

# Steve Paxton: Drafting Interior Techniques

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Culturgest  
Lisboa, 2019

The head in this work is a limb. It has mass.

# Moving-moved

## *Hubert Godard and Romain Bigé*

*This chapter is a result of an interview with Hubert Godard by Romain Bigé that turned into a conversation. It is written as a single voice, mingling the ideas that were exchanged. It is sometimes difficult to disentangle thoughts.*

*The Earth is bigger than you. You might as well coordinate with it.*

Nancy Stark Smith

Earthlings, we are earthbound.

Our external form, our movements, our rhythms are shaped by gravity more than by any other force. From the point of view of gravity, we are not so different from large rocks, other large mammals or plants: thrown into the air, a human body will ineluctably follow the same and simple ballistic laws, and describe a parabolic trajectory. There is something heavily reassuring in this permanence: wherever we go on the surface of this planet we are inhabited by a force that will not let us go astray for long.

How does the relationship to the Earth effect our movements? This chapter examines Steve Paxton's interior techniques dedicated to the experience of gravity. Gathering information from neurophysiology and somatic practices, we consider the philosophical implications of this study. We ask: what kind of subjectivity is invented through the study of gravity? What relations does it invite us to construct with our surroundings? In short: what can we, earthlings, learn about ourselves when we are taught ways to interact with the Earth?

#### STANDING: THE TONIC FUNCTION

In the 1960s and 1970s, Steve Paxton developed a practice in stillness—known as the Stand, but also as the Small Dance. A standing meditation, the Small Dance rests on a simple activity of observation: standing, relaxing their bodies into the upright posture, the dancers observe the minute movements that appear when they suspend voluntary action. Erect whilst minimizing any unnecessary tensions, dancers observe the micro-movements of their postural adjusting. The simple practice of standing thus reveals, under the habits of movement, a symphony of reflexes that maintain human beings as upright without the need for conscious intention.

Apparently, the Stand is an invitation to a solipsistic exploration: the eyes are often closed, and the internal focus tracks the invisible events that occur in the body on the micrological level.<sup>1</sup> But really, through this very internal experience, what is discovered is something else than solipsism: constantly bathed in gravity, we discover that we are streaming movements that are not ours; movements through which the Earth moves us (gravity's pull) and movements through which we respond (our anti-gravitational reflexes); "our mass and the Earth's mass attracting each other..." (Paxton 1986). The micro-movements of the Small Dance are thus the signs of a force we are constantly in dialogue with, and yet we keep forgetting (or repressing) in our everyday experience.

We lack the words to describe our sensorial relationship to gravity. Proprioception? An unfortunate word: as if we could perceive our "selves" (*proprio*) without referring them to the exteriority.

And yet, we might be curious: *where* in the body is the sense of gravity? We might even want to name the organs that perceive gravity: the vestibular system, the viscera, the eyes, the feet... But there are no "organs of gravity": there are only perceptual systems, always involving the different parts of our body, in dialogue (Gibson 1966). Ordinarily, the main systems involved in gravitational stability are, on one side, the feet in relation to the *substatrum* (radical gravity) and, on the other, the eyes and the vestibular system inside the inner ear to orient the head (subjective gravity). This multiplicity is essential: we need at least two grounds to be able to move. Moving, indeed, is momentarily abandoning

1 Nancy Stark Smith recalls taking Steve Paxton's Small Dance "soft class" in 1972 at Oberlin College: "We would come into a beautiful old wooden men's gymnasium, and there would be a chair at the door with a box of Kleenex and a little plate of cut-up fruit. You took a tissue and a piece of fruit and came into the gym. Steve led us in standing still, the small dance, while we kind of fell asleep and woke up, and also did some yoga-like breathing exercises. Then you'd blow your nose and eat the fruit, and after an hour, the sun came up and that was the end of the class. My mind was definitely opening, I had no idea what we were doing, but I was very moved" (Stark Smith 2006).

one's ground—leaving one place to inhabit another—living in nomadic dwellings.<sup>2</sup>

American ecological psychologist James Jerome Gibson, an important influence on Steve Paxton's understanding of the senses (Paxton 1981), spoke of kinesia and haptics, rather than proprioception. By that, he meant that our acquaintance with the environment happens through ways of moving (kinesis) and ways of touching (hapticity) that immediately entangle the subject with the world. In other words, I cannot feel the world without moving in it, and I cannot move in the world without moving it in return. Furthermore, I cannot touch the world without being touched by it, and I cannot touch the world without being changed by it. This is true of our sense of gravity: sensing gravity *is* fine-tuning our movements to it, sometimes riding, sometimes counteracting its pull.

Now *what* do we sense, exactly, when we experience the small oscillations of the Stand? Paxton describes them as a “background movement static—you know—that you blot out with your more interesting activities” (Paxton 1986). What is this ‘background’ and where does it come from? One response could be that they consist in a very ancient (ontogenetically speaking) set of reflex activities that neurophysiologists call the “tonic function” (Wallon 1941). The tonic function is structured in infancy, through the affective-motor relationship that binds the infant with their primary-caretakers: before speech, before even the possibility of locomotion, there are variations of muscle tones that the infant uses to communicate their state to their parents, in what Julian de

2 When we perceive ourselves in danger, when our ground is threatened, we momentarily lose this ability to inhabit nomadic dwellings: we narrow down our panoramic view, which in turn inhibits the vestibular system, and thus causes us to lose the internal reference to gravity for the head. The ultimate consequence of this chain of events is that, in danger, we start to depend mainly on the verticals perceived with the eyes in the environment to know where our head is: this gives an impression of visual gripping—known as the “weapon focus” (Schmitz et al. 2009). An antidote to visual gripping seems to be the awakening of what the Japanese call *ma*, the interval space, the space in between me and the visual edges of my surroundings. In the martial arts, it is the kind of presence that is sought after: a presence that suspends the vis-à-vis, and that is maximally panoramic—an interior technique to invite gravitational peace.

Ajuriaguerra has dubbed the “tonic dialogue” (Ajuriaguerra 1962). It is these variations that are made graspable again in the Small Dance.<sup>3</sup>

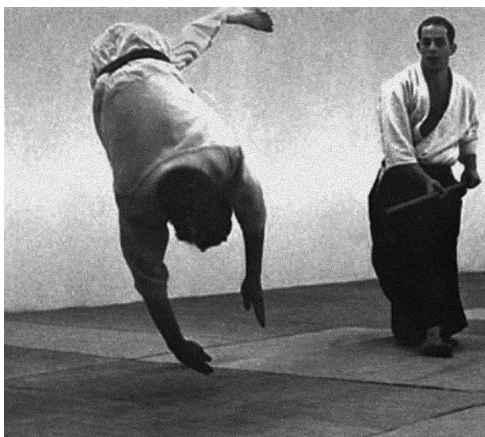
The Small Dance, in this sense, puts us in contact with a primordial tonic dialogue: it puts us in dialogue with the Earth and reminds us, through it, of another ancient dialogue we began with our affective environment.

#### CONTACT IMPROVISATION: A PARIETAL DANCE

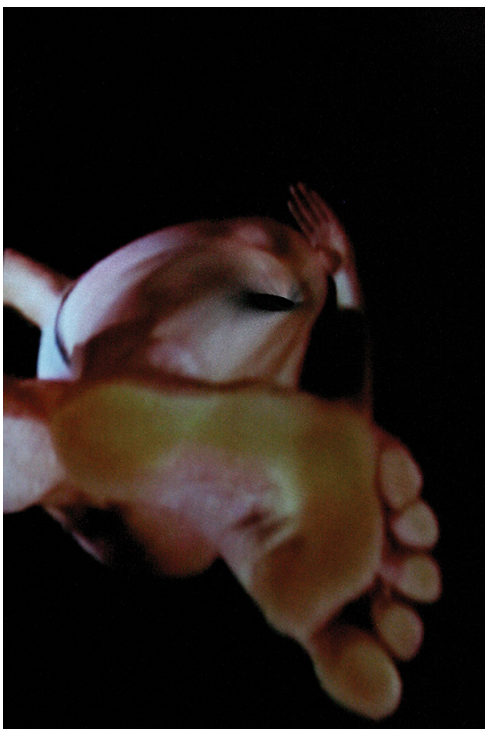
Steve Paxton gave the following “definition” of Contact Improvisation, a duet dance form he contributed to initiate in 1972: “Solo dancing does not exist: the dancer dances with the floor: add another dancer, you will have a quartet: each dancer with each other, and each with their own floor” (Paxton 1973). We can gloss this: dancers do not simply dance *on* the ground; through them, grounds communicate. Meeting with you, giving you my weight or inviting you to give me yours, I allow for this communication to occur: through me, there is a parcel of Earth that becomes perceivable to you, that you can occupy with me—you can support yourself on my body, or rather, through my body, on “my” ground.

In Contact Improvisation, the encounter between two dancers constitutes a shared nomadic territory: a territory that we inhabit only transitionally, and where we invite others to dwell. Here’s the strange paradox of Contact Improvisation: we create a territory in the sole purpose of letting it be occupied by others. What is happening in Contact Improvisation? Paxton says: in Contact Improvisation “the dancer’s weight is only [theirs] to give: not to possess” (Paxton 1973). You take my weight, I take your weight, but we constantly give it back to

3 Steve Paxton was well informed of these phenomena. In the 1970s, he met American psychologist Daniel N. Stern, a specialist of the “interpersonal world of infants” (Stern 1985): through high speed cameras and slow motion, Stern systematically studied the gestures, sounds, tone variations that support the dialogues between infants and prime caretakers—events that happen at such a speed that they remain invisible to the unaided human eye. Paxton felt enough kinship with this research to invite Stern to present his work in a studio in Soho to a group of dancers and artists he worked with (for a testimony on this meeting, see Stern 1973).

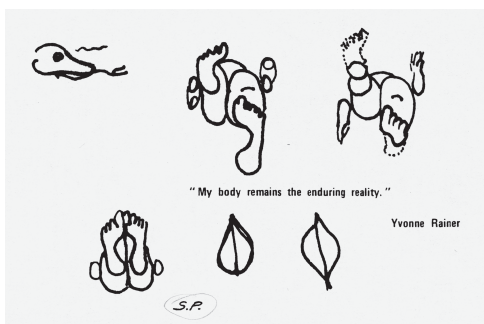


Greg Brodsky demonstrating Aikido with uke (training partner) Steve Paxton, New York Aikikai, circa 1964. Photographer unknown. Source: *Aikido Journal*.



Charlie Morrissey in *Material for the Spine* (2008),  
created by Steve Paxton, Baptiste Andrien and Florence  
Corin for Contredanse in Brussels. Image still from  
[materialforthespine.com](http://materialforthespine.com)





Doodles by Steve Paxton. Reproduced from *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 2(2), Winter 1976.

Thirty-two years before Contredanse realized *Material for the Spine*, these doodles anticipate the investigations on standing and walking that form the core of Paxton's latest somatic technique.



An image from *Gravity* by Steve Paxton, edited by Steve Paxton, Florence Corin, Baptiste Andrien and Lisa Nelson, published by Contredanse éditions, Brussels, 2018.  
Photo by Willy Thuan.

each other. What happens to me in the simplest of walks, by letting parts of my body take the weight of others, enabling joint-travel, what has been called a phoric relation (Godard 2013), is extended to the partners. I yield to you as you yield to me, at the same time. There is no longer a vis-à-vis, an opposition between subject and object, but the constitution of a third entity: neither you, neither me, neither us, but at the interstice between these three pronouns, a third-included.

How is it possible to widen one's territory in that way? How can my sense of my own body come to include others? When we write and think about the body in motion, we need to distinguish between two planes: the body-as-agent and the body-as-territory. As a body-as-agent, the body is egocentered and instrumental: it is one with my potential of action. As a body-as-territory, the body is a bundle of affects and perceptions: it corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1945), which is my body's ability to prolong itself in space through perception.

It is as a territory that I can meet and mingle with the other. As a territory, I can grow or shrink: I can include or exclude you. For instance, when I listen to you, I can listen to what you are saying, to the meaning of what you are saying, through the aerial transmission of the sound to my ears—in that case, you are kept at a certain distance, which allows me to approach your ideas through reasoning. But I can also listen to the vibrato of your voice, through the reverberations of your voice into my bones and viscera: in that case, I allow you into my territory, I let myself be affected not only by what you are saying, but also by how you are saying it (Sacks 1985).

The body-as-territory, we can call it the 'visceral body' or, even better, the 'parietal body'—it is defined by walls or linings, and by the ability to expand these walls to the inclusion or exclusion of others. Allowing for the parietal-territorial body means making room for being-affected. As long as I consider myself as an agent, I move, you move, we move, and yet, there is hardly any room for this reciprocal hospitality that seems to define Contact Improvisation. At best, we share a space,

we inhabit the same studio, but nothing of this symbiotic relationship seems to appear in some Contact Improvisation duets, what Paxton describes as a “state of being or mind permitting mutual freedom with mutual dependence” (Paxton 1973), a state of radical solidarity, where I am free but through that which binds me to the other.

Our becoming-territory, our becoming-parietal, relies on our ability to accept that things, others, circulate in us and out of us. And we can think of all the resistance mechanisms that we need to overcome in order to access this parietal state: mechanisms through which we close ourselves in order to prevent others from coming in, and mechanisms through which we spill over ourselves and invade others, rather than giving them a chance to visit us.

From that point of view, Contact Improvisation is potentially one of the most political practices one can imagine. Why? Because it is a practice where we have the opportunity of losing ground, a practice of stepping down from our identity pedestal. It is a political space because the condition for politics is that subjectivity is not the result of subjection or subjugation (Butler 1997), and this is what is experimented with through Contact Improvisation: radically, a space without subjects.

#### PEDESTRIAN MOVEMENTS:

##### THE GRAVITATIONAL MATRIX

What is an a-subjective space and what does it have to do with gravity? We can here return to what was mentioned before: the fact that the muscular and neurological apparatus that allows us to “handle” gravity has originally (in each of our individual histories) an entirely different function—that of allowing us to communicate with others. In other words, expressivity is the first function of our anti-gravitational apparatus, and all the control (conscious or unconscious) we exert on our postures has been trained in the first affective attunements with our prime caretakers. When we speak of an a-subjective space, we do not seek to get rid of the subject, but rather imagine that we can strive to recall, in our adult bodies, this pre-individual

realm where our subjective styles of inhabiting the world are still in the process of being invented, where instead of assuming gravity and ways of handling it, we are discovering its constitutive influence on us.

In our everyday behavior, there are two repetitive gestures that form our relationship to gravity, and consequently most of our kinetic melodies: walking and breathing. Whatever I do, whatever I learn, if there is no modification of the way I breathe or the way I walk, my movements will not fundamentally change. There is a simple reason for this: I inhale and exhale twenty thousand times a day, and I move fifty thousand kilograms of leg every day. When Steve Paxton, in the 1960s, began his inquiry into walking and other ordinary gestures, it was precisely these repetitions that he questioned. What are the gestures that dispose me to do something in spite of myself? What are the gravitational propensities that are created by the gestures we repeat unconsciously every day? These are some of the questions that the pedestrian dances raised.<sup>4</sup>

With gravity, we immediately face an ethical question: how to get out of the same patterns (and make room for the other)? How can we avoid unnecessary repetitions and tired habits? One possible answer: to step out of the same, we cannot limit ourselves to avoiding certain gestures; to step out of the same, we need to question the ground on which those gestures have been built. Indeed, in what does our *habitus* consist? What is predisposing us to prefer certain gestures over others? Social sciences have widely researched *habitus* as the tendency to hold one's body in a certain way (Bourdieu 1977), but they have seldom questioned the embodiment of *habitus*: where are our tendencies, our potentials of action, "stored"? It is in the field of (eco)

4 Steve Paxton offers a striking eco-social interpretation of the birth of his interest for pedestrian movement: "When I began to consider serious study of dance, I moved from Arizona to New York City. On the island of Manhattan, I walked far more than I had in Arizona, where the automobile was already ascendant. So perhaps it was the combination of all that New York walking along with my first deep physical training that produced a simple question. I was spending many hours a day in dance classes, trying to understand my body's movement. But when I walked out of the studio, I forgot to be conscious of it. What is my body doing when I am not conscious of it?" (Paxton 2018: 17).

somatic practices and theories<sup>5</sup> that an answer has been given to this thorny issue: our core *habitus* lies in our relationship to gravity; it is a certain quality or attitude that is inseparably a physical posture and an ethical stance (Bull 1968; Newton 1998).

What are pedestrian dances? They are dances that manifest the postural ground from which our gestures detach themselves. Staying there, on the plane of the gravitational matrix, Steve Paxton has created dances that genuinely make room for the accidental, that is for the bifurcations that are not produced by the will of the subject. As long as dance does not question the ground, as long as dance remains at the level of gestures and figures, accidents remain impossible or almost invisible: at best, dancers can make mistakes, they might face difficulties and from time to time manifest “awkwardness in movement”, as Merce Cunningham said of his choreography (Cunningham 1985), but there is seldom room for actual singularities. On the contrary, when one is offered the opportunity to witness people walking, people standing, people breathing, one may get to grasp this very ordinary miracle: that there are no two ways of breathing, walking, or standing that are identical. Each time, in these most simple gestures, it is an entire world that manifests. It is the special gift of pieces like *State* (1967) and *Satisfyin Lover* (1968) to precisely give nothing to see, nothing else than the unique way every person is a variation, a subtle accent added to the human way of being bipedal.

#### AIKIDO: NOT-DOING

To witness gravity at work, the rational mind is too slow. If I use a focal gaze, if I start to think in terms of causes and deductions, I will miss the most important part of the anti-gravitational

5 Somatics can be defined as a “field which studies the soma: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception” (Hanna 1986). Somatic practices and theories reject the body-mind split, and further, integrate the person in their context and environment into an eco-somatic continuum (Clavel et Ginet 2015). In (eco)somatic theories, the body-mind-environment is a unit, and the practices aim at the integration of those three components of the self. Steve Paxton approached the somatics through various encounters: with Yoga, first, and further in his relations with two long-term collaborators and friends, Mary Fulkerson (teacher in Release Technique) and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (founder of Body-Mind Centering).

style of those I am seeing. On the contrary, in order to have sensitivity to gravity (and this is something that somatic practitioners as well as aikidokas and other martial artists know quite well, Doganis 2012), I have to relinquish the centralized rational mode of sensing. I have also to accept to be in a peripheral attitude and I have to accept not be the (only) center of my experience. Stated radically, I need to ‘incorporate the person’. Through a very concrete kind of anthropophagy (Godard 2005), through a practice of self-alteration, I have to accept to become the other in order to sense what is happening in them.

Peripheral witnessing blurs the distinction subject/object: we enter into a relationship of intercorporation, where the will is momentarily suspended in favor of a state of being in which the landscape around us, with its sensible and imaginary valences, gives birth to movement. It is as if I was imagining a river in order to let myself be moved by its current.

This points to one of the cornerstones of Steve Paxton’s work: the notion of not-doing. A classical example of not-doing is suggested in *Zen and the Art of Archery* (Herrigel 1953), where the archer lets the target grow until it becomes so large that aiming becomes obvious. At some point, the target fills the field of perception to such an extent that there is nowhere else to shoot. Conversely, as long as I keep the target at its objective distance, as long as I refuse to let myself be affected by it, I have no hope of reaching it. This is a core aspect of not-doing: accepting momentarily to be invaded by the very world I intended, a second earlier, to act upon. I can thus move without giving myself the instruction of movement, but the condition is that I let my imagination or affects build a world in such a manner that I no longer have to move, where the only thing I need, is to let myself be moved. In that case, I am being born to the movements that I do and that move me in return.

Of course, such a sensitivity to affects and imagination can be trained. Yet, it remains a rare practice in our pedagogical tradition. As Paxton noticed: “I have seen willful students straining their muscles in an attempt to improve their dancing, but I have yet to observe them strain their senses” (Paxton 1981).

It probably hasn't been said enough, how much the martial art of Aikido—together with Tai Chi Chuan, both of which he encountered in the 1960s (Paxton 1976; Paxton 1993b; Yeh 2001)—shaped Paxton's understanding of movement. Through Aikido in particular, Paxton discovered Qi: “a concept, he says, that refers to both the quality and potential of connections. Applied to our bodies, it is about relationships between parts, and then flows onward into relationships with the environment” (Paxton 2018: 64). Learning to recognize this omnipresent force is to learn not-doing: a form of humility-in-the-act, that invites the forces that be to manifest instead of covering them with our activities. Morihei Ueshiba says he discovered Aikido when he realized that he had to love his opponent. Aikido is unique in the martial arts in that sense: it is not an art of waging war—a martial art—, it is the art of suspending it—an “art of peace” (Ueshiba 1992). At its core, Aikido isn't supposed to teach the ability to defeat your adversaries, it is supposed to teach the ability to defeat adversity altogether. At the same time, there is a territorial clarity, and constantly the willingness to abandon one's ground in favor of the other (in the rare videos we have from Ueshiba, we can almost always see him *making room* for his attackers, seldom resisting them).

This “martial art of peace” implies a radical decentering which rests on the discipline of Qi. It postulates, once again, that it is not I who move, but the universe or the environment (including my opponent). The only thing I can do is to let this movement happen and welcome it with love. This approach is absent in the vast majority of the (martial or not) arts of movement, where pedagogy is more frequently ego-centered, and based on the teaching of gestures, but seldom looking for the matrix of movements. This is the lesson Steve Paxton has extracted from Aikido: a curiosity for another master than the ego.

Gravity, much like the Earth itself in our ecocidal societies, is repressed in most human cultures. Paxton remarked: “Oddly missing in our pantheons, which in antiquity included sun



gods, harvest goddesses, storm gods, and other deities of the natural events, there is apparently no God of Gravity” (Paxton 2018: 8). We are often presented with an image of humanity as distinct from other species precisely based on this exception from gravity: standing on their two feet, far from the ground, human beings are supposed to have erected themselves against the Earth’s pull—and this is supposed to be the secret of their superiority. It seems that humans like to forget that they have a weight. Along the vertical axis, down is generally associated with evil, and falling is rarely considered an enviable activity—except, of course, when we fall in love. Don Hanlon Johnson has suggested that instead of that monodirectional morality that negates weight, we need a “multidirectional spirituality” (Johnson 1994), we need to multiply the axes of relation in our experience.

The study of gravity suggests a sensorial basis for this alternative ethic. An ethic where instead of erecting ourselves against the ground, constituting our subjectivities against the Earth, we learn to recognize our movements are never more than inflections of preexisting forces that move us before we start moving.

Moving-moved, our bodies stream gravity.

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