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Meg Stuart and Trajal Harrell in conversation with Cristiane Bouger



Auf den Tisch!

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Cristiane Bouger: I would like to start by asking you to talk about the improvisational score and more specifically about how you establish the sequence of the improvisation. How do you work on that structure?

Meg Stuart: For this table project or generally?

Cristiane: Specifically for this work.

Meg: The first thing is the set up, which is a very clear proposal and has been in every edition of *Auf den Tisch!*. So the set up is not a general improvisation, but indicates that it is a conference. There is a guideline that we are in a conference situation and these four microphones before us are

always the starting image, the starting point, which indicates to the performers that dialogue, exchange and debate are as important as movement. I started asking each performer to come with something, either a score, a proposal or a stand which they want to put on the table, and we have some rehearsals. We met on Tuesday (Nov 3rd) for the first show, which was on Friday (Nov 6th) and we met audience for the dress (rehearsal) when it became clear what are the issues of the performers. I would say with that there is a kind of loose score that melts people together.

Cristiane: So you do not establish a sequence from the scores every performer brought to you during the rehearsals?

Meg: No. Not at all.

Cristiane: Things just happen?

Meg: I think they happen by dialogue because there are intentions others put out. We want intimate conversation, we want to talk about certain topics, and things are expressed in this rehearsal period, which are at hand to be accessed by people during the performance.

Cristiane: That's interesting. So, each performer has to understand the moment to bring his/her specific issue to the table... There is not a sequence, at all?

Trajal Harrell: No.

Cristiane: What made me think it really was? I really thought it was.

Meg: It is the beginning. And I forget to really stick to that beginning because I think it signifies a listening and everybody is talking about the body and it is talking about a shared body and a shared body of knowledge... It kind of tunes the audience for all that kind of democratic space, because we are all in that listening space, and we are already expressing that. The audio input is as important as the visual input. And that is kind of put that way right at the beginning. I think that is a very clear start.

Cristiane: Yeah. It is the kind of project that relies a lot on the ability of listening and perceiving the right moment to bring things out, change or shift what is going on. How to perceive that as a performer and how to deal with this kind of information?

Trajal: It is very specific to the framework of the conference. I think this is such a strong proposal because it is being in a conference. I think we really try not to play conference. We are in a discussion, we are developing a certain way of thinking about improvisation, a certain way of improvising and we are conferencing, so listening is inevitable and inextricable to having the conference. And for the performers, it has to be negotiated through listening and through speaking and through performing, and all those things require a level of history that we develop through rehearsals as Meg was just saying. I think when it comes to the listening it is not radical because it has to be, you have to listen if it is going to function really.

Meg: I think if you bring an international group of performers and improvisers and you put them together and say, "Okay, now we are going to perform", this sharing of knowledge and these negotiations, this meeting, diverse languages, being in the moment, listening and responding, it is all already present. Somehow we are just making it more visible. It is becoming visible because of the way the space is delineated, but it is already present when good improvisers are together. We are tuning or amplifying that, so it is more present. I think there is one layer for the audience but there is another layer for the performers where they have a chance also to point out, to reflect, not only to dance but also to have a shared discourse about improvisation. Another subject.

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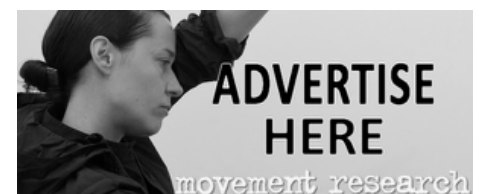
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Cristiane: OK... but I just want to mention I thought that was very interesting because even though it is implicit to improvisation listening to the other's body and in this case to the other's speech too, we tend to consider more important to speak than to listen. I felt it was an interesting negotiation you allowed us to experience together with the performers at the moment they are dealing with that. Talking about performers, how did you arrive to this specific group of artists? I am talking about the cast for New York.

Meg: I wanted to have some people from New York and some people from Europe, and not necessarily a comfortable group, but a group that are somehow connected or that I felt connected to. Yvonne Meier, for example, I met twenty years ago and even studied with her a little bit and I was very interested in her approach to scores. Keith Hennessy I just met recently and he took my workshop in a very intense short meeting. I wanted to have also a very mature group and a group where there would be a certain amount of tension because it would be different ideologies, different practices, different kind of approaches meeting each other. I also wanted dancers/performers that I knew very well—Vania (Rovisco) has been in my work, and we've worked together for 5 years. But she is another generation, she is improvising on her own. And then Anja (MÅ4aller), is now in my current work so she is someone I just spent a year improvising with everyday in the studio. Personally I was interested in different kinds of approaches, different histories for me to cross. I wanted people that were as much thinkers and that feel very comfortable to speak and that can very fluently go between action and reflection, between talking and doing.

Trajal: I think it was also my input knowing the New York scene a bit. I was trying to find different people who had a relationship to improvisation but who come from a different point of view or different ideologies or methodologies. I think that was essential because, of course, David, Yvonne and I are quite different. Yvonne has a strong legacy of improvising in New York and she is a certain symbol of the history of improvisation in New York. And David Thomson is someone who is quite well known as being this incredible dancer in New York, but he also has been improvising a lot. He comes from the Trisha Brown history in his body, and he has worked with Ralph Lemon, among others. I think improvisation has been a good part of his practice working with these choreographers. George Emilio Sanchez I know as someone whom I have heard speak a lot and who is very opinionated. He also has a very direct relationship to this history and scene because he has been a chairman of the board of Movement Research and he performs a lot in shows that are in the dance world. So I thought he would be someone who would bring a very verbal acuity to all of this but also would relate, because he has a relationship to the stage practice. Myself, I studied improvisation more as a very young student in theater, much more so than now. I mean, only now is it starting to kind of be a part of my research and the way I compose. Because of wanting certain possibilities in the work, improv is a way of inviting a different kind of texture in the work. I think many choreographers today are using improvisation in that way... but I have to say my strongest sense of improvisation comes from being a very small child in the African-American church and the sense of the extraordinary vocal and physical language that happens there. This is what I remember so much. When I heard about improvisation, I was "Oh, this is very related to what was going on in my kind of Southern culture". Even my grandfather singing on the porch. My grandfather sang blues all the time on the porch. He had a group and they would sing when they got together around his house. It was very normal. And sometimes kids on the street would start teaching a new dance and it was always improvised. But in my artistic practice, I never really dug deep into improvisation or contact improvisation. Although I looked at it a lot, it was not a part of my studio practice.

Cristiane: I think there is a division and a kind of conflict between work that is rehearsed and work that is improvised, but as you were saying, many dances are improvised; it is a natural thing to improvise. In street dances people relate to that in a more natural way. And bringing that to a performance space – again, there is a whole history in improvisation -, but I think it is an interesting thing to put that in a conference where people can look at it from a different angle and discuss it or watch a discussion on improvisation in a maybe – more formal way, since a conference is something that is very formal in relation to a form that is somehow opposite of this kind of established structure.

Trajal: Yeah, it is very difficult. That is what makes Keith really interesting because he has also been writing his Ph.D., I can't say exactly what his Ph.D. thesis is on, but I know that he is doing a lot on improvisation in different ways—and that is very clear when he engages in dialogue about improvisation at the table. It's very clear that he's been developing an intelligent way of thinking and writing about these issues. But in general I think the language of how we talk about improvisation is still being developed and still being argued, and that it is still in a kind of discursive problem area. Even to say improvisation is rehearsed is questionable for some people. It is not something that is not rehearsed just because it is not repeated. We are rehearsing; we are going to rehearse now.

Meg: I am trained in contact [Improvisation], and I felt it came very easy to me and I enjoyed it because I felt very comfortable somehow. But then I realized that there was a big gap between what I wanted to show in my own work which is about the problems of communication, things that block people from being together, and I did not want this... For me things aren't equal necessarily, it is not like "I roll on you, you roll on me" and we have this shared agreement. Normally there is much more tension, and I wanted to also pull out this tension. So I was always trying to figure out how I can push contact by taking some of the principles and either moving into other fields—like Contact with visual artists, Contact with musicians or space—or in what way can we work with different languages and, not disagreements, but things becoming more jarring, pressing up against each other. This has been a kind of ongoing search for me in all different ways.

Cristiane: One of the things that I am interested in is the tension between the spontaneity of speech and movement and the relation of a certain kind of pressure in saying the right thing or the coherent thing to start a movement, action or reflection or disrupt it. So how does it work while you are performing? How do you deal with this tension between spontaneity and pressure?

(Silence)

Meg: I do not know quite what you mean in terms of pressure...

Cristiane: Basically... (Looking at Trajal's face) You know what I mean, right?

Trajal: Yeah, I experience this a lot in performance. I think it has to do with risk and experience. I mean, the best improvisers are very attuned in some ways. [To Meg] And you are very good at this because I have learned a lot by watching you do this. It is a level of being in tune with yourself, what's going on with yourself, and also knowing the whole so well... You have an impulse: is it the time for that impulse? Of course, if you think about that impulse too much it kills it... so it is an attunement and a constant calibration of things... it is playing an instrument, you are both playing the instrument of your individual performance and the instrument of the whole performance. And that is what the best improvisers do, they are able to take those risks, not worry, trust, go in, deep in, you know... They are able to play with that. It is a challenge, it is hard, it is hell. I mean, that is the thing. Of course, you have a huge amount of pressure to do something, to make the thing work and you can't just be "doing" all the time.

Meg: Yeah... I think restraint and not doing is a big action. That is a very powerful, very important choice. And also just

always remember the context. I mean, like where you are so you are not just carried away by the moment and also know that it is on a timeline. It is an event that it is marked in time so there is a difference between the first minute and the tenth minute and the thirtieth minute. There is also somehow trying to keep track, so it's not just passing through a reel but somehow there is like, "OK, this event has happened, this event is happening, this person is here"... so you just really have tuned in with the timing of the whole thing as well.

Cristiane: Have you ever had audience members who spontaneously came up to the microphones to speak or on the table to perform with you?

Meg: Not spontaneously, I mean even in the dress rehearsal we invited two audience members to dance at the end and at the end we asked some questions. I thought it was quite interesting. We talked about "is there discourse in New York or not about improvisation?" And then one of the audience members says there is no discourse in New York. Point. And then some of the audience members added their thoughts about that. So I thought it was quite exciting when they get involved in the discussion, but for the most part we have not had a kind of sabotage action or somebody who is pushing and I think they have been quite respectful. I mean, it does seem they are open but they don't sort of like jump right in without a kind of gesture or invitation.

Cristiane: How do you act as a moderator of this conference with the time of the action? Last night you didn't interfere so much, right?

Meg: I'm not the moderator in that sense. I mean, I had the set up and we together [with Trajal] chose the cast, but I have to have a profound trust in them and also the nature of improvisation. The agreements are made by the group—this specific group—and they are discussed: how much structure we have or not. And there is a certain amount of trust, so somehow, at the point of the show, I am also on pretty much equal ground. Because I think if you start censoring in the midst of that it can be quite dangerous.

I mean, there is a way to say like "OK, this is missing, I will put my input in or this thing is to take off, or on a certain level I want to see this", but not to sort of cut people off or sort of clip their impulses because that can cause a real blockage to expression in the group.

Cristiane: I like to think about this political body on that space and at the same time to think about the political or activist speech and how in certain moments it appears in the dance work. Many times I keep asking myself why to dance or why to watch dance, or why to write about dance, and somehow for me, personally speaking, the biggest thing about dance is the political act of moving the body in a freer way. How do you relate to that when you bring this kind of political speech to the table, and of course, it comes from different people and their specific issues, but how do you perceive this political speech and why this is so important right now?

Trajal: I think for myself there are three ways I can answer that question... one is that the personal is political, the choices we make, the things we put on the stage, the way we create the conditions, the practices that we develop around work...

Cristiane: The choice of being in it.

Trajal: This is political. For me, doing this project is political. I step into it fully because I believe it is radical and it is important that dance have a voice, especially in New York, and it is like someone said that night, there is no discourse in New York. Well, it is true, there is no discourse and it is quite marginalized, which we know about dance in New York and many of us who are working in dance are constantly trying to solve this. Number two, I think within this context of [Performa](#), it is very important that we talk about this form. It is not at all a protest, but it is a great political testament to have it in this festival, and for people to begin thinking about it and to see its value and to read this interview about it... because that is what is incredible about this form: there is a limit, let's get real, you know. Balanchine said there are no stepbrothers in dance. And I always remember this because it is really true. Unless you say he is the stepbrother it is really hard to make a movement to figure out that that person is a stepbrother, okay? And I think stepbrother is very important because of course, "step" is not just about being the brother, it is about the politics of marriage and divorce and blah, blah, blah. So, when we think about this kind of form, it allows for another level of approaching dance, of politicizing dance, thinking about these cultural, social issues around improvisation. Like Meg said before in another answer, it amplifies them in a way that makes it visible for an audience. Three, I think in this context of New York has such a political function, and I am not just talking about education and making people think that is good, but I think we really have to re-evaluate the role of the arts in culture and society. Meg asked the question the other day "do soldiers in Afghanistan improvise?" I mean, that says it all right there.

Meg: I think also it is a crossing of forms, I mean there is improvisation and performance, but you could also see it as a kind of extension of this renewed interest in the [Movement Research \[Performance\] Journal](#) and also, somehow the practitioners themselves can own their own discourse. And it's bringing discourse back to the body. It is not like there are not experts talking about what they are doing, or critics saying what dancers and choreographers are doing, what are doing, but they are also with themselves saying, "hey, we also want to discuss among ourselves, we want to have this kind of platform for ourselves". I think it is interesting that everyone that is on this table as a practitioner is also sharing the same risk. Sometimes I find it hard when people make work and then a critic shows up or an expert shows up, but [here] I love it ...I think it is political that we are all risking in all senses, even the ones asking the questions, the ones answering, the ones lying on the floor, the one getting naked... and we are all put on this shared level, I think that's very critical as well.

Trajal: Yeah.

Cristiane: It is very interesting to see this political aspect more and more in dance, because theater has a long tradition of political theater, and dance is getting more and more political not only in a thematic way, but in its action. This work is an important platform to reflect that through this crossing of backgrounds and issues. I am also intrigued by the NATO conference picture used to promote your work. I can see a couple layers of significance in that, but I would like you to talk a little bit about the decision of choosing that picture...

Meg: Yeah, I think everyone can immediately have some sort of image of it, it talks about the people on this table are experts, but I think also there is a whole series of translations and different points of view. There is much understanding, but there is also misunderstanding and miscommunication and lobbying. ... Let's say people have issues... yeah. I think I just put it in another space rather than show a picture of a dinner table or other kinds of tables with large groups that you can imagine. And also you get clearly this idea of conferencing and that there are things to be worked out.

Cristiane: And NATO is an organization about security and you are talking about risk...

Meg: It can be also, yeah. I think crisis and emergency are often a given when you talk about improv.

Cristiane: I like to think about how the dimensionality of things can completely change our perception. I really felt affected by that huge table and the way its image could become a stage but also flows to the image of a celebratory space or a conference table... So, you created a space that could become many spaces. Do you have something to say about that flow between the political, the stage and the celebratory aspects of it?

(Silence)

Cristiane: (smiling) Maybe it is just my personal reading.

Meg: Yeah...

Trajal: I think it is pure potentiality. (pause) It is all there...

Meg: I would hope that when there is an action – I do not even want to call it physicality or movement – on the table, that it is also another way of perceiving it... even if it is not defined or it is not framed by those speaking, even if it is just silence, I mean, movement with music, it feels like that is speaking, it is expressing... you know, you don't say "Okay, here is the dance part". But I hope also kind of makes you perceive it differently because of the context. I mean, for me I often see movement as text, I see it as authoring, I see it as expressing. I work with the intelligence of every single part of the body and how it can express someone and what else it is expressing between languages or beyond language... and I have a lot of faith in the body and the movement as well! Yeah, that is also another part, a kind of platform for this. It is part of what we want to push as well.

Cristiane: The light and sound cues were also improvised? I mean, it is clear there are cues, but do they choose what to use in specific moments?

Meg: They are improvising, it does not mean they are not preparing, I mean, all day yesterday Jan (Maertens) was here, they were following our meetings and our sessions and both Jan and Hahn (Rowe) I worked with – I mean Hahn for a very long time but Jan for many productions – so, they were improvising with the experience of the kind to find tune and awareness... for Jan, he has been following this Auf den Tisch! projects, but there are no set directions ... I mean, they discuss, Jan discusses his concept with me, but they are making their own choices during the course of the evening.

Cristiane: Is there something important you would like to say about the project that we did not mention?

(Silence)

Cristiane: Information about the future of this project you would like to share?

Meg: There are no future plans, though I feel it was the right project in the right time at the right place, let's put it that way. I felt I was really happy with the response of the audience last night. With the dancers, it is not about liking or not liking or having a good evening... it was like... I think it ran quite deep and made people really think about what they were doing, think about the kind of dialogue they were having and I think it is a big meeting. You know, I have this vision this table could stay in New York and other people could improvise on it or work on it. I feel there is a need for this... I am curious how that is going to move things in relation to exchange and improvisation in New York. I hope it does.

Cristiane: How it is going to echo...

Meg: Yeah, the echoes. I'm interested in the echoes.

Cristiane: Thank you.

Meg: Thank you.

Trajal: Thank you.

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