

Attention moves us. An interview with Meg Stuart

A atenção move-nos. Uma entrevista com Meg Stuart

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Abstract

In this interview, choreographer Meg Stuart explores issues related to improvisation as both process and public performance. Stuart shares the motivations behind public improvisation projects such as *Crash Landing* (1996-1999). Improvisational practices, rhythms, and shifts in attention also appear in her work with video as a medium.

Keywords

public improvisations | performance | choreography | attention

Resumo

Nesta entrevista, a coreógrafa Meg Stuart entra em diálogo com algumas questões relacionadas com a improvisação como processo e a improvisação como apresentação pública. Stuart partilha algumas das motivações por detrás de propostas de apresentações de improvisação públicas que se popularizaram, como *Crash Landing* (1996-1999). As práticas de improvisação, as cadências e os movimentos da atenção são evidenciados também nas suas experiências de trabalho com as ferramentas do vídeo.

Palavras-chave

improvisações públicas | performance | coreografia | atenção

Introduction

The choreographer Meg Stuart is part of a generation of artists who left their mark on the European performing arts scene since the 1990s. Her influence continues to this day through her work in the fields of dance, performance and video. A frequent presence on the programmes of European festivals, this artist's work also encompasses the dissemination and teaching of the performing arts as a teacher or choreographer-mentor, for example, at PACAP — Forum Dança in Lisbon 2025.

One of this US artist's specialities is organising events centred on improvisation and the performing arts/dance, notably as co-organiser of *Crash Landing* (1996-1999) with Christine De Smedt and David Hernandez, *Auf den Tisch!* (2004-2011) and, more recently, *Serious Fun* (2016-2018) with Mark Tompkins, Ana Rocha, Mariana Tengner Barros, Elizabete Francisca, amongst many other collaborators, and *One Shot* with Mark Tompkins (2016-2023). The writing and compilation of texts by contributors in the book *One Shot, dialogues on Real Time Composition* (Tompkins, Stuart 2022), serve as the backdrop to this interview.

Having spent years following the work of choreographers who reflect on issues of improvisation and choices of attention — such as Lisa Nelson, João Fiadeiro and Mark Tompkins — Sílvia Pinto Coelho interviews the choreographer Meg Stuart as part of the thematic issue of the Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens entitled 'Cadences: attentional moves in the arts and everyday life'.

Introdução

A coreógrafa Meg Stuart faz parte de uma geração de artistas que marcaram o panorama das artes performativas europeias desde os anos 1990. A relevância que alcançou estende-se até aos dias de hoje com propostas na área da dança, performance e vídeo. Frequentemente presente nas programações dos palcos europeus, o trabalho desta artista estende-se à transmissão e ao ensino de artes performativas como professora ou coreógrafa-mentora, por exemplo, no PACAP — Forum Dança, em Lisboa, 2025.

Uma das especialidades desta artista estadunidense passa pela organização de projectos de improvisação e artes performativas/dança, nomeadamente como coorganizadora de *Crash Landing* (1996-1999) com Christine De Smedt e David Hernandez, *Auf den Tisch!* (2004-2011) e, mais recentemente, *Serious Fun* (2018) com Mark Tompkins, Ana Rocha, Mariana Tengner Barros, Elizabete Francisca, entre muitos colaboradores, e *One Shot* com Mark Tompkins (2016-2023). A escrita e reunião de textos de colaboradores no livro *One Shot, dialogues on Real Time Composition* (Tompkins, Stuart, 2022) servem de pano de fundo para esta entrevista.

Após anos de acompanhamento do trabalho de coreógrafos que pensam sobre questões de improvisação e escolhas de atenção, como Lisa Nelson, João Fiadeiro, ou

Mark Tompkins, Sílvia Pinto Coelho entrevista a coreógrafa Meg Stuart a pretexto do número temático da Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens, “Cadências: movimentos da atenção nas artes e quotidiano”.

SPC: Since the 90s, you have been challenging the public’s attention through your artistic work in a wide variety of ways. Can you tell us about how you use your attention as an artist?

MS: What we perceive shifts our reality. It changes the quality of movement and our perspective on movement, and even why we are moving. Attention is a smooth way to shift the dynamics or the material while you’re moving, without feeling like you have to change everything. You can direct attention towards the context or the space when you’re moving, then shift your attention towards the rhythm, or the sensation, and so on. And these shifts reveal the many layers and complexities of how different frequencies and qualities coexist. All these layers are happening at the same time, in every movement, in every gesture.

I just realised that maybe there wasn’t enough emphasis on this when I started dancing. It was more like “you do too much,” or “you’re too dramatic,” or “you’re too...” But this idea that there are different temperatures and levels of attention also shows that there is depth in any single movement or action. I just find that fascinating.

In life, when you have a situation that comes to you, you can think about what’s going wrong, or you can think about what is actually positively taking place, or you can think about how you feel. Or you are distracted, and you try not to think about it. I just realised that all of that is movement, and I find it a really interesting experience of movement.

I wonder if we talk enough about training attention in dance practices. We might talk about release technique or building strength to move, about changing the duration, simplifying, or working on the dramaturgy. But it is very critical to be able to modulate the sphere of attention and the curation of attention. Because what you pay attention to expands or grows. I think this is also what resonates and has an impact on how people experience what you do: when you say “look at this” or “pay attention to this”.

I have this exercise I do with dancers where they sit face-to-face with someone else. First, they just practice looking at each other, and then there’s a shift where one of them allows himself to be seen and the other looks; then they shift, and the other one is looking, and the first one allows himself to be seen. That can also be done in a performance. You stand in front of an audience, and you allow yourself this vulnerability to be seen, instead of pushing yourself and saying, “I’m showing you something.” It’s valuable just to be able to talk about that as material, as movement: “I’m showing,” or actually “I’m allowing,” or “look at me.” Being vulnerable is a movement, you know? We can say “oh, that person isn’t fragile enough,” or “they’re not vulnerable enough,” or “they’re trying too hard,” but I think there’s just more nuance when you talk about attention in movement and in dance.

I'm quite obsessed with that, and it aligns a lot with Mark Tompkins' work. Mark often talks about the witness. You can understand what's going on in an improvised space by becoming a witness. You become still and watch. Even if you are inside, in the middle of things, you stop and take the time to see the whole scene.

He is so focused on vision: what you pay attention to, what you see, and how you see, or how you close your eyes and see internally. It's a shared interest we have, but maybe in another language, in other words, another point of view.



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Image 1
Portrait of Meg
Stuart. Copyright
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What is the difference between improvising for a project and sharing improvisation with an audience?

MS: When I'm improvising with a group for a project, it's not about keeping the moment alive or trying to make sense. It's a kind of deep research, where you start with a score, a question, or you have a word, or nothing, you just doodle, or you try. You are really walking through the forest, and you're just trying to understand the path. You're trying to go deeper and deeper into something.

And when you're improvising a performance, for an audience, you're very conscious: "I did this first, which makes this." You're quickly trying to compress the compositional process, you're in an instant composition, and it's more about chance: "this happened, and that means that this became possible." You're trying to make links and connections and create flows and sense.

Improvising in a creation process is more like digging, it's almost archaeological. It's about sifting, about doing something exhaustively, obsessively as an activity. It is very often about repetition. Whereas in performance it's about what magic can appear in that moment, at that time, with that full trust, with that synchronicity and with whatever energies are in the room at that particular moment. It's more singular, and it feels

more about chance in a way, and magic. Of course, it's also about listening, and how people come together, and they might have some scores and agreements before, but...

Sometimes, when you are just improvising in a studio during research, you're rather stripping things away. You're trying to burn out the first ideas or the ideas that come up first, so that you can allow something that you wouldn't have thought of to appear.

Would you say you share an ethics or even a style when you find a group?

MS: That's a good question because I'm about to work with a group on Monday. I think so. Maybe in some scores, ideas, or proposals, there's a wider scope for interpretation. Especially when it feels like a real and charged conversation is happening for the first time, or happening in real time, the ethics are about trying to understand the other. Even if they're improvising with a different language or a different way of moving, you still try to meet them. And you also try to provide dancers or other artists with tools to meet through different languages. Historically, there used to be an agreed-upon language. We danced through contact improv, or through certain states, or through theatre, or through a technique. And I think a lot of contemporary improvisation is about not understanding, or having completely different tools, and completely different interests, and still trying to share and have a connection in the room through those differences.

Would you say you are influenced by the Postmodern dance period in New York? How do you deal with that nowadays?

MS: I'm definitely influenced by that period, by the trust in the body to speak, and in its intelligence, and weight counterpoints, even if I might use other words now. I don't feel like I've abandoned it, I try to extend it. I think our generation has just extended those tasks. Feeling that we're still in dialogue, still in contact, even if we're not touching or we're in a different state. Even in different languages, we're still trying to follow those principles of meeting. There is a connection.

Like in Yvonne Rainer's saying, "The mind is a muscle", I feel you experience this challenge of going to places you don't know.

MS: I do. And sometimes those places are surprising because at first you think, "Oh, that just means freaking out." But the unknown can also be really subtle and quiet. I have always sought out disruption: first in movement, by disrupting flow, and then in performance, by disrupting expectations of what can be considered dance material. By being open to different languages and hybrid spaces. That can also happen by working with new collaborators. I try to keep it fresh, to stay experimental. I look for that in form as well. So yes, I do have a formal interest that I keep returning to.

You have a very particular way of bringing a kind of anarchic feeling, of keeping attention alive, and resisting what wants to be settled. Do you do that out of a visceral need, or is it something that puts you in contact with the public sphere? Or both?

MS: There is a kind of restlessness. I love trying new processes, but there are also certain topics I keep returning to. I'm like a pendulum. My work shifts between abstraction and fiction, the individual and the collective, encounter and energy. I'm fascinated by the energy that is released through emotional work, and the vibrations and energetic fields associated with transformation and healing.

My choreographic interests very often involve bringing up subconscious material, anything that is hidden under the surface. Whatever is dormant or latent, whatever needs to be unearthed and brought into view. I like breaking taboos or conventions, being kind of irreverent and playful, and working with humour. I also care deeply about atmosphere and spatial environments. Because the work is often situated in very different worlds, I often shift my approach.

For myself, in my movements, I try to be a system of support for my own body. Practising a kind of auto-contact, an auto-support. And then, I try the impossible, the task of wanting to merge, to become the other, to fly together, to enter the other body, to become one, to shape-shift, to be in many places at the same time, to travel with many realities. It's about doing things that the body can't do. The magical act, or the impossible act, or the dream act, or to levitate, or to explode. This kind of material. The joy of it also lies in discovering the dream self, the dream body. I think this is very much part of the work.

Can you give us some examples? Talking about public improvisations, one of your best-known projects is *Crash Landing*. Can you talk a little bit about these public improvisation projects and the encountering peers?

MS: In the 90s I was touring a great deal and I found myself in Europe, somewhat disconnected from my dance community in New York, where I had studied and begun making work. I was going from festival to festival, and back then I also had a lot of time, compared with now... I had a lot of time to make work, a lot of time to improvise, and a lot of pieces within pieces, because we had plenty of time to investigate. We could spend long periods researching material, letting one piece generate the other, which is a luxury. I also felt that there was a lot of time to produce. Back then, I wanted more than the brief encounters that happen at festivals. I didn't want to meet someone, say we admired each other's work, and then simply move on. I was looking for a deeper exchange. Being shy, I also felt more comfortable socially when I was in a project with others.

When I saw improvisations, I often felt like the scores followed the same pattern: oh, there's a solo, and then there's a duo, then there's a trio. I somehow wanted to have more control over the scores, or have more content discussed. And I also wanted to collaborate with musicians working with electronic instruments rather than acoustic ones,

and to include a visual artist in the improvisation. In *Crash Landing*, which I created with Christine De Smedt and David Hernandez - who were dancing in my work at the time - we wanted to explore collaboration as the container for improvisation. But then, everything kept expanding because why have only one stage designer, when you know they might also need somebody to improvise with. Same for the light designer. Every discipline opened a new possibility. So, all of a sudden it started to grow, and each night we had a new space, with a new design, and so on. The project kind of exploded. Out of our conversation, we decided to create an improvised environment on a large scale. We went to Théâtre de La Ville, performed in Leuven, Lisbon, Vienna and other places.

It was quite a thing to go to Théâtre de La Ville with an improv project, rather than a piece. It felt risky and wild, and people said “yes”. Jérôme Bel was a part of it, and so was Xavier [Le Roy], and Vera [Mantero]. It was also a way to meet these people and the musicians. It became this playful testing ground. I met Nadia Lauro as a very young artist in that project. In one of her first collective projects. Many people met each other for the first time through *Crash Landing*. Yeah, it was beautiful. It’s not like every night was extraordinary, but there were always unexpected things that happened, and that risk was a really bonding experience.

It is very interesting that you say, “risk is a bonding experience.” Do you think it is a possibility for joint attention to emerge?

MS: Yeah. There’s nothing to get right. There’s no way to get it wrong. It’s just that we can’t not jump. We also began to think differently about the theatre itself, looking at the theatre from the perspective of possibility, not limitation. “Let’s not just use the theatre as it is, but let’s use the balconies, let’s use the audience seating, the upstairs, the downstairs...” It was about looking at the theatre as a site. Looking at it as a place to play. “What can we do with what we have? What’s available to us? Can we hang from the ceiling? Can we walk on the seats, on the balconies?” It was about what’s possible, and what we could do together. That spirit made the work incredibly joyful.

Would you say that performing demands a special courage that challenges the individual to shed social fear? I’m thinking about how it could be part of our education and our courage education. Do you think it’s a useful tool?

MS: Probably, in a structured way, it is. Encountering improvisation was thrilling for me, especially while I was studying dance at NYU. The idea that you can just go on stage and not have any instructions. You can just start dancing and be with others. It’s insane.

When big crises happen, you can’t prepare for them. But when they do happen, you have to improvise just to survive, and I think it makes you resilient for sure, and collectively resilient. There’s a trust in it. There’s a trust in a higher power. As if some forces that are unseen are dancing with you or supporting you.

Can you recall special moments of discovery, encounters where everything seems to click and you think “oh, this is exactly it!”? I think there’s a certain pleasure when you find a “click” in a group improvisation. Can you describe moments when everything is flowing like magic?

MS: Improvisation always partners with magic, but I can’t recall an extended stand-out performance right now. I know that Mark has experienced this. He describes it in *One Shot*, this one special evening in Vienna, when we performed *Serious Fun* in 2018. It’s true that there have been so many beautiful moments of synchronicity over the years, but I don’t have this feeling of, “oh, this is the night where everything worked out.” Maybe I don’t remember it that way. I’m obsessed with things that didn’t click. The moments where you think: “Oh my god, how did we get through that?” Or “I can’t believe I did this to that musician” or “I can’t believe I walked onto the stage and did that.” These are the things that I replay, and not the click. And then, I just have to let it go. “Hey, there’ll be a next time.”

So, you don’t think there is a special addiction to taking risks?

MS: No, it feels natural. I’m more interested in questions like, “Why did it work that time? What were the conditions?” or “How did we prepare?” “What did we talk about?” “How much did we rehearse?” “How much of it was scored?” “How much was left open?” Those are the things I’m thinking about. Because the chance to just do pure improvisation in front of an audience is quite rare. It doesn’t happen very often, so there is a lot of time to consider the format.

What’s the pleasure of that? Why do you wish to improvise? Is it a need, a challenge?

MS: Especially when you’re teaching or transmitting a lot, improvisation becomes a way to process things in the moment. It’s a way of processing your interest, processing your subconscious. It is a way to open the gates and become a channel.

Several times now, I’ve performed a solo at Tictac Art Centre in Brussels. It’s just half an hour, it is quite casual, but I’m always surprised by what I decide to do, or what comes out, or how that happens. I only prepare on the day itself, and it’s quite interesting. Of course, it’s beautiful to see somebody work on a piece for a year, and it’s exactly as they want it to be. But there is something special about the moment when it’s simply, “Wow! We just started dancing!” If you feel the urgency, if there’s some sense of why, or a feeling that this needs to be shared... You can feel the difference in attention when you’re performing in front of improvisers, especially if you’ve been in the same room practising for a week. It is another dimension of the exchange, not just a performance.

I feel I can do this because I’m passionate about it. And because I have dedicated so many hours to it, and because I also guide people through it. I also need to put myself in

that fire with the others, or with myself. I need to enter that situation again and again, to test what I think I know. Otherwise it remains abstract.

There's something different about improvising in a studio or being in a jam, where you go to dance with people freely. There are different qualities and states of dancing, and you can circulate, and it's beautiful! That's how improv spaces were formed and started historically. But when there's an audience, it ensures every choice is exposed. There is another kind of time, another kind of development, another kind of space. And I also love this thing of "wow, I can't believe this is happening here." Sometimes you discover that you are stronger, braver, stranger, rougher, more tender than you thought. Things emerge that you just didn't know were there. Seemingly random events lead to unexpected solutions. Problems have to be solved one way or another. Of course, it also depends on the people you are improvising with and the energies in the room.

For instance, I did many lecture-performances in a kind of talking-dancing format with Mark [Tompkins]. There were stronger moments and weaker moments, but there was something very alive in the dynamic there. I really loved it because it was a performative continuation of an ongoing personal conversation about improvisation and life. That made a lot of sense to me, because it was a shared practice. In those situations, you act without fully knowing what you're doing, while others are watching. The presence of an audience gives a strange kind of validation—not as approval, but as witness. It's life-strengthening and empowering, not only for the performer doing it, but also for those witnessing it, from the inside and of course from the audience. To see people act without certainty, to watch them discover things in real time, to remain in the unknown together.

It's clear when dancers are not covering up the moment with technique or with flourishes, when they are really allowing for a suspension of time, creating an openness in which things can emerge.

There are two words I found in *One Shot*, the book, that surprised me:

"immanence" and "transcendence". Do you use them as concepts, or is it just something that helps you as a tool in the lexicon?

MS: "Transcendence" for sure. We're trying to have a transcendent moment, something that goes beyond your form, beyond you. It's a connection to something larger: your spirit, your higher self. This can be your witness, something that dances through you, or in relation to others, or in response to them. "Immanence", I don't know. But transcendence for sure.

In the lexicon you wrote with Mark Tompkins, you say “Immanence” — things as they are. And things as you’d like them to be would be “transcendence”. I think this is very interesting.

I would like to go back to the first piece I watched by you, which is *Splayed Mind Out* (1997), with visual artist Gary Hill. In this piece, I observed several layers of attentional challenges for the audience. Can you talk about your work from there?

MS: *Splayed Mind Out* (1997) was part of the *Insert Skin*-series, which I began in 1996 when I invited visual artists to collaborate with me. Gary Hill was one of the artists I worked with. I was curious to bring his artistic language into dialogue with my own and see how they could meet in a shared space. Gary was also performing in the piece. We explored how the body could become a site where physical presence and mediated images overlap, and how choreography could respond to video as an active, thinking partner. I would describe this piece as being closer to performative visual art.

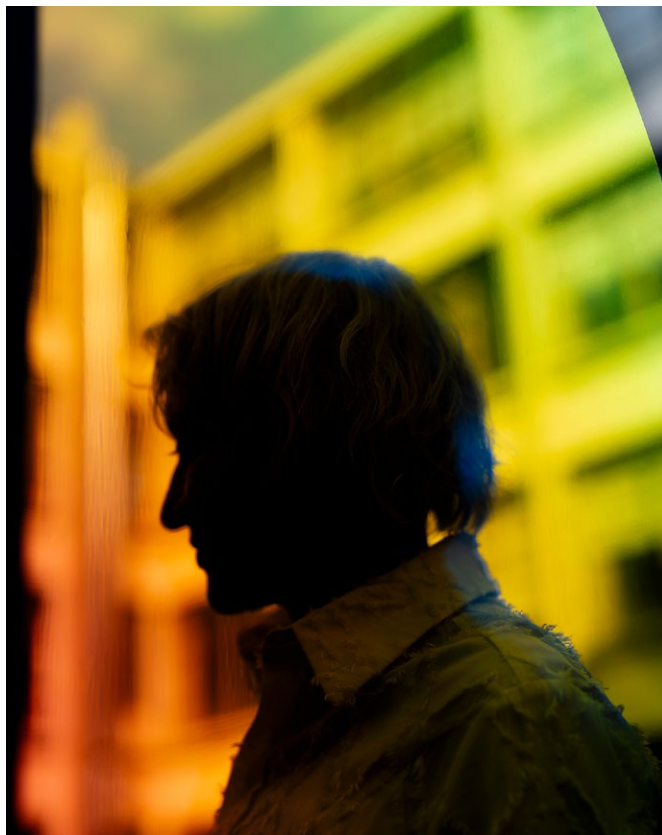
A few pieces later, when I worked on *Alibi* (2001) and *Visitors Only* (2003) in the context of my residency at Schauspielhaus Zürich, the work was more theatrical and more focused on states, portals, and different realities. It was about energies and forms and spinning, about the idea that we have different ages in our body, about fragments and narratives.

A big turning point was making the piece *Hunter* (2014), a solo piece. It was about a healing journey, about transpersonal memory, and the study of quantum physics, shamanism, and healing family lineage. This brought me into contact with shamanism, witchcraft, energy work, and tantra, and all these kinds of studies that have scores, materials, and protocols, like Osho meditation, dynamic meditation, and kundalini yoga. Somehow, these studies do not call themselves art, but they have a physical energy, a movement practice, and a methodology.

In 2016, I made this piece with Tim Etchells where I’m dancing and he’s describing what I’m doing. It’s called *Shown and Told* (Stuart/Etchells 2016). He keeps on saying, “it sounds like, it looks like, it seems like...” and just giving every moment a different imagination of what I’m doing. I really love this piece! It makes me feel expanded as an improviser, as a dancer. I mean, now I’ve set it more and more, so that I’m meeting his language. But in the beginning, it was quite improvised.

And then, in 2020, there were no theatres, and I was invited to work on the roof of Haus der Kulturen der Welt. That’s what started my interest in video.

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Image 2
Portrait of Meg
Stuart. Copyright
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Would you say that you also became a video artist?

MS: I like the idea of improvised filmmaking or improvised video making. I think it's an interesting genre, and there have been some interesting improvised moments in the history of cinema. Think about filmmakers like John Cassavetes or Wim Wenders.

Video work also allows you to work with people for short, intense periods. Aside from that, I just think that video cameras are an accelerator. The camera was always in the room throughout my practice, recording every rehearsal and every show. Often, we learn from those videos, or we consult them. It's interesting to make that relationship more intentional, more deliberate. Instead of the camera simply being there, we perform for it. The witness becomes larger.

Thank you.

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