

Editor Note

MEETING MY MAKER

Micro-Freedoms, Nano-Restraints

"Nod Yes, real small" was written next to the tracing of a skeleton on the performance backdrop.* Mysterious. Now try No. Between the nod and the shake of the head: one vertebra. Comparing the sensation of these two actions reveals the distance between atlas and axis. Yes and No. Go and don't go.

We sit on the borders of a square empty space in Contemplative Dance Practice. Present. Breathing. Noticing breathing. Noticing space. Ready to enter the open space. Also ready to *not* enter—to not follow the first impulse but wait to feel a stronger, clearer call to enter, and then follow that. What is "pertinent" to this improvisation? artist Julyen Hamilton might ask. What belongs here—and why?

I'm trying to put my finger on something in the act of being made, wedge my foot in the door of the micro-moment between potential and actual, what could be and what becomes. I want to understand what's happening in the space left open in improvisation for the unforeseen. How does it work, and who (or what) is calling the shots?

When I get together with improvising artist Ruth Zaporah, we often talk about "the imagination and the engineer." It's a conversation about the experience inside improvising, specifically the collaboration that's taking place between "the imagination"—an open channel for spontaneous impulse, feeling, and action—and "the engineer," the one who's keeping track: of time, where I am and why, what's happened so far. And between the two, the piece takes form.

I had my doubts about presenting a Public Underscore in central Turkey last summer. The group had only been together for 10 days, and many were new to contact improvisation, the Underscore, composing while improvising, performing, and new to me. Add to that a completely unknown public:

* For Steve Paxton's solo performance at Site Gallery, San Francisco, 1978.



Transit Festival workshop with Nancy Stark Smith and Mike Vargas, Cappadocia, Turkey, July 2010.

the stray French or Japanese tourist, but mostly the Muslim Turkish people who live in this extraordinary landscape—a small ancient village surrounded by tall, pointy rock formations called "fairy chimneys," swiss-cheesed with caves, some of them still inhabited. How might anything we're doing here relate to these people?

The Muslim work crew assigned to build our outdoor "studio"—wood floor, canvas covering, outhouse, electricity for night practice—spent a lot of time in their "tea cave" overlooking the floor, laughing and watching us silently. Hassan, the smiling foreman appeared especially engaged.

The crew observed many different aspects of our practice—long periods of seeming inactivity as dancers released their weight into the floor; periods of falling and rolling over one another; big, fast flying CI duets between men, women, men & women; clearly etched group improvisations of stillness and movement. They watched long discussions, even our floor sweeping rituals, and listened to Mike Vargas's unusual range of electroacoustic music. What did they see/hear/think/feel?

We went ahead with the Public Underscore, a 3-hour run, and invited the audience to come and go and change viewpoint as they wished. Hassan and crew were there; women in head scarves ventured down near the floor with their children; a group of hip young male Turkish artists in black took up residence on the straw mats. Many stayed for hours.

The dance changed many times over the hours, like watching the light change over the course of a day. The dancers milled, stilled, deepened, hatched, developed, interacted—sometimes playful, sometimes formal; some-

times wildly physical or introspective—and came to a final group stillness. Continuing the score, we rested, reflected, and came together to share short observations. Hassan had tears in his eyes when he spoke during the final sharing. He was touched by what he'd seen over the week and, he concluded, whatever it was we were doing, he needed to do it too.

Hassan and I had exchanged many smiles and handshakes over the 10 days, but when we left the "platform" that last night, I felt the impulse to embrace him. Was this OK? Muslim man and American woman? I approached and sailed past the handshake with arms open into one of the most awkward and meaningful hugs I've ever experienced. The hug was a remarkable experience of contrast—his physical body stiff and dense; the energy between us warm, appreciative, and close.

It happens very fast, the sorting process. Yes. No. Go. Open. Close. What is pertinent? It seems that inside every improviser is a value system—whether stated, implied, assumed, or challenged—through which the stream of life's particulars are passing, being chosen or not. A lot is happening in that tiny space of time. Improvisation lets us study this; share it with others; and use it as a way to evolve, amuse ourselves, make art, and participate in life's complexity and mystery. Nodding yes, very very small.

Nancy Stark Smith

Many thanks to Yanael Plumet and Defne Erdur Bekdik for their tireless work in making the Transit Festival in Turkey—their own extreme improvisation.