

Cathy Weis talks with Sílvia Pinto Coelho. Sept-Dec 2022, Weis Acres, Broadway SoHo, US

Cathy Weis conversa com Sílvia Pinto Coelho. Set-Dez 2022, Weis Acres, Broadway SoHo, EUA

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Abstract

This interview was carried out in the context of post-doctoral research centred on attention and choreographic thinking.¹ In this research, the work of US postmodern dance choreographers such as Lisa Nelson and Yvonne Rainer are examples of a type of ethics, aesthetics and even politics that is characteristic of the arts in a particular context and that expands to various other fields, both in terms of approach and focus of interest. Following a stay in New York, another choreographer entered the “collection of US dancers with a camera in their hand”, and the use of cinema elements on stage. Cathy Weis’s work stands out for its originality in this area, which made me want to interview her in 2022 while staying at her loft. The pretext for my stay in New York was to consult and watch films and videos at the public library (NYPL), visit museums, watch performances, and eventually take dance classes. However, because I was living in the historical terrain of postmodern dance in the United States, I began to see research as “fieldwork” rather than just “archive work”.

1 “Attention and Choreographic Thinking” is the title of Sílvia Pinto Coelho’s post-doctoral project (ICNOVA, FCSH 2019-2025).

Keywords

Cathy Weis, Weis Acres, Artists in SoHo, Video onstage, Video archives

Resumo

Esta entrevista foi realizada no âmbito de uma investigação de pós-doutoramento centrada na atenção e no pensamento coreográfico. Nesta investigação, o trabalho de coreógrafos da dança pós-moderna estado-unidense, como Lisa Nelson e Yvonne Rainer, serve de exemplo de um tipo de ética, de estética e até de política que é característico das artes num determinado contexto e que se estende a vários outros domínios, tanto em termos de abordagem como de focos de interesse. Após uma estadia em Nova Iorque, outra coreógrafa entrou na “coleção de bailarinas estadunidenses com uma câmara na mão” e que usa elementos cinematográficos em palco. Neste domínio, o trabalho de Cathy Weis destaca-se pela sua originalidade, o que me levou a querer entrevistá-la em 2022, durante a minha estadia no seu loft. O pretexto para a minha estadia em Nova Iorque era consultar e ver filmes e vídeos na biblioteca pública (NYPL), visitar museus, assistir a espectáculos e, eventualmente, frequentar aulas de dança. No entanto, como estava a viver no terreno histórico da dança pós-moderna nos Estados Unidos, comecei a ver a investigação como “trabalho de campo” e não apenas como “trabalho de arquivo”.

Palavras-chave

Cathy Weis, Weis Acres, Artistas do SoHo, Vídeo no palco, Arquivos de vídeo

Introduction

Over the years, I have observed different practices of artists in the field of contemporary dance that interact with the experience of cinema, namely the practices of choreographers such as Lisa Nelson, Mark Tompkins, and Olga Mesa. In 2022, I had the privilege of doing a research residency in New York. I contacted Lisa Nelson to find out if she would be in New York at the same time as me and if she knew of any spaces where I could stay. Surprisingly, she replied straight-away that there was exceptionally, a room for rent at her friend Cathy. That is how I ended up living at Cathy Weis on Broadway 537 for three months. Next to the bedroom and kitchen I lived in, on the other side of the loft, there was her office space and an incredible studio that, until 2005, belonged to the choreographer Simone Forti. Weis Acres – as she calls the loft – is in one of the original Fluxus loft buildings in SoHo². Choreographer Cathy Weis and I met there, and we developed a relationship of colleague-choreographer, friend, and “informant”. Since she naturally provided me

with primary source insights for my “field diaries”³. I was at her home, in the loft she bought from Simone Forti not so long after being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

In this context, in which mutual curiosity led to a friendship, I wanted to write a life story. Cathy went through a traumatic period when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which forced her to rethink the way she approached all aspects of her life, including her artistic work. I was particularly interested in her work with film and video elements on stage. I had also approached Lisa Nelson’s work in the past, and the conversation continues that research path. Cathy had done much work as a choreographer and videographer, and that was fitting the kind of research I was after.

In this interview, the questions are exploratory to give

3 I deliberately use the vocabulary of anthropological field research here to situate my point of view in the context of participant observation “at home” since my professional background introduced me to this field as “someone who knows the genealogy of US postmodern dance from the inside, through technical, ethical, and aesthetic approaches, despite the generational difference” - I’m a dancer like them.

2 See also Bell (2015).

Cathy the space to digress and even to contradict herself on the dates and sequence of events in her life story to finally achieve what would interest both of us – i.e. a discourse on her artistic work and her discoveries with the use of the camera, editing, manipulation of technical objects, etc. So, we finally recorded our conversation on different days. Here is the talk I would like to share with you⁴.

Friday, October 14th, 2022

Cathy Weis and Sílvia Pinto Coelho

Conversation#1

SPC: Hello Cathy, thank you for receiving me to your beautiful loft and allowing this interview to happen. I want to start by asking you to develop the story I read about your context. I mean the hometown where you grew up, your family and your education.

CW: I was born in Kentucky, and if you were from my hometown, there is only one way of pronouncing Louisville. That's "Louvul". It was fun living in my neighbourhood while growing up... it was a lively scene with a swarm of kids. In the summers, all the kids got together, and we played Tag, Hide and Seek, Toss the Egg, and Statues. A couple of summers one of the older kids directed a play... I remember "*Snow White and the seven dwarfs*", where I played Sneezy. And my mother was a staunch believer that each of her three children should have something they could do well. She, for instance, played the piano. My older brother studied the clarinet, my younger sister, the cello. But I found a different passion. Dance. They say the middle child is often different.

SPC: Did you go to ballet school?

CW: Oh yes. Miss O'Brecht's School of Dance. My mother would drive me there once a week from the time I was very young. One of my first memories is standing in front of the candy machine in the dressing room at the ballet school. The candy machine had about eight knobs that you could pull like a slot machine. Above each knob was the cover for the candy you could buy. Now, my favourite candy was M&M peanuts, hands down, and yes,

they had M&M peanuts. However, above the last pull was a red rectangle with a big black question mark. And damn if I didn't stand there each week completely transfixed. Week after week, I pulled the rectangle with the question mark, which was always a total letdown. I figured it was a sign that I was either really a very stupid or curious person.

Even at the time, I had very different worlds that were separate from one another. My intense dance life, my intense school life and my intense family life. They only rarely intersected.

SPC: What about the dance studio and the teacher?

CW: The dance studio became another home to me. By the time I was in high school, I went to two classes a week, except during the annual Ballet season when it could be four. Then I took classes with the dance company. Each year, the Louisville Ballet took two new people into the company. The year I turned thirteen, I was old enough to audition and I did. They choose Debbie Wi-seheart and me. From thirteen till I left for college, I was in the ballet. A big part of my life it was like my independence. I was very close to a world that my parents knew nothing about. And my parents were trusting enough to let me be. At thirteen, I really formed my own life. Also, at both the O'Brecht studio and in the ballet rehearsals, I always worked as hard as I could to get better, better as in practising the scales. Repetition. Good habits. Alignment. No one had to cheerlead me. I was passionate.

SPC: What about your relation to the mirror? Do you remember that?

CW: I used it as a tool. Seeing myself moving in space was a way of improving positioning and balance from an outside perspective. And it was always a part of the O'Brecht studio, so I never got into head trips about questioning the effect on my ego. But everywhere in America at that time, there was this image of how the perfect woman should look. Even more so in sports. In all physical activities. Absolutely in Ballet. I was too short. Ballet was very exclusive.

SPC: Was the balance between discipline and fun lived in a pacific way? Were you ever feeling too much of a disciplinary system on...?

4 This text was reviewed and edited by Cathy Weis last time in December 2023.

CW: No, I remember when young, I felt the discipline more as a challenge. A challenge against myself by myself that I found exciting. I wanted to be good at what I was doing. Also, it felt good. To be able to turn. Jump high. And I always had fun with my dance buddies, like Debbie Wisheart, my best friend. And Debbie definitely had some kind of special gift⁵. My friend Debbie Wisheart was also born with a huge talent. She never worked harder than we did because we all worked as hard as possible. But when we could do two turns, she could do three. When we could jump this high, she could jump higher.

SPC: After doing the dancing formation – you only had Ballet, or you started with modern dance?

CW: No, growing up in Louisville I only had Ballet. After high school Debby Wisheart joined “*Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal*” while I went to college. My mother made me write every school in the country with a dance department. We picked Bennington College. Southern Vermont. A beautiful place way out in the country. A small liberal college. All women. Strong in modern dance.

SPC: What was it like going to Bennington from Kentucky?

CW: On the plane leaving Louisville, I cried and cried at the thought of leaving my family and friends. When I first got there, I had a ballet bun, and they were all, like, smoking dope with thick black eye makeup. 1966. I was intimidated by big-busted freshmen carrying their favourite poetry books. Like, in my Kentucky public high school, we never had an inkling of stuff like poetry. At Bennington, the few times I mustered the courage to ask a question in our poetry class, somebody behind me would mimic my strong Southern accent. I spent a lot of time hiding out in my room that first year. Although, in dance class that first year, I met Lisa Nelson. Became good friends. 57 years ago!

5 I once asked Sarah, a friend of my father's, how she would define talent. “Well”, she said, “I would define it by something I saw in my son. When he was very young, before he could talk, one evening, he was in the tub and kept screaming “more three, more three, more 3”. It took me a while to realize he was transcribing all the letters into numbers. He saw a “C” on the faucet for Cold, which he seemed to understand simultaneously was the third letter in the alphabet. And it was true from the earliest days that he was born with something. He became a brilliant mathematician”.

I was at Bennington College from 1966 to 1970. There were incredible years for the country and for me personally. I remember laying on the grass, drifting off in the warm sun, The Mamas and Papas singing “*California Dreamin*”. I remember, after a demonstration against the Vietnam War, getting picked up by police. I remember taking a dance class from Viola Farber. I remember a pottery teacher telling me I needed to “Look Up, Oh Catherine, Look Up”. I remember taking magic mushrooms. I remember reading “*Under the Volcano*”. I remember in Kentucky a tornado swept the neighborhood inches from our house.

I didn't really get back to live in Louisville ever again, although I always visited. By the time I graduated from college, my mother was sick with multiple sclerosis; she struggled for many years...

SPC: Oh... Do you want to add anything about the college years?

CW: By the end of the four years, for the first time, I just didn't feel like dancing anymore. In retrospect, I think I was feeling the first symptoms of my own MS. So, I started working in other arts and new processes. Less dance. I got into playing the cello and making stained glass.

SPC: Did Bennington College have cameras already?

CW: Well, there was no video at that point. There was no video for the average layperson. Wish there was. I made some pieces I would love to be able to see now.... I think. For instance, I took over the beautiful stone Music Building for my junior year dance project (I was a dance major) - an old white mansion covered in ivy set apart from Bennington's other buildings. Actually, it was a collaboration with another student, a bit older, Mary Fussell.

I invited people. I sent out invitations to people with the date, location, and a very specific arrival time, down to the minute. There were old dresses, XVIII th century gowns, and tuxedos from the costume department. Upon arrival those invited would be taken into the dressing room, and be clothed in a costume, be fitted. Then lead into the ballroom where there was a chamber music quartet playing waltzes, tangos, and different old dances. New people would come every five minutes and join the ball.

After a while, invitees on the dance floor began to

question their own eyes. "Was that really a lion's paw?" "What just went by?" "Her face looked frozen". The whirl of the dances never stopped. After a while, somebody would come up to you and ask you to follow. They would take you downstairs into the basement, where Mary Fustell had transformed the many small rooms into the functioning parts needed to maintain the body of the building. The lungs in one room. The spleen in another. Each small room was a metaphor of how that body part worked. And then, at the end, they exited from the frantic workings in the basement into the clear spring night.

SPC: So, you could watch an event alone in a small room with someone?

CW: No, you were part of it. You did not watch, you were part of the event. There was no "audience" in the basement. You became part of whatever was going on in that room. Whether it was making sound or making blow up dolls. By the time you went thru the colon and out thru the asshole, you were in the lush dark evening, where you changed back into your clothes and went home. It was a huge hit. Very unusual. No one had ever heard or ever been to "a happening". Certainly not me.

SPC: Was it your first creation of the college, or you had already tried other things? Like choreography?

CW: While living in Kentucky, I had no experience or knowledge of creating movement-based performances. When I went to Bennington, the dance department focused on choreography. After a number of years, I realized I was not so interested in choreography, in the specific learned movement. Rather some kind of event or experience that the audience and performers would make together. And more broadly at Bennington, students were encouraged to make their own brand of performance. Using their imagination. Their inventiveness. Their creativity. Perhaps this was the strongest tool that Bennington gave me. And 20 years later, as the MS limited the range of my own moving, I proved that to be true.

SPC: I find there is much humor in your work.

CW: Glad to hear that. You know, dance can be so devoid of humour, usually devoid of most emotions besides the very beautiful or tragic or pedestrian. I love those moments when I just have to laugh out loud because I've

been caught off guard by something totally unexpected. I also love it when I have deep emotions that cannot be easily described. And, of course, I love to see someone loving to dance.

SPC: When you are dancing you can feel deeply the fun of it. You can enjoy the sensation of dancing; either it's fun, tragic, or... When you dance, you appreciate something different from when you watch dance.

CW: Definitely! I'm always interested in what people who are not dancers see. When I sit next to a dancer at a dance concert, I can feel their movement as they watch. They internalize the weight shifts and alignment needed for the dancer to move, as gravity is dealt with.

In this country fewer and fewer people are exposed to dance so I'm so curious.... what does the non-dancer see?

SPC: So, would you like to go on telling me what you did after college?

CW: Sure. The first big adventure after college was travelling across the country in an old school bus with Willie and Tom⁶. Tom left the bus on the west coast to join his brother. After a while, Willie and I ended up joining fifty school buses that were following this spiritual guy, Stephen Gaskin, who, with his followers, were travelling the country, looking to buy land in order to settle down as a community. The caravan was like a little floating bubble, self-contained with strict rules. Like the marriages in each bus were never hampered by quantity of participants, gender, or age, that was ahead of its time really, they all were "believers", but I could never quite put my finger on the belief. Each bus was a work of art (except ours) with intricate biblical stories frescoed on the walls and ceilings, made from discarded carpet fragments, not plaster. After a month or so, I had to go to Kentucky as my mother was sick, so I left the caravan. Willie stayed and eventually made it to Tennessee, where the group did indeed buy some land and settle down.

SPC: So, you didn't join the Steve Gaskin caravan then (It's a historical moment!). Did you join them later?

6 Although my first crossing was with Willie while in college when we hitchhiked across country. It was the summer of Woodstock. As we travelled, he read out loud to me every page of "War and Peace".

CW: No, no. That time, for me, was all about my mother. She was sick with MS, and she was getting sicker. So, I was going back there more and more often. And Willy wanted to stay in California with his brother, but I wanted to return to Vermont. So, I did.

After a while I went to Europe with three close friends who were fine musicians. Cellists. I was a novice cellist. They had transcribed Bach's organ music into a four-part cello. We took our four cellos and played at different places. It was thrilling for me to play with them. And then, without cellos, we went to Tunisia. I remember standing by myself on a beach, thinking this is the most beautiful spot I've ever seen. When the three friends left Europe, I stayed in Florence because someone had a friend who was leaving town for a few months, and he let me stay in his apartment free. It was a beautiful place overlooking the Duomo in Florence.

SPC: Wow!

CW: Yes, it was quite beautiful. So, I was in Florence by myself in this fabulous place and started hanging out on the Duomo's steps, meeting other young travellers. Naturally, I met this guy—an Iranian architect student. We were almost married but did not. I went back to the USA and moved to California.

SPC: So, you moved to California alone?

CW: With Tom who was a wonderful five finger banjo player. We lived in Sausalito, where I had a stained-glass studio. I worked there every day. Ended up being interested in making three-dimensional stained-glass objects. A two-and-a-half-foot-long three-dimensional alligator head with a three-way light system lamp. A life-size three-dimensional stained-glass chair was grafted onto a 1925 metal art deco frame. I won first place for Creativity in the annual Northern California Stained Glass Contest. For the first time, I felt a long way from dance.

Wednesday, November 2nd, 2022
Cathy Weis and Sílvia Pinto Coelho
Conversation#2

CW: Lisa Nelson visited while I was living in California and introduced me to video. I became hooked while taping (recording) my 92-year-old grandmother in Lou-

isville. Her baby sister, Irene, at 89, was visiting, and the three of us stayed at her apartment for a week. Video was utterly new, fresh, and magical.

SPC: What kind of camera was it?

CW: I started with a borrowed portapak that I took to Kentucky. The first camera I bought was a VHS when they were just coming out. San Francisco. The cameras and decks were separate units, and they were heavy. At this time, there was a big war between VHS and Beta. I bought a VHS but the portapak, in my opinion, was the better video unit. First of all, you held the camera with both hands in the middle of your body so that you could switch eyes on the camera's viewfinder while being able to shift your weight easily. The VHS unit had a saddle-like thing to rest on one shoulder for the camera. You were locked in to one way of shooting. Also, to me the black and white image with the portapak always seemed of superior quality to the VHS.

Anyway, I got a VHS unit and shot all the time. Tape was cheap. Tapes piled up. After a while, I made a rule for myself that I would not shoot anything I didn't look at. I wasn't allowed to finish shooting and just put the tape on the shelf. Had to view what I shot. So that made me a little more discerning. I began editing myself while I shot.

When I left California, I met up with Lisa in Massachusetts.

SPC: Was she living in Massachusetts?

CW: Yeah, we lived there together for about a year. She was into video. I was into video. A year or so later, I moved to NYC. I lived in Spanish Harlem with John at 183rd Street. In NYC, I began to contact old friends, mostly dancers. I had a camera, and everybody wanted me to shoot them. I began documenting everybody. In retrospect, I see I was fooling myself a bit because this was a sneaky way for me to get back into the dance world without admitting it to myself.

SPC: So, after the recording with your grandmother and living with Lisa, you came to New York around 1983.

CW: Yeah. So, I got back into the dance world that way. Through video. Through documenting other choreographer's work. I got a friend of mine, *Harry Whitaker Sheppard*, to go out with me to Washington Square

Park as a way to teach myself how to shoot movement in space. I would give myself little assignments to master how to shoot moving people. I would follow Harry around in the park as he walked and try to keep him in the same relationship as the frame, zooming smoothly as he moved. I'd make up little assignments to test myself for shooting in performance. I tried always to avoid all automatic camera functions and only use manual.

SPC: As if you had your own choreography of shooting.

CW: Yeah, but I tried to teach myself technique first. Just hand-holding the camera, not using a tripod, I needed practice. The shows were generally an hour or so. I had to be very steady with the facility for zooming in and out. I made up different exercises, like practicing the scales and developing chops.

One exercise, I remember, was very helpful. Normally I shot with the camera's viewfinder covering my left eye. If that eye was intensely focused on the dancer in the viewfinder, the other eye would naturally close. If something important happened on the stage that was not directly near the dancer, I would not see it. So, I taught myself how to shoot with both eyes open so that I could easily focus on what was happening in the viewfinder while at the same time see what was going on outside the viewfinder frame... in the performing space.

SPC: What would you see, was it black-and-white or colour? The viewfinder was a small thing...

CW: It was black-and-white and yeah, it was a small viewfinder. Yet even through the viewfinder, I felt in sync with the dancer. You know, I could still intuit if that dancer was going to walk over there, so by keeping both eyes open, I could be at the spot when she got there.

SPC: Yeah, and you also had to adapt your body...

CW: Absolutely. While watching, I was always moving because dance was in my body. I could anticipate where a dancer was headed. Anticipate the arch of a leap. When I look back, I can't believe I was so steady. You can't tell the difference between a tripod and my shoulder.

Over thirteen years, I accumulated an archive of over 200 hours of footage. A record of dance and performance from a very specific time in downtown NYC. Anne Bo-

gart, Ping Chong, Molissa Fenley, Bill Irwin, Deborah Hay, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Bill T. Jones, Yvonne Meier, Meredith Monk, Mark Morris, Steve Paxton, Stephen Petronio and Elizabeth Streb, among others.

I've made a detailed database that documents each performance with a manual for database use. My experience both in front of the camera (as a choreographer), and behind the camera (as a videographer), gives me a unique point of view. Many fine choreographers are at a loss for how to communicate to a cameraperson when filming movement in space. There are no words or spatial awareness for good communication between the choreographer and videographer. Terms like Head Shot, Medium Shot, and Far Shot just don't cut it. So, I have an important dance archive – that is one of the projects I am currently working on.

SPC: After a while, you decided to do your own work.

CW: Well, what happened was... Let's see, what happened was... [pause].

I enjoyed, in a way, documenting others but there were parts that were a drag. First of all, I was living on 183rd St. while doing all my work downtown. I had to travel on the subway, up and down, late at night, by myself with all this equipment. But it never occurred to me to worry about my safety. It was a different time. And although I was young and strong physically, it wasn't easy, and the travel with equipment each day wasted a lot of energy.

SPC: How heavy was the equipment, around 5 kg?

CW: I have no idea; it was heavy. And it was cumbersome. John and I, finally, were lucky enough to move to 16th street. But it was a very small place. One small room with a tiny kitchen and a small bath. We used every inch. The closet became a bedroom. We tried everything but it always remained way too small for two people to live there.... for 10 years.

During those years, I began to have serious falls. I did not know what was going on. I couldn't understand. I was diagnosed with MS in late December of 1989. The next two years were a black hole for me. I backed away from my friends and my NYC life. It was such a difficult time for me so when I finally came out of that dark period, fears about performing or creating seemed laughable. I

decided I'd better do what I wanted to do Now! I felt an urgency to make things for performance.

I just used what I already knew. It was not the time to do homework. It was time to make something with what I already knew, which was dance and video. I ended up blending the two to make my own vocabulary – dance with sound, design, and technology. It developed naturally out of a need to concentrate on making rather than on losing. It made me feel better.

So, I wrote a letter to Aat Hougee, who ran a school for choreographers in Amsterdam, telling him how important it was for choreographers to learn about video. I suggested I'd teach a six-week class, at the end of which I'd do a performance with the students. He said "Yes". I went. I was young and inexperienced. I dived right in and made the classic, so-familiar mistake of trying to do too much. Too many ideas. Even today when looking back, I like the ideas I was trying... I just had no idea how to execute them. This was my first full evening performance, and it was a killer. Of course, a piece like this is always the best teacher if you can stomach investigating your blind spots. It taught me, among many things, how to be practical about what I can do in the time given. Moreover, after the Amsterdam show, I took apart that piece and used ideas from it for the next ten years or so.

When I came back to New York, I felt confident about making a performance piece. I Got a gig at PS 122 and decided to ask my favourite dance performers in New York, which I did, and they all accepted. A sterling group! It was unusual then to see video on a stage, and I had a very hot group who could get into the stripped-down ideas from the Amsterdam mess. It was called "*A String of Lies*", and it was a huge hit in New York. It sold out, with people waiting outside in lines. It was fun to perform and successful to boot. What could be better? I was sailing and never considered getting reviewed, but when the New York Times dance review came out, the piece was viciously panned.

I think it was the first review by that reviewer, and I have never heard his name again. All my friends started to show me their bad reviews. So sweet! One friend showed me her first review: "When Betty Mathews came

on stage, I wanted to throw up". Another: "She looks like a piece of popcorn. She is so round and fat, she shouldn't even be onstage".

The review was just the biggest put-down you can imagine. And I was so shocked. Caught off guard. I got over my first review, but it was a blow. And my poor family in Kentucky.

SPC: Interestingly, you have reviews here (NY). We hardly have that kind of review in Portugal.

CW: Oh yeah?! No, here, it is very public.

SPC: But that didn't stop you, so you went on doing a lot of work in the same year, no?

CW: Oh yeah, these are all from 1995. This was a very productive time for me. 1995 was the first year I did full performance evenings in NYC. Usually once a year, but often more. If you study my website, which I'm sure you have, you'll find a list of all the shows I've made. There was like a ten-year run when I was focused on work. Basically, for the first time since I left Kentucky, there was no love mate in my life. And I had just weathered the biggest medical fear in my life. My priorities were pretty grounded, and I was able to forge full steam ahead. Would you like me to talk about any of those shows?

SPC: Since I know Lisa, would you talk about your work together?

CW: Sure. We collaborated on "*An Abondanza in the Air*" (1989).

SPC: Is it a set piece? Trying out stuff, video?

CW: Very set. Video throughout the whole thing. We spent decades...

SPC: Did you have the cameras onstage? What about television sets onstage?

CW: We didn't have live cameras onstage. The images were all pre-recorded.

SPC: What was the pretext? What was the first idea?

CW: Well, you know, I think we just wanted to work together. We had been sending each other postcards. Video postcards. The videos we took were an autobiography of where we were and how we saw things. We shot what was around us at the moment. It was a real history. We had the same interests when we started making a performance.

SPC: What did you do with your bodies onstage?

CW: The action on stage was totally blended with the video images on the TVs we were carrying. On the two black and white 13-inch TVs. We had attached handles for easy carrying and a battery holder with a flat bottom so we could easily set the TVs down and be cordless. We had found a remote-controlled gizmo down on Canal Street that could project the audio/video signal through the air. 1995. This tech was not expensive but not flawless. The cheap remote projection units were not that reliable. In some performance spaces, it would work well; in others, it would be shaky. We found that the eye would forgive a flickering image if the sound was steady. So, we ran a line from our VHS deck into the sound system of the performance space and only used the remote to send the image. This low-budget tech allowed us to manipulate the TVs, tossing, sliding, and sitting on them, while the audio plus the prerecorded images gave us a steady timing that we could rely upon.

Light, of course, was a huge element. We said it was like reality was in the dark and dreams were in the light. I loved working with Lisa on this piece. We'd get together once a year to work on it in her Vermont studio, at the end of which we always said, "By George, I think we've got it this time". Next year when we got together.... "What were we thinking? This sucks!" Dismantle the whole sequencing and re-edit, rebuilding until we ended up saying, "By George I think we've finally got it this year". Then, the next year, we'd tear it apart. This went on year after year.

CW: How does work develop? For me, it always comes out of the studio...working with your tools and watching. For instance, after spending hours in the studio looking at stuff, a mistake can make you go: "That's interesting," or "That's beautiful". Telling you something about yourself. And by following that thread, by having the curiosity to develop that a little bit, a new path may emerge.

SPC: Can you give an example?

CW: Well... [thinking]. I remember in "*Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard*" (2005), there was an awkward transition at one point. The image we used had been projected on a huge screen on the upstage wall behind the performers. I needed the next image to be transferred to a

smaller screen on wheels that could be rolled across the stage. Luckily, I slowed down and tried to make the transition into a whole section that had a weight of its own. As the screen was rolled onto the stage, it sliced across the lights in the air; this created shadows and colours that morphed into fascinating shapes as the angle at which the light hit the screen altered. It was stunning and surprising.... I gasped the first time I saw it. Years later, I was watching the video documentary. I had forgotten how beautiful that moment was. So, four years after "*Electric Haiku: Calm as Custard*", I made a new show called "*The Bottom Fell Out of the Tub*" (2009), based on that idea. The idea is that there is a world living in the air that we can't see, but with the proper tools, one can make the hidden world visible. In this case, a projection screen on wheels.

SPC: How did you work? What did you propose to dancers? Did they dance with cameras? Or did they interact with TVs?

CW: I do not teach dancers how to be videographers. No one uses the camera. And really, TV sets were fine for certain spaces but ultimately too small for most. I ended up using projections, usually live projections. A pragmatic decision on my part. Dancers who worked with me had to understand how the audience would look differently at the stage, at the dancers, when a big moving image was added to it. The eye needs more time to take in this new element. And habits need to be dealt with. The audience was in the habit of staring into a frame from film watching, never needing to move their head or have their gaze scan the room. When an image is projected onto a screen on stage, the frame for viewing is around the whole stage. The projected image is a part within. The dancer, especially a good improviser, needs to understand how the eyes in the audience see. The timing for the mover is different than without an image on stage. A diverse amount of time is needed if one wants audiences to see both mover and image as one.

One learns how to choreograph for the eye. The timing is completely different.

My interest in choreography deals with sound, space, and how the seeing eye can blend two-dimensional and

three-dimensional movement. I am not so interested in making specific moves for dancers. But I am interested in how dancers develop their own way of moving, I love the diversity between individuals. Usually, there are specific tasks to be performed in my work, getting from A to B, for instance, and I am very interested in the imaginary solutions dancers choose. The timing. The strengths and weaknesses of different bodies. How this is expressed.

We work with many issues, for instance, how the dancer could move on stage and partner the projection without staring at the image being projected. Guaranteed that the audience will follow the dancer's gaze and if the dancer is staring at the image, the audience will as well. So how to expand the gaze to include the dancer as well as the image. I used the floor a lot to let the dancer understand the timing of the projection. For instance, when you do that diagonal downstage, by the time you arrive here, the projection will be dark.

SPC: Would you ever draw it on a piece of paper?

CW: I could draw on a paper. Or mark it out on the stage floor. Coordinating two-dimensional space with three. So, we would work out what they were doing. It was not a free-for-all — there was an idea. And the dancers' imagination was called to the task.

SPC: Tell me if I'm wrong, but I have the feeling that you have a kind of affection for the materiality of the technology: the TV sets, the tower... You seem to have this way of relating to the body, the cameras... Do you ever think about that? Do you relate your own body to the materiality of technology?

CW: Well, I don't know how you cannot relate. Everything for me was about the body. As a dancer, I view technology as a tool to help me extend my range of movement as my personal range shrinks. As a camera person, I think an important answer is that the video is not shot from a cameraperson's point of view — outside the dance. I'm always inside of the dance. I know what it feels like for the dancers to move, use space, and grapple with gravity. Dancers may be holding a prop, a TV, or a camera or working inside the screen's frame or the stage's frame. There is a relationship with all that that I understand with my body.

SPC: What about the light? For instance, when you project lights on the stage, and you have the light of the projector or the light of the television, do you feel that you're working somehow on colouring? Or...

CW: I've been interested in light for a long time. The light from a TV on your body differs from any other kind of light. Especially theatre lights and... You know, light is a big element in all imagery. And what isn't an image? I can show you some experiments that might explain my interests.

SPC: Before you show me, I find that there is a relation between the stained glass and the work with light on stage. And that is maybe something you don't see so well on the recordings. Were you aware of this relation?

CW: Oh, yes, I was aware. Stained glass is all about light. And so is video. But my initial attraction to both of them was obviously intuitive.

The stained glass it's all about putting one coloured glass next to another colour to create a third. And video also with the live performer. Putting things next to each other that makes something new. They're very similar, but of course, they are nothing like each other.

SPC: Did you ever work with film?

CW: Yeah, I worked a little with film. I did do one film called *"Silent Twins"*. It was a part of another choreographer's work, Fred Holland. So much more beautiful than video. I don't think anybody would question that. But it was very expensive out of my control doing film.

For me, the pros of film were the quality of the image and the actual handling of the film. The pros of video were that you could play back the image as you were recording it. This opened up huge possibilities. It was very exciting. And compared to film, very cheap.... inexpensive to buy tape so you could experiment, you had the freedom to make mistakes. And once video was chosen, there still were a ton of decisions. Do you rent a good quality camera or buy something cheap that you can have in your hands every day? For instance.

SPC: I find it amazing the way you relate to sound.

CW: For me, it's so much about sound.

SPC: It's like you had the cinema in fragments into different media. But they are all together at the same time.

It is not cinema, but one can understand how light, image, editing, live people, animation, projection, and sound play a role.

CW: That's great. So glad to hear you see that. It is very much the way I see it. And like with telling any story, the roles always carry different weights. In my performances, sound is a major player, The Heavy Hitter (I include silence as part of sound). Sound always has a leading role. Movement, of course, always has another leading role.

Saturday, November 26th, 2022

Cathy Weis and Sílvia Pinto Coelho

Conversation#3

SPC: Last time we talked, you told me you were significantly involved with Choreography and video. Pieces like *"Dub"*, *"L.I.P.S."*, *"Politicians"*, *"A String of Lies"*, *"Cathy Weis and Friends"*, *"Fractured"*, *"Just the Fracts Ma'am"*, *"Face-to-Face"*, *"Doctor Doctor"*, *"Dawn of the Magicians"*, etc.

CW: Yes. If you visit my website, cathyweis.org, there's a listing of all shows with photos, a brief description, and hopefully a short video.

But when I began working, it was a time when electric imagery was not something seen often on stage. Now it is used by everyone. But I became interested in blending the two forms for personal reasons. Did we discuss this the other day? At a certain moment in my life, using video and dance as a language developed naturally out of an urgent need to create, so that I could make, rather than focus on what I was losing.

SPC: I'd love you to tell me about one of your shows. Would you talk a bit about... say... the first show you made in NYC?

CW: Ok... well, the first show I made in New York City was *"A String of Lies"*. The year before, I had made my first full-length show called *"DUB"*. I made it in the Netherlands. As a rookie, I made every mistake in the book by throwing in every idea I had ever had. That made for a very confusing show. Yet *"The String of Lies"* show plants the seed for many of the themes and technological set-ups I would develop over the years and lays the groundwork for my style: vignettes featuring partnerships between te-

chnology and the human body in performance. The many vignettes were strung together to form a whole show.

The first vignette, *"Politicians"*. It is one of my interactive pre-show events that lets the audience in on how the technology they're about to see in the show works. As they walk into the space, an event is happening. A performer asks someone to sit in a chair facing a camera. As they look into the camera, the image of their face is projected behind them, merged with the pre-recorded talking heads of well-known politicians of the day like Newt Gingrich, etc. "If you and Newt wed and had a child, is this what your kid would look like???" I used this preshow nugget many times over the next few years and realized that when I understand how the audience will react, this setup can be a lot of fun. But in situations when the political scene is more intense and has real consequences, such as when we were in Czechoslovakia after the wall had come down, it was murkier and much more complicated.

Once the show begins, a string of vignettes is strung together, each partnering video and the human body. For instance, in one, Scott Heron, begins dancing and he ends up very close to a live camera on stage. As he stares deep into the lens, an image of a close-up of his two eyes is projected on the large screen upstage. Then fish begin to swim in his eyeballs. As he backs away from the camera, it looks like he is swimming with the fish. Both are in sync to a lively audio score. As the fish dance continues, one may become aware that this is the same set-up as was used in *"Politicians"*: A live video recording from a camera on stage, mixed with a pre-recorded video.

SPC: We were talking about how you were working a lot in choreography until you came to this studio, to this loft.

CW: Right. At the end of the 10 years of intense show-making, I realized I had to stop. While it's true I was excited to be developing a way to partner with movement and technology, I found that I needed a workspace where I could leave my equipment. Required to take a break and set things up better if I was going to continue making work. Taking the subway and lugging heavy video decks, cords, and lights from place to place, setting up each rehearsal, then breaking it down was a headache. This

daily grunt work became an utter grind. Didn't leave time, desire, or energy to rehearse.

That's the main reason I went to Bennington. They said I could have my own workspace to work and teach my classes, and in exchange, they'd give me my master's degree. The studio was an old, abandoned room that had previously been used by a much-beloved music teacher. He had made his own instruments. After he retired, he left them in his studio. There were these really incredible old boxes, rectangles, high like 13'... stringed instruments that he had made. I would project images onto those rectangles. Have dancers play the instruments as they move through the projections. The images fractured. Cubistic. I began developing another style.

Also, at Bennington, I worked with a wonderful teacher, Ruben Puenteduras. He was a brilliant computer scientist and we worked on several performances together in which we connected to Macedonia through the internet. We called our set-up "*LIPS Live Internet Performance Structure*" (1998).

This was way before Skype or Zoom. It was very exciting to actually make connections with artists from another country, not with talking heads, but by sound and movement. We made *LIPS* performances at Bennington and in NY, Praha, Macedonia. The NY "*LIP*" performance received a Guggenheim Award.

After I left Bennington, I returned to 16th St. I now was one of four dancers who collectively were renting Simone Forti's studio at 537 Broadway while she was living in LA. Finally, having a relatively stable rehearsal space, I began the "*Salon Project*". I'd call up my friends and have them come watch what I was working on. An intimate, informal performance. But they didn't live near... not like the 60s when artists lived in the same vicinity. Not so easy for friends to drop by. Also, sharing a rehearsal room after working at Bennington felt like a step backwards. I continued looking for my own space. Spent a couple of years looking. Unsuccessfully. But looking, looking. My friends said, "You're not really serious, or you would have gotten something by now". But not true. And when Simone Forti needed to move from her studio, I was ready to go all in and buy it.

We both were dubious if we could pull it off. Simone had personal conditions and timings she had to honour, and real estate dealings were new to us both. But we trusted each other and saved money by cutting out the middleman. Gave it our all. With help from Simone and my family, I was able to get a mortgage. We took it step by step, inching forward. This all was quite stressful, of course, but somehow, miraculously, it all worked out, and I became the owner. Actually, in a co-op, you don't own the space; you own shares in the corporation, and shareholders have the perk to live in the building.

Once in, I couldn't believe my good fortune. I was ecstatic. I felt like the luckiest gal in New York. What a joke that turned out to be. And it took me many months to realize I had moved into a nasty, dangerous hornets' nest. (Five years later, I made a piece called "I Live in the Meanest Coop in New York City").

But initially, it just felt freaky. My 16th Street apartment could fit into Simone's bedroom. I couldn't believe I could open Simone's bedroom door and still be in my loft.

SPC: Is there a gap between when you produced a lot of choreographic work and when you finally bought this place?

CW: Well, there was a gap. That's true. But the big gap was not here. In fact, the last major piece I did during this time was in 2005, which was the same year I moved into 537 Broadway. Even though 2004 was hard because buying this place seemed like a full-time job, I managed to keep working on my shows. And, of course, the reason I was moving was so I could work more efficiently. It was only after I had moved in that I had to stop everything to concentrate on real estate. That was the major gap.

SPC: Yikes!

CW: Yelp. Once I got in here, it took ... the coop took over my life for about four years. I didn't do anything else. This place was so fucked up. An example:

When I first came here, they wanted me to vote right away on the board. I said I wasn't comfortable voting until I understood more about the building. They: "Just come to a board meeting and follow our lead. You'll be fine".

So, I went to a board meeting before I even bought the place. There would be Richard Bassik, the managing

agent, and three others because you need three shareholders to have a quorum. Two of the three shareholders were like this (close). They ran the place. And the third member at the meeting was totally drugged out. The other four shareholders were all out of town, handling long-term personal crises.

For me, that first board meeting went like: Richard would hand the board president a paper. She would read it aloud, "Ok, today we are going to vote to see if X is Not on the board". And then, "All in favour say 'Aye'". Two Ayes. And they would all turn to the drugged-out member, "Well, you want this too, don't you?". And she would go, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Sorry. Aye". I thought: "Wowww!! I'm beginning to get it. Richard Bassik is completely running the show here".

So, back home, I looked up who was Richard Bassik. Turns out he was a convicted felon who had recently gotten out of the federal prison after serving his 15-year sentence for kidnapping his business partner's child. When I told my father, he went, "All I can say is, please don't get shot". Wise, concise words. The guy was dangerous and did not want to go back to prison.

But the shareholders just loved him. He would fix little things, you know? If somebody's toilet wasn't running, he would have it fixed. While at the same time was skimming the big money. He was a major thief. There were eight shareholders. Always four against four. Divided in half. A microcosm of our country. Concerning Richard, there were four in favour and four against. The situation was totally torturous. The four who loved Richard refused to look at the facts. They only followed his personality. Sounds familiar? It really opened my eyes to the real world. Those four years were the worst. Just horrible!

Years of in-fighting and greed; everybody fighting everybody. In the beginning, I said – "I can't believe it. This is the most amazing building in the city; Anybody would give their eyes teeth to be here!" It should be a paradise, but instead, it's hell. I mean it took me four years to understand what was going on. I had to stop everything to concentrate on this building that was falling apart from neglect.

I said to myself – "I don't give a shit about this place;

I don't want to spend my life here if I have to quit all the things I love doing. I'm going to sell the loft and get out of here". But then, "No, don't do that. The other side is just as tired as you are". And each day brought such an unexpected, dramatic twist that I began keeping a record. I still think if I can find the right writer, we'd have a gold mine. The story has everything... greed and lust in hip New York SoHo. A story about white, liberal, educated middle-aged professionals who tear apart their own riches, trying desperately to get more.

Any clever writer out there who wants to make some money?

So finally, after four years of living at 537 Broadway, there was a political power shift. The alignment of the shareholders' changed from 4 against 4, to 5 against 3, and again to 6 against 2. I've begun to breathe again and to actually work again. I started "*Sundays on Broadway*". But that will have to be saved for another time...

SPC: Are you tired? Let's stop then. Thank you so much!

Final considerations

As I approach the research field of a generation of artists and authors who have participated in a paradigmatic shift in contemporary art, namely some of the protagonists of post-modern dance in the United States, I recognise a myriad of other research possibilities and lines of influence (or confluence) of ideas and artistic research. In this interview, I am only exploring a field of possibilities for further research work.

Cathy Weis is a dancer, performer and choreographer, her work explores the partnership between live performance and video to "pose unnerving questions - about how and what we see, and about the nature of physical control, a central issue for dancers and people dealing with body failure (which means, at one time or another, all of us)". (The Village Voice) (see also [here](#)).

7 Cathy's tiredness is one of the symptoms of multiple sclerosis that made us stop several times although we were both happy and eager to move on and watch videos.

Sílvia Pinto Coelho is a researcher in ICNOVA-FCSH, Lisbon, a choreographer, dancer/performer, and teacher. Holds a PhD in Communication Science - thesis "Body, Image and Choreographic Thinking" (2016); did the Communication and Arts PhD Program with a grant (FCT); a master's degree in "Contemporary Culture and New Technologies" (2010); a license degree in Anthropology (2005); a Bachelor's degree in Dance Performance, ESD - IPL (1996); Forum Dança course for contemporary dancers (1997-1999). Sílvia presented her choreographic work across Portugal, Berlin, and Madrid. She has collaborated with artists in choreographic projects and films. She teaches as a guest assistant teacher.

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