

## NESTED NESTS

### On Framing Bodies and Spaces in Dance and Choreography

*On 12 February 2009 a revision<sup>1</sup> of Steve Paxton's Ave Nue from 1985 premiered at Loods 6, an arts venue in Amsterdam. It was a production by the Artist in Residence program AIR, the SNDO and the AMCh of the Amsterdam Theaterschool. The piece was shown five times in total. The author of this paper was present during most of the rehearsals, and watched the general rehearsals and the premiere of the performance. He takes the opportunity to trace some of what he perceived as Steve Paxton's guidelines and to interweave them with some of his own thinking around choreographic work.*

In a short backstage talk right after the premier Steve Paxton replied to a question about the mix of abstract dance and anecdotic scenes in the piece: "Yes, isn't it? Cunningham and comic books!" He read comic books as a young adult, because it was there that one could find the "real information about what was going on in Vietnam, in economy, ecology, and in other political fields. At the end of the 60's, I spent a lot of time in comic book stores." In 2010, let us spend some time with comic books as well. But this time not with political ones but with one that might help us think about *Ave Nue* and Paxton's work in general.

### 'GUTTERS', FRAMES AND CHAOS

In his entertaining yet illuminating comic book *Understanding Comics* Scott McCloud talks about our perception of the world, especially of time, and how this can be represented in comics. The tool relevant for this paper is what McCloud calls the 'gutter', the space between the single panels of a comic, which is the space that holds most of comics' magic and mystery. It is an empty space that only gets filled by the reader's imagination. This imagination in turn is informed by experience that there must be something in this space that connects the panels. This ability allows the readers to construct a continuous reality and, in the case of comics, narrative. Psychology calls this ability 'closure'.

While McCloud specifically speaks about the art of comic book writing, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explores how and under which conditions art in general emerges. In her compelling essay *Chaos, Territory, Art – Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008) she suggests that art proper doesn't only involve a creator and a perceiver but needs sensation that is detached and autonomous from either – sensation as an independent actor within art and at

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<sup>1</sup> This term is particular to the very process described in this paper. Normally, dance and performance scholars and practitioners refer to processes that work with material from the past as "reconstructions" or "reenactments". The notion of revision was introduced by Steve Paxton and seems to stress the fact that here a maker looks again at an old work of his and reworks it according to circumstances and desires that have changed over time.

the same time formed from chaos by art. The first step on the way to such independent sensation is what Grosz calls with Deleuze “the first gesture of art”: the making of a frame. Art then takes some chaos into it and “forms a composed chaos that becomes sensory”. The frame tames earth’s uncontrollable forces, renders them ‘compose-able’ and allows for intensifying and transforming living bodies. (Grosz 2008: 1-11) McCloud’s panels and ‘gutters’ seem to be renderings of Grosz’ notions of frame and chaos specific to the art form of comics. Comics’ panels or frames act as indicators that a story’s time or space, are being divided. Placed one after the other on a two-dimensional page, they follow more or less a narrative’s timeline. Although visibly empty, the ‘gutters’ are filled with all the potential narrative connections between two panels, which are as closely related to the narrative’s timeline as to the undistinguishable qualities and uncontrollable forces Grosz talks about when she talks about chaos.

#### LAYING THE FLOOR: THE OCCURRENCE OF CHAOTIC BODIES, DANCING

With furniture-maker and architect Bernard Cache, Grosz asserts the wall as the first frame. It creates an inside that excludes everything outside of it. Projected downwards onto the ground, the wall becomes a first human territory, a smooth, supple and consistent floor, which is the condition for dance’s emergence. (Grosz 2008: 14) On it the body is protected from everyday activities and can indulge in an exploration of elements such as weight, thrust, yielding or momentum in new ways. Thus the body can explore gravity’s and movement’s excess. It becomes a “unique chaotic event” (Steve Paxton 2009: Jan 26). Framing these chaotic events through movement exercises is the gesture that comes right after framing a part of the earth by putting down a floor.

During the opening workshop from 26 to 28 January 2009 in Amsterdam Steve Paxton introduced the dancers of *Ave Nue* to his movement technique *Material for the Spine (MFS)*, which entail not only a collection of physical exercises but also a philosophy about the body and its sensing, moving and thinking potentials which increase once a dancer has stepped onto the (dance) floor. Regulating, organizing and forming their movements through choreographic operations follow<sup>2</sup>. But unlike comics’ panels, which follow each other on a timeline, the frames in dance and choreography are nested: Earth’s chaos framed by the floor, unleashing the powers of the body framed by exercises, unleashing the powers of movement framed by choreography. Accordingly, the ‘gutters’, where parts of the dance escape us and have to be filled in through ‘closure’ are not to be found in between single

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<sup>2</sup> “Art is the regulation and organization of its materials – paint, canvas, concrete, steel, marble, words, sounds, bodily movements, indeed any materials – according to self-imposed constraints, the creation of forms through which these materials come to generate and intensify sensation and thus directly impact living bodies, organs, nervous systems.” (Grosz 2008: 4; emphasis by the author of this paper)

moments of a dance or in between certain points in the room where a dance takes place. As there are no panels that arrest movement, 'gutters' in dance must be of a different nature than being empty spaces on a page. They will probably be found nested in between parts of a body that have not yet come to the senses, and in between bodies that experience the event of a dance from different points of view. But let us first have a look at two instances when the body occurs as chaotic event:

*First: anatomy.* When we see a body in front of us, we perceive its form, the color of its skin, its posture. When it is close enough, we might also smell it. What we don't perceive are its insides, its bones, muscles, and organs. We don't even perceive the complete insides of our own bodies. We might feel their weight. We might have seen images in anatomy books that show us what a dead body cut open looks like. And perhaps these images have become part of our imagination that helps us bridge the gap to our insides. But most of our lives and even after death, our anatomy remains inside our skin, enwrapped in darkness. And if our skin is cut open during a surgery, only the few specialists in the theater will see parts of our anatomy in full color.

*Second: the well-(un)known intervals between sensory stimulus and its realization, and between decision to move and motor activity.* Since neuropsychologist Benjamin Libet got involved in research into neuronal activity and sensation thresholds, he and his colleagues have developed methods to gauge the duration between unconscious movement readiness and subjective feelings of volition. In the 1980's, they found that the gap between the two lasted approximately half a second.<sup>3</sup> But unless we use EEG's, EMG's and other instruments, there remains an uncanny inability to pull these intervals into the frame of our perception. What ever happens during these intervals remains largely in the 'gutter', inspiring much speculation about its purpose and lively imagination to bridge its duration.

Our bodies are not always distinguishably ours, not entirely represent-able in language, and not visible in their interior structures nor in all their effects and affects. They always also form "a plethora of orders, forms, wills – forces that cannot be distinguished or differentiated from each other, both matter and its conditions for being otherwise, both the actual and the virtual indistinguishably" (Grosz 2008: 5). Much of the body's potential is thus not perceived. Most of the sensations available to it are not sensed and can thus not be unleashed. They mostly stay outside of the frames of perception and conscious experience. They remain in the 'gutter' and can only be brought to sensation through activity that includes imagination and 'closure'.

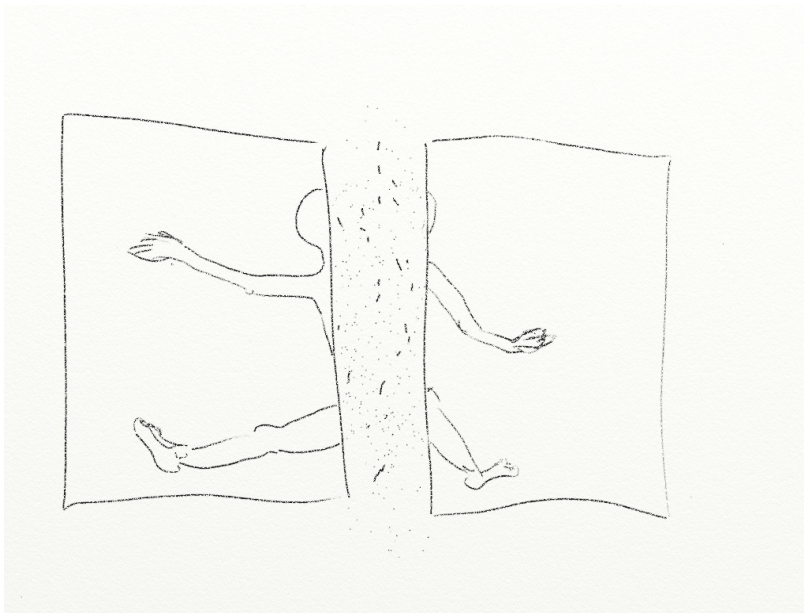
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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin\\_Libet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Libet), accessed on August 10, 2010

## PREPARING THE GROUNDS: EXERCISES IN DANCE

This is when dance and choreography take a step away from the chaotic body on the (dance) floor, so that the body can become the matter for their framing operations: physical exercises, improvisational tasks, choreographic operations and staging procedures. All of these cut into and through the body as milieu or space and connect it to the territory of the (dance) floor, bringing back into contact the chaos inside and around it. Through the various exercises, tasks and operations in dance and choreography, chaotic states of the body are entrapped and movement qualities are extracted from the body that thus comes to the senses and is eventually enabled to produce consciously sensed movement.

This oscillation between unconscious chaos and knowledgeable sensation is one of dance's and choreography's basic conditions and does occur constantly when training the body via different kinds of dance exercises. Acknowledging the body as unknown and chaotic in order to then expose it to an exercise that frames the body's chaos and brings certain parts of it to the senses, leads to knowing the body and territorializing some of the bodily chaos, mapping it and, through repeated exercise, to developing habit, skill and technique; which then might be questioned again through a new set of exercises that bring different parts and properties of the body to attention and sensation, thus making it chaotic again in order to reframe it ... a constant back-and-forth along flexible edges between grasping sensation and letting it go, between panel and 'gutter', frame and 'closure', between sensing the moving body and imagining what has not yet been sensed and what has yet seemed impossible in movement.



Framing the body

In this sense, physical exercises can be seen as frames that make the chaotic body choreographic territory<sup>4</sup>. They act similarly to the floor that marks the very territory on which the body becomes chaotic in the first place, facing its new relations to gravity and movement released by it. However, dance exercises don't just exist flat on the floor but as virtual and dynamic images and instructions that become spatial in their execution.

Referring again to Grosz and with her to Cache, we can say dance exercises act as furnishings. They are three-dimensional entities put onto the (dance) floor to become bodily supports that trigger our imaginations and afford our bodies to certain movements and sensations. Exercise as “[f]urniture brings the outside in” (Grosz 2008: 16), not in the sense of the chaos outside of the (dance) floor coming into the body, but in the sense of bringing the chaos within the body into the frame of consciousness through sensing the body within the design of a certain movement or mental focus. Exercise as “[f]urniture enables the body to be most directly affected by, but also protected from, the chaos of every outside: ‘For our most intimate or most abstract endeavors [...], furniture supplies the immediate physical environment in which our bodies act and react; for us, urban animals, furniture is thus our primary territory.’ (30)” (Grosz 2008: 15) For us, dancing and choreographing animals on the (dance) floor, exercise is thus our primary territory, in which the exercised and aware body finds an inside, a house that keeps the chaos of the not-exercised and unaware body outside without rejecting but offering it a chair to sit down next to, or even with, the sensed and sensing body.<sup>5</sup> Exercise is what brings

To consciousness the inner sensations, the moments, when usage reveals operations of the skeleton, the muscular connections available between pelvis and fingertips [...] *Material for the Spine* takes as given that the palette of the

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<sup>4</sup> In dance, it is an on-going discussion whether a dancer's training should focus on strengthening muscles through repeating certain movements and situations until they fit into a dance style such as classical dance or Graham, or whether a training's set of exercises should enhance the dancer's ability to sense her body that dances. In dance history, much attention has been paid to repeating formal exercises. But since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with, among others, Isidora Duncan and Rudolph v. Laban the focus has shifted towards a more open approach to dance training that understands itself rather as a frame for perceiving the body within different contexts than as a pathway to achieve the looks of a certain dance style. Steve Paxton's *Material for the Spine* can be understood as an example of a training that tries to combine both strategies through strengthening parts of the body by bringing them to the senses within the frames of its exercises; dance technique as something that “enables dancers to adapt to changing contexts and situations rather than making them repeat situations” (Jeanine Durning).

<sup>5</sup> “It is the job of the dance student to first bring the unconscious movement of their body into the realm of consciousness. Next, to form the movements into an array of possibilities, a dance technique, which is useful for choreographers to pattern into the new, albeit customary, dance of their culture. For the student and the culture it is a precious legacy: the steps, their organization, and the way we learn them. Cultural legacies, however, can be confining. My inquiry was not so much about escaping the legacy of dance as discovering the source of it. Where was something pre-legacy, pre-cultural, pre-artistic? Where was ancient movement? [...] The answer of course, was right under my nose. I placed the chair in the space, and began to stand.” (From a note to the White Oak Dance Company, summer 2000)

dancer exists as sensations in the body. It attempts to point out naturally occurring events and develop exercises which bring them forward for examination. (Paxton 2008: introduction).

### SIMPLE POINTING AS COMPLEX EXERCISE

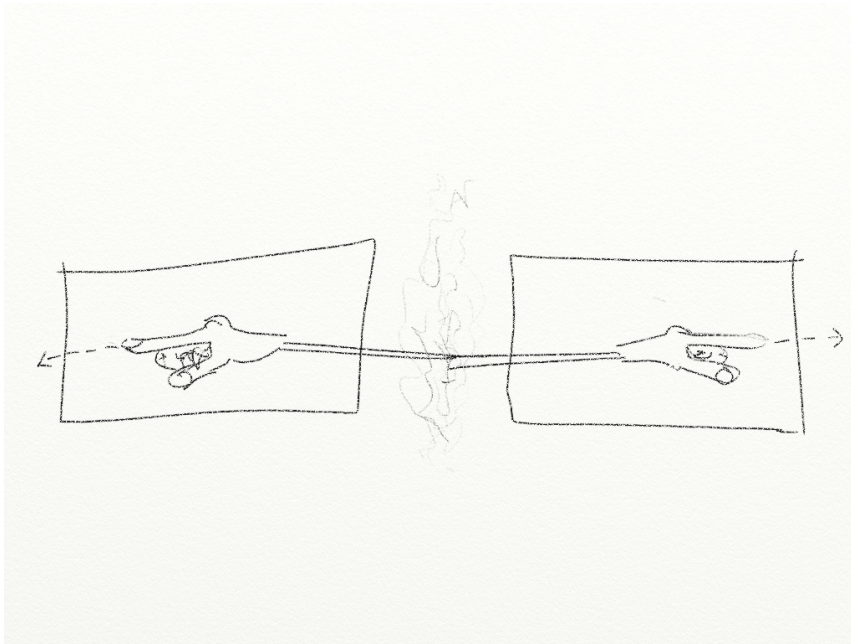
During the workshop preparing for *Ave Nue*, this understanding of the dancer's sensational palette in the body was central. Sensations<sup>6</sup> of the body within the design of an exercise were to be marked and worked with. One of the exercises or forms of *Material for the Spine* that was studied during the workshop shall clarify how Paxton's approach to training the body and its senses acts as a strategy to frame the body's chaotic events in order to extract qualities from and create sensation with them. This exercise is *pointing*.

Pointing seems to be not very complex. After all, pointing is an everyday gesture all of us think they know how to do. But it becomes complex once we acknowledge that there might be kinds of coordination involved we actually haven't sensed yet. Paradoxically, this simple recognition of the body's chaos and excess throws it onto the (dance) floor, a territory that allows for abandoning the everyday clarity of habitual movement, and for surrendering to its chaotic excess. In other words, the known frame of the pointing gesture and the known territory of the body acting as a frame within the frame of the gesture must be opened up to what is not yet sensed and has so far remained outside of the gesture's frame, in chaos:

There are moments when we point in two directions, for instance, expressing 'from east to west.' Somewhere in the middle, in the shoulder girdle, two imaginary lines are leaving, each projecting toward these opposite directions. Now, my question is what to call the space between the origins of those two lines. It is not a simple place, because if one arm is more emphatic, then the shoulder, the scapula, and all the way to the spine are implicated in that direction. But anyway, there is a central area, which is an anchor for the gestures, uncommitted to either direction. It's directionally ambiguous. And I have named it the 'ambiguous zone'." (Paxton 2008: sensation and senses: pointing: parts of pointing)

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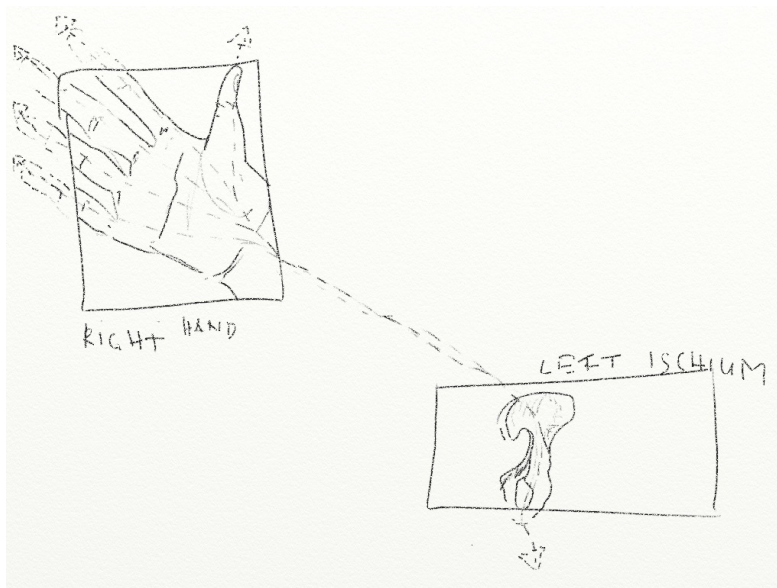
<sup>6</sup> The obviously different uses of the word 'sensation' in Grosz' thinking and in Paxton's is not entirely unproblematic and could be the topic of a whole paper. For this one, the author has chosen to understand Paxton's use of the word as in 'sensing' or 'experiencing', although it is a simplification and leaves out the complexity of sensation occurring in the event of sensing.



### The ambiguous zone

This ambiguous zone brings attention to one of the blind spots or better 'gutters' nested in between known zones or parts of the body. During the workshop, pointing was exercised with all the fingers and with the ischia.<sup>7</sup> In one of the exercises, pointing was done by an ischium of one side and one of the little fingers on the other side simultaneously, thus diagonally stretching the body along the backsides of arm and torso. The questions raised in the workshop were: "Where is this area? How does it feel? How far can the tissue in this area be stretched, so that it becomes a kinesthetic continuity, bridging the invisibility of your back?"

<sup>7</sup> „Usually pointing is done with the index finger. But any finger can do it, even the thumb. If you try this [...] notice how the scapula reacts through the spectrum of different pointing fingers. I find the scapula rises with the thumb point, and goes down as one points with the third and fourth fingers. These two fingers are a part of the hand that is used to push us away from things, or things away from us, because it connects along the underside of the arm to the lower part of the scapula, and from there down the back to the pelvis, where the center of mass exists, which must be moved, if we are to push ourselves away from something, for instance, the table.” (Paxton 2008: sensation and senses: pointing: parts of pointing)



### Pointing

With such inquiries, stretching between two points of the body becomes an exercise, not only lengthening the muscles but also widening a dancer's sensory capacities. It does so by blending instigating questions in language with a movement design that enables sensorimotor experience, and by enhancing sensing through imagination (that there is a certain structure that looks like a picture in the anatomy book; that there is a line that can be drawn between the places in the body; that there is something at all). The exercise thus brings together sensing and imagining, movement and image, blind spot and vision, in order to actualize a certain potential of the body's chaos. The exercise instigates and touches the body in a way that the dancer is enabled to bridge the 'gutters' of the body on the (dance) floor. The exercise addresses a dancer's desires and impulses and affords him or her to move and sense the body in a new way. It allows to look carefully at the resulting movements and actions and how they project within the body and into space, eventually refining the dancer's perception of her anatomy and as a result her movements and actions<sup>8</sup>.

### NESTING BODIES: CHOREOGRAPHING

Working with bodies in order to organize their movements in space where they appear in front of or among spectators, in other words to choreograph, is a different operation than exercising the body. While the latter frames the body on the background of its own chaos on the (dance) floor through repeatedly adapting to certain kinds of movement, the first frames the body on the background of the chaos of the earth through inventing moving relations.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Paxton puts it this way: „*Material for the Spine* aims to provide a kinetic identity that the student is unlikely to have encountered before, a spine, head and pelvis-centered experience, which is explicit in design, but asks the practitioner to design the necessary sensations of movement for its manifestation.” (Paxton 2008: introduction)



Exercising focuses on sensing the 'chaotic' bodies and their parts, choreographing stresses the sensations unleashed by and in between bodies and their parts. But despite being different practices, none of the two ever comes purely. Each always contains portions of the other, and, although without causal relation, they are always nested in each other. Sometimes they even depend on one another.

Exercises extract from the body movement qualities and the ability to produce and unleash sensation: the body starts to dance and oscillate. Choreography relates this oscillation back to, and organizes it within the performance space and its resonant qualities. It nests the dancing bodies. Its *techniques* are improvisational tasks, choreographic or compositional operations and staging procedures<sup>9</sup>. The latter concern the performance spaces and thus also spectators and how they will watch or be nested in relation to the dancing bodies. In order to understand this relation better, let's have a look at some elements of the performance of *Ave Nue*' revision, which took place in a six meters wide and 79 meters long performance space.

It begins with a birth scene: The cast's four female dancers carry in a human-size hand made from foam and lay it down gently on a white cloth spread on the narrow space between the two rostra, on which the audience is seated. They then animate the hand as if in labor until one dancer pulls out a little package from its insides; midwives at work helping to deliver the hand's baby-hand. Shortly before it is born the cast's six male dancers appear smilingly<sup>10</sup>. The recorded sound of waves soothes the contractions' pains. There is a sense of tenderness and comfort. The audience's gaze is smoothed by two gauze screens, which are put up in front of each rostrum. A distorted popular tune is faintly heard. The midwives gently fold out the new born. At the end all dancers exit, taking the hands and the cloth with them and removing the screens in front of the rostra to the sides of the space.

## MOVING SPACES AND OSCILLATING SENSATION

During this beginning the rostra were placed close to each other. After the screens had been removed they started to be slowly pulled away from each other, revealing the full length of the space at the end of the performance but at first producing an odd feeling: as the eye balls continuously needed to adjust focus to the changing distance from the scene, the ciliary

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<sup>9</sup> On the notion of technique in the arts also see footnote 8 of this text, and Brian Massumi, 2008: "... art practice is a technique of composing potentials of existence, inventing experiential styles, coaxing new forms of life to emerge. It's inventive, literally creative of vitality affect. And I do mean 'technique.' To achieve any affective-effective composition requires the same kind of care, minute attention to detail, and obsessive experimentation in how the situation is set up or framed [...]. It's more a *performance envelope* than an objective frame. A dynamic or operative frame." (p.30)

<sup>10</sup> The complete cast onstage was: Daniel Almgren Recen, Tomislav Feller, Pablo Fontdevila, Stephanie Luehn, Roger Sala Reijner, Rodrigo Sobarzo, Alma Soderberg, Teilo Troncy, Yurie Umamoto, Emma Wilson

muscles were constantly busy; their tension was felt without knowing that a distance had changed, leaving the spectator with a tingly, almost vibratory sensation in the eye sockets. It took a while to realize that the space was actually growing bigger. Only then the tingling could be related to the eyes' actual focusing. But vision had already become a kinesthetic event. There was a quality of movement of the eyes that was achieved by moving the rostra away from the dance and thus changing the perceptual frames of the spectators. The rostra's movement smuggled a kinesthetic sense into the eyes that perceived the images of dance in front of them. In *Ave Nue* Paxton used the motion sensitivity of people and integrated the activity of vision in the game of motion. There was an interval between an indeterminate feeling and a conscious determination of what this feeling was. Before stepping over this sensation threshold and realizing, the spectators felt vision's movement while watching dancers move.

This sort of sensational inclusion was not just part of the performance. It was a constant process in the revisioning of *Ave Nue* in 2009 and apparently also in the making of *Ave Nue* in 1985. Jan Ryckaert, Paxton's technical director from 1985, called this inclusive way of building frames "building a nest" in an interview with Myriam van Imschoot (29<sup>th</sup> of January, 2009). Paxton began this process in 1985 by making the performance space as comfortable for the performers and staff as possible. In 2009 he also build a nest by introducing the dancers to his movement practice, so that they could calibrate their artistic frames with his – of the body, of movement, of space, unleashing their chaotic powers, produced by the dynamic tensions between sensation just framed and sensation yet unknown: an oscillation that was brought into the performance space, unleashing sensation and imagination in the audience and in between the audience and the dancers: an oscillation nested, bridging the 'gutters' specific to dance: not yet sensed yet nested parts of and in between bodies.

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