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CONVERSATIONS IN VERMONT: STEVE PAXTON

Myriam Van Imschoot, Tom Engels,
Lisa Nelson & Steve Paxton

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RÉSUMÉ DU PROJET

« Conversations in Vermont: Steve Paxton » par **Myriam Van Imschoot**, **Tom Engels**, **Lisa Nelson** et **Steve Paxton**

[constitution d'autres types de ressources]

Conversations in Vermont [www.conversationsinvermont.net]

Conversations in Vermont hosts a vast collection of interviews with two North-American artists who have been influencing the course of Western dance in the 20th century and up to the present: Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton. Each of these artists created significant performances, techniques, and interactive movement systems that rely on persistent inquiries into the sensorial body and its moving potential, be it both puzzling and provocative. Articulating their ideas with candor and precision, these recordings capture them once again as equally seasoned and eloquent thinkers.

Myriam Van Imschoot interviewed both artists around the turn of the millennium when she was working as a dance scholar on a Ph.D., investigating the role of improvisation in the New York avant-garde scene of the 1960s up until the European flaring interest in improvisation in the 1990s. Among the many people she interviewed at that time, she found in Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton a pair of interlocutors to guide her through the conceptual minefield of "thinking" improvisation. Nelson and Paxton delivered more than personal testimonials. They represented more than exemplary "cases" in a historian's narrative. By orally reviving their stories, lives, performances, and poetics they helped determine the very way these unwritten histories could be "told" in the first place.

More than 15 years later, Van Imschoot invited writer and editor Tom Engels to collaborate on making these research materials public in a way that would keep the orality central. The first installment of the publication, Conversations in Vermont: Lisa Nelson, was published in 2018. The second part, Conversations in Vermont: Steve Paxton, was added in 2020 to complete the diptych. Each offer an epic listening and reading experience, with recordings and transcripts intertwining as mutually supportive strands. Both publications were developed in dialogue with the artists, who now extend these once undisclosed conversations with people worldwide. A deliberate gesture of democratic partnering. Sarma, the laboratory for discursive practices and expanded publication, and Oral Site, its digital platform for artist publications, formed the curatorial and productional environments in which such work could take place.

The parts of a diptych

Conversations in Vermont: Lisa Nelson encompasses approximately 6 hours of interview materials that cover her work up to the mid 1970s. This is the period in which Lisa Nelson accumulated new strategies to view and edit dance, informed by her practice as a video artist. This would later crystalize into The Tuning Scores, a container work that aggregates a set of exercises, scores and protocols, which can surface in performances or be used in workshops. It's an impressive toolbox that conveys a wish for communication in and through action, be it alone, in duo, or in larger groups, where the “players” calibrate opinions and desires when making dance together in non-hierarchical and imaginative ways.

Van Imschoot was inspired by the tuning work after she first saw a presentation of Lisa Nelson during the festival On the Edge, curated by Mark Tompkins in 1998 in Paris, and later participated in a workshop that Nelson gave in Brussels, organized by Contredanse in 2001. The interviews that were selected for this publication not only shed a light upon Lisa's main poetic principles but are also often conducted in one of Van Imschoot’s main interview formats: the keyword interview. This format is directly influenced by the attentional panning and spanning of some tuning exercises of Lisa Nelson, as well as the importance given by her to listening and witnessing as an active partnering. In that vein, in a keyword session the interviewee circles around one notion or topic until calling it an end, whereas the interviewer for all the time of the “run” does not intervene and listens intently. Composed curiosity can do wonders, and needless to say, to give full credit, that Lisa Nelson was a magnificent keyworder. The keywords on image, attention, rewiring, etc. included in the publication, offer keystones of her artistic vision. They also testify to something else: that her aesthetic values are always honed from life and return to it with an overall interest in the perceptual habits and survival mechanisms of humankind. Furthermore, the collection of interviews is complemented by an anthology of approximately 40 writings by, with, and on Lisa Nelson.

Conversations in Vermont: Steve Paxton publishes roughly eleven hours of interviews and takes on a different scope. With ten years of age difference to Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton channels us to other generations of dance makers and art references, from the late 1950s onwards. Paxton was a dancer with the Merce Cunningham Company when he co-founded the Judson Dance Theater, which became a hub of creative experimentation in a vibrant New York scene buzzing with inventions and trends. Steve Paxton was also a founding member of the improvisation group Grand Union and conceived Contact Improvisation in 1972, which quickly moved into wider circles of adaptation and practice after its inception.

Van Imschoot had met Paxton several times in Europe in the mid-nineties in the frame of the improvisation events that were organized by curators and artists at contemporary dance festivals, like Klapstuk (Leuven), Danças Na Cidade (Lisbon), Frascati (Amsterdam), or Crash Landing (Meg Stuart, David Hernandez, Christine De Smedt/Damaged Goods) and festival On the Edge (Paris, Strasbourg, Marseille) to name just a few of the booming initiatives that propelled improvisation from a more

subcultural niche to greater visibility. To a wider audience Paxton was mostly known as the iconic soloist in the Goldberg Variations (1986-91), later followed by Some English Suites (1997); the group improvisation events however added a different aspect to Paxton's profile, that of a collaborator, a team player, a peer, and a nestor of sorts. He could bridge histories beyond the range of younger generations that were still possible to grasp if one was willing to reach.

Like in the interviews with Lisa Nelson, the present is always the horizon and provides the questions when reverse engineering back in time to the formative years, where the accidental or seminal intertwine before the established histories valorize them as one or the other. With Paxton as a willing ally, Van Imschoot looks for cracks in the stories, turning around the topsoil of facts while easily skipping the already downtrodden paths. They share the thesis that improvisation does not have a real ontology, but is deeply perspectival. It emerges in situations where performers can exercise a greater degree of choice, and therefore is akin to, though not synonymous with, a larger array of strategies that loosened up solid structures, whether on the plane of composition in postwar art (chance, indeterminacy, spontaneous gesture, task, game structures, scores, etc.) or on the larger plane of society and its countercultures.

The selected interviews are bundled in three parts or clusters. The interviews unravel over hours (and sometimes days) while holding an arc in mind more than that they are bound to a theme. Because of the higher number of references, annotations and images were added to contextualize them. Some writers were invited to respond to a part and thus reframe it with updated research, like Lou Forster who expands on the photo scores that Paxton developed in the 1960s and used in later decades too, like in Ave Nue (1985) and Audible Scenery (1986). Furthermore, there are keywords, on gardening, lecture performances, scores, the use of plastic in his work, etc. In one keyword, Gardening, Paxton explains the fermenting process of compost. It is the perfect image that can instruct us to see time, once fleeting and ungraspable, not as “chronos” as in “chronology,” but as a sculptor of sedimentation, an assemblage of layers and fermentation, a treat for the worms and the air that plough and oxygenate substance.

Conversational pull

Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton have intersecting careers, but the choice was made to treat them distinctly, and by doing so give their work the due attention and specified approach. From the very start, the interviews were considered as collaborative sessions of thinking together while mapping the foundations of artist careers. In the interviews a gravitational pull can be seen at work, or is it a swing, that lures an interview practice indebted to historical agenda's towards a conversational and verbal improvisation in its own right. Both Paxton and Nelson have a way of the “tongue” and eke their thoughts with playful wit, always precise though never precious. They speak with plenty of time at their fingertips, but pace it differently. How they build units of thoughts or make bridges and construct arcs,

digress and return, each with their own measures and landmarks, is a delight to participate in. Heterogeneity, rawness, abundance if not excess, incompletion, and hesitations do not undermine the richness of the exchange, but mark the very nature of it. It's called speech. Speech that was never published, never put to public use, never quoted, never ever released into the public sphere until now. Upon the request of Lisa Nelson, who is a fine editor and proofreader with years of experience, the transcripts of her interviews appear more as texts, which she edited herself. In contrast, the interviews with Steve Paxton, which have a longer breath, are transcribed ad verbatim and stay much closer to the audio-source. A sentence that looks crooked on the page, may feel just right, when hearing it in the flow of utterance. Still, every transcript, be it closer to or further removed from the source, is always already a fiction, an operation that "textualizes" the sequences of breath and seeks to punctuate it, give it rhythm or divisions, whereas in reality there's only flux.

Coming, going, commoning

As the title of this publication suggests, most of the conversations happened in Vermont, and more specifically at Bennington College, where Myriam Van Imschoot joined Lisa Nelson in May 2001 during a teaching stint of hers, and at Mad Brook Farm, the community in Northern Vermont where Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton live since the early 1970s.

Lisa's house perches on the rim of a canyon where pine trees line the hems and give a sense of pristine wilderness. Paxton's cabin faces a well-maintained garden and borders a dance studio. Far away from metropolitan bustle, the Vermont landscape offered a habitat in which ears had to rewire, replacing honking cars with shrieking guineafowl, and aircraft engines with the babbling of a small creek. One hears in the recordings of the interviews the birds in the background, flies buzzing around the microphone, a kettle on the stove, the phone ringing, the voice of Lisa upstairs in the mezzanine office, visitors dropping in.

In order to be "in," one has to "go to." Displacements imply more than the geographical moves on airplanes, trains, buses and car drives it takes for Europeans to get to the artist and farmer's commune, but involve an equally great transporting of horizons, mental dispositions, backgrounds and a willingness to enter and be received in somebody else's world. In July 2019, Tom Engels and Myriam Van Imschoot traveled a last time to Vermont to work on this publication. It formed the occasion for Engels to continue an older interview cycle that had started in October 2001, more than 18 years ago, where a tape had gone missing. He did not see that as a way of "completion," but as a way of transfer, of speculation and ramification. It became a study case for handling and understanding these materials. For they can be handed over and passed on. They can be better understood as unresolved and heterogenous documents than finished texts. They can travel and should circulate. They can spark fresh ideas, revisions, new beginnings.

Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson have more in common than their Vermont abode. They have been neighboring each other's artistic concerns as only kindred colleagues and lifelong friends can do with the pure force of example. But this they share the most: thousands of dancers could benefit from a deeply generative and generous attitude that expresses ideas without holding on to them, that does not make an economy out of techniques and even less so plants flags in history. There are only stakes, no stakeholders. Terrains without territories. It's a very lively available and accessible way of building critical heritage and therefore community.

This attitude moves this publication. There's not one use, and therefore not one manual. There's not one reader or visitor, there's definitely not one genre and not one tone, not one outcome, not one motivation. Throughout Conversations in Vermont runs a curiosity in the ways audiences will engage with its heterogenous set of materials. Sometimes sketched out and raw, other times a refined improvised exposé. It is a work of the many. The many hours that went into talking, conversing, recording. The stamina and the momentum. The many questions, the many gestures. The many readers, the multiple agendas. With only one wish: to restore the force of two people's minds when thinking about dance. Language might not always be the most appropriate form, but it is what we have. That's a lot and enough. Or like Lisa once wrote: “Look, but do not publish? Ah, then: to publish is to touch.”

Conversations in Vermont: Steve Paxton

Possibly some people, like leaves, turn pretty colors when they begin to look old. Unlike leaves, the changing colors of people, depend on states of the mind.
Jill Johnston, Fall Colors, October 31, 1963.

Imagine a jumbled pile of minidiscs. Their pretty color combination - purple, green, yellow, red, grey - gives the display of technological vintage a joyful look. They seem more like toys than the relicts of research once conducted. Every particular medium shapes its particular relationship, be they letters, text messages, a secret language, or pictures, as is prime nowadays. In this case, the minidiscs are the sign of a relation too: a relation in sound, oral, and recorded. Hours and hours of conversation between Steve Paxton and Myriam Van Imschoot got canned into those tiny square objects.

Steve Paxton has been called a great many things. A Buddha of American Dance, A Grand Old Man of Post-Modern Dance or the inventor of walking. Such statements reveal that Paxton is an indisputable benchmark in the development of dance since the early '60s. He was a founding member of the Judson Dance Theatre and The Grand Union, the inventor of Contact Improvisation which proliferated across the globe in and beyond dance communities, the mastermind behind a set of techniques and practices called Material for the Spine, and he had impressed in solos and collaborations many audiences as an iconic improvisational dancer. Paxton compresses and embodies a large chunk of history of the 20th century in one unique lifetime.

No wonder that Myriam Van Imschoot, who at the time was doing doctoral research on improvisation, found in Steve Paxton one of her main interlocutors. Her project got its impetus when the Western European dance scene throughout the '90s manifested a renewed interest in practices of improvisation as a performance art. She had met Paxton several times in Europe and had interviewed him once in 1996, but it's in 2001 during three visits spread over a year - one in Brussels and two in Vermont - that a more encompassing interview project took shape with momentum. That's the scope of this publication.
In search of American precursors, Van Imschoot looks into the New York avant-garde of the '50s and '60s. Improvisation allies with wider compositional experimentation across disciplines. On the slippery slope of new structures, games, task-dances, indeterminacy, process-oriented art, one may say that improvisational performance further loosened up the structures towards a distributed creative responsibility within non-hierarchical collaboration. It's a critical heritage worth considering, because a lot of its potential would after the 1970s become instrumentalized as a “tool” in the choreographer's kitchen (to generate movement and then reproduce it) or a set of movement and awareness qualities to create an all-round dancers' subjectivity and capacity - flexible, creative but ultimately operating with a different and mitigated contract in service of the choreographer.

The work of Van Imschoot unravels a complex entanglement of ideas, cultural information, historical data, mental images, stories told and untold. She looks for another understanding of the period than the account she got from the established dance studies in the field then. But ultimately, one starts suspecting that more than historical inquiry, there may have been another drive that pulsates these encounters to a nearly excessive output: a love for thought in action more than for the crystalized thought, for the expanded terrain of meandering speculation more than fact.

Can historiography be an alibi for a dance? More often than not, the interview sessions transform in verbal improvisation where the intrinsic dance leads the way, not a questionnaire or a list of need-to-know. The mode and tone of speaking oscillate between a myriad of genres. They embrace in an almost unorthodox manner the sharing of aesthetic affinities, the gathering of historical data and events, the mapping of biography, the expression of past and current desires, the trivial and the wit of the moment, all at once. There was no such thing as “on” or “off the record.”

The publication involves a double leap in time. The first leap was a “grand écart” performed in 2001, when Paxton and Van Imschoot go back to the life events and artistic practices of Paxton, dating as early as the late '50s, a bridge of more than 40 years. The second leap is, more recently, when Van Imschoot invited Tom Engels to work in collaboration on the publication, and they returned to the interviews that were never published, 19 years after their conception. They bundled them into three clusters and a section of keywords. While doing so, this material was posing many questions: how should it be made accessible, which form should it take, which degree of completion should be strived for? Tom Engels brought another filter in the editorial process, with his interests and research. In the summer of 2019, they traveled together to Mad Brook Farm to visit Paxton to do more research, to clarify unresolvable issues, to conduct a new interview, and live at the farm for a week.

Revisiting documents that one recorded many years ago often means reconciliation with incompleteness or the omission of the incomprehensible. It's a fine line. More than anything, it was vital to make the tracks as accessible as possible to a listener, as they require many hours of attentive time. Steve shows himself a master of attention, creating long journeys of time-travel, yet being there in the moment, so utterly aware of his oral composition. The editorial ethos was to leave the “tensegrity” behind this composition intact (as Van Imschoot calls it in an introduction with a hoodwink to the dome structures of Buckminster Fuller). Some excursions or unclear passages were omitted, but it was clear that the files shouldn’t and couldn’t be made “complete.” Ad verbatim transcription was favored over more edited interview options to strengthen the nature of the oral material, keeping the flow and ellipses, false starts, and retractions. Clarifying sidenotes and illustrations where needed. One listens to two people having a conversation, each with their idiosyncrasies playing ping pong with shared and unknown references, unfinished sentences and hesitations. It is speech. When reading and listening at the same time one will discover this wonderful tension between the oral and the written, between the rubato of speech and the approximative attempt to put it on a page.

To witness a dance, or to perform it, always relies on a conglomeration of perception, vision, hearing, and, most importantly, on the passing of time. Here, in the length of the material, the passing of time is brought to an extreme. The interviews reflect on dances as much as they reiterate word-dances, and sometimes they relive specific dances most minutely, like Proxy (1961), Flat (1964), or a piece no one heard of before, which got to be called The Tape Piece (1967). This step by step reconstruction of a dance from memory brought to life a genre that could be considered a sort of “memory theatre.” The Italian Renaissance polymath Giulio Camillo Delminio presented his Theatre of Memory as an ideal representation of the mind as a striated and orderly space, but this interview collection reveals a more whimsical take of a memory play. The pieces have a script that is constructed in the act of playing them with visible effort. It relieves the play of historical stringency and makes space for a sometimes hallucinatory quality. It reveals that one can’t be entirely sure of one’s own past. Or in Steve Paxtons' words: “What I know about my own work, I have to accept as a partial answer. I can just know the part of it that I have become aware of, so pronouncements are a little suspect, including my own pronouncements. Including what I just said.”

Credits Conversations in Vermont: Steve Paxton

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