Robert Steijn
in conversation with Daria Faïn

Daria Faïn: We are going to talk about Robert and Maria, at Danspace Project. Tonight is the last night. What is the essential experience for you performing this work, if there is one?

Robert Steijn: The act of collaboration—how to be together as two different artists in a way that we can relate to each other—what’s happening in our presence. How that could communicate towards an audience about human relationships or about what is art or what is the presence of an artist on stage.

Daria: Do you place your answer as the objective of your work as well as the experience? The objective of the performance being what you said, what you intend to do and what it is about.

Robert: And that’s immediately also the experience. This is a little bit how I work.

Daria: But there is a very different way you could express that.

Robert: Tell me.

Daria: Your relationship, the difference between you and Maria [Hassabi], created a very specific language, right? I’m interested to know how did you come to that language and what is it like to perform it?

Robert: When I saw Maria’s work, I was quite stunned by the exactness of the presence of the body: the details of a certain gesture or the gaze of the eyes. When we talked, I shared a kind of sensitivity about feelings, about how we are, and how we make work. But I’m always very playful and intuitive, doing silly things on stage. Then I thought: but I have this desire to be very precise. I am very precise, but I felt that she could give me a kind of devotion to a physical presence—how I could be more present in my body in communicating a visual language. But then we were starting to make a work together and it really is about how can we do something together that we are both capable in. Because I’m not capable to be in certain choreography she would make. I like a lot to let things happen in a process, not intellectualize it too much. Although we talk a lot about what we could do, it’s just by the doing in front of each other and looking at other examples—what you like or things that are in your mind at that moment. And then at a certain moment the proximity of each other looking into each other’s eyes gave us a freedom to be creative.

Daria: So, looking into the eyes is a big part of your process.

Robert: Also of my own work. Once I did a solo about love sickness, and I wanted to make work about the taboo because I was lovesick and I was 48 or 47—I felt like a loser. I saw in my surroundings that a lot of people had lovesickness, but that you only talk about it in intimate dialogues with people. I wanted to make a solo about this, a little operetta, a little too pathetic. But then I looked at the audience in the eyes at one moment. (I did it once with 300 people and it was another thing; it was more for 30 or 35 people.) Then I felt this psychic energy of the people watching me. In improvisation sometimes I could easily see when people look into my eyes. Some actors, when I was looking at them in the eyes, were busy with the audience, so they acted like they’re looking in your eyes, but their concentration is to the outside. I felt in the eyes there could be a connection between me and Maria to stay together. Instead of doing something and then discussing it afterwards, which is a judgmental approach: “so what shall we do?” “what do you think about this?” “what do you think about that?” “is it ok?” I think this negotiation was there in the doing and checking each other in the eyes: “are you following me or am I following you?” “how are you at this moment?”

Since we found that, it was clear there was this connection, and then how much can that be communicative towards an audience? I do a lot of looking at people in the eyes as an exercise, but it is a kind of meditative thing. Not that you disappear, but you ground yourself in the other. And it was clear that this was not the entrance of us looking to the eyes. Maria was also very clear about it; it had to be very vivid.

Daria: So very active.
Robert: Very active, more like checking or negotiating: “okay, who are you? who am I? And not the disappearing. You know, when you see Marina Abramovic or you see the reenactments, you see that they have this more ‘I come to stillness in your eye’ energy. I feel in our duet it’s more, not calming down, but ‘what’s happening with you at this moment?’

Daria: That’s intense—to be always checking on someone else. It’s interesting because for me it was like you were talking, it was very much a conversation all the time, so that makes a lot of sense.

Robert: My work is a lot about silence, but I thought this piece is not so much about silence but about talking or noise. No, noise is not a good word. It’s much more vacant. There has to be a need for silence, and I think in my collaboration with Maria it is a lot about talking.

Daria: And you mean that literally?

Robert: Literally. I feel that’s where we connect.

Daria: So, talking, exchanging ideas, personal?

Robert: Yeah, expressing. And for me that was really clear when we had the title. Not that it is about Robert and Maria as a personal biography, but that it is about two human beings. So we don’t pretend something else than how we relate to each other. No forced dramatic things, which only happen on stage.

Daria: When you say people you talk about literally Robert and Maria?

Robert: Yes, and Maria with her background on how she makes performances and me with my background on how I make performances or how I am present on stage.

Daria: I was very interested in these dialogues you had about the relationship between intention, action and time. And how those different gaps between the things in a continuum create a language of performance. Let’s talk a little bit about the relationship between intention, action and time.

Robert: I think in my connection with Maria there is a desire or knowledge or experience in her to know what she wants to communicate, to know in what kind of form she wants to express herself. And I have no idea.

Daria: That’s great.

Robert: So the whole intention-action comes from this dynamic. I feel that I am, not the silent one, but the more receptive, reacting one. And then you can say she is the acting person or the animating. But it is relative because it can easily turn around. You know what I mean?

Daria: I see completely what you mean.

Robert: So in that way these roles can always change. But I feel always like there is a certain aesthetic or a certain way we think is the right form to communicate towards and audience.

Daria: What do you mean by the right way to communicate with the audience?

Robert: Let’s say a process of coming into action, into moments of decisions and impulses. Do you follow that? What does it mean physically? Does the emotion act in your face, or do you go for a kind of awareness in the body posture? Do I do the thing that Maria likes? It’s about dissecting all these moments.

Daria: Yeah, I completely understand that.

Robert: For me it’s an exercise also in being sensitive towards yourself, but also towards your desires or the fears of the other.
Daria: Do you know Fiona Templeton's work?

Robert: Not so, really. She was in Holland a few times.

Daria: She says that theater is the arts of relationship.

Robert: That's very obvious for me. I've worked in theater because I'm always really hesitant about how I can connect. How do I connect with everything? It's very seldom that there is a kind of 'I am home in what I do'. It's always about the right intention followed by the right action. And that's why I like theater a lot when I make my own work or solo work, because it's about one belief system. I'm going into this belief system and I'm not hesitant about this belief system. But when you are with another person, that doesn't work because how can I relate to this other person?

Daria: That makes a lot of sense.

Robert: For me, that's the beauty, when you stay honest with this. And that's why it's also in the doing or the being because I'm not so interested in talking. I like to talk a lot. Talking acts as an exchange—how does this person talk, how do they feel? But to talk about aesthetics and decide in talking about aesthetics doesn't work so much for me. Then it stays in an aesthetical sense, or shape or taste, I don't know. What's taste? Fuck it.

Daria: I totally agree with you. I think about that a lot because I'm trying to understand how influenced we are by these concepts that are so archetypal in a way, you know, these ideas of dissection. It's somewhat about the fragmentation of our perception of who we are. And that going through the process of inhabiting this fragmentation, we are expanding our possibility to be more than what we can be. I was thinking of Greek theater when actors were called the “hypocrites.” I always think about that because on the crisis, meaning separation, the one that can inhabit the crisis is inhabiting the fragmentation and expanding. I felt that very much in the work, very alive, and I felt very connected to that. Another thing I thought in relation to the work was the choice on duration and slowness. I don't know this in English actually.

Robert: Say it in French.

Daria: You know, Zenon as in Z-E-N-O-N; it's a Greek thing. You throw an arrow and then think about half of the space... The arrow is reaching the target, but each time you go to the half, the half, the half, the half. I thought about how that enhanced the moment and the presence to create a form of suspension of action. It's like you place the importance of what the performance is there. Does that make sense to you? Because you're checking into each other...

Robert: I think because we are checking, we never arrive.

Daria: Exactly, but you arrive in the sense that the form that you are giving is the arrival.

Robert: Yeah, that's it. I made once a piece called “Sink in” and there I don't know if it's not arriving, but there it's really 'let's go in'. I felt here it was more 'let's go towards something'. I don't know how it is called in English; in mathematics it's this [draws something].

Daria: I don't know what this is.

Robert: You have the isotope and it never comes to the X, you know, it will never reach it but it always goes like this, and I think it is because the awareness is always active, it's always checking. Because it is always checking, it will never reach the point. That's the principle.

Daria: Right, right. It's the same, except in Zenon, I was very surprised because I thought that the arrow could never arrive, but then a mathematician told me “no, no, the arrow actually arrives.”

Robert: Also in infinity, at a certain point everything becomes one.
Daria: Hopefully, yeah. Another thing I thought, and it’s a little bit a superficial afterthought, is I saw this as the perfect piece in terms of marketing. I’m going to provoke you a little bit. Because it’s a theater piece as well as a dance piece, but it’s also a visual art piece. So I thought in the market it’s going to do really well. I’m not saying your intention was to do that at the beginning at all, but I’m just saying it’s kind of a fact.

Robert: It’s quite interesting how you name it because in a way I’m looking for a structure how to coexist and create with Maria on stage. And there is a kind of honesty, but this honesty relates to a creative form. Because it’s not honesty like it’s expressing something. But the forms of creativity I don’t relate at all to anymore as if they are visual art or theater or dance. Yesterday there was someone who liked it a lot and she said it goes beyond dance and theater and visual art—it’s so honest. And then I thought, does it mean then that an art form is not honest in itself? You know what I mean?

Daria: Yeah, absolutely.

Robert: And the whole thing of poetics of daily life or of being or of not pretending. I don’t know what not pretending is, but let’s say the act of checking is not pretending—communicating and checking is not pretending. But still, I’m going to do a piece now in Hungary called “Propaganda” because now there are very hard political slogans everywhere in Europe and particularly in Hungary—demagogic—I don’t know how you say it, populist, and I have this idea to have a banner where people say, “I have two hands” or “I listen.” Just the beauty of being a person without all these outside things, which people think they need to become someone. We really have to go back to the source. I feel that people see that suddenly as it not being in a category of theater or dance because…

Daria: What I’m saying is the opposite. I think it’s in all these configurations.

Robert: But because I don’t come from a certain technique, not a dance technique background, not an acting background, I’m a dramaturge. I come from reading and looking. I was looking for more than 15 years. So there’s a lot of knowledge about looking, but to look doesn’t mean that you can do what you saw. But there is a love for this body. I feel my biggest technique on stage is to loose my shame. And to be there without any adding, you know?

Daria: It’s interesting to loose your shame. I’m very fascinated by traditional forms of dance and theater, I don’t know why; it’s always been like this. When you say that, I’m interested in the relationship to the personal history you spoke about in relationship to Maria. In Indian forms, what you do before the performance is that your self ‘dia’ goes and you invoke the character. At the end you thank the spirit that has come and your self comes back. In a way, it is never you. It’s like you peel yourself off in order to do something that is bigger than yourself. But when you speak about shame, you speak of a very deep relationship to the self.

Robert: I can only talk about my own perspective; imagination is a big word for me to prepare myself. And in my imagination there is this going away from myself and letting other energies in.

Daria: Right. You spoke about devotion a lot (on the panel).

Robert: Let’s say when I’m onstage I’m already free. I’m a free person. A free person is a little bit difficult, but let’s say there are different energies in my awareness, because I don’t know so much about defragmentation of awareness or letting other energies in and take over. But let’s say the construction of myself—I have no idea from what kind of place I talk, but I feel that when I talk I’m guided to talk in this way. From what place? I have no idea. And to trust this is a little bit like… When you go on stage, you also go to look for a certain silence, which allows other things to come, which has not so much to do with the social behavior.

Daria: Yeah, in Greek that is called the kenosis—the process of emptying.

Robert: For me that is really important. I was such a social person and perhaps I still am, but I felt that communication was really about putting yourself in the needs or the desires of other people. I’m not talking about stage but just, how I felt or how I was raised as a kid. And I feel in theater or in art, that’s a free place. There is a place where you can observe other ways of connecting, which don’t have this social behavior to
affirm powers: I’m one of the group? I’m with you? Are you with me? Is how I am acceptable? All these things are out.

I’m quite familiar with “Familien Aufstelling” in Austria. I think it’s called family recognition patterns, by Bert Hellinger. It’s very popular in Vienna and it’s a therapy where you are with a group of people and then you ask, “Do you want to play my father,” “Do you want to play my mother …”

Daria: It’s called psychodrama in English.

Robert: No, it’s different because you don’t play it yourself, but perhaps it’s a little bit too long to explain. The idea is that the people who play your roles, you position them in space and by positioning them in space, they feel how the relation is together. I learned a lot about Greek drama through these positions, gazes, the body. That we have knowledge in our body, which really can discover what it means to be with someone and to stand like this.

Daria: I call that the prosodic body—the position in space, the awareness of the space behind you, the sounds around us, and the way we look at each other, the gesture we’re making. All of that is part of what is said, and what is said is actually just the top of the iceberg. You know, is rounded into these incredible layers.

Robert: I’m with you about the not knowing. We try to go together somewhere to find discoveries about my work or your ideas about theater. There’s an ongoing thing going on. When I’m onstage, although there is a structure and a concept or an idea, I want to be free—there’s no direction and I want to feel what is there. And that’s very funny with taking over by spirits or energies. It’s more ‘I want to be free’, and how to listen to this freedom.

Daria: And the freedom is so much about, not awareness, but a space of possibility that needs to evolve, open and keep opening…

Robert: It’s potentialities because when I would be alone different potentials would come. But within my connection with Maria, we are in chemistry—other potentials come in. And I have no moralistic idea about that’s good or bad.

Daria: You have to be very unselfconscious on stage. You are really trapped if you start thinking like that.

Robert: It is a kind of innocence, this way of looking. I can imagine that as a man it is a little bit easier, when I talk perhaps to other people, to be this innocent on stage in a couple with man and woman.

Daria: You think so?

Robert: Or no, I don’t know.

Daria: It is very interesting that you say that because I was going to start asking you about the basic histrionics of you and Maria as a representation, and you being a man and she being a woman. The quality of your emotional components is very distinct. And they project something that is beyond what is directly happening between the two of you. I was wondering if you took that into consideration or not at all.

Robert: Of course.

Daria: You did.

Robert: I do it in a different way than Maria. I think, but you have to ask her. I think I’m not into the representation. I am in what is the body at that moment—it can only represent itself in that sense. And I feel how I behave towards Maria or how I present myself, my body, my energy, has to do with what I can do within this constellation with her as a woman, with her in her character, in my character, with our friendship and all these kind of things. So I would never try to cause a kind of border between us to represent something about man or woman, violence or sexuality. When it’s not there between us, or when it’s shy, it stays shy in that sense. That’s also why it’s called Robert and Maria, it’s not about “Man and Woman.” Although I know by
looking at us the audience can have the opportunity to project things of their own, what they think about men
and women, and power games and things like that. In a way I feel it’s so much about size also, and how these
two look like this.

Daria: Absolutely. That’s what I wanted you to talk about.

Robert: I feel this kind of let’s say, admiration, domination, all these kind of things. But they stay for me in the
level of communicating, observing what is possible. We never spoke deeply about what I represent, what you
represent. Sometimes it’s clear that I’m the more silent, more staying in my space and Maria is more busy. But
perhaps it can be a man and a woman. I feel when Maria is laying down, if I would go over her it would be
interpreted as sexual or dominating or all these kind of things. But why we didn’t choose to go for that direction
has to do that that is not part of our potential at this moment on stage.

Daria: That is very clear to me.

Robert: It’s what’s happening between us and where I can be with Maria and where she can be with me. In a
way, what is right for both of us. I like a lot this because it’s quite intimate in proximity and in the eyes, but that
doesn’t mean that you can go into another person without this other person saying yes—there has to be an
allowance. I like it a lot, and I learn a lot about what it is to be with another person, and how much you can allow
yourself to come into the territory of this other person and how careful you have to be with this and how tender
in a way. I think we find a tender timing and I like tenderness a lot.

Daria: Yeah, you can’t live without it. There was a moment in the first evening where you both came at the
same level and your bodies started to really twist. Then it’s the body that becomes really the language, and you
know the thing that is interesting is that you know the same principle that activates these things. There is a
constant, and the constant can activate those different ways of seeing you. But when it becomes like a women
and a man… To my understanding of human that is totally mine, there is nothing that is not sexual.

Robert: That’s interesting that you say something about sexuality because I think I don’t know so much the
difference between creativity and sexuality.

Daria: Exactly. It is the same thing; it’s vitality.

Robert: It’s giving life to forms or to curiosity or awakening. So in that sense sexuality has so much in its field of
sensuality. I was thinking a lot about Eros as a force, how to connect through the senses. And this, in the eyes.
For me sexuality is interesting as a form to connect, and not in a way of now we are having sex together. But
there are so many other varieties to open up the body, to open up awareness.

Daria: Yeah, definitely, this is something I think about all the time because if there is no vitality… But there is
vitality.

Robert: One of the basic motivations for this piece from my side was the perspective of the heart. At it’s also
why we choose this text of Rumi: “you dance inside my chest where no one sees you, but sometimes I do and
this sight makes our dance.” There’s a beautiful poem of Rumi where there are two people in a court, Chinese
and Greek artists and it’s in Persia. They live in the same palace and they want to know who’s the better artist.
And then the kings says, “ok, we have a debate” and the Chinese talks a lot and the Greek says nothing. And
then they think they can’t find out by talking. Then the Chinese asks “let’s both decorate a room” and there is a
curtain inside between the two rooms. And the Chinese need a lot of colors. Everyday they have new paint,
dyes, and the Greek say our art isn’t about dye or colors, and they just clean the walls. And at a certain
moment, the Chinese are ready and they beat the drum and there’s a big party and it’s amazing. There are all
kinds of very beautiful birds, and then they open the curtain and the Greek people cleaned the space so much
they are mirroring all the Chinese party.

Daria: That is so beautiful!

Robert: “You dance inside my chest”—that for me is very beautiful; that the heartbeat is the essence of what we
can do and not the drum and not an opening in a gallery. I had this feeling once, I have at home a whole wall of paintings and I thought, “what is the painting I want to make?” and then I thought, “Ok, let’s do everything out, but then I have an empty wall.” It’s quite beautiful but I thought, “It’s not enough. I have to break a hole in the wall and then what I see, that’s my beauty.” But what is it? It’s just the outside street. We can see it always, but still I want to make that, so what kind of walls do I need to break for dance and theater that we can look at life in its beauty, or in its silence, or in its… I don’t know, in its daily poetics…

Daria: And it’s an ongoing thing, it’s not like you are going to break it and find it.

Robert: No, that’s it.

Daria: An ongoing breaking through.

Robert: But it’s breaking a wall. I don’t know, it sounds pathetic, but for me it’s important. I have no idea how to do it.

Daria: It’s incredible how we reinvent the way of doing things all the time. How is that necessity an incredible mystery for me. Why do we keep doing it?

Robert: This breaking the wall… I see really beautiful work and really touches me a lot, but for whom? How can we get out of the institutionalized product-making artwork for a certain kind of audience?

Daria: Absolutely.

Robert: And the audience is already partly professional in that field. That’s why I’m happy with Eagle Ager. Sometimes it’s also very difficult to change a mentality, a way of looking, how to reach people to share it.

Daria: I had this conversation with Ralph [Lemon] right after the panel at Baryshnikov Art Center, and a third person said ‘I’m doing this performance’ and Ralph said, “Daria, don’t say performance.” And I’m so not happy with that because I said, “Ralph, if you do not say that it’s a performance, then you’re buying into the market to define what they think is performance. I want to say that it’s a performance, even if they don’t think it’s a performance. Then I’m putting myself in a position where I am saying actually, yes, this is a performance.”

Robert: For me it’s this breaking the wall. Revitalize our profession. I think it’s about redefining the position. I feel a little bit that artists marginalized into a kind of, not entertainment, but let’s say a sophisticated entertainment.

Daria: I totally agree with you.

Robert: It opens your mind, but is that our role—to sophisticate people? To sophisticate a certain amount of people who are already creative for themselves? And not that I want to do developmental work, but there has to be… I feel that because film is a little bit more a mass medium, it can easily get more into discussions about society. But we still need a body to communicate. There is a lot to communicate also in that sense.

Daria: I spent about five months in Greece doing research on Asclepios, the god of healing. Doing this I discovered all the theaters were always near all the sights of healing.

Robert: Hospitals.

Daria: Yes, and I became totally obsessed about why and how. What was that relationship between those two entities? And the connection was huge because it was this festival where people would purify themselves and go through this dream incubation. And then they would go to the theater as a way to be awakened. They would go through this internal process, it was called going through the abaton, which is the place where you cannot step with your foot. And they were basically in the dark lying down and tied on a table until they would get a dream that would heal them. They will be guided through the process of what the dream did to them and they would be healed. What is so interesting is that they would give money when they were healed and that money
would finance the theater. And theater works were competitions, you know, and it's the opposite—the abaton is in the dark and you are alone, and the theater is in the light because theater was during the day, and you're with others. I had a way of thinking about that in that the abaton is like the perineum and the theater is what's visible. But it has to rise in order to get visible. And you can't be disconnected because otherwise you are in the representation of the visible. I completely lost track of why I'm saying this, but it was in response to...

Robert: About redefining. I don't know if I'm connected. For me it's very difficult to define what is the influence. Let's say I had some experiences or I met with Korean Shamanism. There's a woman in Vienna called Hiah Park, and she made it more, let's say, adaptive to the West. She also talks about this connection between the hospital and theater in Greece because her work is like that. I invited her to make a performance in Amsterdam, to get her on stage again. It was interesting to see different ideas and how different people react. I like it a lot… I'm not deep in it, really; I'm touching it. But I like it a lot—this celebration of society, of a community in a space, and who is in the middle to recharge the energies of the people.

Daria: Yeah, that is all that it is about.

Robert: And that's why I'm here with Maria. I feel that. And I have no idea in what kind of form, or in what kind of presence.

Daria: That's beautiful.

Robert: Because you don't know, why should I be this person or she? But still I think that's the case. We have to change the energies of the people that are looking. How? I have no idea, but let's make a start. And I really feel this redefining theater as a part of a society is looking to other people in the society who are dropping their social masks.

Daria: You spoke about institution and I'm wondering since I'm no longer in Europe… People from institutions were literally telling me, “Daria, if you want help, you need to do it the way we want you to do it.” And I tried, and I had my own space, and it really didn’t work. But I'm sure that it is very different in France than it is in Brussels...

Robert: It depends on persons. You can't say it's like this or like that because although it is very market oriented and people have to take care for subsidies, it's also very connected to who is doing it. Is this person doing taking part of this market or does this person have a genuine interest? For instance, I feel very at home in Kaaitheater, but I also feel very at home in Montpellier, in the place of Mathilde Monnier, and then they asked me to do something to reach a larger audience than their normal public. And then, not that I made a mistake, but I said okay, I want to do more a kind of ritual, trans-ritual with the public, because I feel that when we go trans or shamanistic, other people come in who are not coming towards dance. And I do a week of preparation, by giving a workshop. People who join this workshop will help the audience go into a ritual. And it worked well, I think. We were dying—180 people onstage and everybody had this kind of imaginary process of dying. It was very emotional. First you make contact with a very small circle of people, then you listen to some inside private stories of these people about what they consider as highlights of their life and then before they die, they take farewell by hugging each other and they lay down on the floor. They invited a cultural anthropologist, I forget his name now, he was very close with the famous documentary maker who did a lot of these rituals filmed in Africa.

Daria: Jean Rouch?

Robert: Yeah, Rouch. He was the assistant of Rouch for a long time, so we saw a lot of films and we wanted to show it, but I wanted also to work with this man more so I invited him to participate and tell his experiences afterwards to the public. And then this man, who is talking afterwards about it, was quite humiliating for me because the whole thing was about whether it was a ritual or not. I'm totally not interested in that. I wanted to know what is the experience of the people that are doing it. The whole time it was in an academic way of justifying why it didn't work for him as a ritual. And I thought, 'why can't we talk about experience?' That's me as an artist, I borrow things from other cultures, and then they are so moralistic in a way if you use things from Africa or from this… When I read a Tibetan book, isn't it my culture in the moment? I don't know, of course I come from a Christian culture, but all the Tibetan books they are available now. You know what I mean?
Daria: Of course.

Robert: Why should you be there to…

Daria: To dissect it?

Robert: Yeah, I don’t know. It is just a playful attempt for me to share how I feel with other people.

Daria: It was the anthropologist that was talking, not the man.

Robert: Yeah, and then I thought so much the fear of an institution. To do something crazy like that, 180 people lay down and say that you’re dead. They can’t handle it. Although they gave me the space, and later they were really happy.

Daria: Why do you say they can’t handle it? Just because of this guy? Or…

Robert: Not just. Why do they all have to die? They want to go with me, but when I actually do it, they are very afraid.

Daria: It’s always like that.

Robert: Because the public isn’t in the dark anymore in a seat. The first time I was presenting my work in the first week I said: “Okay, my work will be about dying and the ritual will take place in the Dominique Bagouet studio.” Dominique Bagouet died of aids almost twenty five years ago.” I said “who wants to talk about him in this studio?” No one, perhaps 20 people who knew him personally were in the audience and knew how he died, no one wanted to talk a little bit about him. I had to delive into my memories as a dance critic about his work. So how much is there freedom in the institution to open your heart for this man? There is so much fear in an institution to do the wrong thing.

Daria: So what do you…? Because I had that experience in France so many times, I can’t even tell you…

Robert: They’re so academic. But I see it as elastic. It’s opening up, especially in such institution in Montpellier. At least I got the possibility to do this ritual, but the consequences are sometimes hard, you know?

Daria: Yeah. I think now I wouldn’t mind because then I was much younger and I got really beat up. Now I think I have much more humor, you know, I can play with the boundaries much more. How do you, as an artist, as a person, how do you navigate within those dangers of institution, how do you act on it? Do you do things outside of the institution that you produce yourself? Does that exist in Europe?

Robert: Not so much. I think what I have to see is to see everyone as human beings.

Daria: Definitely that helps a lot.

Robert: When people are part of an institution, to still be in contact with them not as a part of this institution. But that takes a long time. You need patience.

Daria: Exactly. This is exactly what it is about. You have to take away the fear itself.

Robert: And, you know, I have to take care of myself. How to become independent? Of course we know you can go into the mountains and into the dessert, and then you find your own strength and then you come back. But this own strength we have to develop. That’s why I’m so into how to connect. Because I have to connect, with nature, with love, with happiness, with private life, before I can connect to difficult situations. So I don’t need these other connections to feed me in that way. Before you can give something, you have to learn to receive things or to enjoy.
Daria: But to come back to institution, we began when you spoke about New York you said, “I don’t know the institution.” Do you have a perception of what the institutions are in New York? You were beginning to say something about it.

Robert: Yeah. I feel very welcome in Danspace, I feel very welcome in the Platform. But I have no idea what’s the power of critics, what’s the power of people who give money, you know. I’m outside this community.

Daria: There is no money here.

Robert: Yeah. Totally not, huh. A lot of people come now to Europe, to survive as an artist.

Daria: Yes, a lot.

Robert: I like DD a lot and Jennifer Lacey, although she’s not here that much, or Melanie.

Daria: But DD, she’s really in Europe now.

Robert: But let’s say when I meet her, she represents a way of thinking we don’t have in Europe. So in that sense, it’s New York for me. And that I appreciate a lot, you know. It inspires me a lot, and all these discussions I like a lot. I don’t know the dance community so well, how it functions, to see how it is institutionalized. I saw a very beautiful piece of Paige Martin last week with a lot of people from the community, I was really happy to see it. I don’t know, I’m not used to making art in such a survival way. It makes me a little bit sad… the lack of money. I don’t know.

Daria: The problem is that there isn’t any, and that is the saddest thing. The relationship with the audience is very moving because the community is very supportive in being there for you to see the work and there is a layer that is understood, that it’s about making the work; that the fact that we like it or that we don’t like it is completely secondary. That’s the beautiful thing.

Robert: That’s a beautiful thing. When I was in Mexico (with Prisma), there were people from New York and people from Europe, and the people from New York are so interested and supportive just in what you do. Because they already know the struggle it is to make it, so they are totally supportive. In Europe, pa-f is kind of a good example, this residency. I think it is time also for self-organization of artists, to find your own public in a more liberated way. That’s why we talk about Eagle Ager for instance. Ray (Roy) wants to go on a bus and tour with Felicia (Ballos) and the baby, and work with people and show the work. It’s such another mentality and I love it a lot.

Daria: That’s very American—that is important to create a self-sustainable organization that has meaning for you and the people around you, and that you create your own audience and you create your own means. It’s the spirit of the grassroots in America; it is very powerful. It is Obama, no matter what we think about him. He was elected because of these organizations—people. America had that at the base and it kind of disappeared. You were speaking about breaking the wall, and we are in front of a wall. If we are not doing anything for ourselves, in a broad way... It is not about a self, it is about the people. It is not possible and it’s very exciting. I’m very excited by it. I think I always had that in me, but to push it to another level is very exciting and, you know, I have no idea how to do it. I really have no idea, but to be with other people who don’t know how and to ask these questions is fantastic. I feel very lucky that I can do that.

Robert: I think it’s a new social engagement, which goes much beyond the ideologies of the hippies. Sometimes people hear me speaking, and say, oh, this is new age, from early times, but it’s not.

Daria: It’s from now.

Robert: Because I really feel it from a younger generation and it resonates. It’s not a revival; it’s pragmatic. Not pragmatic, but practical also. It’s not an alternative; we have to change. It’s not that we are an alternative society.
Daria: No, we can't do that anymore. The last meeting (of the Commons) was a lot speaking about the difference of societies that were enclosed within themselves trying to break the relationship with money, the relationships with rules, but how to do this within the larger society instead of isolating ourselves. The problematic of the individual in relation to the collective now is really, really rich, it's absolute. Everything is possible if we start to think about it.