

Transcript from Movement 12's Salon Evening with Steve Paxton in Brighton on 21st February 2008.

Steve: We are talking about 1962 in New York City which seems a long time ago now. What was going on in 1962? I guess the scene was a fairly small one. It was in Greenwich Village, Judson Church is at the bottom of Washington Square. That's the park at the centre of Greenwich Village - our Greenwich Village. And way up to 14th Street. 14th is where The Living Theatre and the Merce Cunningham Studio was, and Greenwich Village kind of went east and west as well, but it was an area that you could put down in the middle of Brighton and no-one would really notice, I suppose. The Living Theatre was doing quite radical theatre work and also protesting the development and the proliferation of the atom bomb. Sadly they didn't win that argument, obviously, but at least there has been no more bombing, but at that point we were not far from the United States having bombed Japan. They (The Living Theatre) were very much into that and creating street protests, and I think that in a way they began the protesting habit that went on throughout the Vietnam War. So there was a critique of society going on, let me put it that way.

Cunningham remains one of the most innovative artists in the world because of his stance, which was that he didn't want to mean anything. He wanted to make dancing and the dancing was supposed to speak for itself. He made that come true. Against all odds. He started his company in 1952 and he wasn't really accepted till 1964 when he went on a world tour with the company. I was on that tour, and we came to London. We had a fantastic success and the papers were full of reviews and most of them positive. We went on all round the world and when he came back to the States he was a star. He was on a different footing and that very much helped. I mean he continues to do work that you cannot justify rationally, and it remains still very beautiful to experience. So how many of you have seen Cunningham? Isn't it a weird aesthetic he's produced? It's almost no aesthetic at all.

But, I'm trying to put down a background for you, and that was the background as I saw it. There were very lively poets. And the musicians were very active, John Cage is one whom springs to mind, but there were a lot, A group of mature composers all actively working. The painters in 1962 - the scene was still the action painters, abstract expressionist painters. They had transformed everything. I think for transformations of the kind that we are discussing here, the dance transformation that Judson created, it really is easiest to do it in music and art. Dance is very cumbersome as I am sure you will all appreciate. Expensive, cumbersome, time consuming, life consuming, body consuming stuff. A painter can go into a studio and in an afternoon create something that is a work, and dancers don't often have that facility. Although I think that we should work towards that. Learn to do that somehow, but I'm not sure how it could happen.

So, there's a scene - a very lively scene - a very, very hot scene on all fronts of the arts. The people knew each other. I'm not talking about a huge number of people. maybe 50. There were a few bars that one knew to go to to hang out with people and there were discussion groups. The painters had a very famous discussion group, where they discussed what they were painting, why they were painting it, really putting themselves on the line, and I suppose they showed work.

The mainstream dance work was the mature to ending period of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Jose Limon. They all went on for a fair bit longer, but they were at their apex at this point. They were very much appreciated. They had created an American form of dance (if ballet is the European form which was the prior form). And because of the war and the way that the modern dance of Europe got cut off by the war, a lot of those modern dancers came to the States and helped to make the mainstream scene. These were touring companies and companies that did New York seasons. It was like having 5 or 6 major dance companies in one city, which was sort of unheard of. How many does London have including ballet, that have regular seasons?

So that was the major scene. The minor scene is really what interests me more. What was happening amongst us. Cunningham had a studio, a small top floor kind of room. Freezing cold in the winter. In that studio, a musician named Robert Dunn decided to give composition classes to dancers. It is interesting to me that he chose to call them compositions instead of choreography. Why didn't he call them choreography classes? But they weren't, they were composition classes. He was working with musical ideas and applying them to dance.

There had been a prior musician who had taught this way. A man named Louis Horst, who was Martha Graham's musical advisor. He also taught choreography classes, and he did it by teaching us Bach - taking a Bach piece and showing us how it worked and asking us to please make a dance that works the same way, do the same counts and all of that. Dunn realised that Horst was covering classic, pre-classic and modern forms, but he wasn't covering Cage or any of the living musicians and what they were doing. Robert Dunn decided that he would teach that work. So he was teaching Cage scores initially. He also had us work to Satie, who was quite obscure at that point. Cage made scores by doing things like holding a paper up to the sky, finding the imperfections in it and making a little mark on the imperfections and making the music fit that. The imperfections became the notes of a piece of music. He also used the I-ching and other chance procedures, coins and dice. Cunningham was also using chance procedures. His point was that he wanted to not work with his own ego. It is very time-consuming working with your own ego, to make all the choices that you can make. To make a 5 minute dance can take you forever. So I think he was trying to get past that part of it. Moving on and getting into performance, and getting to something that you can then shape. The chance procedure produced the clay, and Cunningham produced the pot. The students that Robert Dunn found, mostly were invited from the student body of the Cunningham Studio, and I suppose there were 15 or so each year. We would bring in 2 or 3 minutes of work each week and show it. We didn't critique it. We certainly never judged it. We just looked at it. By the end of the second year some rather powerful things had been made and it was at that point that we decided to do a showing to the public.

I mentioned that the painters were quite powerful at that point. The younger painters had got into the idea of performance; they were making 'happenings'. A 'happening' was an event that largely had painterly concerns but which had human bodies instead of painted figures. They felt that they could break forms. They felt they could ... its like Alice Through the Looking Glass ... the painters felt like their two dimensional world could become four dimensional. They had been working at Judson Church on a number of pieces.

Charlie is just asking about the phrase 'why not', which was a catch phrase that Robert Dunn used. I got sick of it, I got really sick of this 'why not' thing. At the beginning it was an

important element, because “what stops us from doing things?” is what it implies. Why would we not explore, why would we not investigate an idea? If you have an idea, unless you think its total crap, why would you not try to manifest it? So manifestation - trying to get to manifestations, and he just got through doubts and all kinds of aesthetic qualms that he might have about an idea. He would just say ‘why not’.

So then we had our first performance. It was about 2 hours long. It had 25 people involved. Don't forget that everyone is connected to everyone else by 6 degrees of separation so that means there were a lot of people connected to those 25. We sent out 400 flyers we had 600 people show up. We managed to get about 300 in, including the New York Times dance reviewer of the moment, who had just taken over the position. The reviewer who had just left would never have come to see us . Not even possible to consider. But this new guy was a music guy and he wrote a positive and curious review of the event. And if you want to know why something happened to Judson, or how it got on the map, that accident must be considered. Critics have so much power.

We started the event and the pieces ran. My pieces were booed, but there were a couple of people who were very powerful performers and made some quite strong pieces. I am talking about Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, and Trisha Brown. They had been showing work occasionally here and there, and had achieved something of a reputation. So that was why the crowd had showed up. Also the classes had got a bit of a reputation. Modern dance had been in a bit of a doldrums, so it was time for something to change.

So we then went on for the next 3 or 4 years to do more performance there, and on the basis of having such a venue, and knowing that time was sort of short, people did produce some strong .. you know they really put out at that point. Everything up to the first evening length works which started in maybe the 2nd or 3rd year had been group performance. And group performances have many advantages and many disadvantages as well. But it was the evening length works that started to ... that was when we each started to claim a style and a way of working for ourselves. But it took a while to get there.

The thing was always fluid. The system we used was a Quaker method, by which you tried to reach consensus. Consensus - nobody disagrees actively. Everybody is willing to let things slide by, or actively agrees with the process and we even used this to get rid of work that was too long or too crummy. If people didn't like it they would say ‘we think this work isn't really mature yet - work on it a bit more’. Or “its a bit too long and you already have two other pieces’. It worked well. So maybe I would come with 3 or 4 pieces - of that 3 or 4 the group would say ‘well this one is 20 minutes long , this one is 15 minutes long. This one is 5 minutes long. Lets have the 5 minute one.’ I mean I was willing. I think everyone else was willing to have the group do these kind of decisions because they have to be done. I think one of our most fantastic performances was 4 hours 15 minutes long. The audience could barely believe it - they were cross-eyed with all the work that they saw.

You do have to take the audience into account. Its too short and it becomes nothing, like an incident. Unless it is very powerful, it just becomes an incident. Or if it's too long it become monolithic, and they don't have the audience chops to sit through such an event.

However this just shows you that we weren't too concerned with the audience. We were mostly concerned with finding ways to make work, rehearsing it and getting it produced.

The gym was donated and the money raised went for publicity costs, things like that. We didn't get paid. I had an apartment that cost \$19.84 a month. So I had to make \$20 a month to house myself. So it wasn't so hard to live. Those of us who were not subsidised lived cheaply.

I was also at that point in the Merce Cunningham Company. The fee I got for a performance was \$ 25. And I did painting and carpentry. I didn't want a job. Cunningham was so unpopular we were touring 9 of us in a VW bus across the country, driving across a continent, and doing as many performances as we could. We performed in some really dreadful situations. Sometimes there were not many people in the audience, sometimes many walked out. Cunningham wrote into his contract that after each performance there would be a big supper for the dancers, and so the local people would be there to provide that. And it was pretty bizarre. they could only say things like "Oh you must be so tired." I mean its hard to talk about weird work that you have seen, and then you have to go and have supper with these people afterwards. I am sympathetic.

Dancers in those days were not the obscure figures that they are today. It was a respected field. That has slipped a bit. The reputation that had arisen was one of dance being a new form. Modern dance was being newly invented right in front of America's eyes. And in a way the Judson was a point at which the work got very interesting, from a theoretical point of view, but the audience lost track of what was happening. Suddenly there weren't these iconic figures to know about. In the same way that you had Fontyn here for instance at the same period and we had Graham there, and others - Balanchines people. The public needs someone to identify and to think about in terms of their work. So with Judson, suddenly there was a field of choreographers, and for the first couple of years they couldn't distinguish between us in terms of our aesthetics. Then a few of them identified themselves. Yvonne, Deborah Hay, Trisha Brown, Lucida Childs, Simone Forti. As real individuals that could be written about and considered. But it takes a machine to get the theory of an individuals work out to the public and get it discussed, and I think that that stopped happening in the second part of the 20th century.

Well, the most successful people were making evenings as I said. With an evening length work you went and you sat and saw something, and it became like a show in a museum or in a gallery. A solo effort that people could really concentrate on. Yvonne was working very strongly in dance technique and taking it just over the edge from polite performance, making it more erotic, more psychological. She had a way of really staying within the form but the coloration became much more modern.

Did we feel that the Judson period was risky. or innovative? Definitely. But it was in a social situation in which that was completely acceptable. It was what was expected of us. The job was to get out new forms and to make new art.

Did we identify ourselves as dancers? I had trouble getting rid of the word dance. As we began this period I was performing in a dance company. I was taking ballet classes as well as modern classes, and I was making work and being in work that my peers made, all of which required dance technique and awarenesses. The kinds of awareness that you build in class.

But the work that I started producing was pedestrian work. Started with walking, standing. I guess there were a few figures from the past ... the Muybridge photos... now he wasn't

making dance but I can see that his movement analysis had a dancerly mind somehow. In the way that his photos that analyzed human movement was very close to the way that someone analyzing choreography would break down the moments. And then there were the readymades. If Duchamp could sign a urinal and people were able to entertain the idea that this was art, or that he had in some way pointed out its artistic qualities - if he was willing to look at that and make us see it in a new way, then I was able to look at walking, standing and sitting and see it that way. And go through that transformation myself.

I don't care any more to be a dancer. I'm going to keep working with human movement. I feel like they have a point when they say 'its dance' or 'its not dance'. It's just that who owns that word, who colonises it, is not a big deal to me any more.

Yvonne had made a piece called We Shall Run. We got very involved with how to capture pedestrian movement in performance, because of course the minute you put something on stage it becomes performance. Its like bringing a camera out and everybody starts acting a little differently. And I would say that in most of my walking dances which did happen in front of audiences, the very thing that I most wanted to see was lost because of the transformation of people who are walking front of an audience. They lose that natural thing. It turns into a unnatural act.

Was I working with trained dancers in the walking dance? Not always. When Baryshnikov did those dances in 2001 they were done with people from the community and don't know if they were dancers or not.

There's a score and it tells you relationships. Who walks first, who walks second, what they do on stage. Cos they don't just walk, they stop and stand as well. Don't think that they just walk... and they sat down. So all of this was structured.

Someone is asking me about about work that has been read about with images of surgery and pornography.

It wasn't really surgery. It was a doctor with a bottle of saline solution, he drained the saline solution into my body, into a vein whilst I was dancing. And that piece was done in protest, it was done as a kind of lecture about the nature of how work gets changed by sponsors. And the work that was not done was one of the walking dances in which I wanted the performers to be nude.

I am a naive person. I really think its stupid how we cover ourselves - we are all naked underneath our clothes and I just can't get over that. I've never managed to see past that

So there was another example in which I had a pornographic film - a simple pornography, not what you find these days, simply a couple screwing in black and white. And a black and white film of Swan Lake shown side by side, and the live performance space was between the two images. So it was coupling of various kinds, I could quickly and critically call it.

I tried to show that at the New School for Social Research in New York and was forbidden to show the pornographic part of the film. So I got a hold of a film of the starvation in Biafra, which was happening at the time, and showed that next to the Swan Lake and the audience was outraged that they couldn't have the pornography and that they were confronted with starvation. They got the point. But really I think it was a better piece. If it had been Muybridge filming sex it would have looked different to us, but if it sold in a certain kind of market and it is obviously meant to be salacious, it loses its scientific

objectivity. Somehow this slips off the image and instead this leering enjoyment takes its place. I can understand society's problems and ambivalence about these kind of images. But if you have something that is as sumptuous and remarkable as ballet and you look at that next to the images of starvation its ... it points out how crazy we are - how great and how crazy we are.

I really wanted to say just a few things in terms of thinking what value I could be to you in this day and age. That this work and the work of many artists started with composition classes. Just to say that. Charlie asked how a group of people who aren't a group can come together. We were not a group. We were students of the same teacher, which I think had a kind of bonding effect. We had a conversation among us about what was going on. Having that teacher, any teacher would have done.

Dunn was not a magical teacher, he was someone who would say 'why not', which maybe gives you some idea of the kind of laxness but also his kind of breadth of mind. He knew his stuff, he knew his modern musical composition and he was very patient and he never argued and he never judged what he saw. He just kept working and out of that some very amazing art developed. Coming up with an idea a week and performing it in front of your peers. The fact that you are peers allows you to undress and be dopey if that's what you need to do. But eventually you realise that people are producing amazing moments and maybe you should get your act together. Its simulating in that way, just kind of social building of imagery. We went on to perform, we were lucky with that reviewer. We had an overflowing crowd before anybody had ever reviewed us, something strange happened and I think it was the reputation of the classes and the work that leaked out which just rallied an audience around us somehow. We were then found by people who were interested in supporting us and a few tours came our way.

I took charge of a lot of those. I toured us to Michigan. I was very involved in the 4 hour 15 minute performance in Washington DC. It's because I knew somebody had to do this work, and this is something that a group which is not a group has to accept. I have been interested in groups ever since. I have worked with loads of collectives and collaborations. I've lived on a commune for 38 years, so I'm really interested in groups and how they interact, and there is forever the problem of who's doing the dishes. Whose going to write the letters and do the management, and it really has to be faced and dealt with clearly. There will be people who do not do that and they should be ousted. I say should be ousted but did I ever oust anyone? No. I didn't. It's a hard thing to do.

My work directly relates back to that period. I think for all of us we can say that. I am still in email contact with Trisha and Yvonne and David Gordon and a few other people. It dispersed by people getting known as individual artists and starting to tour by themselves. In the early days of that period at the end of the 60's and the beginning of the 70's we danced for each other so we were still seeing each other. If I was doing a performance I would have Yvonne or Trisha or someone else dance in it. But eventually Trisha was asked by 4 women who were not part of Judson if she would make work for them. Her dance company came and got her and said 'choreograph for us please'. So she did.

Yvonne went into films and David started a dance company. Douglas Dunn started a dance company. There was an interim period called the Grand Union in which those of us who were still in touch, which was about 9 people, formed an improvisational dance performance company and out of that came so much work. I think improvisation is the

hardest thing to talk about. But it's a curious thing. I have been looking at it now since the 70's. I'm totally fascinated with it but I can see that it's not what you would call a career. It's very hard to make it clear to people exactly what it is that you're doing, and how it works. Maybe it's easier now days I don't know.

If you can do it again and again. If you have a work that has an identity there are a lot of advantages. Having established that, you can go on to make another one that's different. Whereas if you are improvising it's very hard to get out of yourself, past yourself to develop yourself into another form. There are a number of reasons why it is quite a complex thing to do. Composition is not all that difficult or all that complex. We can start to see how it fits into the social structure.

The question is did we have a philosophy. It's easy to look back and say that we did, but I'm not sure if we did.

Charlie: What about Yvonne Rainier's 'no manifesto'?

Steve: That's a bullshit young artist egotistical ... (laughs). She was only speaking for herself. I've known Yvonne for many many decades now and part of her strength is she looks strong and clear and defined and in fact she's not. Have you read her autobiography? Oh it's heart breaking. She writes with a kind of clarity and strength that is just knockout story-telling, but the life she lived was in fact ... she struggled through it. She was lost much of the time.

So the 'no manifesto' is a manifesto. She said much later that she had thought that it might backfire. And it did. She's going to be chased by that forever. Was it an important thing to do? She said no to art music with dance and then we went on to use movie music instead. This is when I was dancing with her, in these evening length works. They were great works, really interesting, strong, well-danced, definitely dance works. And then she changed and the reason she changed was because she fell in love and she changed philosophies. I don't take the 'no manifesto' very seriously, because she no-manifestoed but she yessed theatrical strategy her way to great prominence. It's all a lie! It's a thing that suggests great purity. Charlie is saying that it points out things that normally do characterise dance. She's saying no to it but then she's doing it. She was using some of the most highly trained dancers in New York to make this dance, dancers that someone else had trained.

(the group tried to remember the no manifesto)

Yvonne published it. I read it. People regret things that they do of this nature I think. I went on to do it as well, but it was very different. Not a manifesto but a statement, an artistic statement. I can't remember it. I'll tell you why I can't remember it, because it starts off with the sentence. "Like the famous tree which is unsure if it will be making noise should it fall to the ground in a forest without people, there is a way of looking at things which renders them performance". It went on in that vein and it's too convoluted to understand. Do you understand it? What did I mean by that? Did I mean no to rational statements?

How do you get beyond yourself is the question. My question has always been for me, going back to Merce's day about how he used chance, there is something about the mind

which inhibits itself and it has its own conventions. Maybe what Yvonne was doing was saying, this is what I have to do to get past my conventions. Maybe everyone should write one. For me it would be no to walking, no to sitting down, no to standing still, no to touch, no to weight. No to the spine.

It's interesting that it's a no manifesto instead of a yes manifesto.

Young artists rejecting. I think it's a useful phase. How do you leave home? As a dancer I spent many years studying dance and in that time, I became brainwashed. And I came out of the Cunningham Company and I couldn't stop pointing my toe. That's the problem. We are creatures of physical habit, so you can tell yourself that you know how to dance. Yes I understand ballet, yes my body can cope with Cunningham. yes, I know aikido. Any movement. It takes a long time, years to grow the form. Then you can't stop being it. You have changed yourself, you have transformed yourself into it. I think this is an interesting discussion.

So if we had a philosophy, it was that there was no group philosophy. We were not a school. we did not adhere to the 'no manifesto' as a group. We didn't develop a group mind.

Ju: When you make work now, do you ever feel that those early times feel like a burden, that you achieved something that now can't be so new or radical?

Steve: The real work was not so much what we produced, but was becoming an investigator. So all this investigation for me turned me into a person who investigates movement, so I go on investigating movement so it keeps coming up new. New points of view. No they don't seem like a burden. I'm told that mathematicians tend to make their real leaps in Math in their twenties, and I think that that's what we gave ourselves permission to do. Was to make that leap into some other theatrical form, or some other viewpoint other than the one which was around at that time.

Anna. Has that informed your life as well as your work.

Steve. Yes. I'm still working on walking and it has now turned into a technical approach and I finally feel like I've solved it and I know a lot about it and I've always felt that walking being such a basic programme to the human being was the source of all the dance steps that you would ever want to see. Certainly ballet is a walking-based art form, modern dance too. Contact improvisation is not for instance, so having found a non-walking foundational structure., then it was possible to conceive of structures that were not based on that foundation. The identification was very useful.

Ben. When Baryshnikov did Past Forward, were you excited to see these things again?

Steve. That question about whether work is a burden - that is an interesting possibility, it had never occurred to me that it was a burden. When you step outside the known world to make work, it's very interesting to see it again, and see how the world adapts over time to accommodate. Cunningham is such a great example of this because there's nothing there beyond composition and technique. He's so clean.

Before Yvonne renounced all that stuff, Cunningham was already very busy in the world that she was describing. And yet he is one of the most acclaimed choreographers in the

world. I don't know how you feel about him, but I think he is an amazing figure in dance history, he's really something. He made the world open their minds to this concept. He made us do it. he gave us no alternative. You can not like the work, but you have to admit that he started out with 5 dancers and 2 musicians and a lighting person in a VW bus and has lasted 50 years doing this work and it stands. Its an incredible monument. So when you step outside to make work, there's this possibility that it doesn't stay outside, and I felt that that was what Past Forward did. But the really thrilling thing about Past Forward was how David Gordon orchestrated it into an educational spectacle. Because he was showing the work, introducing the artists, talking about the times. There was video, there was photography, there was live performance and he just shuffled it all together into this amazing soup. I thought it was a very rich evening.

Claudia. We all laugh when you say that you worked on walking and eventually added in standing, or sitting - and we laugh because it seems so slow.

Steve. It is.

Claudia. And we don't have the time to go slow. It seems so radical, to simply slow down. And you are obviously still slow.

Steve. I'm getting a little faster.

Well, in my slowness I've produced two movement techniques in my life, and quite a number of works, and taught thousands and thousands of people. I think that's the kind of thing you can only do when you are slow. I think if you are fast you couldn't get around all that stuff.

If all you have got as a dancer is sensation, then I think you have to take the time; to figure out what the sensations are and how you want to apply them, and what you want to make with them. I don't think that's fast work. I think its non-verbal, sometimes illogical. I think it's very rational, but its extremely complex, how all this works. If you are going to actually try to make that conscious and then compose with it – that's why choreography is so complex, it's about a consciousness of what you are doing and how you want to apply it. When you start with the human body, how fast do you want to go? If you are going to do fast, then you will only experience fast sensations and it's going to end up looking like dance always does.

Slow down and dance.

