

## UNEDITED

### Undefined Space in *Auf Den Tisch*:

#### A Conversation between Danielle Goldman and Beth Gill

##### **Beth:**

Maybe I should describe the space. The performance took place in one of the studios at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. A large square table, maybe 15 or 20 feet in length, was situated in the center of the room. The table was actually a series of smaller, wooden, rectangular tables pushed together, that when lit had a slightly golden hue. There was a single row of chairs along the edge of the table and another row around the periphery of the studio. The table itself was completely bare with the exception of a few microphones with short stands that were positioned in the center of each side.

By the time Danielle and I entered the studio the audience had filled up most of the two rows. It was the dress rehearsal. I remember looking around at the room for people I recognized, wondering how and why each person had been lucky enough to get in that night. If you wanted to, you could see almost everyone in the room. Within the first row of chairs (around the table) there were empty spaces in front of the microphones. Danielle and I sat down behind one of the spaces and, shortly after, the performers casually found their places in those seats, amidst the pre-performance chatter of the room. Keith Hennessy and a man I didn't recognize [Jean-Paul Lespagnard] sat down right in front of us. To their left sat a woman [Anja Müller], with whom they chatted. Across the table sat David Thomson and George Emilio Sanchez.

Trajal Harrell and a woman [Vania Rovisco] were on the side to our left and Yvonne Meier was on the right, but closer to the far corner of the table. Meg Stuart was walking through the small aisle made by the two rows of chairs, handing out sheets of paper to the performers. When she came full circle, she took her seat at the center of the table, on my right side, directly across from Harrell, and the space became quiet.

These formal choreographic decisions that happened in the first few minutes of the evening already provided me with so much information. Stuart's gesture, which seemed to energetically round up the space, signaled a beginning and established a sense of hierarchy within the room. The performers were distinguished from the audience and Stuart, who through the action of passing out papers was distinguished as an organizer or leader of the group.

My understanding of these roles seemed reinforced by my focus. I remember as Stuart sat down, that I was looking at her and seeing only her regardless of

the fact that she was surrounded by others who fit in my frame of view. As I brought my gaze to the rest of the table I noticed that, similarly, I could hold all the performers in my vision, against the backdrop of the other people in the room, in a way that affected their sense of scale and tone in the space. They seemed to glow. Thinking about this observation now it occurs to me that maybe they were, because they were lit. I didn't think of that at the time. I never looked up or around at the lights that evening, which is rare for me.

This immediate organization of the people in the room felt important and political. I realize now that in addition to this being my frame for the remainder of the evening, it was also a construct that was rarely challenged. As a result, I often found myself that evening focusing on Stuart as a leader and organizer, and wondering about her intentions and motives. I've been struggling with this realization, because it has forced me to question assumptions I have about improvised structures. I assume, based on an imprecise history of improvisation that I've gathered through experience and discourse, that democratic structures and ideals are inherent inside all improvisation. As I'm writing this, I'm thinking to myself, "of course that can't be the case now a days, let alone ever." But there is a strong legacy that informs contemporary improvisation both for the practitioners and viewers.

While the political structure of the improvisation was rarely challenged I still had a sense that my own questions regarding dance improvisation's legacy and current state was present that evening. There was one moment in particular, when Stuart called a pause in the improvisation that exposed this friction. I want to talk about this, but a little later on.

The performance continued with Stuart reading text into a microphone. Eventually others joined in reading different sources of text that layered over each other. One of the more beautiful moments of the night followed when the first performer (David Thomson) climbed up onto the table.

I wonder as I'm writing this what the other evenings were like (I just read Claudia La Rocca's review of this evening, and thought it was interesting that she also commented on this moment). My experience of Thomson dancing above me is held in my memory. Specifically, a moment when he traveled to the edge of the table, right in front of me. My proximity to him enhanced my experience and focused my eyes. The details I saw in that moment imprinted themselves in my memory more loudly than other moments, which I now struggle to remember.

I've questioned in hindsight why this action inside the larger improvisation

affected me. Was it the novelty, at that early stage of the evening, of seeing a body on top of the stage, or the break from text that captured my attention? I think these things played a part, but I am mostly aware that my attention and fascination was held by the rich experience of watching an incredible dancer.

**Danielle:**

I love that you have taken the time to describe the space. The tables were beautiful and I wish we could have been seated up front rather than in the outer ring. In any case, in those few moments before the performance began, I felt compelled to touch the table and make contact with it. It was smooth, and I tried to hold a sense of it as I sat. I also was aware of the windows that lined two of the four walls, and New York City beyond them. There was a tension between the coolness of the windows and the warmth of the table. It definitely felt like night.

In any case, Thomson's initial solo struck me as well. I remember his long limbs and his blue jeans and his hoodie and his ankles. And, of course, I remember the remarkable fluidity of his movement and also the way he held his ground. I thought of Trisha Brown as well as Ralph Lemon.

After his body first made its way prone along the table, someone said, "Don't worry, he does this for a living." It was a funny moment, but it also indexed a history of training and the broader economy of dance.

You mentioned that he was dancing not only right in front of us, but also above us, and for me this was an important aspect of the performance. I know the table was meant to reference a conference table that we were all seated around, and there was the suggestion that we could participate in the conversation. The performers asked questions of the audience from time to time and toward the end of the evening, as part of an "encore," audience members were actually invited up on the table to dance with Keith Hennessy. Still, I seldom felt like the barrier between audience and performer was breached. To what extent was the audience a part of the performance? How flexible was the work, really? In this respect, I keep thinking of the moment when Meg Stuart cut herself repeatedly with a razor. Her eyes seemed wild and I was aware of her lips as the boundaries of the work went way out. She waved her bloody arm over head as Hennessy sang out, "work, work." But when an audience member seemed to buckle in the face of the image, the "performance" seemed rigid and hard to bend. I was aware of the "performance" as such. I don't mean this as a criticism. I'm just trying to think about power relations in the room, and to think about who was responsible to and for whom. Perhaps this has something to do with your

comment that democratic ideals in improvisation no longer seem tenable in the way they did for some folks in the 1970s. This suggestion became salient when Hennessy said that talking about contact improvisation is boring.

**Beth:**

Maybe this is a good time to discuss the moment I mentioned earlier that naturally highlighted the politics of improvisation. At some point after the performance had been going on for about an hour, Stuart called a pause. It was a confusing moment, because it seemed like some members of the cast were uncertain whether a pause was actually being called, or if this was another contribution to the improvisation. In fact, some performers chose to keep going. I remember thinking of a sports game, and the confusing nature of "time" being called to stop what's happening or what may happen. I seem to remember Stuart saying something to the effect of needing to regroup. Hennessy in particular seemed resistant to the idea of pausing, and Anja Müller, who had just begun to dance on the table by herself, was left trying to figure out if she was ready or wanting to pause at that moment. Hennessy encouraged her to keep going, and she did, although the majority of the performers followed the suggestion of pausing and removed themselves from the improvisation either physically or energetically. This shift in the room changed the nature of viewing what was still clearly a continuation of the improvisation. All of a sudden the value of watching seemed to be a question, which was left to the audience to decide.

Toward the end of the evening, Meg Stuart told the room that the last time she saw improvisation in New York was 20 years ago. Initially, this statement seemed weird because I feel like improvisation is always present. But as I tried to recall other improvised performances I had seen, I also had a hard time.

What is its role or presence in contemporary dance? Why had this evening been curated?

Beyond questioning the truth of Stuart's statement, I was struck by its impact on the actual improvisation. It seemed to halt the direction the performers had been taking up to that point. Characters were dropped and performers, as themselves, started asking each other questions about contemporary improvisation.

**Danielle:**

I think you're right that improvisation is always present in dance to a degree. As the ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner wrote in *Thinking in Jazz*, "improvisation and composition overlap hopelessly at the margins." The same

is true for dance. Many choreographers employ improvisation as a way to generate material or get to know their dancers, and many choreographers today use scores of various sorts, even when the “steps” are set. When it comes to performance, even in the tightest instances of choreography, there are moments where decisions must be made – the floor is slippery, how should I step? Or, my knee is hurting so how can I bend? These are mundane examples, but that’s the point. Such choices always exist. Moreover, contemporary dancers who are interested in things like “presence” pay attention to the vicissitudes of any given instant, which resembles an improviser’s practice. It is for this reason that an analysis of improvisation seems necessary for the study of dance in general.

But this is not to suggest that improvisation does not involve practice, or that all dancers are skilled improvisers, or that all choreographers are aware of improvisation’s challenges. Skilled improvisation is more than simply moving around or doing what one pleases. It seems to me that the most compelling improvisers are those who have an intimate relation with various types of shifting constraints – formal, historical, social, even psychological – and then, on a moment to moment basis, make informed decisions about how to move. While all the performers chosen by Stuart were accomplished and stunning in various ways, they didn’t all seem to be on equal ground as improvisers. You made a comment after the show about those performers who were able to wear their fragility, which seemed quite poignant. Perhaps we could talk about this.

**Beth:**

Yes, my thought was that the most captivating improvisers are usually the one's who are able to maintain vulnerability inside their decision-making. You know, on my way home from work tonight I was thinking again about Hahn Rowe's presence in the evening. His skill and sensitivity to working inside an improvised structure is really impressive and I felt aware of him as a kind of master improviser that night. It is certainly interesting to consider the politics behind his position in the improvisation. In many ways his role is different or separate from that of the other performers. His body, while executing gesture and action, is expressive via the instruments he is using. Perhaps the most significant difference for me is the relationship Rowe had to the space.

Territories were set up throughout the evening. Some, like the table, held a certain power and meaning more permanently than others, which were drawn and erased inside actions and movements. But Rowe's location or outpost was a kind of undefined space. Although his territory was clear (even more clear than other places in the room where dancers had imprinted themselves)

because he was stationary like an anchor, the space he occupied did not feel heavy or fixed. At times throughout the evening when he would shift his sound score I found myself glancing over to the corner where he was set up. He was visible, but not charged with the same presence as the other performers. In a way, this was important because it allowed me to listen and hear his presence through the sound.

**Danielle:**

I agree. Hahn Rowe was amazing. Also, I think improvisation provides an interesting way to re-think some of the more traditional power structures between music and dance. I was struck by Rowe's selflessness within the work. While all the performers were generous, ego never seemed to get in the way of his participation. I initially attributed this to his sensitivity and skill as an improviser, which of course are immense. But now I'm thinking, as you suggest, that it also had much to do with visibility – the hyper-visibility that being on the table brought about for the dancers. At times, this charged visibility (coupled with the dancers' elevation above the audience) magnified the "star" status of the performers, if only to bring about an elusive set of impossible expectations. This is part of what they had to negotiate during their improvisations.

It's strange, given how close we were to the dancers, that I didn't get a fuller sense of their bodies. By mentioning Rowe's presence, experienced largely through sound, you've gotten me thinking about aspects of the dancers bodies that I couldn't access.

**Beth:**

You know, I feel like I have a unique perspective on this last thought of yours because I was one of the audience members who in response to Keith Hennessy's invitation climbed up on the table at the end of the evening. While I was up there I was really aware of just how exposed my body felt. With the audience both below and all around, I had the feeling of limitless space surrounding me. I remember one of my gestures was pivoting in a circle while looking out in front of me. I distinctly recall the moment when my scanning reached the windows and I saw New York and had the sense of space unfolding even more. It was hard for me on top of that table to hold a clear sense of my body or presence. The way that the space around me felt so undefined seemed to translate into my experience of my own body and I noticed that I kept gravitating towards the table below me, probably trying to create some kind of grounding for myself.

**Danielle:**

That attempt to create ground was visible. I also remember you situating yourself near Rowe and his computer, which drew my attention to his instruments while also giving me a sense of sound's physical relation to your body. The space between you was charged. I felt frustrated that attention in the room seemed to dissipate once audience members stepped on the table and, later, when Hennesy stepped down. Perhaps people were tired, or the performers felt like their "work" was done. But once again the value of watching emerged as a question, which the performers also had to consider this time.

Perhaps as a way to conclude, we can return to the moment when Stuart mentioned that she hadn't seen much improvisation during her visits to New York over the past 20 years and asked what she had missed. In the dress rehearsal we attended, nobody really answered this question. Instead, perhaps because Stuart casually asked what people have been talking about, someone in the audience said that there is no discourse in New York. People in the audience then mused about the lack of time in the city and the tendency for conversations about dance to take place in private, or in small bursts. I then thought about what took place when you and I entered the Baryshnikov Arts Center, where the performance was held. Our names, for whatever reason, weren't on the list of people allowed to the dress rehearsal. When you mentioned that we had been asked by the Movement Research Performance Journal to write something, the person in charge almost turned us away. "Absolutely no press allowed," he said. "This is a dress rehearsal. If you're going to go in and enjoy the rehearsal, OK, but this is not a performance. Are you planning to write something?"

Chuckling at the notion that the MRPJ would be lumped with "the press," we avoided the question and backed against the wall, hoping we'd be allowed inside. This incident of course had nothing to do with Meg Stuart or the show, and I certainly understand the delicacy of a dress rehearsal. Still, when the work itself raised the question of discourse in relation to improvisation, it seemed relevant. The man's response seemed very much at odds with the labor of improvisation – the way improvisation challenges the distinction between process and product – and certainly the need for critical conversation that is not aimed at a marketplace. It seems odd that writing would happen merely after the "finished" work. Perhaps we need a shift to create opportunities for writing otherwise.