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PPMS (en)

Lou Forster

One can approach Steve Paxton, Myriam Van Imschoot and Tom Engels' *Conversations in Vermont* as a historic document produced at a double conjunction. On the one hand, the principal object of the narrative: modern dance's second moment of development in the United States, which opens at the end of the 1950s and of which Steve Paxton is a privileged player; on the other, that of the 2000s in Western Europe, marked by a renewed interest in the work of choreographers from the Judson Dance Theater. In this article I do not endeavour to account for the variety of subjects and questions that Paxton, Van Imschoot and Engels undertake, which cover the complexity of a life at work in dance. To read the chapter "Of Routes and Routines" took me nearly four days, an amount of time that anyone should grant to this text, which covers, among other, the choreographer's formation; his transformation (technical, social, and cultural) as a dancer in New York at the end of the 1950s, specifically in the Merce Cunningham Company; his part in inventing what would come to be known as "postmodern dance", a term that he rejected; the development of improvisation techniques for which he is famous today; his critical positioning vis-à-vis the reception of Judson Dance Theater and the work of the group's other members.

Next to the use of environments and plastic commented in S. Paxton, M. Van Imschoot, T. Engels, *Conversation in Vermont*, Keyword, "The Inflatables in the Age of Plastic".

My point is to focus on a question or problem, i.e. the use of photographic images in choreographic processes, on which Paxton and Van Imschoot's discussion repeatedly revolves. In 1961, Steve Paxton was at once a member of Merce Cunningham's company and participating in Robert Ellis

Dunn's workshop, from which Judson Dance Theater emerged. The realising of his second choreographic piece, *Proxy* (1961), drove him to produce what he named "people photo score" or "people photo movement score" (PPMS), which he used subsequently for three other pieces: *Flat* (1964), *English* (1963), and *Jag vill gärna telefonera (I would like to make a phone call)* (1964). As such these scores constitute one of the methods of choreographic creation that characterise Paxton's work in the 1960s¹.

A score among scores

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

Steve Paxton had previously commented on the invention of the first PPMS in an interview in *Avalanche* in 1975, as had dance historian Sally Banes. Steve Paxton, she informs us, "had made *Proxy* while on tour with the Cunningham company in 1961. A trio, it was a 'slowpaced dance in four sections, with two photo movement scores for [sections] two and three; instruction for [sections] one and four.' The dance involved a great deal of walking; standing in a basin full of ball bearings; getting into poses taken from photographs; drinking a glass of water; and eating a pear. Paxton speaks of the dance as a response to work in Dunn's class with John Cage's scores"². Steve Paxton specifies the challenges that lead him to realise this score:

Paxton Steve and Béar Liza, "Like the Famous Tree," in *Avalanche*, n.11, 1975.

"My feeling about making movement and subjecting it to chance processes was that one further step was needed, which was to arrive at movement by chance. That final choice, of making movement, always bothered my logic somehow. If you had the chance process, why couldn't it be chance all the way"³.

For a detailed description of the implementing of chance operations by John Cage in the early 1950s, see Pritchett James, "From Choice to Chance: John Cage's Concerto for Prepared Piano", in *Perspectives of New Music*, n.1, vol.26, 1988, p. 50-81.

The realisation of PPMS anchored in one of the great aesthetic controversies of the 1950-60s at the intersection of dance and music, and for which the Merce Cunningham Company served as laboratory. From 1951-52, John Cage took recourse to chance operations for the composition of his musical pieces. The various sounds played by the instruments were organised on a chart and then thrown, heads or tails with various coins, following the model of an ancient method of Chinese divination, the I Ching⁴. Used for the first time for *Concerto for Prepared Piano* (1951), this graphic technique was subsequently adopted by Merce Cunningham in *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three* (1951). For each dance, gamuts of movement, length of time and directions in space were composed at random.

Steve Paxton claimed that PPMS's displace the stakes of chance operations from movement's composition to movement itself. Photographic representations of persons in motion offered a found vocabulary, whose rendering in choreography became one of the creative challenges of making *Proxy*. The piece's title describes this dimension, as it is choreographed "by proxy" (by procuration). Steve Paxton offers the following description:

S. Paxton and L. Béar, "Like the Famous Tree", art cit.

"I made the score and then handed it over to the performers, and they could take a linear or circular path through the score. You could start any place where indicated, and you went back and forth as indicated. But how long it took and what you did in between postures was not set at all. It was one big area of choice not at all influenced by the choreographer. The only thing I did in

rehearsing the work was to go over it with them and talk about the details of postures. We looked at the dance and discussed whether they'd accurately done the picture scores or not and worked on getting it more accurate. We talked about the possibilities of how to interpret the scores, because there's a confusion: When you're looking at a picture score you can interpret the picture, in the same way in which when you're in class and the teacher sticks out the left foot, you're supposed to automatically stick out your right foot. The convention was questioned. We went through the various points in the process to see what would make people feel secure. And then they gave a secure performance. It was relaxed and it had its own authority"⁵.

Pritchett James, *The Music of John Cage*, Cambridge, MIT Press, p.109.

See Cage John, "Indeterminacy," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1961, p.35-41.

The score of *Proxy* transformed the approach to choreographic creation by allowing Steve Paxton to introduce various factors of indeterminacy. The performers are free to begin dancing from any photo in the score, to circulate in a linear or circular manner through a mosaic of images, to negotiate exposure time as well as the manner of moving from one image to the other. Indeterminacy was the other principle that was the subject of active debate for composers at the end of the 1950s, notably Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff. As historian James Pritchett explains, "whereas for Cage 'chance' refers to the use of some sort of random procedure in the act of composing, 'indeterminacy', on the other hand, refers to the ability of a piece to be performed in substantially different ways — that is, the work exists in such a form that the performer is given a variety of unique ways to play it"⁶. In this regard, indeterminacy is not unique to contemporary forms of musical composition. In a lecture on the subject, *Indeterminacy* (1958), Cage analyses the forms that it

takes in Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art for Fugue* and Karlheinz Stockhausen *Klavierstück XI*⁷. *The Conversations in Vermont* offers the current view of Paxton on this question:

S. Paxton, M. Van Imschoot, T. Engels, *op. cit.* Cluster 2, Part 4, "Score and Indeterminacy".

"I was working from [chance operation as a] premise to some degree. But I was not interested in having an objective mechanism that would make decisions so much as I was interested in creating a situation where the performer themselves had - with whatever mechanism they had developed in themselves - had to make choices and to operate on the level of creation within a certain line through the dance. So, I was opening it up not to indeterminacy, which is the Cageian word for giving performers options in the structure, but..."⁸.

S. Paxton, M. Van Imschoot, T. Engels, *ibid.*

At this point, the choreographer hesitates. Which word could accurately describe the relation of dancers working with his scores? If "improvisation" is obviously anachronistic, the term "indeterminacy" is too rooted in cagean aesthetics. In between this two realms, Paxton concludes provisionally, "I was trying to see what does this kind of structure create"⁹. If the experimental and pragmatic dimension of Paxton's work with the score should be acknowledged, a more general explanation seems to lie in a theory of image which guided Steve Paxton in exploring the relation of poses and their being set into motion.

S. Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, *op. cit.*, p.59.

Before tackling this issue and abandoning the cagean terminology, one can still wonder in which respect chance operations constituted the "premise" of the PPMS. Differently formulated, could *Proxy* and the

subsequent pieces be considered *at once* indeterminate *and* based on chance operations? If, as we have just seen, the realm of "indeterminacy" organises the relation of the performers with the score, neither the choice of photographs nor their graphic organisation on the page have been commented yet. To clear doubt on this point, Sally Banes cites an interview that she conducted in 1980 with Robert Ellis Dunn, where he explains that, "Paxton cut the images out, dropped them on various places, let them float down, then glued them in place. One of them was a photo of a baseball player sliding into base. Those stop photos are very beautiful"¹⁰. Banes concludes that the method undertaken to realise the score "was close to Marcel Duchamp's work, rather than Cage's"¹¹. This testimony and Banes's conclusion exclude chance operations in part but prove to be questionable nevertheless by their indirect and vague characters.

Consulting today the only conserved PPMS, *Jag vill gärna telefonera (I Would Like to Make a Phone Call)* (1964), one notes at the contrary that the organisation of photographs on the page obeys both an iconographic and gestural organisation. Composed of three sheets of paper of approximately 40 x 60 cm, the poses of its upper level gather jumps. The second offers multiple variations of walks (at upper left), running (centre), falling (at right). Finally, the third panel explores different relational forms from contiguity to contact. Coloured stickers and arrows indicate various directions for reading and draw relatively coherent itineraries as when, for example, one views the different photos on the right side from top to bottom. Jump, fall, grasp, and lift follow one another and offer a sort of chronophotographic cutting of the same movement. Therefore, it seems unlikely that this score would be composed by chance operations. If suspending judgement strategies inspired by Marcel Duchamp were employed, it would demand, at least, to be specified. Steve Paxton in his discussion with Myriam Van Imschoot gives an important clue to this question:

S. Paxton, M. Van Imschoot, T. Engels, *Conversations in Vermont op. cit.*, Keyword, "Score".

" Making scores [was an attempt] to just find a way to think about movement. I mean, I'm proposing on the stage definitely a dance, but I'm proposing in my mind's eye as I'm creating the score all kinds of my own transitions between one thing and another and it's like a mental dancing to work with the photos. One gets very intimate with the photos "¹².

The charts have been reproduced in Cunningham Merce and Starr Frances, *Changes: Notes on Choreography*, New York: Something Else Press, 1968, n.p. For a recent investigation into Merce Cunningham's archives see Nolan, Carrie, *Merce After the Arbitrary*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Paxton's testimony radically diverges from that of Robert Ellis Dunn and the conclusion reached by Banes. A closer look at the charts developed by Merce Cunningham in order to subject movement to chance give a hinge into this complex question¹³. As Paxton, Cunningham made scores in order to "think about movement" and not only to compose. Specific charts gathered gamut of movements such as jumps, leaps or falls. The recourse to intellectual technologies of movement cataloguing, such as a grid, was as important as tossing coins at the end in order to choose at random the succession of movement. In a similar fashion the PPMS of *Jag vill gärna telefonera (I Would Like to Make a Phone Call)* collects and organises the gamut of movement provided by sport magazines. Abandoning the "objective mechanism", Paxton kept from chance operations the recourse to a visual literacy which allowed him to develop his kinesthetic imagination.

Double image

S. Paxton, M. Van Imschoot, T. Engels, *Conversations in Vermont, op.cit.*, Cluster 2, Part 2, "Mystical Learning, Surrealism and Magritte's Puzzles."

“Myriam Van Imschoot:How would you have access to Magritte? Through books? Steve Paxton: Books and posters at first, I think. Then, I found out that Jasper and Rauschenberg were interested in him and Cage [...] Anyway, and then Suzi, whom I also knew...”¹⁴

Gablik Suzi and Russel John (ed.), *Pop Art Redefined*, Londres, Thames&Hudson, 1969.

Gablik Suzi, *Magritte*, New York: New York Graphic Society, 1976.

The piece was presented in the frame of the Bridge Concert at Ann Arbor, Michigan. For a short description of the piece see, *Conversations in Vermont*, Keywords, “The Inflatables in the Age of Plastic”.

See in particular *Conversations in Vermont*, *op. cit.*, “Mystical Leanning, Surrealism and Magritte’s Puzzles.”

Born in New York in 1934, Suzi Gablik is an art historian and artist. She studied at Black Mountain College then at Hunter College with Robert Motherwell at the beginning of the 1950s. In 1969, she co-directed the important catalogue *Pop Art Redefined* with John Russel.¹⁵ At the end of the 1970s, she concluded her artistic practice and dedicated herself entirely to art criticism. She became a columnist for *Art in America* in London. She is additionally author of a major reference text on René Magritte who hosted her occasionally over the 1960s when she was completing her monograph¹⁶. A less known aspect of her trajectory is her friendship with Steve Paxton and her participation in a piece of the choreographer’s *Ann Arbor Deposit* in 1966.¹⁷ The *Conversations in Vermont* illuminate the importance that the art critic played in Paxton’s reflections on image, and in his regular frequenting in the 1960s of paintings by Magritte or of their reproductions.¹⁸

As to make use of the famous line of the Count de Lautréamont in *Les chants de Maldoror* (1869) which served as a watchword for the

Surrealists. My emphasis.

S. Gablik, *Magritte, op. cit.*

In her book on Magritte, the art critic insists on the importance of what she terms "double images." Over the 1950s, the Belgian artist retreated from the surrealist approach towards found objects, which had proceeded from "the *chance encounter* of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table,"¹⁹ to explore the "hidden affinities between objects, [such as] the relation of shoe to foot, of landscape to painting, or of a woman's face to a woman's body. [...] A singular conceptual image [then] expresses the synthesis of two or more conceptual images only if it is born at the intersection of a paradox."²⁰ To identify these "intersections," Magritte developed a practice of doodling that reflects on this duplication of images. More punctually, he used photography to arrange compositions in which he, occasionally, posed. In his descriptions of the PPMS, Steve Paxton insists on the succession of images since it was essential to studio work. The instructions given to the performers consisted of passing from one image to the other by means of movement. It can be additionally proposed that one of the functions of these scores is to produce double images, as is the case in *Flat* (1964). For this solo, Steve Paxton wears a suit. Seated amongst the audience, he stands up and enters the stage with a chair in his hand. Then, the performer makes circles around the chair and poses repetitively, each time, removing an article of clothing. Ultimately stripped to his undergarments, he methodically dresses again following the same principle. During the poses, the clothes are hung on hooks which he has taped directly on his left arm and on the top of his back, and he activates the photos of the PPMS. While certain photographs are performed in a quotidian manner and with a demonstrative slowness — removing his socks for example — others become an object of pantomime or of virtuosic and rapid movements according to the register of the image: going to pee, looking over a wall, fishing, embracing the space with his arms as a classical

statue. In 1990, Steve Paxton describes *Flat* in the following manner:

Tufnell Miranda and Crickmay Chris (ed.), *Body Space Image*, Londres, Dance Books Ltd, 1990.

" A series of small surprises — the suit, the undressing, the pauses, and the hooks on the body. The ironic displacements of the familiar are reminiscent of a Magritte painting."²¹

"I feel like *Flat* is more a surreal piece than it is a minimal piece. It's that figure that walks around in a bowler hat in Magritte paintings", Steve Paxton dans *Conversations in Vermont*, *op. cit.*, "Mystical Leanning, Surrealism and Magritte's Puzzles."

M. Tufnell and C. Crickmay (ed.), *Body Space Image*, *op. cit.*

It seems then that this solo activates images in two distinct ways. The first is the succession of poses following the PPMS, the other is the production of a double image in which Paxton becomes, at once a masculine figure à la Magritte (which merely lacks a bowler hat)²² and a coat rack. One can hypothesise that the painting of reference is *Un peu de l'âme des bandits* (*A little of the outlaw's souls*) (1960), in which a violinist's face is replaced by his instrument. In 1960 the preparatory drawings for this painting, whose original title is *Les lettres persanes* (*The Persian Letters*), enter into the collection of Harry Torczyner, a significant New York collector that Suzi Gablik most certainly had to have known. In the drawings one sees, notably, the violin hanging on the violinist's back (sheet III and IV) where Paxton would place one of his own hooks. One can additionally relate the thin and almost hesitant line of Magritte's doodles with Paxton's when in 1990 the choreographer represented the intersection of this two images on a sketch for the catalogue *Body Space Image: Notes Towards Improvisation and Performance*.²³

Succession and Seriality

Suzi Gablik's book invites reevaluation of a last commonplace in Steve Paxton's use of images in his works. Dance historians and the choreographer himself insist on the pertinence of Edward Muybridge's chronophotographic studies for considering the relation of photography to movement in the 1960s. One notes this influence in the score of *Jag vill gärna telefonera (I Would Like to Make a Phone Call)*, where the succession of shots is organised in such a way that they invite a linear reading. From the action of jumping succeeds fall, rising, etc. However, the poses belong to different series (athleticism, football, boxing). Steve Paxton reconstructs a succession of heterogeneous provenances. The series is not the result of an organic action, as in the chronophotographs, but in a montage that creates the appearance of continuity.

S. Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, *op. cit.*, p. 54 and Lambert-Beatty Carrie, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960's*, Boston, MIT Press, 2008, p.60-63.

S. Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

One of the most striking moment of the *Conversations in Vermont* is the so called "Japanese Tea Ceremony" where Paxton discuss a foundational aspect of his dance practice, "inquiring into the routine". The point of departure is the tea ceremony and Magritte's landscapes painting where "the act of looking out a window is subverted, or taken to a different pitch, or you're shown a different level of reality", in. Steve Paxton in *Conversations in Vermont*, *op. cit.*, Cluster 2, Part 3, "The Japanese Tea Ceremony".

In the third section of *Proxy*, Steve Paxton places a muybridgian device directly on stage: a black curtain around which the dancers turn, appearing and disappearing before spectators' eyes at seven intervals. Sally Banes and Carrie Lambert-Beatty²⁴ insist that in the early 1960s Steve Paxton was interested in the manners by which technology shapes

our perceptions. By placing this device on stage, he would explore what Walter Benjamin calls “the optical unconscious” — the worldly dimensions revealed by cinema or photography when a close-up or a slow motion gives us access to phenomena invisible to the naked eye. The use of poses would operate then “almost as if the choreographers wished to appropriate the filmmaker’s ability to slow down a film and watch it frame by frame.”²⁵ It strikes me that one can doubt this section of *Proxy* as aiming to literally reconstitute Muybridge’s experiment in order to place spectators in the position of analysing movement. Instead, the recourse to slow-motion and frame-by-frame appears as a portal to a dimension of movement genuinely inconscient with Benjamin’s expression. In this respect, Paxton’s movement approach shows affinities with the magritian approach to the non-narrative representation of the ordinary²⁶.

Conversations in Vermont, Cluster 2, Part 2, “White Paintings”.

Within René Magritte’s pictorial inventory, there are several paintings representing multiple images, as in *L’homme au journal* (*Man with a Newspaper*) (1927). A room is figured at four reprises, but effectively in only one of them is a man seated reading a newspaper. This compartmentalised image introduces a banal story line but the absence of causal links between each picture cannot render the succession. So, exiting the narrative structure, turns the painting into an enigma. It seems compelling to think that in the third section of *Proxy*, Steve Paxton explores this magritian gap between seriality and succession. The accumulation of poses performed in slow motion not only confront spectators with their optical unconsciousness but also with the impossibility of reconstructing a narrative from discontinuous appearances. That they appear seven times also has also a specific purpose: like the *White Paintings* of Robert Rauchenberg, it bears on the “[smallest] number you need [...] to suggest infinity.”²⁷ With this section we enter in a world that is simultaneously quotidian — the register of the images — and uncanny and where time and causality no longer govern

succession.

During the 1940's and 1950's, chronophotography was applied to movement analysis in a dance context in a very different perspective by Joan et Rudolf Benesh at the Royal Ballet in London.

S. Paxton, M. Van Imschoot, T. Engels, *Conversations in Vermont op. cit.*, Cluster 2, Part 4, "Proxy".

This part of the piece maintains a paradoxical relation with the tasks, eating a pear and drinking water, performed previously. While the tasks are distinguished by their differing durations in time, they nevertheless share a common subject (the everyday) and are staged in the same, consistent space, marked out on the floor by yellow tape. In this piece, tasks are likely not meant to produce an effect of reality, instead their absence of peripeteia are reminiscent of Magritte's paintings. They produce an equal feeling of strangeness which one could compare to the first films of Andy Warhol. In *Sleep* (1964) the poet John Giorno, Warhol's lover, is filmed during five hours and 20 minutes sleeping. Extending a task beyond the duration of its usual representation exposes the fundamental eeriness of a real, shared intimacy. In a word, more than a modernist investigation into biomechanics for which Muybridge's experiments would stand as model²⁸, *Proxy* troubles with new choreographic tools (tasks and PPMS) the norms of representation. Described as a series of "revelations"²⁹, *Proxy* give access, through ellipses or durations, to the choreographer's reality which was at likely unrepresentable at the time, and indeed camp.

Conversations in Vermont, Cluster 2, Part 2, "The flatness of flat".

Numerous publications take interest in this aesthetic attitude, ever since the groundbreaking *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*. Stearns Peter, New York, New York University Books, 1994.

Lucinda Childs cited by. Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, op. cit., p.98.

See in particular the chapter "Allegories of the ordinary and particular" in Burt Ramsay, *The Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, Londres New-York, Routledge, 2006, p.88-116.

See in particular Rainer Yvonne, *Feelings are Facts: A Life*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006 et Rainer Yvonne, *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts*, Baltimore, The Hopkins University Press, 1999, p.27-46.

I have never found this dimension of Steve Paxton's work rendered as explicit as in these *Conversations in Vermont*. The PPMS expose problems of theoretical and intimate bearing, such as the real duration of tasks and the narrative time of images, and their jostling. Receptions of the choreographer's work have insisted on its cool³⁰ or "jesuitical"³¹ manner, though it proves to be much more ambivalent. This openness towards an infinite duration or to double images unmistakably associates him with such choreographers as Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, or Fred Herko, against whom he has been previously opposed.³² Unlike visions of critical retrospection such as those that Yvonne Rainer bears on the 1960s,³³ it seems to me that the dialogue between Paxton and Van Imschoot invites us to consider the complexity of a historical moment which cannot be caught up in oppositions. Paxton's life at work in dance is fueled by contradictions from which he choreographs. Beyond these pieces from the 1960s that occupy our focus here, Steve Paxton's later work continues to develop imaginary spaces and durations which, from *Part* (1979), to *Bound* (1982), *Night Stand* (2004) or *Quicksand* (2019), combine with dance techniques he subsequently developed.

Translated from the French by Macklin Kowal

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