolved and changed from his teaching within the Theatre Laboratorium in Wroclaw, where he had developed the actor’s training. In fact, he was then about to end the Theatre of Sources that came after the Paratheatrical phase. When building this comparison it seems that Paxton rather thinks of

²⁰ Yvonne Rainer has used this expression to explain her conception of dance at the Judson Dance Theater and onwards: “The artifice of performance has been reevaluated in that action, or what one does, is more interesting and important than the exhibition of character and attitude, and that action can best be focused on through the submerging of the personality; so ideally one is not even oneself, one is a neutral ‘doer’ ” (Rainer, Yvonne, *Work 1961-1973*, cit., p. 65).

Grotowski's previous productions, though, and of the personal training he led with Ryszard Cieslak for *The Constant Prince* during the Sixties. In this approach, spontaneity is something that comes after all the psycho-physical constraints have been eliminated and social masks discarded. Similarly, in contact improvisation the technical work was aimed at the pure action, discarding narratives as well as social roles. Now, thinking about these three elements in hindsight, Paxton still dwells on the intricacy of their meaning and interaction, acknowledging that he was "searching for something not evident" and that projection somehow relates to the dancer's "comprehension" while moving in between awareness of one's own abilities and unconscious immediate reactions²¹.

When asked by Bents whether contact improvisation can lead to permanent changes in one's own mind and body, Paxton finally seems to skirt the matter skillfully.

The present seems to be the place in time that I have the talent for. It's perhaps why I developed contact improvisation, or was interested in improvisation. It was a mental position that I felt comfortable with.

This mental position provided a solution to get away from the social constraints and the political problems Paxton witnessed growing up in the Forties and Fifties. Even so, in the conversation his words also show a more optimistic attitude. He says that if contact improvisation may not produce change, it can provide the information to contrast ordinary habits, affecting the mind and body awareness. In fact, during classes, contact improvisation was immediately a tool he employed to work against everyday habits and taboos. For instance, he used to ask the students to avoid using their hands, not because of a specifically technical motivation but because, in this way, they could break with the social taboo of keeping at a distance from other people they did not know.

What stays after the class or the jam is over, though? Do the effects persist? This is a controversial point. Some dancers would agree with Paxton's early

²¹ See footnote n.3 of the interview "Thoughts on Contact Improvisation".

belief. Cheryl Pallant in her book *Contact Improvisation* mentions a German contacter, Andrew Wass, who describes how his attitude changed as he became more confident. Walking on the streets, he would no longer be inhibited by other people but would rather feel his right to claim space and take his direction freely²². Other similar stories are probably not uncommon. And yet, thinking about it retrospectively Paxton says that he used to “wonder if CI would affect peoples’ ability to adapt in life situations, but (that) it quickly became clear that it had little if any effect on their lives, as though the brain kept movement training and life compartmentalized. [...] The physical intimacy of CI did not lead necessarily to better interpersonal relations”²³. A generalization of its effects is thus hard to sustain, nor can Paxton’s conversation with Bents be detached from the time it was enunciated. From an historical point of view, his early utopian attitude rather seems to be a demonstration of the ideology that informed the inception of contact improvisation. At the same time, as for any utopia, its value does not lie in the results, but in the processes it can encourage: can contact improvisation affect life? Keeping this question open for personal practice is maybe the answer.

²² Pallant, Cheryl, *Contact Improvisation*, cit., p. 90.

²³ Email communication from Steve Paxton, 23 November 2013. Quoted with permission.

Steve Paxton

Thoughts on Contact Improvisation²⁴*Pedestrian movement*

Steve Paxton: I have been interested in pedestrian movement since the early sixties. I don't know if everybody means the same thing by that term. I am referring simply to what a body does when it is task-orientated. That is, how people interact with each other when they are not self-conscious, how someone can decide to go to the store, and get there without much conscious thought, how someone sits down or touches things. As a dancer I suppose I became self-conscious because my body was being trained and then I wanted to find out how to be conscious of myself without being self-aware about being conscious²⁵.

Folkert Bents: Being aware but not being inhibited by it.

S.P.: Yes; in other words, how to let everything just go along smoothly without inhibition. Noticing can become an inhibition. I was concerned with how to get past that stage of noticing and into more interesting material. I tried to perform ordinary movement in theatre. The paradox posed in that situation

²⁴ The following text was partly published in "Theater Papers", fourth series, n. 5, Theatre Department, Dartington College as the verbatim transcript of a conversation Steve Paxton had with Folkert Bents in 1981. However, this version served as the basis for an exchange of ideas that has led to the elaboration of an overall new edition of the text: the original transcript was re-edited and expanded with a detailed specific contribution by Steve Paxton. Titles in italics were added to separate the themes dealt with in the interview, as well as editor's notes and Paxton's comments. Specific additions are clearly indicated so that the reader might differentiate the 1981 text from the current interventions. Email communications from Steve Paxton are quoted with permission. This new version is edited by Rossella Mazzaglia.

²⁵ "Being self conscious might manifest as vanity, or the opposite, low self-esteem, or other problematic attitudes toward one's own being. Yet it is perfectly natural to grow in awareness of self; for instance to notice a habit which is not productive and change or eliminate it. For the dancer, going from untrained to technically adept, I pose the idea of the growth of a part of the mind which keeps track of the technical detail of sensations of exercises as the muscle and joint function changes; so dance training is not just physical. Additionally, both internal and external sensing is organized, coordination of movement in metered time, ability to adjust movement in whole-body movement while adjusting fine details". (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 19/12/2013.)

is almost like a Zen riddle, it's implicit in the term "act natural". I lived with that paradox for about a decade and I never answered the question but I saw other people sometimes successfully make the theatre that I was trying to make. Lucinda Childs made a piece, *Street Dance*, in which she had the audience in a building looking down on a street. The performers in the street were making gestures, which they had timed to a tape that the audience was listening to. People passing in the street became part of the piece and the cars going by became part of the piece. Sometimes the people who were not aware that there was a performance going on became the stars of the piece. The audience focused on them and the two figures in front of the building faded away, the whole street became the scene. So I saw it done. I saw pedestrian movement posed as theatre. It isn't impossible to do but it does require a kind of manipulation of a situation. Then I became interested in the awareness that was fed by Tai Chi and by Yoga and Aikido.

Body awareness: Aikido versus Contact Improvisation

S.P.: Contact improvisation resembles Aikido quite a lot, in that they are both partnering forms and both are concerned with a very light and appropriate use of energy in fairly dangerous situations, but Aikido is a response to an act of aggression and Contact Improvisation an act of dance. They both rely on training or manipulating the instinctual reactions in some way. In Aikido I became aware of movement reflexes acting to protect me because every class was dangerous and often with rather crowded mats, a lot of people working and flailing and falling. You just opened yourself up and had to be aware of both your concentration on the act that you were trying to perform, and on everybody in the space around you. Sometimes very highly active exercises were performed by everybody all at once in whatever rhythm they felt they could work. The class was, I think, an hour and a half, and you were in these circumstances pretty much the whole time. In a way the very crowding, the lack of organized rhythm to the class and lack of space around each person was an important part of the training, because it gave you a keen

sense of peripheral vision. It's almost as though, with this visual capability, there was no danger in that situation, or only a slight danger, or maybe the social discomfort of interrupting somebody else's work brought you to a higher awareness. You had to focus at the same time as you peripheralized. You had to do both at once. I think Contact Improvisation relates to that strongly, but in some ways they are diametrically opposed. Aikido is a martial art. It's about a life and death situation, potentially, and Contact Improvisation is just the reverse. Instead of keeping your centre away from somebody else as the martial arts do, instead of fending them off, you are allowing them into your centre, you are allowing them to come close or to depend physically upon your balance, your centre of mass, for their own movement. And you're doing the same with them. You are mutually employing each other's leverage. It is an intimacy that is not granted in Aikido, because one person uses that intimacy, but the other person doesn't. The attacker is off-balance...

F.B.: So in Aikido you have to get the other person off balance...

S.P.: No. In Aikido you are attacked, it's a defensive art form; you are defending yourself against attacks. Now, when I attack, I can't hit you without moving toward you, I have to move some part of my body toward you. If I just move my arm toward you it's not much, but if I put real weight behind it and really prepare the blow, then I have engaged my center of mass with my fist in order to use my mass to increase the impact, and I'm a sitting duck if somebody pulls my arm instead of being there to absorb the blow. If there isn't a target, if the target moves, then I'm at a loss, I'm flying, I'm way off balance. The body knows that. The body can see that. It seems, in abstract, an odd thing, but one of the loveliest kinds of funny principles in Aikido is that if you see somebody coming to attack you, you present a target. The attacker's mind is guided toward this target and, then, when the target moves the mind moves with it. It's an important principle. You guide through both the mind and through the physicalities. In Contact Improvisation you are doing just the opposite. You do present part of your body as a target in a way, but you allow

any other part of you to be a target as well, so that you might touch on the shoulder instead of the hip and instantly your mind refers itself to that change. In some ways Contact Improvisation is the reverse of a martial art, but I only saw that later. At the time I had to train people to become proficient at something I didn't quite know what it was, in order to be able to find out if it could exist, and how it could exist. The teaching problems had a lot to do with "how fast do perceptions open up?" and efficiency in training the body for this kind of work.

Perception, projection and proportion in Improvisation

S.P.: Improvisation is very difficult to define. Have you ever noticed that? It's an odd, very tricky question for me, I get so confused between perception, projection and proportion. Those words sometimes come together at once as one idea and I can't separate them out²⁶. You have habits and you feel like nothing is happening, but what that means is you're not sensing finely enough. If you just tuned your senses you would see that, in fact, your habit is changing and adapting, and that becomes a very nice study all on its own. If you see your habit grossly, then you just see it as still doing that old thing, or doing it again

²⁶ These words are never mentioned together in other writings or interviews by Steve Paxton. Thinking about these concepts in hindsight, he has now expanded on their meaning: "Evidently, I had analyzed these elements of our sensorial means of interacting with the environment, including perhaps with other dancers. By 'perception' I probably meant being conscious of what I was sensing. 'Projection' perhaps meant either how I felt about what I sensed, or perhaps searching for something not evident; one may note a pothole in the path and so casually avoid it. More subtle is seeing that there is no pothole, so no avoidance is required. 'Proportion' might be used to describe how one fits into the situation; so adjusting steps to avoid the hole, but also how all the senses interact to provide information. One may see the hole, and at the same time hear a car, adjusting by scurrying or pausing. And what if the situation included pulling a suitcase while walking with a child? We might propose increasingly simple or elaborate circumstances, and rely on our perception and comprehension (projection) to provide appropriate proportions within the matrix to more or less automatically see us through. For the dancer however, these elements are the basis of choices that are ongoing constant elements of a dance. In a set dance movement, the move will provoke sensations perceived as the proper phrasing of the ongoing known movement, and the next appropriate movement sensation will be anticipated. If in an improvised movement however, the sensations propose the next possibilities, among which the dancer will have to choose to manifest. The dancer develops awareness of sensing abilities to enable and refine their movement task. I think the confusion I mention is that of, on one level, being aware of the abilities while at the same time, those abilities continue to work without consciousness, a dual level of motor activity, without which no confusion would exist." (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 21/12/2013.)

with a different partner, but in fact you're not quite doing that, because things don't actually repeat. All this has to do with proportion, which is to do with how you perceive something. I was trying to define the problem of how to have a definable, clear way to improvise that was still improvisation, in movement, so that one could discuss principles and aspects of the body and its physiology and its chemistry that one could sense. It was a question of how to work the whole thing, not through any academic filter, but through the perceptions and the sensations, given that those are two different things.

Focus and peripheral awareness

[S.P. (2013): Focused vision and peripheral vision are two modes of seeing which interact to provide a visual spectrum to help orient the viewer in visually sensing the environment. Peripheral vision provides the field in which the focus can select a subject for closer scrutiny, operating both for the eyes and the 'concentration' of the mind attending the vision. It is of course not difficult to shift from focused to peripheral vision and back. More subtle is the awareness that, to change focus, the peripheral is required to provide the range of possible next subjects. But Contact Improvisation, although using vision, is often more concerned with haptic and kinetic awareness, that is the range of senses of the body, obviously including touch, position, orientation, inertia (that is, rate of relative or total motions). To equate this range of sensing with visual sensing, what elements or conditions of it would become focus, and what could be considered peripheral? Well, focus would probably be the 'point of contact', the area of touch between the dancers which provides the possible operating information for the improvisation which they share. So what would be the 'ground' or field within which this focus occurs? I chose the sensing of gravity, because it seemed to me that the intricate flowing information of the touch finally relies upon gravity and the physical interactions made possible by the bond with the mass beneath the surface of the earth. Gravity becomes the field, if movement and weight exchange becomes the focus. These counterpoints or contrasts are meant to allow awareness of both components,

much in the way that vision is enhanced by contrasts in light and colors, or how the figure is contrasted with the ground. That all may make sense, but we must keep in mind that these rationales are constructed to be applied to *human beings*; more variable than snowflakes, each on their own paths in life, with various strengths and weaknesses, with ambitions to dance, but also with fears, doubts, mistrusts, vanities, perhaps broken hearts, worries, distractions. From an objective plan of what to say to the students, the teacher becomes the listener, watching and assessing just how each student is coping with the complexities of improvised movement and sharing a spherical space with another person, an adventure of tastes and reflexes, impulses and reverses mediated by the swiftness of touch and the immediate responses of the body. It is mutual between the partners, and if the communication is open and warm, they come to depend upon the others body easily, almost physically conjoined in the movement²⁷.]

Now, J.J. Gibson has pointed out that people with a cane seem to sense not their hand but the tip of the cane. I think that's what we are doing in contact. We are using touch and with these phenomena, when you sense through the person you are touching, you can sense their relation to the floor. Contact Improvisation is based on this principal²⁸.

[...]

²⁷ Though Paxton did not change his point of view on focused and peripheral vision since 1981, he has decided to clarify these concepts for this publication. The original transcript has, thus, been replaced by his current articulation of this matter.

²⁸ In his 1981 interview and in his current notes, Steve Paxton refers to Gibson, James J., *The Senses considered as Perceptual Systems*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1966. When asked to explain this reference, Paxton has further extended on this theme: "Through weight-dependent contact with another person you sense the floor and the many shades of energy and alignment which support and activate the other person. If you feel well supported, it is likely that you are sensing the floor beneath your partner. If not, it is likely that your partner is not well grounded. Gibson and others use the example of touching with a stick. Like the visually impaired using a cane to feel their way. Most of us have seen someone do this, so it is an easily visualized example. But it is not a subtle example, because it poses the effect outside of the human body. The same event occurs within the body. For instance, how do we know our body is aligned? How do we adjust our balance into supportive alignment? The positions of each of the movable parts of the trunk, head and legs rely on feeling the character of the ground beneath our feet to move into alignment. If we are using a crutch to move, the tip of the crutch will supply information to the armpit. If we depend on the support of a partner, the partner's system of alignment will be transmitted via touch and weight-dependent points". (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 19/12/2013.)

It seems to me that full sensing allows you to be safe on the surface, or as safe as possible, because your balanced ears, eyes, kinesthetic sense, smell, taste gain an enormous amount of information. When you focus strongly through the eyes as our culture trains one to do, then you can be quite oblivious to the fact that something is approaching, or that the surface you are standing on is changing, because you are very concentrated on the eyes - your mind is focused there. You can over-ride, in other words, signals that are obviously coming in. You can *not* hear something extraneous because you're so involved in conversation.

F.B.: The moment you said it, I suddenly realized...

S.P.: You suddenly realized... There again we over-rode the focus for a moment; we were focused and then you mention opening the focus, and you over-ride the focus; although you can still keep track, you can still go on with the conversation. The training is full of that, and that experience occurs again and again. I'm sure it is one of those things that has no ultimate end. You just go on opening up in finer and finer detail and far more attention on a lot of levels. There is a potential for that, you don't just open up and be opened, but opening up on all these levels is itself a journey that lasts as long as you're around, as long as you are alive, as long as you are animated.

Ordinary habits and the body potential

F.B.: However I experience that I fall back into my ordinary habits of sensing and relating to the world.

S.P.: But now you are calling them that, and so there you have a contrast. That's already a modification of the old ones because you have a contrast.

F.B.: And I know where I will want to go. I have a base line next time.

S.P.: Or maybe you realize that you have things like that and you want to change them. Maybe it's not possible to change them because I think it is very difficult to manipulate or deal with certain basic kind of things about a person.

But you have information. Maybe you can find some place where, if you wanted not to have a habit, you could have it changed. That to me is what contact is a tool for. It is to point out things like that and then if you want to change it, or if you want more information about it, you can go and get it.

[...]

I think the body is designed by nature, or has evolved in nature, to throw itself around the landscape with great efficiency. But the way we live now, since agriculture and certain inventions like the chair, is just the opposite. Watching the body mainly in New York, where I lived, and seeing the city life, was seeing that many people sit and watch television and go to bed. They get up and walk a little bit, then they sit on their transportation to the office, where they sit all day; then they walk a little bit, then they sit for lunch, then they come back and they sit at their desk again, then they go out for drinks and they sit at the bar, then they come home and they sit and listen to music or watch television. That's not an uncommon thing these days, and that's like one per cent of our potential. And the thing about that potential being so minimal is that our bones, our muscles, our organs and our senses are all both expressive and sensing. There is input and output everywhere, and the more that you can employ and train and get strong in the way you understand the proportions of things, the better adjusted you become to what is occurring on all levels.

[...]

The greater the contrast you can draw and keep going in your life, probably the more you'll see the elements of both ends of the spectrum. I've noticed that standing has dropped away from contact improvisation. People have stopped standing still. [...] You have to slow down to do it, way down and get involved in a microcosm activity and it's far away from the world of stimulation and activity and socializing that seems to be the norm²⁹.

²⁹ "Standing was introduced in 1972 to be the event where gravity could be observed working upon the upright body, where the question about why we don't just succumb to it may be asked, where the fine harmony of standing reflexes can be actually observed, and where some appreciation of the speed and fullness of them can provide the mind with reliable support in the moments at the other end of the spectrum, the fast intricate negotiations in high speed interactions." (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 21/12/2013.)

F.B.: You used to do standing still classes?

S.P.: Yes.

F.B.: And you don't do these classes anymore?

S.P.: No, but I think they should come back. As a matter of fact, in the pedestrian movement period of my life I produced the most boring works that were done in my circle at that time³⁰. I was really fascinated with them, but they were considered quite boring works, although intellectually interesting, or intellectually the position was interesting to be maintaining, especially as I did it for such a long time. But for an audience, for somebody who was just coming along to see a show, to watch a group of people standing still for fifteen minutes was odd to say the least³¹. No, there was not a great upsurge of interest in standing still, and I doubt if there will ever be, but I think it is that kind of contrast that gives the other stuff, the movement, its values. You can see the values inherent in what you are doing, otherwise it all becomes the same. Fifty million changes in position over ten years and a growing result, a finding of discrimination and awareness of reflexes and movement subtleties, an ability to handle quite a lot, and then it stops. You stop growing because there is nothing to push you any further. I don't think I have at all come to the end of it; I just think one has gotten good enough to handle it, so that one doesn't pursue it any further. So there is the question of how to continue, whether to get involved in material of an emotional nature or psychological nature. I am very interested in Grotowski for that reason, because he has played between imagery and physicality and it seems to be an incredibly rich and poetic one³². I'm very interested in lots of contrasting disciplines for that reason, sort of wondering

³⁰ By his "circle" Paxton is here referring to the Judson Dance Theater.

³¹ *State* (1968).

³² Paxton had an indirect knowledge of Grotowski's work through a description of his method from Dr. Anna Furse, who had studied with him: "she explained the exercise discipline of bringing to rote physical exercise a new mental image to affect it. (By contrast, in studying dance, one often has nothing in mind but the counts and moves. Grotowski went a step further, so the student became aware of what else the mind could do within the physical rigors, which would subvert the natural tendency to dull exercise habit)". (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 19/12/2013.) However, though Paxton admired Grotowski, he did not use his ideas or methods in his work.

what to do next, because I think we have come to a point where a step needs to be taken, but I'm not quite sure what it is. I think probably the next step is to stop worrying about the next step and to go on and study something else. [...]

F.B.: ...at the beginning, you wanted to get away from such habits as using vision.

S.P.: I wanted to get away from social taboos. When you first meet a person, you don't embrace them, you shake hands with them. Most people in contact classes don't know each other very well. Their partners might be total strangers to them. So I made a rule which over-rides the taboo against torso touch and I stress torso touching, and that goes on for quite a long time until I see that they are very comfortable with that, that they have themselves found the reasons for this rule. And then the rule relaxes and after that hands come into play much more and expressions come into play much more and the eyes make contact much more and that kind of thing. I feel that certain things mask other things, that the habits for one thing mask exploration possibilities, that the conscious mind acting as it does through knowledge, and in pursuit of the knowledge that it can envision, can't very well see a full spectrum of possibilities. So what I'm trying to do is get rid of these masks, and get down to tuning the body in different ways. In some ways this statement is about what contact can accomplish and about why I'm interested in pursuing it myself. It also says something about the tuning of the body for the activity that you are going to be in, or the state that you are going to be in, above and beyond contact. You can think of the body as a tuneable instrument rather than as an instrument whose tuning is pedestrian or organic or habitual in your life. It isn't just that. It can also be trained to pursue different ways; what I hope is that contacters grasp that point and find ways through various disciplines that they encounter or invent to create tunings that are appropriate, and finally to find a tuning that is more appropriate.

Leadership in improvisation and teaching

F.B.: Might a new direction come into contact work through such a thought?

S.P.: I don't know, because there's this whole thing of leadership in improvisational situations. How when you are trained to do contact, you have a teacher and you follow instructions and this is antithetical to an improvisational way; it creates a dependency, it's a hierarchical situation, and I think that that has to be obliterated at some point. The students have to be made aware of it so that they take over their own responsibility for the training. [...] What I would like is that other people would just take off, and take over their own responsibility and do their own investigations, based on the possibilities this form has presented. In other words, use the form as a model. We stress frequently that the movement is the teacher. In other words, in saying that "I'm not a teacher but a guide or a moderator in the situation or the organizer or a focus" is saying that the movement is actually doing the work, and that is what you are actually working with. You are not working with a teacher, but you are working with the movement that you discover. Trying to express this to a student is trying to make them assume their own responsibility, or response-ability³³.

F.B.: That is a political point of view that I think is very important.

S.P.: Well, it's ludicrous to go on preaching a kind of improvisational approach and be doing it through a leadership model, because that creates a dependency.

³³ Paxton replaced the word "freedom" from the original transcript with "responsability, or response-ability" for this new publication. His previous use of the word freedom is significant, though. In fact, one can only be responsible for the actions that he/she makes as a free man/woman. It is not possible to be totally responsible for actions that are made under constriction. This is true in life but, on a different level, is also true in dance. The more the student is set free to make his/her own choices, the more he/she has to take responsibility for them.

Analysis and emotion in dancing

F.B.: What is the relationship between the body fluids and the emotions?

S.P.: The emotions seem to arise from states that the fluids are in. Certainly the glands, the circulatory system and the spinal fluid, cause sensations which I interpret as emotionally related if not based; the stomach also and the other large organs in the torso, the state of the diaphragm as well. All these things are inter-related and the state of the muscles in this work are both sensors and actors and what I'm attempting to do in a lot of the training is to emphasize their role as a sensor - as a sensing organ; and to indicate to the student that it is possible for him to act without conscious intervention or conscious prejudice (pre-judging one's action). It is possible to witness the action, to use your mind as a lens, so that you can witness the action and the emotion and the imagistic world as a unit. I would like the state where the sensing is not unconscious, but where it is not the aim; where one is simply aware that one is sensing. It's like with sound; we listen to the conversation, ignoring the background sounds. I would like a situation where we could follow and be inventive in the conversational realm and still be aware that the birds are singing, that people are passing by, without being a distraction. Distraction is an interesting idea because it goes into a broader emotion and patience; distraction means that one's focus changes from one thing to another. If you enumerate the parts of the body, you can concentrate on your hand, you can concentrate on your toe, you can concentrate on your fears, on your senses, but you can also assume an image which is more holistic where you say the whole body, or all the sensations, and in that case you are encompassing all of those individual units that you were considering before. I think both are very healthy things to do. I think that the holistic viewpoint is very much alive by having considered all the individual points. But I consider that looking at the individual parts is slightly unrealistic because they are all interconnected. If you want to see the connections you have to know the analysis; if you want to have a richer synthesis then you have to understand the elements. So that's the

balance that one is playing with, almost constantly playing with these two things.

Some people come to the classes who are very much a subject of their senses; they cannot understand life without an emotion leading hither and thither. They don't understand that it's possible to consider those emotions slightly objectively, not completely objectively, but to analyze that aspect of themselves as well. And this is especially so in dance, where, in the older traditions³⁴, emotional projection is a primary quality, not that it is taught very well, but through the technical movement ultimately what they are trying to do is to convey an emotional narrative. At this stage in contact, and in some of the other post-modern works, you have a situation in which emotional narrative projection is seriously questioned. Partly because I think one of the main questions about it is: is it healthy to be pretending this stuff and acting it out, even if from the first 'do it' it's organic to you? Perhaps you work from improvisations, or your teacher has a great insight into your personality and knows what part of you to bring to the forefront in a performance, but ten years later you can still be doing the same work, and that means you carry the movements, habits and emotional connections with you through all that time. And there again, it's something that might lead to this perpetual adolescence in dance, with the emotional projections and roles you begin to assume in your early twenties when you perhaps join a dance company and you might have to do those roles and smile those smiles and frown that frown hundreds and hundreds of times a year.

A comparison to theatre

F.B.: Grotowski seems to have attempted to make it real at every occasion.

S.P.: Yes. One of the things he seems to have done in technique is that he asks the students to make up a new image to accompany physical action, so supposedly you have a strengthening physical activity rigorously done, but each time you do it, you bring to it a different mental image, and that seems to me

³⁴ By older traditions, Paxton refers to any type of dance from the ballet until Cunningham.

very healthy, because it counter-poses the two worlds in a very lively way and you get a sense of alternatives, you get a sense of play. But in many of the theatre pieces I've seen there seem to be two sets of mental images, one appropriate to the piece and the other the world images, plus the actions which are connected to the projections which are pertinent to the work; and I just wonder how healthy a situation it is. A lot of actors are often not very stable persons; though I don't know exactly what kind of premium to place on stability or what kind of stability might be desirable. There may be realistic stabilities and unrealistic stabilities, so to speak.

F.B.: People often get easily upset if somebody just plays or acts out emotions and are often thought of as being unstable, but one could actually define that fluidity of emotion by its appropriateness to the situation.

S.P.: Well, it depends on whether the actors of those emotions become lost or not, whether they lose their base or go through so many changes that they have no basis for emotional involvement. They are having emotions without a base, without an outside connection.

F.B.: But you feel they actually experience emotion?

S.P.: Do you think the actor can pretend or do you think that the low brain, for instance, thinks that it's pretending when it's being asked to weep? I mean the whole actor is weeping; the conscious brain has said 'O.K., now it's time to weep', and the whole body has to weep, the glands have to weep, the muscles have to weep, the skeleton has to weep, the chemistry has to weep. I think the imagination affects these things, but I don't think that some parts of the body realize that they are acting. I think they are really doing it³⁵.

³⁵ In hindsight, Paxton mentions two examples that influenced his thinking on theatre at the time: one is film and particularly concerns the emotional responses provoked by scary or violent films or by tender filmic moments, which elicit tears. In both cases, the viewers are aware that they are watching fiction, but they are nonetheless emotionally affected. The other example relates to the New York 1965 run of *Marat/Sade* by Peter Brook. This work, whose text had been written by Peter Weiss, described the life of inmates in the asylums. In order to develop its characters, Brook and his actors actually visited psychiatric wards, but when they showed their piece in New York (after the London première in 1964), the news spread that

F.B.: And the body can repeatedly do it night after night, go into these deep changes, that actually happens?

S.P.: Yes.

[...]

F.B.: You suggested that he [Grotowski] might use different images in order to gain this state of his body mind. Is this the right understanding of what you said before?

S.P.: Of Grotowski's technique, yes. But then Grotowski is a radical, a new view. We're not talking really about the bulk of actors, we're talking about a relative few, a growing number of people who work this way.

F.B.: But who are obviously very influential. What is your special interest in Grotowski?

S.P.: The fact that he is working with emotions in this way, and images in this way, strikes me as a very powerful tool, because he has taken a step in which the actor is a direct participant in their own training. They are not passive, they are not following instructions in the usual way, but the instructions say: "Take over responsibility for this area, to do the vigorous exercise, and at the same time invent, be constantly involved in the process of being aware of the contrast between the mental world and the physical worlds, and in that way it should become a synthesis which is full of analysis of the situation."

Changes in life through dancing

F.B.: The really important question for me is about permanent changes in one's mind and body. I wonder if you have observed in yourself or in other people such changes coming from your work. I'm not so much talking about

some of the cast were exhibiting psychological difficulties. Though it was just a rumor that could not be verified at the time, Paxton remembers thinking that it was maybe "possible that nightly enacting of inmates of an asylum including the troubling figure of De Sade, and the politics of violence of the French revolutionary era, might indeed be destabilizing". (Email communication from Steve Paxton, 19/12/2013.)

extraordinary split moments, for instance in time slowing down, but more subtle changes concerning the senses, peripheral sense or kinesthetic sense, or what happens to your thought processes or images.

S.P.: The present seems to be the place in time that I have the talent for. It's perhaps why I developed contact improvisation, or was interested in improvisation. It was a mental position that I felt comfortable with. It's all very long term and hard to assess, but I suspect that I have lost to some degree the ability to project in time, to make plans and to care about the development of this moment, and the next moment and so on, ten moments or a year from now. I have been forced to make certain plans, make certain arrangements for the future, and have a desire to fulfill certain tasks that I have begun that I had to postpone and come back to. I'm very tenacious about those kinds of things, but in terms of actual detailed planning, I don't do that very well. I sometimes wonder if that isn't a result of having spent ten years in improvisation and focusing so hard on the moment. And yet I do worry about the future actually; maybe that's again a reason why I spend so much time in the present. I was raised in a time of war, and then the Atom Bomb came along, then my adolescence came along, and then another war³⁶, and that was about the time, sometime towards the end of the fifties, that I started college and decided not to continue with college but to become a dancer³⁷. In a way it's almost like a rejection of the normal planning for the future, that whole process you know - serious business or worrying about money or about getting married or any of those so-called normal American concerns were pointless, because perhaps the bomb was going to drop - you know, a sense of impending doom. So there has been in my life and for my generation consistent worry about the future and a consistent acceptance of idols or models, like Elvis, the Beatles, where 'let's not care, let's not worry, let's get involved in our sexuality, let's get involved in drugs'. In other words, acceptance of what previously had been considered a wasting or wasteful momentary concern as opposed to serious, considered,

³⁶ The Korean "police action" (1950-1953).

³⁷ Paxton went to University in 1957.

rock-steady planning for the future, laying the foundation for the career and all that. It's a chicken and egg situation, isn't it? That was how I was raised. I found myself interested in dance and improvisation. It could have been because I just couldn't take seriously this world of famines and bombs and ugly warfare, ugly ignoble warfare, mechanical warfare, the dehumanisation of that ultimate act of aggression, which previously was a personal act. Maybe that's why improvisation has come, because it seems less like those acts than almost any other act. It could be considered a rejection or a retreat from those realities. Maybe it's the only positive course available, so to speak, because if you do have to take into effect that your family is going to exist in a world of diminishing resources and increasing population, or in the threat of chemical, germ and atom warfare, maybe those are such distasteful things to consider that the present, and its potential, seems the only one that you can really get involved in. One could say that I do worry about the future, but in a generalized way; unable to focus on the specifics of how to get from now to then. Instead I get very concerned with the specific of what I'm doing now and what it feels like and a whole lot of philosophies and procedures that increase that potential, so that there is more to think about now and therefore less and less time to think about then. And whatever insecurities one may feel in performance improvisation, not knowing exactly what one is going to do next and knowing that in a kind of karmic way it all adds up and it all counts, and whatever decision you make is going to be decisive in some way. Yet the insecurities of that moment seem so light compared to more considered projections, and makes them seem more desirable just by contrast.